THE GLOWING CLOUD

By Steven Utley

Steven Utley's fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, Universe, Galaxy, Amazing, Vertex, Stellar, Shayol,* and elsewhere. He was one of the best-known new writers of the '70s, both for his solo work and for some strong work in collaboration with fellow Texan Howard Waldrop, but fell silent at the end of the decade and wasn't seen in print again for more than ten years. In the last few years he's made a strong comeback, though, becoming a frequent contributor to *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, as well as selling again to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and elsewhere. In 1992 alone, Utley published at least three other stories that would have been considered good enough for inclusion in this anthology in another year—in *addition* to the vivid and suspenseful novella that follows. In it, Utley takes us to the troubled island of Martinique in 1902, in company with a somewhat reluctant time traveler on a desperate mission, with the fate of history itself in the balance—a mission that he must rush to complete before he is destroyed by one of the greatest natural disasters of all time: the awesome eruption of Mount Pelée on the morning of May 8th, 1902 . . .

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He could see no moon, no stars. The sky was black where it curved to meet the western horizon, and to the east it was roiling and opaque and glowed red about the summit of a burning mountain. He was descending to a landing at a point on the slope well below the crater but overlooking the narrow crescent of illumination that defined the town.

This part felt like a dream. He could feel the tingling, not-unpleasant burn of the drug behind his eyes and in his fingertips and teeth. His saliva tasted metallic. It's the drug, he told himself, a hallucination induced by the drug, but he had never quite convinced himself of this on any previous occasion, and couldn't now. He came down slowly, at a shallow angle. He could see not only what he reasonably would have expected to see from a great height at night, but also to a great depth. He saw, imagined, what nobody had ever seen: the planet in cross-section, with the green, unsubmerged peaks of the Windward and Leeward islands stretching across the Caribbean's blue, map-flat expanse from Puerto Rico to a Rand-McNally-colored South America complete with place names. There were latitude and longitude lines as well. Two of these intersected several kilometers west of his position, and in one corner of the intersection was a neat notation, *14°45', 61°15'*. East of the islands,

the world had been sawn in half. Its mechanisms were exposed, rendered with textbook definition and shading from the blue-black of the outermost layer of atmosphere to the yellow-white of the nickel-iron core. The scale was skewed, emphasizing the massive conical bases of the Wind-wards, particularly that of the island to which he was being drawn. To the east of the archipelago, the edge of one plate of oceanic crust slipped under another. They ground and scraped and warmed, and masses of molten stuff the size of major planetoids burned their way up through the island's, so to speak, basement and went shooting out through the, so to speak, roof. The magma beneath the crust was done in incandescent yellow but darkened through streaky orange to primary red as it made its way to the surface. He thought the view as impressive now as when he had first seen it, years before, in school, in a geo holo.

Adding to the dreaminess was a time-lapse effect. Medlin sank through a leafy canopy, disturbing it no more than a moonbeam, and alighted on firm ground. Trees cut off his view of the town. All he could see of the volcano now was a red-tinged dark sky. He could see it better, in fact, than he could see his own nimbused hand. Yet, even as he watched, the sky lightened, pinkish-brown cumulous masses of volcanic smoke raced across the sky, and shafts of sunlight speared down through gaps in the treetops. He was standing in the middle of an unpaved road in the heart of a tropical forest.

As he solidified, he became aware of other, less pleasant details.

The air was full of white specks that looked like snowflakes but stung like nettles when they hit bare skin. He took a breath, and the moisture in his mouth evaporated. A second breath made the lining of his throat sear and pucker. A paroxysm of coughing bent him double, and frightening thoughts filled his head.

Perhaps he had mistimed his arrival.

Perhaps he didn't have the better part of a week after all.

Perhaps he had arrived instead at the climactic moment.

But he did not shrivel, did not burst and stew in his own juices, did not become a charcoal mannequin. He lived, and felt as though he were coughing himself inside out, and reached with one hand to steady himself against a huge tree garlanded with lianas and orchids. The bole was warm to his fingertips, almost hot. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his mouth and nose. That made breathing easier—a little easier.

Watery-eyed and puffy-lidded, he rested against the tree, and at almost the same moment, he realized two things: one, he was not alone; two, Ranke was not present.

The road was barely more than a trail of wheel ruts through the jungle. It branched above a fast, swollen creek, one fork veering to his left, the other plunging straight down the creek bank into water full of uprooted trees and other vegetation. Coming off the creek was a powerful smell of rotten eggs and dead animals. Strung in a ragged line beside it were two hundred men, women, and children. They were staring gloomily at the water. Medlin immediately knew them for what they were. He had seen their like thirty-six hours before, subjective time, in the Low Countries in 1940. As a conse-quence of that experience, he was convinced that it was impossible to mistake even small numbers of refugees for any other group one might encounter anywhere. These were, with a single exception, dark-skinned people. The men wore straw hats, loose trousers, and shirts. The women wore madras scarves, white blouses, long skirts. They carried little more than their infants.

The exception among them was a late-middle-aged white man dressed in a cassock. He was the only one wearing shoes. He started so violently when he noticed Medlin that Medlin thought the priest must somehow have detected the luminous vapor that clung to him. His alarm did not entirely fade as the man strode forward with a belligerent expression on his face: even as reason asserted itself—the envelope of charged particles which Medlin saw as a nimbus about himself was as imperceptible as water vapor to deni-zens—he retreated two steps backward and thrust his hand into his coat pocket to feel the butt of the revolver there. The priest had enormous ropey hands and looked very fit for his age. Behind his wire-rimmed glasses was the fixed squint of someone who had spent a great many daylight hours hatless in the sun. He slightly knitted the muscles between his thick eyebrows, and the squint transformed into a scowl that told Medlin, here is a clergyman used to getting his way with the laity. The priest said, in snappish French, “Do not waste your time trying to persuade us to return! We are not going back!”

Behind him, several of the men put on scowls of their own. Medlin mustered all the sunny good nature he had in him at the moment and said, “I beg your pardon, Father. I have no intention of persuading you to go back. In fact, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

The priest looked past him in obvious expectation of seeing others. Finding no one, he relaxed his expression somewhat.

“With that accent,” he said, “you are a foreigner.”

“I am an American traveler.”

“Ah! An American!” The priest half-turned for a moment to give the refugees a reassuring smile and nod. The men’s scowls yielded to the same disconsolate looks as before. “Americans are the only other people on this island who have shown any good sense so far! Accept my most sincere apologies. I am Father Hayot. When I saw you, I thought that the governor must have sent you after us.”

“I myself have never met the governor.” one played these things by ear.

Father Hayot’s face wrinkled into a relief-map of righteous anger. Up close, he was even more formidable. He had eyes like musketballs. “My parishioners and I are from Le Prêcheur, a village to the north. Yesterday, while Governor Mouttet was safe in his residency in Fort-de-France, where the mountain cannot possibly harm him, *we* were fleeing for our lives. The lava destroyed everything, homes, crops—even the statue of the Virgin. Then, when we reached St. Pierre, the governor telegraphed the military commandant to confine us to the town hall compound, as though we were criminals! We would be there even now if I had not persuaded the guard to let us go.”

Medlin thought it generally good policy to listen sympathetically to deni-zens, so he said, “But why would the governor have you confined?”

“He is too concerned with elections. He must feel a few poor refugees will cause a panic that will drive people from the polls!”

The volcano made a sound like something clearing its throat. Medlin would not have imagined it possible for the villagers to look any unhappier than they did already. They surprised him.

“They believe the mountain is the chimney of a gigantic blacksmith shop—God’s or the Devil’s, they are unsure.” Father Hayot’s expression was both patronizing and exasperated. “I have been with them for many years now, and still, *still,* I cannot make them understand the vital difference between Christian faith and paganistic belief.”

Medlin had never understood the difference himself, but did not say so. Instead, he asked, “Where does this trail lead?”

“Over the ridge to Morne Rouge if you follow it east. Straight to the coast road if you go west.” Suspicion suddenly clouded the priest’s face again. “Do you mean to say that you do not know where you are?”

Medlin put on a rueful smile. “I know that I am standing next to a live volcano. Obviously, I *am* lost. I am not even sure what day it is.”

Dismayed but disarmed, the priest clucked reproachfully. “Today is Saturday.”

Five days, Medlin thought, relieved. Five whole days and nights.

“If you have been lost out here on the mountainside,” Father Hayot went on, “you are indeed most fortunate to be alive and unharmed. This is dangerous country even under normal conditions. Serpents. Wild pigs.” He lowered his voice, and there

was a fresh element of bitterness in it. “Some-times I think there are no true Christians here in this countryside. People here may have a priest, may say prayers to the Virgin, but in their hearts they believe in magic and the world of ghosts. They listen to the *quimboiseurs*—the wizards, who kill whomever they meet and use human bones in their evil work. You must be very careful whom you meet in the jungle.”

“I have a companion who seems to be lost, too. Perhaps you have seen him. He is a white man.”

“We have passed few people at all since we left the coast road. Probably your lost companion has gone on to St. Pierre. But, were I you, I do not think I would follow him there. The situation has become very bad since just yesterday morning. No one knows what to do. Worse, no one seems to care. My parishioners want to return to their homes, whatever is left of them, but we are cut off by the torrent. The river is impassable all the way to the sea. I am trying to convince them to let me lead them inland. There is a convent at Morne Rouge where they can find shelter. You should come with us.”

Medlin made himself look as though he were mulling over the suggestion. He actually was pondering his next move, but it involved finding Ranke and getting on with the business at hand, not running from volcanoes. Ranke’s absence was nothing to get too alarmed about, yet. He could simply be late. Passengers sometimes got momentarily misplaced. Experienced travelers and passengers sometimes arrived not even approximately simultaneously. More disturbing than Ranke’s missing a rendezvous by minutes or hours was the idea of his missing it by kilometers. He could have arrived on the opposite side of the island, or far out to sea. Damn all islands anyway. He could have come down close to the heart of the volcano’s red glow. Not that it had to be anything melodramatic. He could have landed right on target, right on schedule, but clumsily, and broken his neck.

Medlin almost wished that, then admonished himself. Ought to have offered Ranke a hand to hold, he thought, and immediately recoiled from the idea. Holding hands was not essential, and it was no guarantee of any-thing, either. Some passengers found it reassuring. There was nothing travel-ers wanted more than calm passengers, but Christ-all-bleeding-mighty, *Ranke.* Not one to take anybody’s hand, unless maybe to break a finger. His problem—Medlin’s problem, now—was not that he needed reassurance or that he was even afraid of time-travel, but that he was no good at it.

Still, as long as he had stood close to Medlin, within the circle marked on the floor with strips of duct tape, he should have gone wherever Medlin went. Only he hadn’t, and Medlin would eventually have to explain why not. It could go very badly indeed if the guy stayed lost. “Agent Ranke and I disliked each other,” Medlin could hear himself explaining, “and it was unpleasant for us to stand close together, so perhaps he unconsciously pushed himself away at a crucial moment,” and,

“Perhaps,” he could hear someone on the board of inquiry retorting, “unconsciously or otherwise, you may have pushed Agent Ranke away,” and “Well,” he could hear himself concluding lamely, “Agent Ranke was there one moment and not there the next.”

Damn damn damn damn damn damn *damn*.

And then there was Garrick. At least the fugitive was near, or traces of her, anyway, scattered on the thick midday air, perceptible but ungraspable. Ranke was much, much better at this stuff. What for Ranke would have been a big neon arrow pointing directly toward Garrick was a film of cobwebs to Medlin.

It was enough to fill Medlin with a glum resolve. He said, “Thank you for your concern, Father, but I must locate my companion. We have important business in St. Pierre.”

Father Hayot used his lips to make an soft, unpleasant, unpriestly sound, disgusted and dismissive. “Everyone,” he growled, “has *important business* in that wicked place. Little Paris of the West Indies. Little Paris! A more appropriate name would be Little Sodom, or Little Gomorrah, especially if the lava should destroy it! Judgment is going to fall on those Pierrotins—a judgment of fire for their sinfulness and stupidity! The attitude among them is that my parishioners are foolish country people, and that Americans are cowards. Most of your countrymen have already sailed away.”

“Still, I must go there.”

“Then may Cod go with you, my son.”

Father Hayot regarded him with unanticipated kindliness as he said that, and Medlin marveled at his own luck in being the one thing on Earth today, an American, for which this cantankerous priest evidently had positive feelings. He said, “Good luck to you as well, Father,” and started walking away. The refugees hardly bothered looking at him as he passed.

“There is no luck,” the priest called after him, “there is only God’s mercy. And God’s mercy is bigger than any mountain.”

Medlin didn’t look back, but gave a friendly wave, as though taking the priest’s word for it. As soon as the villagers were out of sight around the bend in the road, he paused, shakily took a pint flask of distilled water from the left pocket of his coat, and drank half. First meetings with denizens always left him sweating and dry-mouthed.

He came eventually to the edge of the jungle. Beyond the trees was a field of cane stubble and, beyond that, other fields ranked in tiers extending all the way down

to the sea, three or four miles away. In some of the fields were rippling stands of cane and little moving specks that were canecutters hard at their work. Off to the south lay the town, a quarter-moon by day as well as by night, its outline dictated by the natural amphitheater in which it lay. Medlin walked out from under the trees and went some distance before he thought to turn and take a look at the volcano.

He had to crane his head back to see it. Half-obscured by haze, the volcano's rocky collar was surely some distance away, and yet the steep green slope beneath the crater seemed to loom directly above him. It was as though a jungle had been stood on end and a great sooty smoky fire lighted at the higher end. No open sky was visible to the north; the smoke rolled away to infinity. The sight was hypnotic. He turned his back on it with no small effort of will and struck out along the margin of the cane stubble.

He headed south when he reached the coast road. To his right, the land sloped down into a calm sea. On his left, the road was edged with tropical trees. Set among them at intervals were stone crucifixes and shrines dedicated to the Virgin. On a slight rise near the northern point of the crescent, he paused for a first good look at his destination. While he surveyed the town, he took another drink from his flask, almost draining it, and ate his one nutrition bar, a dense, chewy foodstick a little larger than his thumb.

Between the crescent's horns, the waterfront stretched along a thin, scal-loped beach of black sand. Crowded together along its entire length were wharves, warehouses, and, undoubtedly, establishments for the entertain-ment of sailors. A main thoroughfare ran the length of the crescent, about a mile. Numerous intersecting streets crept up from the waterfront to the base of the wooded slope behind the town, a distance of a quarter of a mile. There were one-storied buildings with tin awnings behind the quayside, and blocks of two-, even three-storied buildings. Most of the substantial-looking struc-tures had walls of yellow stone and tiled roofs; the ash-coated tiles were faded pink. Here and there was something more impressive. Medlin saw a lighthouse, a twin-towered cathedral, and what appeared to be a fort or prison. But for the jungle and the volcano, he felt that he could have been looking at any small French Mediterranean seaport.

The town seemed peaceful to the point of stultification. Everyone in it could have been dead already, suffocated by ash. Then he saw distant figures unhurriedly moving about in the streets, comporting themselves as though there were not an active volcano in the world. At the water's edge, on a broad, sloping square dominated by the lighthouse, roustabouts worked like tiny ants. The roadstead was full of ships. The island shelved off at such a steep angle that even big ships were able to anchor close to shore.

