

Caribbean Crisis
a Sexton Blake adventure
by Desmond Reid

Caribbean Crisis is Michael Moorcock's first published novel, a volume in the Sexton Blake library, little more than a chapbook. It has become a rarity that is very difficult to track down and can sell for anything up to \$100. A collaboration with Jim Cawthorn, that was revised by the editor of the series in which it appeared.

Caribbean Crisis is by no means a true representation of Moorcock's work, so if you've never read Moorcock before and want to know what his work is like then this is not the place to start. This is a work more of curiosity value to the Moorcock fanatic, a fun story without a great deal of depth.

There is little, if any chance, of it being published again, but through this medium it can be made available free of charge. I intend to publish it as a serial, one chapter at a time in a weekly schedule, as it seems structured perfectly to do this. Hopefully one day [The Nomads of the Time Streams <http://www.multiverse.org/index-time.html>](http://www.multiverse.org/index-time.html) (the Michael Moorcock appreciation society) will make it available in a more permanent form, for those who still want a physical copy.

A Caribbean Crisis

1. BLOOD IN THE DEEP

Six miles above the ocean bedrock of the Caribbean, the research ship *Gorgon* rolled gently in the blazing heat of the mid-afternoon.

Overhead the sky was a limpid sapphire blue. And beneath the ship's keel - more than a thousand feet down on the ocean floor - lay the Tanangas Deep: the deepest marine valley known to man.

It was a moment of history.

On the squat research ship, derricks stretched outwards over the starboard bow, giving the vessel a slight list.

Suspended over the water from the derricks hung the most unearthly object ever seen East of Cape Canaveral.

A great, bloated melon of crystal-steel blazing off the fire of reflected sunlight; an orb of metallic splendour which hung like a man-made planet, barely ten feet from the surface of the glassy sea.

Upon it, perched like grotesque frogs, two men balanced themselves - waiting.

On the deck of the research ship, half-blinded by the sunlight reflected from the giant globe, brown-skinned men sweated to manoeuvre the derricks.

One of them was shouting. His voice was guttural and pitched high.

"Steady on number three! Ease her out slowly!"

The two men crouched on top of the sphere looked at each other.

The younger one, pale-faced and nervous, whispered throatily: "Shall we get in no, Harben?"

Harben, bird-faced and with eyes malevolently calm replied softly: "You get in. I'll join in a moment."

But the younger man hesitated. He trembled slightly as he glanced around him. He laughed nervously.

"It's silly. I know, but I feel kind of -- scared." He paused before adding tremulously: "Would you think we're going to find down there, Harben?"

Harben's lips curled into a grin. "Getting butterflies, Linwood? Don't worry. This bathysphere is the safest ever built." His tone became mocking. "I thought you wanted to be first to see this prehistoric fish?"

Linwood muttered: "Sorry. It's just a feeling - a kind of premonition. Nobody's ever been this deep before, have they?"

Harben's voice was barely audible. "For God's sake man *get in!* You wanted to have a look down there and you're in no danger!"

Linwood, with an apologetic whimper, eased himself through the open hatch of the bathysphere. His head was visible for a few seconds as he hung there. Then it disappeared and a voice came hollowly from inside the metal globe: "All right, I'm in."

Harben's face hardened. He looked like a bird of prey, poised there with his beak of a nose and his hair ruffled by the gentle breeze. The disquieting calmness had returned to his eyes.

He looked around him. Up at the sun -- down into the water. Nothing could go wrong, he told himself.

He cursed Linwood. The man's fear was infectious.

Harben swore viciously at the crew on the deck:

"Don't stand there gaping! Swing her out!"

The crew scurried to obey his orders.

Electric winches began to hiss and hum.

Harben clambered hurriedly down into the sphere, closing the heavy hatch behind him.

On board the *Gorgon* the mate of the research ship stood by the radiophone. Soon Harben's voice came barking out of the receiver. "All right, Vasquez! Let her go! Slowly for the first

fifty feet -- then increase speed."

