

Lizard Men of Los Angeles

By Lewis Shiner

The beautiful black-haired woman suddenly turned, raised the gleaming revolver, and fired six resounding shots. Five .38 caliber slugs ripped into the wooden packing crate that Johnny Cairo had crawled into only moments before. The sixth bullet exploded a vase of red carnations that stood next to the crate.

Something slumped against the inside of the wooden box. A thread of bright crimson oozed between the pine boards and slowly trickled downwards.

The woman lowered the pistol, shock and horror spreading across her elegant features. The empty revolver clattered to her feet and she took one tentative step, then another, toward the crate.

"Stop!" cried a man's voice from the back of the theater. "Don't touch that box!"

The audience turned, gasped, and broke into applause as they saw that the speaker was none other than Johnny Cairo himself, changed from his dark suit and cape to evening clothes and sporting a bright, blood-red cummerbund.

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Backstage, the entire vaudeville troupe mingled with journalists and well-wishers, though in this Depression year of 1934 the crowds were smaller than they'd ever been. When the rest had departed, one lone man remained behind. He was heavy set, with elaborate side-whiskers and thinning hair. He carried a cashmere topcoat and scarf that had attracted some notice from those exiting past him.

He approached the magician and spoke in a deep and resonant voice. "I'm sorry, but I missed the evening's...entertainment. You are Johnny Cairo? The man the press refers to as 'Mr. Impossible?'"

Cairo nodded, and gestured to the black-haired woman beside him. "This is Myra Lockhart, my associate." She had covered her revealing stage costume with a black velvet dressing gown. From a distance she had appeared to be in her twenties, but fine lines around her eyes and mouth made her true age much harder to determine. Those eyes, set in a complexion as white as cream, flashed a keen intelligence.

"Miss Lockhart," the man said with a short bow.

"Mrs.," she replied coolly.

"Errr, yes." He paused, then inquired, "Mr. Cairo, are you entirely well?"

Cairo had closed his eyes. He too seemed much older than he had from the stage. Beneath his heavy pancake makeup he was perspiring and his complexion had taken on a yellowish hue. "It's nothing," he said. "A legacy of my travels—dengue fever, a persistent amoebae, a trace of jaundice. How may I assist you, sir?"

"My name is Emil Rosenberg. I understand that you, under certain circumstances, have been known to undertake confidential investigations."

Mrs. Lockhart interrupted. "Certain very specific circumstances."

"I seek knowledge, Mr. Rosenberg," Cairo elaborated. "My investigations are always directed toward the great Mystery."

Rosenberg shook his head. "I fear you've lost me, sir."