On the outskirts of town, soldiers were dragging dead animals from a cart and flinging them into a pit beside the road. Mounds of freshly turned dirt lined both sides of the road; this activity had been going on for some time. Only the soldiers

seemed remotely interested in their work, and that only to the point of quite clearly disliking it. Mass animal burials could have been the commonest sight on the island for all the attention paid by civilian passersby.

Medlin entered the town behind a tall black woman who strode along purposefully with a wooden tray of fruits and vegetables balanced on her head. He estimated that she could not have been carrying much under sixty pounds. Watching the play of muscles in her dusky calves made him feel flabby. Trotting along sometimes in front and sometimes beside or behind the woman was a miniature edition of her, with a miniature edition of her burden.

The streets were filled with black, brown, and yellow people, with a sprinkling of white. The falling ash muffled every sound, and voices blended together into a soft background burble. The predominant speech was, to Medlin's ear, like French come through Africa.

It quickly became obvious to him that the situation was not only as bad as Father Hayot had said, but becoming steadily worse. Groups of people stood about who seemed to have no place to go, no idea of what to do. These, too, had that unmistakable look of refugees; the authorities must have stopped confining them, but had not decided as yet what else to do with them. Livestock wandered loose. They seemed to be dropping dead faster than the soldiers could haul away the carcasses. Asphyxiated birds lay everywhere. The fountains were fouled with black mud.

Yet commerce was gamely trying to flourish. Ash bedraggled flowers in the vendor's stalls and made foodstuffs look grayish and unappetizing. The variety was more impressive than either the quality or the quantities—there were bananas, oranges, pineapples, tomatoes, breadfruit, sapodillas. Apart from the vendors' manifest irritation at continually having to brush grit from their wares, few people evidenced much concern about the volcano. Many did not even seem interested. Everyone joked and haggled, harangued and gossiped.

He rested on a stone bench under the mango and tamarind trees edging the lighthouse square. Shipping brokers, all of them Caucasian, stood about conversing among themselves while black and brown roustabouts manhan-dled casks and hogsheads onto lighter barges and yelled to one another in their mutant-French creole. Unmindful of hazards, children chased one another among the barrels. The scene was surreal: sweating workers, tropical trees, blistering pseudo-snowflakes swirling in the air. The concentration of rum, sugar, fruit-tree, and waterfront aromas almost masked the stench of sulphur.

Garrick, too, was on the heavy air. She fluctuated between the almost-there and the almost-not-there. Now she was just beyond touch, just out of sight and hearing, and now she was across the world, on the moon, passing the orbit of Neptune. She was an object removed from its proper matrix, like Medlin, anomalous, leaving, wherever she went, a trail of disturbance like gossamer, like

insects' breathing, like prickles of sensation in a long-ampu-tated limb. Medlin could sense the achronicity but could not follow the trail. His forte was exploiting weak spots in time. Garrick was an itch he could not locate.

He was very hungry as well. His empty stomach seemed to be devouring itself. He sucked the last few drops of distilled water from his canteen and patted the pockets of his coat in the silly hope that he had somehow overlooked a second foodstick until now. There were only the revolver and fake identity papers. If currency had been issued, Ranke had it. Probably it had not been issued at all. No one had thought or, rather, Thomas, the agency chief, had not figured, that Medlin would have to stay long enough to need money. Thomas' credo was "Get in, get it done, get out."

He fantasized about using the revolver to hold up women carrying trays of fruits and vegetables on their heads, then reminded himself he had gone without food or water for two days in Trincomalee that time. Ranke will show up any second now, he thought. We'll grab Garrick and get the hell out of here before sundown.

He waited. The longshoremen went on loading cargo onto lighters, and the children kept playing among the barrels and hogsheads. A cool breeze blew across the square, bringing some relief from heat and bad smells. No one paid any attention to Medlin. He was just a lover of magnificent sunsets, or a drunk. By sundown, the shipping brokers and the laborers and most of the children had gone. The sky stayed red over the volcano, and the streets neither cleared nor quietened. The day's commerce was simply replaced by the evening's.

Medlin ground his fist into his palm and stood up. He did not want to move, but the last place he wanted to stay, besides *here* in general, was *here* in particular, on the waterfront at night on a Saturday. No burning mountain or ashfall was going to discourage people in a place like this from getting themselves roughed up, possibly robbed, possibly rubbed out.

He took a step away from the bench and started to fall. The ground was not where his foot expected it. He went down hard on one knee and thought for a second that he had stepped into an unseen hole. But the ground itself was moving. The bench collapsed behind him—it was a simple stone slab set on uprights—and from the direction of the landing came a sound like the grinding of millstones. He heard a child's shrill, brief scream.

Casks and hogsheads were rolling down the slope and piling up at the water's edge. In the dim light, two or three children ran past him, flat-out, in terror. Their short, harsh breaths were like sobs.

He saw what had happened: a toppling barrel had crushed a small boy. The child was so skinny, so shabbily dressed, that he looked like a small pile of sticks and rags on the paving stones. Amazingly, he hadn't been instantly killed—Medlin,

as he started to kneel, heard a wheeze and a bubbling exhalation above the slosh of waves and the human commotion all along the waterfront. He thought better of kneeling and looked around anxiously. It was against regulations to call undue attention to oneself or to become involved with denizens any more than was essential to the completion of a mission. During the past week, subjective time, he had seen enough in Belgium to think himself inured to the sight of the dead. He knew that everyone in this town was going to die. But no one had told him there would be mashed children beforehand.

Human figures were running back and forth on the square above the jumble at the water's edge, Voices filled the night. He heard shrieks of fright, shrieks of laughter, as if, he thought, suddenly enraged, everybody in town were saying, To think that such a little shake really frightened us! A uniformed white man ran toward him. Medlin could not tell by the flickering light of the man's torch whether he was a policeman or a military officer, but then he turned and bawled out an order, and five or six colonial soldiers appeared. One of them carried a stretcher fashioned from poles and canvas sacking.

"Quickly, quickly," the officer gasped. The injured boy wheezed and exhaled wetly. He did not inhale again. The officer pushed aside the soldier with the stretcher and knelt, checked for a pulse, rose shaking his head. He told two of his men to take the body away and the rest to search for other possible victims in the wreckage at the water's edge. The soldiers scattered across the landing.

"It is really too bad," the officer said to Medlin, "but these little black wharf children are as thick as rats. I wonder that more of them are not hurt or killed every day." He had a roman nose of fabulous dimension. Its shadow hid his mouth as he spoke. "Did you see the accident, Monsieur?"

"No. I only heard a scream."

"You are—"

"An American."

"You are from the embassy, or one of the ships in the harbor?"

Medlin said, "Yes," as though he were actually answering the question.

"Then I must advise you to return. That tremor has caused more than the death of this child tonight."

"Just one damned thing after another."

"Quite so, Monsieur. It is terrible." The officer touched the bill of his cap with a forefinger and went to rejoin his men.

Medlin turned and lost himself in the crowd. He let it carry him where it would. Some portion of it carried him straight onto a street filled with raucousness and ripe smells. There were many sailors. They walked in small groups in the middle of the street—there was no horse or wheel traffic here, and the sidewalks, barely wide enough to deserve that name, had accordingly been reserved as seating or standing space for those too google-eyed to walk. Every doorway on both sides of the street was an illumined hole that spewed human noises, inarticulate cries and shouts, eruptions of laughter and sing-ing, and a continuous rumbling thunder of conversation. Moving remoralike in the wake or on the flank of this or that group of men, trying to look as though he belonged, Medlin heard snatches of French, the local creole, English, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, other languages he could not begin to identify. On second-floor balconies above the doorways more or less dark-skinned women stood leaning on iron railings or sat on cane chairs. A few gazed down upon the promenade with grave humor in their expressions. One woman gave Medlin an especially unnerving look, not of cool, profes-sional invitation but of contemptuous expectation, not daring him to come up to see her sometime but merely holding him to the low standard of male behavior of her experience. She gripped the railing as if she could tear it apart with her hands. Her expression became doubly contemptuous when she realized that he was not going to oblige her. It gave him the creeps. Then she shifted her attention to someone else in the street. It struck Medlin first that her presentation could not net her very many customers, and next that she might only be waiting for one more. She was a knife waiting to fly out of its sheath at somebody.

Most of the women were exuberant and lascivious. They called down to the sailors, issued impossible ribald challenges, and the least-inhibited among them pantomimed fellatio or parted their robes to expose their breasts. There were breasts of every size, shape, and shade. The sailors roared approval and roared answers to the challenges and trooped indoors, roaring still.

Not all propositions were made from balconies. Medlin suddenly found his path blocked by an ancient, gnomish woman whose head barely came to his breastbone. Sire had a face as rough as a coconut and a grip like a blacksmith’s. With her bony hand tight on his elbow, she began tugging him in the direction of one of the buildings. As she tugged, she spoke to him so fast that he did not think he caught as much as one word in three.

Still, her meaning was clear. He saw now that he was being drawn toward not a doorway but the narrow alley between two buildings. Just around the corner, the woman seemed to be saying, and up the stairs, I have the most beautiful young girl for you. Medlin planted his feet on the cobblestones and tried to jerk his elbow free. The woman weighed nothing. He lifted her off the ground when he moved his arm, but he could not shake her loose. Even as he swung her around she continued to babble at him· A girl for you, Monsieur, just this way, come, see, you will like her very much. He felt a little stir of panic, cursed aloud, and broke away with a blow to

the woman's wrist. She gave a cry and skipped away shaking her hand in the air as though it had caught fire. She did no more, however, than glare at him for a few seconds while she rubbed her wrist; then she was looking around for the next customer.

Next victim is more like it, Medlin thought as he moved on. No light fell in the alley toward which she had pulled him. It was a perfect place to get one's skull bashed in.

The crowd on what he was starting to think of as the Rue Syphilis some-times flowed smoothly and swiftly, sometimes lurched along as though pulled by the ambulatory drunks in its ranks. It expanded and contracted, broke apart, reformed, spun off men through the beckoning doorways, drew them out when they had been depleted. Then, abruptly, the saloons and brothels were behind him, and, no less abruptly, the character of the crowd changed. The sailors and other commerce-minded individuals blew away like chaff. In their place were disoriented-looking townspeople.

Medlin's knee hurt. He found a place where he could sit, rest, watch, and not get tripped over by people as they ran about. After a while, he realized that many of them seemed to be moving with a purpose now. Thinking that perhaps they knew something he didn't, he went with them. They quietened as they moved farther from the waterfront. With their footfalls muffled by ash, they walked, Medlin among them, like phantoms through the chaos of winding, unlevel streets, until they reached the gate of a cemetery. Beyond the graveyard was the twin-towered cathedral he had noticed that afternoon, and, surrounding this, a great, dense, milling mob of men, women, and children. They were very quiet—extraordinarily, eerily quiet, he thought. Uniformed men, again, either policeman or soldiers, tried to clear the area. Probably they had been at it for some time, but the crowd ignored them. Abruptly, the uniformed men gave up on persuasion and began to shove. The crowd answered with a surly collective complaint as it was prodded and pushed. For all of the commotion, nobody seemed to go anywhere. The crowd resisted efforts to get it to move through the expedient of pretending to move, withdrawing at right angles to the direction of any concerted drive made by its would-be herders, closing in behind them. Medlin had seen— only on the real-time news, of course—crowds and crowd-managers lose patience with each other, and he thought, just what I *need*, to get caught in a riot. But there was no riot. Some faces were petulant. That was all. No one seemed angry or even frightened, and this, Medlin reflected, amazed, with the big spark-spitter itself just to the north, looking very much indeed like God's chimney or the Devil's whirlpool bath. Perhaps the big statue of the Virgin that stood before the cathedral was exerting its pacifistic effect on everyone.

Whatever she was doing and however good she was, he did not believe that she could keep it up indefinitely. He had a sudden sense of tectonic activity kilometers below. He could feel it through the soles of his shoes. Again he saw, or imagined, cold, heavy Atlantic Ocean bottom being sub-ducted by Caribbean Sea

bottom, becoming less cold, less heavy, rising under pressure and full of gas through weak spots in overlying rock, up into the back of the island's throat. Some bubble broke there, like a god's belch. Shutters rattled nearby. An invisible hand gave him a shove. He waited for something more, and all around him the people stirred, nervous as antelope. He began to walk, with a deliberation dictated by his knee. He found an arched doorway where he would not get caught in a stampede if there was going to be one. He sagged against the wall and waited.

Some minutes later, as he catalogued his personal miseries, a thick, black cloud settled. It got everyone's attention immediately, like an eyeful of pep-per. Blinded and choking, Medlin staggered and collided with a wall. People blundered by, tripping, screaming. Animals bleated their anguish. Somebody stepped all over him. He tried to get out of the way, was engulfed in bodies, found himself barely able to breathe or keep his feet on the ground. The mob came to a shuddering, uncoordinated halt as it piled around him. The doorway was a *cul-de-sac.* The human mass encasing Medlin collapsed onto itself as first somebody went down and then everybody else fell. Medlin kicked free of arms and legs, found himself trapped in a corner. He curled into a ball, screwed his eyes tightly shut, and pressed his handkerchief hard against his face. The fumes still reached him. *I'm going to die here.*

But he didn't die there. Ten minutes later, or an hour—he couldn't guess how long—he heard bells toll midnight and looked up with smarting eyes. The terrible cloud was dissipating. He made out indistinct moving figures, then, blurrily, the walls of the surrounding buildings. By the time his vision cleared, the mob had evaporated like the cloud, leaving the ground covered with debris. Not far from him lay a woman. Everything about her was gray with ash, her skin and clothing, her open eyes.

Coughing and aching, he left her there.

He was resting on a wooden bench set under a tin awning when the volcano showed that it was not finished for the night. There was a brilliant flash; a split-second later, the sound of a tremendous explosion. Purple lightning strobes defined a vast, airborne pile of soot above the summit, and made the world glow a lurid magenta. Out of the cloud spun and tumbled bits of junk like cut-rate meteors, with masses of sparks at their heads and streamers of smoke out behind. These pyrotechnics were accompanied by a rising, falling, unending roar.

From somewhere behind him came the sound of laughter.

The streets were filling with people again. Still more people were pushing back the shutters from upstairs bedroom windows and leaning out to watch the fireworks. They pointed and waved torches and whooped and oohed.

First Garrick goes crazy, Medlin thought, now everyone in the French West

Indies. . . .

There was a pattering like hail on the awning. Someone in the street let out a howl of surprise and pain. The howl became a chorus, and the crowd vanished. Bedroom shutters slammed closed.

The precipitate was pumice. Most of the particles were very small, no bigger than grains of sand, but there were fragments as big as golf balls in the gritty drizzle. They bounced and smoked on the pavement and clacked deafeningly on the tin awning.

The street was empty when the fall let up about a quarter of an hour later. The town seemed to have lost consciousness. Medlin found more substantial shelter, in another arched doorway, and crouched there feeling sorry for himself, wondering what the hell else he was supposed to do, and waiting for daylight. He would have prayed for it had he known how.

He dozed off in a squatting position. When he awoke, his bruised knee was stiff and throbbing. As he hauled himself up, two men strolled by in the street. They looked like any other two Pierrotins he had seen till now, save for the faint, luminous vapor that clung to them.

Nothing had been said to him about other travelers.