Ramon Vasquez let a grim expression of resentment spread over his face in the privacy of the control cabin.

He didn't like Harben. He didn't like taking orders from him. And he didn't like what Harben was doing. It was against the instruction of the project chief -- Professor Hoddard Curtis.

Curtis had forbidden anyone to use the bathysphere without his permission. And Harben had no permission -- but the crew had to obey him because Harben was second in command and Curtis was miles away, trying to get money out of Marine Institute in Florida.

"Very good, sir," Vasquez replied with a hard edge on his voice. "Slowly for the first fifty feet."

He reached across the bank of metres to the electric winch regulator and switched on the down-drive.

Once more Harben's voice rasped harshly over the line. "I'm breaking contact for a short while. I'll call you again in a minute."

"Roger," the mate acknowledged. He flicked the switch to 'receive' and let it stay there. Then he watched from the control cabin window, as slowly and with delicate and precise grace, the huge sphere began to sway downwards.

It touched the surface of the water and the sea heaved up as if to reject it. But an instant later the great globe was plunging down, breaking through the translucent blue waves to be slowly swallowed in the darkness beneath.

The sea eddied round the cables supporting the twelve ton globe -- the fine, woven corded steel which looked too slender to support such a colossal weight.

Ramon Vasquez, the mate, kept his dark eyes on the pressure metres.

An indicator needle crept slowly round a large dial marked in tens feet, then in hundreds, then in thousands.

Ten feet ... twenty ... fifty ...

The needle began to climb faster.

Seventy ... ninety ... a hundred ... two hundred ...

The mate licked his thin lips as the needle climbed steadily to five hundred.

A cold feeling moved deep in his stomach as the metres told of the fantastic pressures now coming to bear on the sphere. Two hundred pounds on the square inch!

The needle crept up to the six hundred mark. It passed it. *Seven hundred ...*

Then the radiophone crackled into sudden life:

"It's very dark now. We're using the lamps--" came Harben's voice. "Can't see much yet. We're just opposite a grotto of some sort; a cave in the cliff face. The water seems thicker; oil. It's quite weird. I've never seen anything to compare with --"

Suddenly Harben's matter-of-fact tone was cut off by a gasp.

"God! What is it?"

His voice was suddenly shrill with excitement and horror. *"My God! This is awful -- I never thought -- it's -- it's disgusting! Horrible! Pull us up! Pull the sphere up! Quickly!"*

Vasquez flicked the switch. "What is it, sir? What have you seen?"

But Harben was deaf to the mate's inquiries. *"For Heaven's sake do something! Pull us up! It's going to kill us! It's awful! We were mad to risk it! Hurry! You've got to save us!"*

Already the mate had slammed the machinery into reverse. Now, with hands that shook, he flicked the switch and spoke again.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

There was no reply.

For ten long seconds there was nothing but silence.

Then suddenly the whole ship lurched. Shock waves crashed upwards, rocking the vessel like a toy.

A burst of muffled thunder reverberated up from the deep, smashing against the ship's keel ... And a sound like the bellow of some enormous sea-beast erupted from the ocean.

The mate was flung backwards. He crashed against a bank of metres. Glass shattered and things flew like rain.

He scrambled desperately to reach the radiophone. But the boat lurched again. He pitched headlong.

A second time he tried and managed to grab the handset.

"Mr Harben! Mr. Harben! What happened?"

But the phone was dead. No static crackled; no side tones. The link was broken.

Frantically, the mate wrenched open the hatch of the cabin and tore up the companionway. The crew were sprawled all over the deck.

Vasquez stumbled towards a man and hauled him to his feet.

"What happened? What did you see?"

The crewman shook his head numbly.

The mate ran to the ship's rail where the derricks poked out over the ocean. Part of his answer was there.

Instead of taut, straining cables there were only contorted steel wires. Wires which had whipped up from the sea, relieved of their burden -- to tangle round the screaming pulleys in an inextricable, tortured mass.