It was useless hiding—the two men noticed Medlin's nimbus at once; in the shadows beneath the doorway, he must have looked equally spooklike to them—so he gave them a sheepish grin and said, in English, "Feet've gone to sleep," and felt like a complete idiot.

They conferred, standing side by side and not taking their eyes off him, one of them bending slightly at the waist to speak quietly to his companion. The man on the right was small, flat-faced, with a stub nose and no lips. Whatever half-thought-out request for assistance Medlin had in mind, he stifled. Beyond the fact that *it wasn't done,* he was too taken aback by the flat-faced man's expression of annoyance to ask for help. The flat-faced man shook his head in answer to something his companion said, and they both turned and walked away, deliberately, without haste.

Nothing ventured, Medlin told himself, and called out, "Wait!"

The other man glanced back over his shoulder and gave him a half-apologetic look, a helpless shrug, but kept walking. Soon, even the strangers fox-fire was lost to sight.

Swell, Medlin thought, as if my plate wasn't full enough, there're strangers in town, and they're stuck-up! He had no idea who they were, where they came from; just one more goddamn thing wrong. He had been unhappy about this mission to

begin with. Now he hated it. If it had been up to him he would have let go then and there and gone home. He cursed Thomas for sending him. He cursed Ranke for being no good at traveling and making it necessary that Thomas send Medlin. He cursed Garrick for making trouble for everybody.

He must have dozed again against the wall. The next thing he knew, it was dawn, Sunday morning, someone was pulling at his sleeve. He could hear church bells ringing and, closer, a child's voice saying, "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

He looked down and saw a boy standing next to him. The boy was dressed in shorts and a baggy shirt. By the light of the filmy sunrise, he looked to be about twelve years old and could have been the twin of the boy Medlin had seen lying mangled on the waterfront. Had that really been only last night?

"You are Monsieur Medlin?"

He was too stunned to answer.

"The lady wishes you to have this," and the boy handed him a folded newspaper.

Medlin took it, asked, "What lady? Who gave you this?"

"A white lady."

"Where did you talk to her?"

The boy looked over his shoulder, toward the entrance to the square. "Just there, on the Avenue Victor Hugo."

"Show me!" Medlin stuffed the newspaper into his pocket and urged the boy to run.

The Avenue Victor Hugo was the main thoroughfare. Though the sun had yet to peek over the highland behind the town, the street was packed. People rose early enough in the tropics anyway, Medlin knew, but the people he saw now looked as though they were up late rather than early. They looked the way he felt, unrested and dirty. No one in the town could have slept much with all the fireworks. There were numerous white faces among the darker ones, none of them the right face. But Garrick did waft on the dirty air. He tried to hold on to her. It was like trying to grab a small wind-borne scrap of paper.

"Crazy woman," he muttered, "crazy goddamn old woman!"

He whipped out the newspaper and opened it furiously. It was a broadsheet called *Les Colonies,* dated Samedi 3 May 1902. A banner proclaimed this to be an

extraordinary edition. There were no photographs or other illustrations.

Written in dark pencil in the upper righthand corner, above the logo, was, See *Mme Boislaville*—G.

The boy was still at his side. Medlin said, “Do you know where I can find a Madame Boislaville?”

The boy nodded happily and said, “She is my aunt,” and set off at a trot down the Avenue Victor Hugo. Medlin called him back and said that he had hurt his leg and could only hobble. The boy led him at a more considerate pace onto a side street. Medlin found himself surrounded by food shops and cafes. Only a few shopkeepers had taken down their shutters today, and they were being overwhelmed by impatient-looking customers. The babble here had a hard, argumentative edge to it.

Halfway down the street, the boy stopped before a yellow two-storied building with blue trim. Its shutters were closed. The boy pounded on the door with his small brown fist.

The voice within was a woman’s. Medlin didn’t have to understand the words to get the meaning: Go away! The boy pleaded. There was silence from behind the door for a moment, then the sound of a bolt being drawn. The door opened wide enough for one eye to peer out.

Remembering his manners, Medlin said, “Madame Boislaville, I pre-sume,” and gave her the merest suggestion of a bow.

The space between door and jamb widened. Madame Boislaville was tall, limber-looking, mocha-colored, of indeterminate age. She could have been twenty-five or forty. She said, “You are the friend of Madame Garrick?”

“Yes. My name is Medlin. Your nephew here—”

She looked down at the boy sharply. He was almost squirming. He said, in French rather than creole, so that Medlin would understand, “Madame Garrick promised that I would be paid to bring this gentleman here.”

“And Madame Garrick,” the woman retorted, also in French, “undoubt-edly paid you herself, Symphar. You wicked boy, go home to your poor mother. She must have work for you to do. Or perhaps she will just give you a good beating. Go!”

Foiled, wicked Symphar ran away.

“Come inside quickly, Monsieur.” Madame waved him in with urgent gestures

and slammed the bolt behind her with obvious relief. It took Medlin's eyes a few seconds to adjust to the gloom, and then he saw that he was in a cramped and dimly lit cafe. Garrick had been here. As palpable as shadow, her trace enveloped him. She had been here *recently,* had lingered here, had touched or been touched by Madame's hands, had . . . had what? He looked around, not quite hopeful or expectant, not quite fearful, not quite knowing how he might feel if he were to see her. Chairs sat legs-up on tables. The only person in the room besides Madame and himself was a mulatto girl who stood by a curtained doorway that separated the serving area from the rear of the building. She looked about as old as the boy. She was eyeing him watchfully. Then a stooped, ancient woman holding a ratty broom appeared behind her and made to put an arm around her—protectively, he thought, until the child evaded the embrace and darted behind the bar. The woman muttered harshly and glared at Medlin as though something were all his fault. She began scratching in a corner with her broom.

Madame had cleared off a table and invited him to sit. He could not help sighing as he did so.

She said, "Are you hungry, thirsty? Would you care to rest?"

"I am very thirsty."

"I have just the thing for it." She turned and clapped her hands and called out a name, Elizabeth. The girl popped up behind the bar, listened to brief instructions, disappeared again. There was a clink of glass, and she emerged around the end of the bar carrying a small filled tray. She kept Madame between Medlin and herself as she set the tray on the table. She was as wary as a half-feral cat, ready to bolt at the first hint of danger from any direction. Her gaze was steady and expressionless, and he could tell from the way she held her head that she was listening with one ear for the old woman. He could only guess the nature of that disagreement. It occurred to him that because he was white, male, and a grown-up, she probably believed him capable of anything. He gave her what he intended as a friendly smile. She responded by scurrying away into some back room.

Madame filled a glass with clear liquid, added syrup from a little pitcher and a bit of lime peel, and gave the mixture a quick stir. She set the glass before him with an air of supreme confidence in the efficacy of its contents. He took a cautious sip. It was basically rum, and went down pleasantly. He took a second sip. It went down very pleasantly indeed, washing away the taste of sulphur, soothing his throat.

Go easy on this stuff, he warned himself. His tolerance for alcohol was low. He made a heartfelt sound of delight and gratitude for his hostess.

She looked pleased by it and said, "Your friend has arranged for your food and lodging here. She paid me for a week in advance, paid for everything. Now sit and rest. I will have a hot bath prepared for you while you eat," and with that she

turned and spoke in rapid-fire creole first to the girl and then to the old woman. The girl nodded obediently and disappeared.

The old woman shook her head and went on fussing in the corner. When Madame spoke to her again, with somewhat of an edge in her voice, the old woman turned and made a short reply. They began to argue as though they had been at it for years and could take up their dispute wherever they had left off last time. His eyes had adjusted to the light in the place, and he thought that he detected a slight but certain resemblance between the women. The older one could have been the younger one's mother or grandmother. Whatever their argument was really about, he realized all at once that he had become part of it, for the old woman was gesturing at him with her broom as she screamed at Madame. Madame pointed in his direction as well, and then enumerated unguessable point on her long fingers. He found being argued about in a language he couldn't understand more than a little scary.

At length, the old woman was in such a fury that she left words behind. She gargled a cry, dropped the broom, raked the air over her head with two bird-claw hands, and stormed into the back. A moment later, the girl came out in a hurry, carrying another tray.

Medlin said, "I am sorry, I have come at a bad time," and reluctantly started to get up.

Madame held up her hand. He settled hopefully back into the chair. "Do not trouble yourself about that old woman," she said. "She is a superstitious country woman, very ignorant. She thinks all whites have the evil eye." The way she said it suggested to him that she herself thought some whites might have the evil eye. "She came here when the mountain began to erupt. She thinks whites are to blame."

The girl had placed the second tray on the table. From it, Madame set warm bread and a bowl of steaming gumbo before him. He put his faith in inoculations and tasted the gumbo. It was delicious. He said so at once.

Madame smiled for the first time. She had a big, pleasant smile. Medlin found himself thinking that much of the best of African, European, Asian, and Amerindian faces had collected in her features.

"There is not much food here now," she said. "This ash, *aiee*, it ruins everything! We did not open for business today because we have nothing to serve—only enough for ourselves and you. I did not believe Madame Garrick. She said there would be shortages because of the mountain."

She seemed about to leave him to eat in peace. He said, "An extraordinary person, my friend. When did you see her last?"

"It was two mornings ago, Friday, just after the mountain began to erupt."

“Did she say where I may find her?”

“She said that she would call for you here.”

“Anything else?”

“She asked if I have relatives living elsewhere on the island. I told her that everyone on Martinique is related, except for the freshest arrival from France. Even then, I told her, they say it is only a matter of time.”

Medlin laughed along with her. “What did she say to that?”

“Oh, she laughed, Monsieur, she laughed the most wonderful laugh.”

She smiled at the memory of that, and Medlin thought, Garrick, you old charmer. Then Madame became serious.

“But then,” she said, “she told me that if I have relatives in the south, I should give some thought to visiting them. She told me that the mountain is going to destroy the town.

“Do you believe her?”

“I do not know. The mountain has not erupted since anyone can remem-ber. It made some harmless puffs of smoke many years ago, when my grandmothers were young girls. But I do not know what to believe now. If you will excuse me, Monsieur,” and she moved away with a rustle of skirts.

When he had finished eating, she reappeared and led him to a small, steam-filled room built onto the back of the house. Covered storage jars and other earthenware were ranked against the walls. There was a small hearth for heating water in one corner. The girl was pouring water from a large pan into a metal bathtub that sat in the middle of the floor.

“Here are towels and a sponge and some soap,” Madame said, indicating each thing with a palm-up wave as she named it, “and here is a robe. If you will leave your garments outside the door, I shall clean them. It is a sin to work on Sunday, but you must have clean clothes.” She paused and stepped out of the way to let the girl pass with her empty kettle. “Do you require anything else, Monsieur?

Medlin looked at her, was about to say no, said nothing. She was standing at the door, watching him, the fingertips of her right hand resting lightly against her sternum above the slope of her bosom. It was not a provocative stance, and yet he thought he saw something in it that was not a welcome and not a challenge, but only a look of expectation. Men always required something else. He could not help

thinking of the whore on the Rue Syphilis, and it shocked him.

"No," he managed to say, "nothing else," and waited too long before adding, "a good long quiet soak is all I need, thank you," and felt like a complete idiot for the second time since he had arrived in town, "thank you very much."

"You are welcome, Monsieur."

Medlin stared at the door after she had closed it behind herself. Had he read those signals right? Had she been offering to let him—? Christ, no, surely not. If washing clothes on Sunday was a sin, what did that make—?

No, surely not, surely not.

A cheap cloth curtain covered the single window. He drew it aside and looked out onto an unpaved courtyard with a small fountain. There was a vegetable garden in one corner of the yard, and what he took to be a cooking shed against the near wall. Some dead birds lay on the ground opposite. Everything looked dingy. Flecks of ash still turned in the air.

He let the curtain drop, and his fingers came away dirty. Ash seeping in through the space between window frame and curtain had collected moisture from the humid air in the room and settled on everything in a gritty paste.

Medlin peeled himself to the skin. First taking care to empty the pockets of his coat, he neatly folded his outer garments, rolled his shirt and underwear into a bundle, and set them outside the door along with his tired-looking shoes. Then he eased himself into the tub. He had always believed that bathing was the benchmark of civilization. But for the thin scum of ash collecting on the surface of his bath water and the sediments of fine volcanic matter on the bottom of the tub, this could have been the best bath he had ever taken. Excepting that time when he and—what *was* her name? His thoughts abruptly veered back to the vision of Madame Boislaville standing at the door, waiting for him to say it, if she had in fact been waiting for him to say something.

You're imagining stuff, he told himself. One glimpse of the nightlife in Little Sodom, Little Gomorrah, and you think every woman in town's for rent.

But, he asked himself, *did* Garrick pay her to do *that*, too?

What the hell, Med, Garrick's crazy. She really *is* crazy, really *has* to be crazy to be doing what she's doing, really is capable of anything, but this Boislaville woman's a *denizen* for chrissake, be like screwing a ghost for chrissake, be like, and he forced the Madames Garrick and Boislaville from his mind for the moment and let the water claim him.

When he began to doze, he got out of the tub, dried off, and put on the robe. It was clean but worn. It felt tight across his shoulders. His hostess evidently heard him thumping around, for now came a discreet knock at the door, and she said, “Monsieur enjoyed his bath?”

He peered around the edge of the door at her and could not read her expression. There was in her voice no note of anything except Professional solitude. He began to feel ashamed of himself, and it confused him. She was only a denizen.

“It was the most pleasant bath I have ever taken,” he told her.

She gave a slight nod and led him upstairs to a small room with a cot, a table, and a chair. On the table was a metal washbasin containing a pitcher and a block of soap the size of a half-brick. There was a porcelain chamber pot beneath the cot. The door had no lock. She nodded at both shuttered windows.

“More dust gets in with the shutters closed than light gets in with the shutters opened.”

Small wonder, Medlin thought. There was no glass in the windows, an ideal arrangement for the tropics unless there happened to be a nearby volcano pumping out schmutz.

The woman made a furrow in the thin layer of ash on the tabletop and showed him her gray fingertip. “It is impossible to keep house. I had the girl clean here just this morning. I shall bring your clothes as soon as they ire clean.”

“Thank you.”

The room was an oven. As soon as Madame left, he opened the shutters of both windows in the, as it turned out, vain hope of getting some air to blow through. The windows faced north and west, and from them he could look out on the street in front of the Boislaville establishment and also see the volcano and roadstead. The volcano seemed to doze fitfully. The sea looked lead-gray and sluggish.

Garrick, he thought, Garrick, what *are* you up to?

Garrick had never been one to do anything just for the sake of doing it.

Medlin sat on the sill and unfolded the newspaper again. By the poor light of the ash-veiled day he began to read, impatiently at first, then more intently and with deepening disbelief.

> Yesterday the people of St. Pierre were treated to a grandiose spectacle in the majesty of the smoking volcano. While at St. Pierre the admirers of the beautiful could not take their eyes from the smoke of the volcano and the ensuing falls of cinder, timid people were committing their

souls to God.

> It would seem that many signs ought really to have warned us that Mount Pelée was in a state of serious eruption. There have been slight earthquake shocks this noon. The rivers are in over-flow. The need now is for the people outside St. Pierre to seek the shelter of the town. Citizens of St. Pierre! It is your duty to give these people succor and comfort.
>
> Because of the situation in the hinterland, the excursion to Mount Pelée which had been organized for tomorrow morning will not leave St. Pierre, the crater being absolutely inaccessible. Those who were to have joined the party will be notified when it will be found practical to carry out the original plan.

There was a burst of complaint from the street below. He looked down to see a fistfight in front of a shop two doors away. No one moved to stop it. An aproned man with an alarmed expression stood to one side, making pushing gestures with his hands and volubly exhorting everyone to go away. The bystanders ignored him. Most of them watched the fight. per-haps half a dozen separated from the crowd and coalesced into a discrete group that moved with stunning suddenness into a vegetable shop across the street. Medlin saw no signals exchanged, no indication that the people knew one another; looting was an idea whose moment had come. There were shouts and crashes. The group emerged and turned into its constituent strangers, who ran away clutching handfuls of vegetables as though they were trophies.

The idea caught on. Other shops were raided. Some raiders began to tear shutters off the closed shops. Medlin noticed a couple of men look speculatively at him and at Madame Boislaville's closed shutters. One of the men took a step forward, and Medlin slipped a hand into the pocket of the robe, wrapped his fingers around the butt of the revolver, wondered if he could actually bring himself to use it on anyone except Garrick.

Another thought intruded on that one: could he do even that?

Now a squad of soldiers appeared. It was met by distraught shopkeepers, who jabbered in creole and French and pointed accusingly at individual onlookers. One of the accused, a burly mulatto, answered by raising a yam to his mouth, biting into it defiantly, and chewing with exaggerated gusto. The lieutenant was distracted by shopkeepers' hands on his lapels. The enlisted men behind him clutched their rifles, looking uneasy.

Medlin started to close the shutter, then stared. From the volcano an enormous black cloud was spreading across the sky. He watched, alarmed, as stuff began to rain from the cloud's underside. From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed an object flashing downward at terrific speed. An instant later— before he could turn his head—the object struck the eaves of a nearby roof, shattering tiles and spraying the street with ceramic shrapnel. Below his window, accusations broke off in yelps and screeches. He slammed the shutter and rushed to close the other. He listened

unhappily for a time, sitting on the cot, yawning in spite of himself. Finally, he stretched out and fell asleep so fast that it was like blacking out. The last thing he heard was the sound of church bells punctuating the clatter of falling pumice.

Heat and the rotten-egg smell woke him. He limped dazedly to the window and cracked the shutter. It was just as hot and smelled just as bad outside, but the view was impressive. Sunset made the vast poisonous cloud hanging over the volcano a thing of beauty. He started to return to the cot when he saw his coat hanging on a peg set into the wall. His trousers and shirt hung over the back of the chair, and there was a bundle on the table that had to be his underwear. His shoes were by the door; they still looked tired. Medlin removed the trousers and shirt, dragged the chair over to the door, and wedged the back under the handle.

He slept poorly and rose early. Madame had arisen even earlier and came tapping at the door as he was washing his face. She apologized profusely and repetitiously for the breakfast she brought. The ash was in everything, she said. The bread was stale, the fruit was speckled. There was no cream for the coffee, which tasted of sulphur anyway.

He thanked her all the same. He ate and drank and then resignedly opened the shutters to meet the new day. This Monday morning, the volcano had crowned itself with wisps of dirty white smoke. Most people in the street had handkerchiefs tied over their lower faces. It reminded him irresistibly of Tokyo and Mexico City.

The old woman was almost directly below his window, stirring up ash on the sidewalk with her remnant of a broom. She was absorbed in her work until a carriage drew up at the curb; Medlin caught some infinitesimal, unseeable, untouchable, but undeniable portion of Garrick’s being. A glim-mering arm appeared at the window of the cab and rested on the sill. The shimmering hand beckoned. Oblivious to the glow but radiating her own suspicion, the woman shuffled over to the carriage. words were spoken, and she suddenly turned to look up at him. There was no mistaking the hatred in her expression. She nodded to the person in the cab and disappeared through the door below.

Medlin shook the ash out of his coat and shoes and rushed downstairs, catching the old woman as she was still sullenly conveying her message to Madame.

“Please excuse my hurry,” he said as he dashed past, “but I must go!” The carriage was covered with ash. Both the driver and the horse were red-eyed and miserable. The cab door was flung open invitingly, and it did not surprise Medlin, as he stepped up to climb in, to see Garrick waiting for him. Still, he paused, and hung half in and half out while his face grew hot and the muscles in his forehead contracted into a frown. Garrick was dressed in white and had a stylish hat on her head. She was so old and faded that, but for the pale blue band of her hat and the glimmer around her, she would have been achromatic. One hand, as gnarled as mangrove roots, curled around the handle of a wooden walking- stick. Her other

hand was drawn into a knobby fist like the head of a shillelagh. Poking from the fist was a small revolver. The muzzle was negligently trained on Medlin's midriff.

Garrick grinned, and skin around her eyes crinkled like parchment. The rest of her face was smooth and taut. Her skin looked shrinkwrapped over the pointed chin and nose and the high, sharp cheekbones. She said, "It's good to see you, Med. How was World War two?"

"Garrick," Medlin said tonelessly, eyeing the revolver, and then after a second added, "is a gun necessary?"

"It depends. How sure are you of your own loyalties?"

"At the moment ..."

"Just to be on the safe side, why don't I trouble you for the gun you're carrying? Lean in just a bit." Garrick let go of the walking stick, slipped her hand into the pocket of Medlin's coat, withdrew his revolver by the barrel, gingerly, as though it were a dead mouse. "Why do men always have to have such big guns?" she said, as she put it and her own weapon into a handbag. "Now come on in."

Medlin stepped in as she told the driver to proceed to the Morne d'Orange. The driver addressed his horse, there was the soft *swick* of a whip cutting the air, and the carriage began to move. Its wheels made no sound on the ash carpet and had trouble getting sufficient traction. The vehicle skidded alarmingly as it negotiated a turn.

Garrick settled back in her seat and looked along her shoulder. Her expres-sion became mock-concerned. "You look like your feelings've really been hurt."

Medlin exhaled with some vehemence. "Until now," he said, his voice threatening to shake, "I was sure it was all a mistake, that everything'd be okay once you went back and explained. Now ..."

"Well," she said, "I guess there's nothing like having a friend point a gun at you to make you have serious doubts about the relationship."

"How are you feeling?"

Now her expression became mock-surprised. "Is that their line? I'm this senile and dazed old dear who's wandered off in time? Or is it that I've been under a lot of stress and gone harpo?"

"Haven't you?"

“Haven’t I which?”

“Either, hell, I don’t know!”

“If I’d done one or the other—gone senile, gone crazy—would I be able to say, one way or another? I guess if you really pressed me for an answer, I’d say I’ve just gone fishing.”

Medlin licked his gritty lips. “They say you stole two dozen ampoules of the drug.”

“Oh,’ she said happily, “I stole the drugs, all right. But I wouldn’t put too much faith in anything else they told you. They’re really just mad because I took my ball and went home. In their present state of mind, maybe I should say, in their future state of mind, they’re liable to accuse me of anything. Was I hard to find?”

“After you checked out everything the library has on volcanoes, Marti-nique, and *fin de siècle?* Took us about thirty minutes to decide you’d come here and weren’t just throwing us off the track. Took me most of a day to locate the hole you came through, but, then, I was dead tired. I’d just brought Witts back from watching Hitler roll up Europe. Otherwise…an earthmover leaves fainter tracks than you did.”

“Ah. Well, you can’t’ve had much time to familiarize yourself with the situation here.” Garrick cocked an eyebrow. “By the way, where’d you tell me Ranke is?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, tell me now.”

“Why should I know where he is?”

“Now don’t be coy,” she said, looking more amused, “it doesn’t become you. We both know you’re the only one who could’ve come after me here. But you’re mush inside.” Her colorless eyes locked with Medlin’s and dared him either to deny the accusation or to look away. “So they had to send Ranke, too. I don’t think he’s arrived yet. Timing’s never been his strong suit, but I’ve never known him to just not show up at all.”

“He could’ve come to grief.”

“Mm, I wouldn’t bet on it. You’ll bring him through, sooner or later. You’re good at what you do. You damn well ought to be. I trained you.”

“You trained Ranke, too.”

Garrick laughed. It was no wonder Madame Boislaville had been charmed; notwithstanding the circumstances, Medlin still thought she had the pleasantness laugh he had ever heard. “And won’t my face be red if he nails me! But, listen, just in case he does, you better get used to the idea of having him around, because you won’t be going anywhere without him from now on. They have a *plan,* dear heart, and they’re not going to let it get fouled up by anybody’s mavericking They trust Ranke. He’s the kind of person they use to keep an eye on all the other kinds of people they use. By the way, how do you like Madame Boislaville’s?”

“Best dive I’ve ever been in.”

“Don’t be a snob. I’ll have you know that Madame Boislaville runs a good, clean establishment—as clean as any place can be with *this,* anyway. She does it all pretty much without help, too, except for that girl of hers. And she’s not a whore, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Medlin looked away quickly, guiltily.

Garrick kept talking as though she had not noticed. “Sorry I couldn’t afford to check you into the International Hotel or such, but we’re on a budget. They didn’t provide you with any money, did they? *Trés* typical. Best-case-scenario planners, every one.” She took a small purse from her bag, riffled through the franc notes in it, and stuffed a handful into Medlin’s coat pocket. ‘Don’t worry, I didn’t hit anybody over the head to get this. I won it mostly fair and square. Believe it or not,” and she made herself look shocked for a moment, “there’s *gambling* in this town! You better learn your denomina-tions before you try to spend any of that. There’re thieves in this town, too. You’ll be relatively safe and well-cared-for at Madame’s. She won’t be as curious about your business as white folks at the International would be. You won’t have to answer any hard questions.”

“Mind telling me where we’re going?”

“Just for a ride.”

Medlin glared at her in exasperation. “You never *just* do *anything.*” “Sightseeing, then. What do you think of St. Pierre so far?”

“I think things are going to hell here, but the newspaper’s playing down all the volcanic activity. The authorities are discouraging people from leaving town.”

She looked at him disbelievingly. “Is that stuff you came here knowing or what you’ve personally figured out since you got here? Oh, never mind. Authority is invested locally in Mayor Fouché who of course enjoys the unqualified support of that rag, *Les colonies.* Fouché’s got his own expert, too, a science teacher from the local school, to back up his assertion that the volcano’s no threat. Fouché also asserts that there’s medical evidence to show that sulphur can be beneficial for chest

and throat complaints. It's all politics, of course. It always is politics. Er, you *did* notice there was a primary election yesterday, didn't you?"

"I was busy yesterday," Medlin said testily, "noticing food riots and volca-nic eruptions and stuff."

"Ah, yes, hasn't this been just the most interesting couple or three days? Always something exciting going on in Little Paris, now more than ever. Thomas probably said, Go find Garrick, and don't get blown up by the volcano. Am I right? Sure I am. I'm only too familiar with his kind of briefing. Get *in,* get it *done,* get *out.* Makes me wonder what sex's like for Missis Thomas."

Medlin bristled slightly. "I know the volcano erupts and destroys the town at eight o'clock Thursday morning, the eighth of May. I know thousands of people die here because city and government officials encourage them not to leave. It has something to do with every registered voter in this town actually having to vote *in* this town."

"That's barely adequate," said Garrick. "Do you know anything about bridges dropping out from under folks, a prison revolt—did you hear those rifle volleys yesterday afternoon? That tremor last night collapsed a bridge over the River Roxelane, which flows through town. A funeral party happened to be crossing at the time. All this ruckus and more *and* an election, too. The final election's scheduled for next Sunday, and it isn't for dog-catcher, either. It's for the French Chamber of Deputies, all the way over in *La Métropole.* Politics here are just like politics everyplace else. There're maybe a hundred and thirty thousand Martiniquais. Most of 'em are people of color, but, surprise surprise, it's whites who own everything—whorehouses, plantations, the government."

"The place seems pretty wide open to me."

"That's just commerce. The government's very conservative. Martini-quais may be the most racially mixed people on Earth, and the most race-conscious. The whites've exploited that ever since slavery was abolished and everyone was enfranchised. But their grip slipped in the last election. The coloreds finally put together a viable political party and sent a *black* senator to Paris. This election, the white party looks to suffer more embarrassment. You can see why neither party wants voters leaving town."

"Garrick, what does any of this have to do with anything?"

"Stop fidgeting. Listen, and maybe you'll learn something—besides the obvious, which is, never live on an active plate margin." Garrick pointed at the smouldering mountain through the window on Medlin's side of the cab. "There's a wild card in this deck. I give you Montagne Pelée—"

“No goddamn thanks.”

“—cloud-herder, lightning-forger, and rainmaker,” she went on, not missing a beat, “drawing to itself all the white vapors of the land, robbing lesser eminence, of their shoulder-wraps and head-coverings.” She smiled wistfully. “Lafcadio Hearn. Not one of the forbidden writers, just one of the forgotten ones. He also wrote that St. Pierre was the queerest, quaintest, and prettiest of all West Indian cities. He outlived the place by a couple of years. I wonder if he ever saw the photographs taken after its destruction. Place looks like Hiroshima.”

Without warning, the carriage stopped, hurling them forward. In the next moment, Medlin heard the report of a gun and an exultant cheer. He looked out. The street was choked with people, including a number of soldiers. An officer was holstering his sidearm. The civilians were running about shouting excitedly. One held up a length of bamboo, and Medlin saw, impaled on its sharpened end, a writhing thing as long as the man’s arm.

Garrick yelled to the driver, “Go around!” and plopped back into her seat as the carriage moved again. Pinned to her breast was an old-fashioned watch, with a dial and hands; she looked at it and murmured, “We’ll still make it in time.”

“What’s all the shooting and shouting about?”

“Snakes. All the refugees here aren’t human. Every stinging, biting thing in the jungle is on the move. Snakes, ants, centipedes. The mulatto quarter’s infested with *fer-de-lances.* Dozens of people are dead of snakebite. Now what’s the matter?”

The carriage had stopped again. “My apologies, Madame,” the driver called down, “but the horse cannot climb even such a small hill as this.” “Then my friend and I shall walk. Please wait here for us. Come on, Med, I believe we’re just in time.”

“For what?”

“You’ll see.”

They stepped from the carriage at the foot of one of the hillocks that formed the amphitheater. Above them, the mouths of ancient muzzle-load-ing cannon gaped over a crumbling parapet. Ahead, other people were climbing the slope—well-dressed white people, ladies and gentlemen. Thick gray smoke billowed from the crater, and the ladies hurried along with the hems of their long skirts lifted clear of the ground and their parasols spread in a brave attempt to protect fair skins and good hats.

“Why,” Garrick said as she and Medlin began to labor up the slope, “I do believe that’s Missis Prentiss up ahead there. I keep running into her. She’s the

American Consul's wife. Saw her in the crowd on the Place Bertin yesterday. The idea seemed to percolate through everyone's head for a mo-ment that the volcano's behavior was legitimate cause for worry. They were whipping themselves into a fine state of hysteria when a churchman arrived in a coach. He got 'em calmed down with a prayer. But about one minute later, the volcano started a new demonstration." She was panting as they neared the top of the hillock, but she still had breath enough for an exhalation that did not stop much short of a guffaw. "So much for the efficacy of prayer, even dear Missis Prentiss'."

The gentlemen and ladies assembled at the summit of the hillock. Most of them peered seaward, but one man looked around at Medlin and Garrick as they approached, and there was puzzlement in his expression.

"We're being noticed," Medlin said, trying to appear as though he were not talking.

"Well, we're white," Garrick said unconcernedly, "and well-dressed—*I* am, anyway—and we're total strangers to all these white, well-dressed folks who all know one another. But don't worry, they aren't interested in us. They came up here because they heard someone say that the sea's acting peculiarly," and she nodded toward the roadstead.

Even as Medlin looked, a stiff breeze was blowing across the harbor, shredding the veil of cinders. Behind and above the Morne d'Orange, the volcano growled bad-temperedly. After a moment, he became aware of two other sounds, one a sort of sizzling, rushing noise, the other a rising, undulat-ing chorus of cries from the direction of the waterfront. Running figures spilled into the Avenue Victor Hugo.

"What," he said, "what's—"

Garrick consulted her antique timepiece again, and as she said, "Here it comes, right on schedule," Medlin suddenly saw as well as heard *it,* a great wave, coming hissing from the north. It was already halfway across the roadstead. It came up under two small sailing ships moored in its path, lifted them up, carried them along. They hung on the crest of the steep shoulder of water and then, as the wave avalanched with shattering impact onto the waterfront, hurtled completely over the quayside row of buildings. Houses, shops, and warehouses twisted on their foundations, disintegrated. The wave surged up the thoroughfare, rising to the second-floor balconies. It reached the lighthouse, swirled around its base, and inundated the square on which it stood. There it hesitated. It hesitated forever. Then, slowly, reluctantly, it started to retreat.

Medlin was on the ground. He had no memory of sitting down. There was a sustained moan from the other watchers on the hillock. They were pale-faced, open-mouthed, awestruck. He knew the feeling.

He got to his feet and brushed ash from his sleeve. Garrick turned to leave, but he angrily grabbed her arm. She looked at his hand and then at his face and said, “Gentlemen do not mishandle ladies.”

He waved his free hand at the scene below and managed to gasp out, “What—?”

“This is nothing, Med,” she said mildly, and detached herself. “Wait. You’ll see.”

“You keep saying that! What’ll I see? More of the same?”

“Oh God, yes. More and worse. The wave was just a side-effect. Not even a prelude. We have a ways to go before it’s time for the grand finale, the show-stopper—the glowing cloud! That being the literal meaning of *nuée ardente* —” she spoke the term the way she might have savored a continental delicacy “—which is the name given to the particularly nasty phenomenon that’s going to destroy this burg. In case you neglected to research this detail, it’s an incandescent cloud of rock fragments and hot gases. Pelée’s going to spit out one of these horrors Thursday morning. It’ll come right down that big notch in the mountainside there. It’ll hit the town at incredible speed, with tremendous force.”

“Why do you want me to see all of these terrible things?”

“Object lesson. It’s time you looked up and saw the mountain.”

“What?” But Garrick merely turned and walked away. Medlin’s options were to follow her or wrestle her to the ground. He followed, and when he drew abreast he said, “It shouldn’t take a genius to figure out, but damned if I know what you’re up to. Unless you’re trying to lose Ranke and me in all the confusion when the volcano does pop.”

She pivoted on her nearer foot and stabbed a finger as hard and sharp as an antler into his breast. “I can lose you without the volcano’s goddamn help, thank you. You couldn’t follow my trail around the corner, and you know it.”

“*I’m* not the one you have to worry about.”

Garrick looked slightly sheepish. “Okay,” she said, “so I *am* counting on getting a little help from Pelée. It never hurts to give yourself an edge when you’re dealing with Ranke. I think he may find it hard to concentrate in this place. It’s very stressful here. The air’s full of static electricity, there’s this stinking ash, the barometric pressure’s all screwy—” “Doesn’t sound like that much of an edge to me.”

She frowned. “Don’t you doubt that I can lose him if I want to.”

“So why don’t you? Why are you still here?”

“I can’t leave you behind, Med. I’ve got to get you to go with me, and you know that can only happen if you go willingly.”

“Go where?”

“Anywhere!”

“What is this game you’re playing?”

Garrick gestured at the town before them. The waterfront was a shambles. Each of the two sailing ships—mastless, shattered hulks—could be seen sitting in its own pile of rubble. “If all I was doing,” she said, “was playing games, I’d’ve gone someplace *nice,* done something *fun.* Parisians are rioting at the premiere of Stravinsky’s new ballet in nineteen thirteen. I might even’ve come here, in some happier year. This is a beautiful island, even if Little Paris is a bit lusty for my taste. But now it’s hot as hell here, it stinks, and it’s infested with snakes. And it’s doomed. Hundreds of people’ve died around this volcano since Saturday. Thirty *thousand* are going to die here before it’s all done. Most of ‘em are going to be killed by superheated gas and politics. I know that sounds redundant, but it’s the truth. Thirty thousand people, a fourth of the population of Martinique in nineteen oh two, all victims of arrogance and ignorance.”

“So it’s an object lesson. What’m I supposed—”

“*Learn* something from it!” Two faint reddish spots appeared high on the woman’s cheekbones. “Here’s all this self-important scramble down here, and, up there, looming catastrophe! And like I said, it’s time for you to look up and see the mountain. I’m hoping you’ll go with me. If you stick with the scramblers, you’re going to get wiped out with them. I don’t want that to happen. You’re important to me. I’m important to you, too.”

“Maybe not important enough to defect for.”

“Then maybe you’ll think *this* is important enough. Someone, the presi-dent, the military, I don’t know who, has been sold the bright idea that past events can be revised to suit present needs. Can and *should* be.”

Medlin looked at her and thought, Crazy. Suspecting it before and be-lieving it now were two different things. It hurt now that he saw just how crazy she was.

She must have seen how skeptical he was, for she said, “It’s true, Med.”

“Oh, come on. People’ve been saying crap like that since before anyone knew *how* to travel. It’s a *joke.* Oh God, if only I could go back in time and not have the accident with the scoozip. Oh God, if only I could renew the insurance policy the day before I had the accident with the scoozip. Oh God, if only I could buy the roto instead of the scoozip.”

Garrick grinned like a skull. “Pretend for a second I’m presenting this scheme in a really positive light, and pretend you’re the president or someone impressionable like that. God, be honest, wouldn’t it sound *so tempting?* Make a big mistake somewhere, lose a war or an election? No problem. Accidentally kill everybody in Arizona? Well, no big loss, but still no prob-lem. Just go back, change things to make ‘em come out the way you want! They’re calling it ‘temporal engineering.’ There’s no telling what havoc’ll be created if those idiots ever actually give it a try.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t have any effect,” Medlin said. “Nothing ever has before. Time’s resilient, forgiving. It’s accommodated us so far.”

“So *far,”* she snapped, “we haven’t tested its patience! We haven’t tried to show it who’s boss! Can you imagine the kind of force needed to really change an event so that it affects things up the way? *Experts* were brought in to say what everybody wanted to hear. That the past can be altered to produce the desired present. Isn’t that a lovely term? The desired present. And here’s where it stuck for me, these *experts* made it a major, fundamental point that if you want to alter the past, you have to have *complete control* of travel, because you don’t want somebody unaltering things on you. So no more mavericking around for you and me!” She paused, panting and glaring. He had never seen her quite so upset before. “The really insulting part is, they broached this insanity to me like they expected me to *go for it!”*

Medlin shook his head. “I’m just not sure I believe a word of this,” he said. “Why didn’t Thomas tell me anything about it? Why didn’t *you?”*

“Someone—maybe Thomas, but I think probably not—didn’t tell you because they were hedging their bet. I couldn’t tell you because you were in nineteen forty when I decided to bolt. I couldn’t wait around for you to get back. They were ready to *roll* on this thing. You’d’ve been told soon enough. After all, a traveler’s essential to this project, and if I’m dead or AWOL, you’re it. We’re the only real travelers they’ve got, the only ones who can go anywhere we set our minds to, almost—anywhere there’s the least little crack, I don’t want to squander this gift playing fetch. Nor should you. Thomas isn’t your friend. And the agency isn’t your home.”

“And you’re not my mom.”

Garrick looked pained. “I’m trying to save your *soul* here.”

“To say nothing of saving the purity and essence of time. Look, forget about my soul for a minute. If temporal engineering’s such a big deal with you, why don’t you stop it? It’s not as though you don’t have clout of your own.”

“Their minds are made up. The only way to stop ‘em is for us to not go back and help ‘em get started.” She extended her hand to him; after a moment, he took it. There was nothing to it but bones and milky skin. “We can skip this depressing catastrophe,” she said, “and go see Stravinsky’s ballet. It’s only an ocean and eleven years away.”

“I don’t know. What about Ranke?”

She made an impatient face. “What about him?”

“He’s going to show up here whether I’m still around to take him home or not.”

“Perhaps Pelée’ll give him a warm welcome. If he’s smart, and he some-times is, he’ll get the hell out of town.”

“And we just let him wander around lost in nineteen oh two forever?”

“Do not waste your concern on Ranke. He’d find his niche wherever he is. There always is a niche for people like Ranke.”

Medlin let go of Garrick’s hand. His arm fell to his side. “I can’t.”

“Oh, God, why not?” She was the picture of exasperation.

“Because I just can’t. I’m not…I don’t know, I can’t make up my mind.”

“That’s *always* been your problem! Well, I’ve got some bad news for you. You’re finally going to have to take decisive action. You just can’t go along and get along any more.”

A darkening pall of ash and smoke lay over the town like twilight. The carriage was still waiting at the base of the hill. Driver and horse looked as though they had been carved from dirty rock. Garrick climbed into the carriage and slammed the door.

Dismayed, Medlin said, “Are you going to leave me stranded here?”

She looked out the window. “It may come to that!”

“I can’t see thirty feet here!”

“Wherever you are in a town this size, you’re never too far from anyplace else. Just go back to the Avenue Victor Hugo. It’ll lead you right back to Madame Boislaville’s street.”

“Maybe her street isn’t there any more! Even if it is, maybe I won’t be able to find it.”

“I understand your distress, but we’re still waiting for Ranke, remember? I’ve taken a big chance here already. As long as your loyalties are all tangled, I’d rather not be around you when he does pop up.”

“This is so crazy,” he said sorrowfully.

“I’m going to have to kill him,” she said, “or he, me. He knows you can’t take me back without my cooperation. I’m sure he doesn’t expect me to oblige him by going back under my own power.”

“Goddammit!”

“Now, now. See you soon, I hope. Driver!”

Driver and horse shook gray powder from themselves. The carriage soundlessly pulled away. Medlin stumbled after it vengefully, but it was quickly lost to sight in the false dusk. He swore, rammed his fists into his trousers pockets, and walked slowly and half-blind to the Avenue Victor Hugo.

He came to the edge of the devastated area. The wave had been a spent force by the time it lapped around these houses. Slowed or not, it had turned the thick blanket of ash into a putrid-smelling porridge of mud seasoned with foodstuffs, utensils, odd pieces of clothing, whole and shattered pieces of furniture, stranded marine life, dead livestock, and human bodies. The living stood about numbly, and then by ones, twos, and threes they came forward, searching for their homesites, belongings, missing families. The pall was murkily suffused with light from torches and supercharged with static electric-ity. Brilliant streaks of lightning intermittently shot through it. There was a constant background chorus of moans and cries.

Splattered with muck, his eyes, nose, and throat burning and his stomach heaving, Medlin wandered lost in a darkened, debris-clogged maze. It was not until he found his way blocked by a mass of splintered wooden spars, shredded canvas, and tangled ropes—part of the mast and rigging of one of the ravaged ships—that he realized that he had strayed off the main thoroughfare. When he attempted to retrace his steps, he emerged onto a great sloping square. A solemn crowd lined its edges. Lying in rows in the center were scores of dead bodies. They had been dusted with quicklime and looked like broken statuary. A priest and a policeman walked side by side among the rows, the priest either calling out a name for each body or else calling on onlookers to identify it, and the policeman writing the name in a roster. The

supply of coffins must have been exhausted. Soldiers were wrapping the bodies in banana leaves, loading them onto stretchers, and carrying them away.

Medlin thought of Garrick and was filled with a great hot surge of hatred that sustained him until he unexpectedly found himself standing before Madame Boislaville's house. The wave had not penetrated her street. Every-thing looked the same, gray, silent, unmoving, dead—*normal,* he thought sourly as he pounded on the door with the side of his fist.

She let him in and slid the bolt home with a good, solid, reassuring thunk. He sank into a chair. They regarded each other dumbly.

"I am glad," he finally told her, "to see that you are all right."

"And you, Monsieur."

"I watched the wave come, saw it hit."

"It is—"

She could not find a word for what it was, but he nodded agreement anyway. He ran his tongue over his lips and spat at the taste.

"Madame, is there anything to drink?"

"There is still water for coffee, and some bread and pickles if you are hungry. And there is no shortage of rum."

"May I please have some rum?"

Almost before he had asked for it, there was a drink on the table. The rum cut a ravine through the sulphur bed in his mouth. He finished it and asked for another. When he had finished that one as well and asked for still another, Madame said, "Too much rum will make you sorry to be alive."

He ignored the warning and got the drink. The next thing he knew was that he was drunk as he had ever been in his life and filled with horror and self-pity. Madame had disappeared for a time but now returned, from either the kitchen or whatever part of the building was her living quarters. There was no sympathy in her expression. She had warned him, he had ignored the warning, now here he was, the foolish American, truly sorry to be alive.

"Join me, Madame," he said thickly. "We'll drink to this doomed town."

She shook her head. "I had better make the coffee and bring you some food."

“Why are you still here?”

She had started to leave. She turned to answer. “I am here because this is my home, Monsieur.”

“Your home is doomed. Look out the window.”

“Perhaps the worst is past.”

“This town is going to be destroyed. Anyone who stays here is going to die. There is still time to escape. Take your girl and your grandmother and go.”

Distaste tugged at one corner of her mouth. “The old woman is my aunt. She is someone’s aunt, anyway. Everyone on Martinique . . . but my aunt, my aunt, she tells me terrible things. She says that she has visited a wizard.” Madame shuddered visibly, then crossed herself. “I have thrown her out, Monsieur. Let the wizard take her into *his* home. She terrifies my Elizabeth. The wizard told her not to place her trust in the power of white men’s god. He told her that the Holy Church has made the mountain erupt and caused all the deaths.”

“Whosever’s fault it is, you must get out. You should have left when Madame Garrick—my great friend and mentor, ace of travelers, knower of all—should have gotten out when she told you to go. Last whenever it was.”

For a moment he thought she was going to cry. Then she said, angrily, “She says that the mountain is a menace! The mayor says that it is not! I know, I *know*, that white people are great liars, but both Madame Garrick and the mayor are white, so I do not know who is lying.”

“White or not, she knows what is going to happen here. So do I.”

“Perhaps yes, perhaps no. You are white, too. You could be lying as well.”

“Then the hell with you.”

He pushed himself out of the chair and somehow made it up the stairs to the room. He stood in the doorway, assayed some calculations based on the distance between himself and the cot, took a long step forward. The room and its meager furnishings tilted sharply and rose about him. The floor caught him, not gently.

He awoke on the cot, listening to a murmur of voices from the street outside. It hurt him to move his head. His mouth tasted of kitchen matches, a whole box of them. He had a dim memory of awakening once to call for water and at least once again to be violently sick in the chamber pot. Neither pitcher nor pot was in sight. He felt exhausted, unclean, poisoned.

He staggered to the window and leaned on the sill. In the street below the window was what first appeared to be a vast funeral procession and then resolved itself into a dense bunch of lesser processions. The black-garbed mourners jostled one another, moving from shrine to shrine, and their prayers mingled in the hot, polluted air to become a soft mush of crying, prayers for the dead, and pleas for God's intervention. There were other, harsher voices, too. Criers added to the confusion and congestion as they ran among the processions. Some shouted instructions from the Action Committee, whatever that was: everyone was to wash the ash from walls and roofs. Others were political sloganeers, broadcasting the political parties' competing messages to the illiterate segments of the electorate.

Unmindful of babble, the volcano industriously pumped out black smut. The sea was calm in the roadstead. Along the ruined waterfront burned regularly spaced fires. Medlin had no idea of what these signified, except more trouble. The sun was a ghostly orb sitting low in a cinder-filled sky, barely above the western horizon. Several seconds elapsed before the wrongness of that view registered, and then dread burst inside him like a soft, spoiled fruit. He lumbered noisily to the landing at the top of the stairs and gave a fearful raw-throated shout, *"Madame Boislaville!"*

She swept into view below. She looked surprised and wary.

"Yes, M—"

"What day," and then his headache caught up with him, forcing him to lower his voice, "what *day* is this?"

"Tuesday, Monsieur."

"How can it—Tuesday. Of course." Tuesday. Christ. He clutched the wooden bannister. Below, she wiped her hands on the apron and made her expression unfathomable. "Is there any breakfast?"

"It is almost suppertime, and I have nothing to—"

"Coffee?"

"Yes, of course, Monsieur. I shall make some and bring it up to you at once."

"No, no. I am coming down."

"There is no food today. I am very sorry."

"No, I understand, it is all right," and, clinging to the bannister, he went painfully down the stairs.

She helped him into a chair and brought him a pot of black coffee and a cup.

She also produced a pair of salty pickles, a stale heel of bread, and the latest edition of *Les Colonies.* The bread was too hard to eat, and the coffee was too hot to drink at first, so he dipped the one into the other and gratefully sucked on it. Most of *Les Colonies* was given over to an account of the previous day's disaster. A lake on the mountainside had burst its walls, sending tons of mud and debris to pile into the sea north of the roadstead.

The mass had incidentally buried a sugar refinery located at the mouth of the River Blanche, north of town.

He was still hungry when he finished his repast, but his headache had subsided. He crept back upstairs to his room and fell asleep again. This time, his rest was broken intermittently by street noises and volcanic rumblings, by heat and stinks. Once, he awoke to find himself thinking about temporal engineering.

There were, he reflected, many things about the world of his proper matrix that had never bothered him very much. Eco-collapse? Never cared for a second, he told himself, that there's nothing but desert or pavement on land, and the oceans are cesspools, and everywhere you go smells like a beer fart. Money meltdown, nuclear exchange? So the world is owned in the Awful Oughts by a few greedy people who want all the other people to keep bending over and greasing their own behinds for the next reaming. So what? When have things ever been different?

It just *hasn't bothered me.*

Because I have a gift.

How can I hate the world, he thought as he turned on the cot and pressed the side of his face into the gritty pillow, when I'm free to *escape* from it whenever l like . . . ?

Still. Only a fool—not that there weren't always lots of fools—would deny that civilization was in trouble, that the planet itself was in trouble. Perhaps temporal engineering could save the day.

Only, it *hadn't* saved the day.

Then perhaps it was *about* to save the day, and this was the last moment of the old timeline, and everything would now shimmer and dissolve or do some special-effects thing, and he'd awaken with the rest of humanity in some restored Eden . . .

He wondered how one would go about heading off the more complicated disasters, and about how different his own life might be after temporal engineering. Neither line of speculation took him very far. The Awful Oughts were the culmination of some trends that had begun with the Industrial Revolution and others that went

back to Sumer, possibly even to Olduvai Gorge. As for himself, surely he would still be a traveler. And surely there would still be an agency, a Garrick, a Thomas. Even a Ranke.

Far away, seafloor twitched. Close by, the volcano gave a growl.

How much force would it take to change the past? Sleep was taking him again. How much force, measured in, say, Pelées? Two Pelées each to stop Hitler, Stalin, Breedlove? Five Pelées to disinvent styrofoam? Fifteen . . .

When he awoke next, night had fallen. His headache was back and worse than before, he was thirsty and ravenously hungry, and he could not recall having felt so wretched or so stupid in the wake of a drunk since college. Downstairs, his hostess was able to offer him coffee and a single brown banana. He ate the fruit slowly and deliberately, by the light of a lamp on the table. Madame let him drink coffee by himself for a while, then came to stand by the table. He looked up and waited. After a moment she cleared her throat softly, put her hand into the pocket of her apron, and withdrew some franc notes and coins.

"Madame Garrick paid a week's rent," she said, placing the money on the table, "and paid also for a week's meals. This is the portion intended to cover your expenses for the remainder of this week. There is no food here, even for my daughter and myself. Money cannot buy it now. The countryside is deserted, so there is no harvest. The fishermen catch nothing." She would not meet his eye. Her manner was very formal, and she addressed him so stiffly that he knew she must have devoted considerable time to composing and mentally rehearsing this speech. "The mayor says that carts have been sent to gather food from other parts of the island, but the carts do not return. Even if the mountain does not destroy the town, it has destroyed my livelihood. I do not know how to reach your friend, so I must impose upon you to return this money to her."

"Please keep it. She will never miss it. Believe me, I am certain that she would want you to keep it."

Madame drew herself up. "I cannot accept charity."

"A loan, then."

She shook her head again. "I do not know when I would be able to repay it. I am leaving for Fort-de-France in the morning. Today, I prayed to the Holy Virgin, who told me that you are right. I am going to take my Elizabeth and visit my relatives in the south."

"I think you are making a very wise decision. I shall personally escort you and your daughter to the edge of town."

“That will not be necessary.”

He indicated the bolted front door with a slight jerk of his head and instantly regretted the movement. His head was still as tender as a boil. He could all but hear his brain slosh inside his skull. “Anything can happen out there now.”

“Yes, I know.” He heard her sigh. “Sickness is breaking out. They have lighted fires on the beach to purify the air.”

He marveled at the logic of that and couldn’t frame a reply.

Madame finally let herself make eye-contact with him. She said, “*La Verette* kills whites as well, Monsieur. You should take your own advice and go.”

“I have no relatives in the south.”

“Will you sail away, then, on a big boat?”

“On something, I assure you.”

The sound of an explosion passed over them. The woman cried out, and Medlin jerked violently and spilled coffee on himself. He heard a rattling of shelves from the bar and next, as the bang faded, a shrill note like the sound of a titan’s train whistle. He realized that he was standing, open-mouthed, with saliva pooling in the back of his throat. He gulped hard, almost choked. The whistling persisted for several minutes before trailing off.

“I must go to the cathedral,” Madame said in a quavering voice, “and offer prayers for our deliverance.”

Prayer, he started to tell her, will not prevent what is going to happen here, but he saw her eyes widen suddenly, saw her listen and cross herself hurriedly. He said, instead, “What is it?”

She shushed him.

He listened hard.

The drumming was ragged and muted at first, but it steadied quickly, sharpened and rose in volume, became frenzied. He could hear shouts, too.

One damned thing after another, he thought, and asked again, “What is it?”

“*Wizards.*” Her reply was almost inaudible. There was an especially sus-tained burst of yelling, and then he could hear them approaching. He extinguished the lamp with a puff of breath, moved toward the window, and peered

through the crack between the shutters. He saw nothing. A din of singing, shouting, and drumming passed at no very great distance, and, as it did, behind him, the terrified woman hissed, *"Monsieur!"*

"Where are they going, Madame?" There was no answer. He looked over his shoulder, and sensed rather than saw her standing wrapped in darkness at the center of the room. "Where are they going?"

She moaned but made no other sound.

"We'll be safe here," he said. "I have a gun." He patted his coat pocket, then remembered that Garrick had taken it. He kept talking. "You should go see about your daughter. Reassure her. And try to get some rest. You will both need your rest if you are going to Fort-de-France tomorrow." Yeah, right, he told himself, as if anyone could rest. "Pray, Madame. Pray for—" Pray for whatever one prayed for.

He went to the table and groped around its edge to her side. She seemed to be standing very rigidly with her arms pressed tightly against herself and her hands clasped over her bosom as in prayer. She was still moaning as he took both of her hands in his. Either she was numb with fear or else the gesture simply astonished her, for she did not resist or react in any way at first. Her hands were dry and much harder than he had expected them to be. They were the rough, strong hands of someone who worked like a mule every day of her life. They felt more real than his own hands. He could not see her face, but imagined it, and wondered how old she really was, and what the life expectancy of a West Indian mulatto woman could have been— could *be,* here, now—at the beginning of the twentieth century. She sud-denly started like someone awakening from a nap. He made no attempt to hold on as she withdrew her hand from his. Wordlessly, she turned and stumbled away.

Depressed, he sat down by the shuttered window and listened. After a time, he caught himself nodding and got up sharply and walked around the room once. Then he went to his room and cautiously opened the shutter. There was nothing to see except the glow of the volcano's mouth. There was nothing to hear except the noises made by earth and sea and town, each restless and unhappy. The shouting and singing had died away, and even the drumming had become subliminal. Medlin stretched out on his cot and closed his eyes. Sometime later, he was shaken awake by a loud report from the volcano. The summit of the mountain looked like a blast furnace; over it was a cloud filled with lightning.

He did not sleep again after that. Wednesday's sunrise was the saddest he had ever seen. With it came a resumption of the volcano's grumbling. Lightning flashed among the clouds, and thunder rumbled down the moun-tainside. The sea was full of wreckage swept down from forest and field during the night. The dozen ships lying in the roadstead looked as though they had run aground on small islands.

It took most of the morning to load Madame's belongings for the exodus to

Fort-de-France. The woman did not travel lightly. The cart she had got from somewhere was a bed of mismatched planks mounted between two solid wooden wheels. Hitched to this creaking, swaying conveyance was a horse hardly bigger than a large breed of dog. Medlin could not imagine that under the best of circumstances it would have been capable of budging the cart emptied, let along with the girl Elizabeth and household goods aboard, and its nose and lungs irritated by volcanic ejecta. At the woman's urging, however—she pulled gently yet firmly with one hand at its harness and, with the other, flicked a long switch over its back but did not touch its ashy hide— the horse got moving with an easy indifference to the loaded cart. Medlin padlocked the gate to the courtyard and took his station, as he imagined it to be, on the animal's opposite flank. They turned a corner and passed the front of the building. Madame did not pause for a farewell look at her locked and shuttered home. She set her mouth in a ruler-straight line and flicked the switch again to let the horse know she would not stand for dawdling.

The cart made its slow way through and out of the town. Medlin walked with his head hurting and the sour taste of the air in his mouth. He was grateful that Madame seemed disinclined to chat. He saw a few soldiers ahead as the cart approached the junction with the road to Fort-de-France, and because he had no desire to be asked questions by them, he looked across the horse's back at the woman and said, "This is where I get off."

She said, very seriously, "Now you are on the street again. I am sorry that your visit to St. Pierre could not have been a happier one."

"The bath and the gumbo were first-rate, and the rum, too." That brought a faint, fleeting smile to her lips. He was pleased to see it. "Perhaps the next time," he began, but she cut him off with an emphatic shake of her head.

"There will be no next time," she said flatly. "Farewell, Monsieur."

"Farewell, Madame."

"My God be with you."

"And with you," and he asked himself, Why not?

He stopped walking and let the cart pull away. Madame did not look back at him. The girl sat high upon a pile of bundles. When he saw her turn her cat-eyed gaze his way, he gave her a little wave. She did not return it. Congratulating himself on the way he had with children, he looked back at the town. It was the color of the surface of the moon. The muttering volcano was half-hidden by its own gray pall of smoke. The afternoon was passing hot, dark, and noisy.

Well, he thought, how much goddamn longer do I have to stay in this hellhole before I can decently abort the mission? It wouldn't make Thomas happy when he

reported failure, but, then, Thomas was so rarely happy anyway. What did Thomas want him to *do?* Garrick had escaped—at least, Medlin hadn't sensed her since, when had it been, Monday?—and Ranke was a no-show.

He glanced after Madame Boislaville and did a double-take and stared. The soldiers had stepped forward at her approach, and she had halted the cart, and now he could see much gesticulating and hear the woman's voice raised in protest. Flabbergasted, he watched her turn the cart around and head back toward the town. He shook off his amazement and ran forward.

She did not slow the cart as he drew near. She looked as dangerous as the mountain itself as he fell in beside her and tried to walk, talk, look at her, and glare back at the soldiers all at the same time.

She cut him short. "The road to Fort-de-France is blocked," she said. "The soldiers say their orders came from the governor himself."

"Did you tell them you cannot stay here? That—"

"The soldiers do not care what anyone but the governor tells them."

"I shall go talk to them!"

"Yes," she said, "certainly they must be more willing to listen to a dirty American stranger than to a respectable widow," and the long switch hissed and snapped over the horse's back, and the cart kept moving.

They walked some distance wrapped in sullenness. Finally, Medlin said, "Madame, you and the girl must slip past the guards tonight."

She said, as she might impart an obvious fact to a stupid child, "The wizards will be out again tonight. They will kill anyone they find on the road."

"Then go by boat! I don't care *how* you get out, but you *must* get out!"

She seemed to be thinking it over, so he said no more. He noticed a small group of people gathered to examine a poster on a public bulletin board and stepped forward to read it.

Extraordinary Proclamation
to My fellow Citizens of St. Pierre

> The occurrence of the eruption of Mount Pelée has thrown the whole island into consternation. But aided by the exalted intervention of the Governor and of superior authority, the Municipal Administra-tion has provided, in so far as it has been able, for distribution of essential foods and supplies. The calmness and wisdom of which you have proved yourselves capable in these recent anguished days allows us to hope that you will not remain deaf to our

> appeals. In accordance with the Governor, whose devotion is ever in command of circum-stances, we believe ourselves able to assure you that, in view of the immense valleys which separate us from the crater, we have no immediate danger to fear. The lava will not reach as far as the town. Any further manifestion will be restricted to those places already affected. Do not, therefore, allow yourselves to fall victims to ground-less panic. Please allow us to advise you to return to your normal occupation, setting the necessary example of courage and strength during this time of public calamity.
>
> —The Mayor. R. FOUCHÉ

Behind him, Madame asked softly, “What does it say?”

Barely able to contain his anger, he replied, “Nothing. Not a damn thing.”

He barred the gate after she had driven the cart into the courtyard. The girl leaped down and vanished. Medlin helped her mother unhitch the cart and put the horse away, and then Madame led him into the back of the house. He had an impression of impersonal space given over to the utilitarian. It was gloomy and hot, and the ash was ubiquitous. The cafe area itself had acquired a dilapidated, disconsolate air during their brief absence.

Madame said, “I think there is still water for coffee in one of the storage jars. Perhaps even enough for washing.”

“That would be wonderful, Madame.”

The girl emerged without warning and in a hurry from the rear. She went straight to her mother, who instinctively wrapped both arms around her, and glared back over her own shoulder. Madame looked past Medlin and started. Medlin, whose back was to the doorway, heard his name spoken.

Ranke stood framed in the doorway and looked very pleased with the effect he was having. Throughout the years of their acquaintance, whenever he did not have the man actually in view, Medlin had always seen him in his mind’s eye as being taller, leaner, steelier—Ranke admired those qualities and aspired to them, and had some odd knack for leaving people with the impression that he possessed them. In fact, as Medlin realized whenever he actually did see him again, Ranke was no taller or leaner than he was, and the steeliness was only the intent look of a predator, not necessarily a mammalian one. Ranke’s light-colored and lidless gaze took in Madame at a glance, but lingered on the girl as though she might be prey, before coming smoothly back to Medlin. He said, “What day is it?”

“Wednesday,” said Medlin, “the day before the eruption—” He shot a horrified look at Madame and saw that he need not have worried. Nothing he could have said would have got her attention from Ranke at that moment.

Ranke stepped into the room and said, without rancor, “Took your own

sweet time getting me here."

Medlin did not reply. The man frequently did leave him with nothing to say. Instead, he turned to Madame. "You said you thought you still have some water for coffee."

It seemed all she could do to look away from the unblinking serpent, the staring-eyed hawk. "Y-yes."

"May we have some, please?"

"Yes. Of course, Monsieur."

Ranke stepped around to the left to vacate the doorway. The girl broke out of her mother's embrace and bolted through to safety. Madame herself edged toward the doorway from the right. The look of satisfaction on Ranke's face made a scowl start to build itself on Medlin's. Medlin said, "Let's keep this private," and led him up to the room, where Ranke looked about fascinatedly. When he spoke, there was amazement or amusement in his voice, or both.

"Some terrific base of operations you picked out here."

"Garrick picked it out. She had everything set up before I even got here."

"I know you've seen her, talked to her. I can smell her on you." Ranke half-smiled; one cheek dimpled. He moved to the windows and threw open the shutters. Without looking at Medlin, he said, "Why didn't you arrest her when you had her?"

"I didn't think it was part of my job. Anyway, she took my gun away from me."

Ranke shook his head and took out his own weapon. It was a Colt .38-caliber automatic, either an original or a replica. He was as likely to have the one as the other. He checked the chamber and polished the four-inch barrel on his sleeve. "I could have predicted that outcome. She took your balls away from you years ago. Still, it's not going to look good on the report, sport."

"Don't brandish that thing. She was expecting me. She's been expecting both of us, in fact. She says either you or she is going to have to die here, because she's not going back."

Ranke sighted along the barrel of the pistol at Medlin's sternum. "Pretty tough talk for an old lady. Did she say what she expects you to be doing while she and I are all locked together in mortal combat and everything You going to be the scorekeeper, the cheerleader? The prize?"

“I’m getting just a little sick and tired of having guns pointed at me.”

“All in fun.”

“Even in fun. *Especially* in fun.”

Ranke chuckled and lowered the pistol. “You won’t always be so special, you know. Even with Garrick gone. Sooner or later, the agency’ll land someone who knows the same tricks.”

“You know it’s not tricks. It’s talent. Talent’s rare.”

“Not as rare as you think.”

Medlin had never seen anyone look so smug before. He said, “You’ll never be a traveler. You pitch wild.”

“We’re not alone here.”

“I’ve seen them, too. I saw them the first night I was here.”

“If you could see what I see—” Ranke gestured vaguely at the tableau outside the window. “All these different trails, like blurs of light on time-exposed film. They’re threaded through the streets and criss-cross the hills up there. It looks like weaving with airplane contrails. There’re a dozen people here who—” he grinned his predator grin and wagged a finger in the air admonishingly “—shouldn’t be here. Most of them, sure, are passengers. But at least one of them has to be a traveler, and maybe there’s more than just one. If they’ve come to this little hellhole, they must have travelers to spare.”

“They may not be as accommodating as you’d like. I didn’t get the time of day out of them.”

“I guess eventually we’re going to find out just *how* accommodating they can be. The day when we all just pretend not to notice other time travelers and don’t get involved with them is over. There’s a plan now, and it’ll only work if everyone sticks to it and does what they’re supposed to.”

“Ah yes,” Medlin said, “the coming world order. Or should I call it the coming world re-order?”

“The world’s in a mess. Things’ve got to change. From now on, whenever we run into other visitors, whoever they are, wherever they’re from, they’re going to have to listen to us. We’ll tell them, These are our rules, you have to obey them from now on. You want to hear Lincoln talk at Gettysburg or see Catherine the Great

screw the pony, you have to do things according to our rules. Otherwise, there's chaos."

"Garrick told me a little about those rules."

Ranke rolled his eyes ceilingward. "We both know what a talent she has for description. I'm sure she's told you there's some great mischief afoot."

"I'm not as convinced as she is," said Medlin, "that temporal engineering's possible. I'm more concerned about being on a leash."

"Ah. I *thought* she'd try to get you to go maverick with her if she had the chance."

"She may yet succeed."

"Listen to me, Medlin." Ranke stopped toying with the automatic and slipped it back into his pocket as a token of his own seriousness. "You and I have always cordially detested each other. I know you think I'm jealous of the interest she's always shown in you. You think her interest is affection. It isn't. It's self-interest. She thinks of you as her only peer and also as her only rival. She's always kept you close, by her side and on her side, so you couldn't be used against her some day. She wants to run now, but she can't leave you behind. She'd always be looking over her shoulder if she did. But if she did talk you into going with her, you think you wouldn't be on a leash then? She'd never let you out of her sight. Whether you stick with us or go with her, she'll end up trying to kill you."

Medlin's face felt as hot as the volcano's.

"I also know," Ranke went on, "you think I'm jealous because you're a traveler. Nothing is farther from the truth. I do pitch wild, and it's inconve-nient. It forces me to rely on you. But inconvenient is all it is. I'm the world's best tracker, and only some of that's thanks to that old woman. As soon as it gets dark, we'll get on her trail."

"Waiting for dark's not such a great idea. Voodoo worshippers've taken over the streets at night."

"All the more reason," Ranke said, "for us to get a move on," and he grabbed Medlin's arm to haul him up. "Come on, it's check-out time."

"Let me go. I'm already worn out from walking. I hurt my leg the first night I was here, and I'm still limping."

"Pobrecito." Ranke had pulled him up and out of the room, and now they plunged down the stairs, almost upsetting Madame, who was carrying a tray with

cups and coffee pot. Ranke seemed not to notice her at all. He went straight to the door and unbolted it. Behind them, the woman shrieked a protest and dropped her tray. Ranke still had hold of Medlin's coat and jerked him outside into the street by it. Snarling, Medlin twisted free, just in time to see the door slam shut. He heard the bolt go home with resounding finality.

"Nice going," he said. He was trembling with anger. "She wouldn't let Jesus himself back in now. Were you Custer in a previous life? Between Garrick and us are probably hundreds of voodoo worshippers!"

Ranke did not reply at once. He stood very quietly in the middle of the street, lost in thought. He was still clean—entirely too clean for St. Pierre— and the few passersby not in a wholly numbed state looked at him in wonder. Medlin thought for a moment that he saw uncertainty in the vertical groove that appeared between Ranke's eyebrows, and he guessed that atmospheric phenomena might indeed be interfering with the man's ability to locate Garrick's trail. But then Ranke smiled and swatted him on the arm and said to him as cheerily as though they had been bosom pals forever, "Come on, let's get moving."

They got moving. The volcano began to grumble and sputter again. It was all Medlin could do to keep from staring at it. It was all he could do to keep walking. Ranke completely ignored the demonstration and strode with the purposeful air of a hunting dog that knew exactly where its quarry was hunkered down. He was the one happy person in St. Pierre. The volcanic tumult did not last long, and when it subsided, silence descended over the town. Ash lay drifted like dirty snow against walls and in corners. All shutters were closed. It again occurred to Medlin that everyone was already dead, that the glowing cloud, when it came, would sweep through a city already extinct. The sun was setting as they reached the Avenue Victor Hugo. Ranke walked easily, almost sauntering. Medlin marched along with his fists deep in his coat pockets, choking on ash and fury, mad at Ranke, mad at the volcano, mad at the world. A number of refugees, men, women, children, sat or crouched in the doorways. They murmured among themselves if they talked at all. Most of them simply sat and stared at nothing that Medlin could see.

An elegant coach and pair came gliding ghostlike down the street. It slowed as it approached a group of soldiers and stopped before them just as Medlin and his companion passed behind them. The door was flung open, and a thick-bodied man wearing an ornate uniform struck a pose with one foot in the cab and the other on the step. He obviously expected to be recognized, and looked slightly crestfallen when the soldiers regarded him incuriously.

"I," he announced, "am Governor Mouttet!"

The soldiers exchanged looks among themselves and shuffled to suggest a military unit dressing its ranks. Behind them, Medlin heard Ranke snicker softly and said, "Wait," and stopped walking. Ranke looked annoyed but waited. Medlin's

head filled with crazy ideas. He wondered if he might not somehow get Ranke's automatic away from him and force this Mouttet at gunpoint to evacuate the town. He wondered if he might not shoot Mouttet on principle, and Ranke as well, now that he thought about it. He wondered, as he realized the futility of grappling with Ranke, if Ranke might not shoot him, not fatally, just on principle.

Anger and perplexity were struggling for supremacy on the governor's face. He looked from one soldier to the next. "What," he demanded, "are you doing here?"

"Waiting, sir," said one man, "for the *bourhousses* to strike again."

"Again?"

"At dawn this morning, sir, the soldiers guarding the road to Fort-de-France were attacked by the voodoo worshippers. Two soldiers were strangled."

This obviously was all news to Governor Mouttet. He withdrew his head into the coach and conferred with another man, less flamboyantly attired, and a woman whom Medlin took to be Madame Mouttet. She was well-dressed but looked very anxious. After a moment, the governor thrust himself out again. He had begun to look somewhat choleric.

"Where," he demanded, "are the soldiers who are supposed to be patrolling the road?"

The corporal shrugged. "Somewhere in the town, sir."

"On whose authority?"

"I do not know, sir. Perhaps their own, sir!"

Governor Mouttet opened his mouth, closed it, and retreated into his coach. The driver cracked his whip. It was the crispest sound Medlin had heard in days, and it galvanized him. Before Ranke could have known what he was about, he pushed past the soldiers and leaped after the coach as it began to move. He got a foot on the step and the fingers of one hand around the frame of the door. "Governor Mouttet!" he yelled. "Order the immediate evacuation of the town!"

The two men and the woman gaped. Medlin heard the whip an instant before it wrapped itself around his neck and head and tried to slice off his ear. He screamed and lost his grip and landed on what must have been the last patch of uncushioned cobblestone pavement in St. Pierre. The side of his head was on fire.

The coach moved away without a sound and vanished into the gloom. Ranke was speaking to the soldiers in conciliatory tones. When he turned from them toward

Medlin, his big friendly smile became the reptilian grimace of a crocodile. He helped Medlin stand, and while making a show of helping him brush himself off said, "Would've served you right if the coachman'd taken your ear off."

Medlin carefully felt along his scalpline. His fingers came away bloody.

"Don't do that again," Ranke said conversationally as he started tying his handkerchief around Medlin's head. "I mean it."

"Ranke, I know how scary you are. But—"

"Good. Now let's get out of here before these soldiers become any more curious about us. I told 'em you're drunk, so act it."

"But I'm *not afraid of you."*

"Meaning, of course, that my threats and implied threats don't faze you, because you're my ride home. Fine. Be scared of whomever, whatever you like. But just don't make any more sudden moves like that, or I'll really hurt you," and he pulled the handkerchief too tightly over Medlin's injured ear, "and I mean, really, *really* hurt you."

Gripped by a hand he could not resist, Medlin made himself a drag on the other man's arm and said, "Listen."

Ranke barely slowed and barely looked his way. "Well? You have some-thing to say?"

"No, *listen."*

They listened. The drumming was beginning. Medlin heard someone— several people—running on the street behind them. He looked over at Ranke. "The voodoo people are about to put in an appearance."

"What're they going to do, come at us with cute little wax dolls?"

"Come at us with cute little steel machetes, more likely. Try to strangle us. Do something unpleasant to us, in any case. We've got to get indoors."

"More delay," Ranke said, shaking his head. He took out his pistol.

Medlin looked at him aghast. "You can't go around indiscriminately gunning down denizens!"

Ranke laughed. "You can't go around indiscriminately trying to *save* them! These people're all going to be dead in a few hours anyway. They're fair game.

Besides, you moron—we're about to get mugged!"

A torchlit procession surged along the street toward them. At its head, men and women sang and danced. Some were trying to dance and drink; they splashed more liquor on themselves than in, but appeared not to mind. Behind them were the drummers, and next came three fantastic-looking figures. One of these held a squirming form, and Medlin thought, incredu-lously, A child? Then he saw that it was a bound goat. Each of the other two wizards carried aloft a fluttering, protesting chicken.

As soon as the celebrants saw the two white men, a howl went up. Several men armed with machetes ran out ahead of the procession. Medlin saw Ranke check the chamber of his pistol and take aim.

"Christ, Ranke!"

Fist on hip, Ranke glanced sideways at him and said, "Now don't go away."

"Shoot over their heads, scare them off!"

"They'll be scared a lot farther off if I nick the paint off a couple of them."

"If we're after Garrick, let's go *get* her, but—"

There was a flash of fire from the pistol's muzzle, and a shuddering little report. One of the advancing men gave a yelp and hit the ground like an empty suit of clothes. It enraged his companions. They raced forward, yell-ing, and Ranke yelled back and fired again into the rushing dark forms. Torches dipped, shadows elongated weirdly, brown-stained metal blades were raised. Medlin, already backing away, already turning and drawing his arms up and going into a crouch preparatory to pushing off at a dead run, saw Ranke's eyes slitted and his teeth bared in a puma's snarl. He looked very happy. Then his automatic jammed, and he had only enough time to say *"Shit!'* before the first machete blade and then the second and the third and the fourth descended in arcs and chopped him apart as if he were merely some obstinate jungle growth.

Medlin had already sprung away.

Once, as he ran, he tripped and went sprawling on the rough pavement, but there was yelling close behind him, and he scrambled forward on his toes and fingers like a dog for a short distance until he regained his feet. The air scourged his throat and lungs; it was like breathing hot sand. The buildings closed in on him from either side. Something reached up out of the earth itself to trip him. Something else gave a triumphant cry as it landed on his back. A wire or cord whipped about his throat. A knee as hard as teak pressed into the small of his back, and there was warm stinking breath on his cheek. Then he heard another gunshot and a startled grunt. The wire

was suddenly gone, and the knee. Medlin, gasping, felt himself being lifted up, felt himself weightless. There were voices, but he was unable to concentrate on them. Everything receded for a time, and then returned more slowly than it had gone away. Serpents, he thought, wild pigs.

He was lying on ashy ground in what he took to be a small clearing. He could see a treetop-edged patch of red-tinted sky above. There were four, five, or six glowing people present, some of them moving about, making it impossible for him to get an accurate count. One, however, was kneeling over him, examining his throat. Another stood behind this man and looked down over his shoulder at Medlin.

"Where am I?" Medlin croaked.

"Safe," said the kneeling man. "Inside the botanical gardens."

"Relatively safe," said the person standing behind him. "This is no place for tourists."

Medlin recognized the second speaker as one of the luminous men he had seen—how many nights before?

"Civilization's falling apart here," the flat-faced man said.

Medlin said, "Who the hell are you?"

A familiar voice said, "Fine way to talk to folks who just saved your life," and Garrick's nimbused head appeared over the shoulder of the flat-faced man. "Med, this is Doctor Leonard Beers, and that's his assistant, Frank Cooley, checking your neck. Doctor, Mister Cooley, this is my young friend Medlin whom I've told you about."

Medlin looked up at Beers and said, "Doctor, we probably could've avoided a whole lot of melodrama just now if you hadn't been so stuck up a few nights ago."

Beers did not look concerned. "Frankly, Mister Medlin, I thought you were a drunken tourist at the time. In any case, we have no interest in anyone's business here but our own." He turned to Garrick then and said, "You'll have to excuse me now, we've got a lot of work to do," and strode off without waiting for a reply.

"Bit of a cold fish," Medlin said.

Garrick shrugged. She was wearing a broad-brimmed hat and men's cloth-ing, loose shirt, loose trousers. "He just really isn't too keen on getting involved in our affairs, or letting us get involved in his. I'm sure he'd despise our little intrigues if he knew much about them. Here."

She handed him a cup of water and a foodstick. The water was cold and delicious but hurt his throat. The foodstick was stale, chalky, and impossible to swallow.

"The voodoo people killed Ranke," he gasped after draining the cup.

Garrick gave a soft snort. "I guess they didn't buy his rough-tough act," she said. "I never could make him understand that *machismo* will get you hurt faster than anything."

Medlin looked around. The strangers were fiddling with odd devices or packing equipment. Beers cut in among them like a factory foreman, barking instructions.

Medlin said, "Who are these people?"

"What *we* started out to be—scientists, historians. They're here to study and record the eruption. Pelée, Tambora, Krakatau, they're recording all the biggest and most famous ones. Nobody, no competent observer, anyway, ever saw a glowing cloud until Pelée. Nobody was set up to study Pelée until after the Ascension Day eruption, or even had the instruments. Volcanology was barely a science in nineteen oh two. Anyway, they'll be clearing out as soon as they finish setting up their monitoring devices. They've got an observation station set up on the heights south of the destruction zone."

"But where're they *from?"*

"I believe they postdate us," she said. "As always, everyone's treating everyone else like a denizen. Mustn't talk, can't say, won't get involved. Still, they did help me carry you into the gardens after I plugged that strangler."

"Ranke knows—knew they were here. I think he was starting to have designs on their travelers."

"Well, Ranke's dead, and they only have the one traveler anyway." She laughed softly. "But, ah, he is worth having designs on."

"You're incorrigible. How long do we have now?"

"Hours. The climactic eruption starts at seven fifty-two a.m."

"Well," Medlin said drily, "I sure don't want to miss seeing the climactic eruption, now do I?"

Beers happened to overhear that. Arms akimbo, he said, very sternly, "I would advise you not to see it from here."

Oblivious to irony, Medlin thought, and said, “What about Morne Rouge?”

“What about Morne Rouge?”

“Is it safe? Safe tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, yes. But you haven’t a chance of reaching it tonight.”

Something made Medlin ask, “Is it safe later?”

“Later?” The scientist seemed surprised by the question. “Well, if you mean—it catches holy hell at the end of August.”

“Deaths?”

Beers shrugged. “Not as many as here. Probably not more than two thousand in all.” He saw something being done wrong and walked away to see that it was done right.

Medlin did not know why he should have felt more pain at the thought of two thousand denizens dying at Morne Rouge five months from now than at the thought of thirty thousand killed in St. Pierre tomorrow morning. For all he knew, Father Hayot and his two hundred forlorn parishioners had not lingered any longer at Morne Rouge than at St. Pierre. Until this moment, he didn’t know that he had been rooting for the priest and his flock. At least they had shown better sense than anyone in Little Paris. He found himself wanting to think that they would somehow survive all of the volcano’s tan-trums, even as he found himself disbelieving that any denizen, lacking precise knowledge of the future, could possibly escape. The lethal ingenuity of human beings was as nothing compared with that of Pelée. If it failed to kill you with lava or poison gas or a mudslide, it could always send a big wave to drown you, or *fer-de-lances,* or a tumbling hogshead.

He looked mournfully at Garrick, who murmured, “Some denizen you met?”

“Denizens.”

“Shouldn’t get so attached, Med.”

“I know. But all of a sudden I’m really tired of being detached.”

Rain began to patter around them. Medlin looked up and let the warm drops strike his ashy face. It felt good until he touched his cheek. Then it just felt slimy. Garrick stood up grousing about her old bones, and they moved to stand under a tree. Medlin heard the muffled pealing of bells striking the hour and counted the strokes. It was ten o’clock.

Garrick produced a flat case and a penlight from her bag. She opened the case and trained the penlight on its contents. Medlin saw two dozen slender, gleaming ampoules.

"There's enough here," she said, "to get both of us through a dozen trips if nineteen oh two doesn't work out."

"Eventually, we'll run out."

"Big deal. Eventually, we'll run out and not be able to travel first-class any more. But we'll still be able to travel."

"It's rough without drugs."

"So's childbirth, I hear, but women who don't have drugs still have babies. We'll just have to be careful not to throw up on anyone important or bad-tempered when we arrive someplace. Consider the alternative, Med. Even if just the idea of temporal engineering doesn't scare the ass off you . . . we'd become cargo vessels, and there'd be someone else's hand on the tiller all the time. The cargo'd be people like Ranke and people a lot worse than Ranke. That's your fate, if you go back."

That was the last thing Medlin remembered hearing for a while. A deep rumbling from the volcano woke him from a doze. Garrick was still sitting beside him, watching the scientists work. The noise increased, and then came a billowing mass of red smoke. Medlin sat up in alarm. Garrick calmly looked at her watch again, then said, "It's still just demonstrating. But we need to be leaving soon. If we are going to leave."

"You know I'm not going back. Before we fly off somewhere, though—" Medlin looked at her very seriously "—I want to help Madame Boislaville escape from St. Pierre."

Garrick pulled dubiously on her chin. "Maybe she's supposed to die with all her neighbors in the morning. And even if she isn't—"

"Maybe she isn't. She told me you yourself urged her to go visit her relatives in the south."

Garrick seemed slightly abashed. "I wasn't trying to force events. I just thought I'd give them a little nudge. Maybe she *isn't* supposed to die in the morning. Maybe the reason she doesn't is that a crazy white boy rescues her. What do you, as the crazy white boy, propose to do with her once you've rescued her?"

Medlin shrugged. "Wish her a long and happy life in Fort-de-France."

“Med, whether she lives or dies, what difference does it really make? She’s still a ghost.”

“No, you’re wrong. You can’t really believe what you just said. Otherwise, why would you have bothered even to try to nudge events, as you call it? Denizens or not, anomalies or not, we’re— Ranke didn’t think these people were real at all, and they hacked him to pieces.”

“You know what I mean.” Garrick heaved a great sigh. “Look, did I tell you how I met Clara Prentiss? Missis Prentiss, the American Consul’s wife? It was last Friday morning, just after I’d arrived and just after the volcano’d started to act up. We weren’t exactly formally introduced. I only happened to see her on the street. In a wonderful display of futile and misdirected concern, she tried to rescue a suffocated bird that’d fallen in the road. I took it away from her and threw it away and told her not to waste her sentiment. She looked at me like I’d arrived from a moon of Saturn.”

“Sometimes,” said Medlin, “you act like it. Between nineteen forty and here, I’ve seen too many people killed by Stukas and volcanoes and crap. I just don’t think I can stand to be around denizens any more and go on telling myself, Well, this is their world, these are their lives, aw gee, that was their deaths. We’re going to be living entirely among them from now on. We’ve got to stop thinking of them as people who’ve been in their graves for hundreds of years.”

“If you save her, you become responsible for the woman’s life, and her daughter’s, and for all their descendants.”

“I think if time’s been resilient enough to accommodate us all this while, it ought to be able to accommodate a couple of denizens just this once.”

“*Aiee.* You’re cutting it thin with this rescue.”

“I’ll get out in time.”

“Christ, as long, as you’re determined to go through with this madness—” Garrick dug around in her bag and handed over a revolver “—you better take this. In case we run into the voodoo people again.”

“We? If you don’t approve, don’t come along.”

“Well, I can’t have you changing your mind about going AWOL as soon as you’re out of my sight.” Something Ranke had said nagged at Medlin. He set the thing carefully to one side in his mind, to be examined later. Garrick was looking at her watch again. “Besides,” she said, “someone’s got to keep time. We don’t want to be sitting too close to the stage when the show starts.”

They stood up, and Garrick sought out Beers, who seemed very uncomfort-able as she thanked him for his help. He said, without looking at Medlin, “I thought you were going with us. The *quimboiseurs* aren’t likely to attack a group the size of ours.”

She shook her head. “I’m too old to go trekking through any jungle at night. Anyway, the streets’re pretty quiet now. Even wizards have to go home and explain to their wives why they’ve been out so late. My friend and I’ll take the coast road south.”

“Then good luck to you,” said Beers, “and your friend.”

Each with gun in hand, Medlin and Garrick slipped past the gates of the botanical gardens. It was five-thirty by the antique watch. Dawn, the eighth of May, Thursday, Ascension Day, looked and felt like the inside of a filthy pressure cooker. Dirty red smoke hung above the crater. Pierrotins were emerging from their homes. Most of them drifted like sleepwalkers in the direction of the cathedral.

At Madame Boislaville’s, all the shutters had been closed and the cracks stuffed with rags. Medlin pounded on the door and called her name, but got no response. He walked around to the courtyard gate and carefully aimed at the padlock. It took two shots from the revolver, a Smith & Wesson . 38-caliber housegun, to shatter the big padlock. He ran into the courtyard and began banging on the shutters at the rear of the house. He identified himself loudly and kept shouting her name. Finally, suddenly, a shutter on one of the upstairs windows opened. She was only a dark shape, outlined by the glow of a candle.

“Go away!” she cried out to him. “Go to your own kind!”

Garrick appeared beside him and raised her empty hand in greeting. “Madame Boislaville!” she said out gaily. “How delightful to see you again!”

“We must leave this town *now,*” Medlin said. “We have come to give you safe passage to Fort-de-France.”

“The wizards—”

They held up their revolvers for her to see, and Garrick declared that any wizard who showed his face would be shot. Madame made no reply. The shutter remained open for a few more seconds, then closed with a rattle. Medlin looked up at it unhappily, convinced that she had made up her mind to die in her home. The same thought must have occurred simultaneously to Garrick, for she began, with a shrug in her tone, “If she’s determined not to be rescued—”

Down from the mountain came the sound of a great detonation. It was followed in short order by a second and then a third. Garrick nervously fingered her

watch. Finally, she said, “We really do have to—”

Madame Boislaville’s rear door opened, and she appeared looking hot, tired, dirty, and unfriendly. She was clutching her beads in one hand and made the other into a fist. Medlin had thought the heat in the courtyard was suffocating, but the mass of air that oozed out past her to envelope him was as dense and heavy as lead.

“Madame,” he said, “I implore you to leave with us at once.”

“I . . .”

Garrick went to the woman’s side. “Madame Boislaville,” she said, “this young man is determined to save you from the mountain. Please go get your daughter while he hitches your cart.”

“The horse is dead ...”

“Then we must walk,” Garrick said, “and we must start immediately.”

The two women turned and moved into the building. Medlin stationed himself in the doorway. He overheard a brief argument about belongings; Garrick insisted that there was no time to gather them. She returned leading Madame, who was wrapped in a shawl and leading Elizabeth by one hand, carrying only a rosary in the other. Medlin brought up the rear. Garrick urged them to hurry as they entered the street, and they moved at a fast walk through the gloom. As they passed over the rim of the amphitheater, they paused to look back. The volcano’s incandescent eye peered through a great sifting veil of airborne debris. The pall dispersed as a warm, sulphurous wind blew down the mountainside. The sun shone down on St. Pierre, revealing a roadstead full of anchored ships and, high on Pelée’s side, a great glowing patch. They hurried on, and only Medlin looked back again. Each time, the town seemed to have sunk a little farther into the earth until at last it vanished altogether. Little Paris, Little Sodom, goodbye, he thought.

As the soldier had told Governor Mouttet, there were no guards to turn back refugees now. But there were not many refugees. A few riders and carriages passed the four, hurrying along the road without acknowledging their presence.

A little more than an hour later, tired, footsore, and thirsty, they arrived at a small fishing village that lay half under the jungle and half on the upper reaches of a glistening black beach. The beach itself lay between two steep-sided promontories.

Medlin asked, in English, “How long till the volcano blows?”

“Not long,” said Garrick.

“Are we far enough away?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure, Med.”

On the beach, villagers—women, children, and old men—were pulling in a long net. Offshore, younger men in small boats slapped their oars against the water.

“That is to frighten the fish,” Madame said, “and keep them from escaping the net.”

The girl Elizabeth voiced a complaint. It was the first sound Medlin could remember hearing her make. It was like the squeak of a young cat.

Madame stroked her hair and murmured to her in creole, then turned to them.

“We can rest here,” she said, “and probably get something to eat and drink.”

“Good,” said Garrick. “My mouth feels like a lava bed.”

They walked down into the village. An ancient woman told them that soon there would be fresh fish to eat, for the catch was much better this morning than it had been for the past several days. She explained that there was no good water for coffee and no rum, only some sugar-cane juice. She poured the juice into wooden cups for them. It tasted grassy. The four refugees sipped and watched from a discreet distance as the villagers hauled in their net.

“They’ll send someone else,” Medlin said after a while.

Garrick shook her head. “They don’t *have* anyone else. No one like us. No one.”

“They could get lucky and find another real traveler.”

“Maybe not. Listen, Beers and his group have got to be from our future. I saw ‘em using equipment no volcanologist ever saw in *our* time, let alone in nineteen oh two. Believe me, I’ve learned a lot about volcanology lately. Now, I imagine there’s about as much wrong with the world in Beers’ time as there is in the Awful Oughts, but seeing these scientists and historians going about their work here—unchaperoned, unfettered, undisturbed by anyone except us—sure suggests to me that temporal engineering didn’t even get out of the starting gate. Why? Because it requires a traveler to carry meddling passengers. Why wasn’t there a traveler? Because we two travelers went AWOL, and no one else qualified for the j—”

There was a sudden sound like a cannonade, and the feeble sun disap-peared completely. The sound did not fade but grew louder by the moment. It came to the village like a rolling barrage of artillery fire. The villagers screamed inaudibly and scattered across the beach. To the north, the glowing cloud climbed into the sky, filled it, displaced it. The cloud was red and edged with black, then black suffused with red, and as it expanded it resem-bled God's or the Devil's great opening hand. Fire and lightning flashed through it. One sickly purple flash showed Medlin stranded fish thrashing on the sand near his feet. The next showed him Madame Boislaville, in tears, plainly terrified, with Elizabeth at her side, clutching her waist, looking at the cloud with wide cat eyes and open mouth. He reached out and took Madame's hand and felt her strong dark fingers grasp his needfully. Holding hands was no guarantee of anything, but sometimes it was good for a little reassurance.