"*Madre de Dois!* May the saints preserve them! What was it? What did they see? What did they do to them?"

Vasquez stared down into the imperturbable waters which covered the deepest ocean valley in the world -- and knew that nothing could save the two men that had gone down.

Without the cables to support them, nothing lay between the bathysphere and the bedrock of the Tangaras Deep -- except water.

Six miles of it!

Two men had gone down there. They were doomed. Two men -- hopelessly, irrevocably trapped in a twelve-ton coffin of stainless steel -- plunging down thirty thousand feet to the deepest place on earth!

Never to return!

"They are finished," Vasquez mouthed the incredible words as they froze on his lips. "We shall never save them."

The eighth son of an Indian fisherman, Vasquez had been taught from the age of five to fear the sea and its mysteries.

All the tales of sea monsters he had ever heard came flashing into his mind.

Cold fear seized him.

What had happened?

The sea foamed and boiled softly against the side of the rocking vessel. Mysterious, dangerous -- it seemed to be laughing at the mate, mocking him.

Two more victims had been taken into its insatiable depths.

The sea -- or something that lurked beneath the sea -- had claimed two more human lives.

2. DIVE SINISTER

Hoddard Curtis, blond-headed, broad and bitterly angry, grated his teeth with suppressed fury as he was encased in inch-thick armour plating, on the deck of the research ship *Gorgo*.

Only two hours ago he had returned to the ship with good news. The Florida Marine Institute had promised to give him another grant. He had returned with a light heart, buoyant and confident because his research was to be allowed to continue.

Years of work had gone into the construction of the bathysphere. Two hours ago he had returned to the ship with a new lease of life -- assured that all the money, blood and sweat of the last five years would soon give way to the realisation of a dream.

Then he'd met Vasquez.

And two hours ago, to the minute, his dream had been shattered ...

The bathysphere had sunk!

Vasquez had stuttered out his story, and Curtis' world had collapsed around him. At first the young professor hadn't been able to believe it. Then shock had set in, soon to be followed by blind, unreasoning hate towards the men who had disobeyed his orders and perished.

The bathysphere was unique. Its loss was a mortal blow to Curtis's project.

For nearly an hour he had been unable to speak.

Then, like a drowning man clutching at a straw, he had ordered out the Sonar equipment to search the depths for some last clue as to the bathysphere's final fate.

And suddenly, incredibly, after half an hour of fruitless casting about, the underwater raider had *blipped* out the position of the sphere -- and Curtis had been unable to believe it.

The bathysphere wasn't six miles down. It wasn't even a mile. It was only eleven hundred feet below the surface.

Eleven hundred feet! Such a depth seemed the merest trifle. Until he remembered that the finest diving suit in the world had never been tested below a depth of nine hundred feet.

Such suits were mechanically operated, armour-plated and clumsy. Curtis had a pair of them on board. He had no means of knowing whether they would stand up to an extra two hundred pounds of pressure.

But he had determined to find out! If five long years of unremitting toil were to mean anything, he had to risk the descent. He had to see the bathysphere; to find out what had gone wrong.

Now, as Vasquez and one of the crewmen helped him into the suit, Curtis reassured himself that he knew marine life well enough to have no fear of monsters which lurked unknown in

deep.

And yet --

A surge of claustrophobia overwhelmed him as the great steel helmet was placed over his head and locked home against the colossal cylindrical torso. Something light and unnerving fluttered inside his stomach.

But there could be no turning back. Grimly he forced himself to attend to the job. He ran through the routine checks of his suit.

From the arms, which were great, hinged sections of metal, claws like the pincers of a giant metallic lobster sprang to serve as hands. They were grappling irons like those used in nuclear laboratories to handle radioactive isotopes.

They were worked by remote control and Curtis tested them by operating a pair of switches inside the suit.

Next he satisfied himself that the radiophone was working; that the built-in air supply was functioning faultlessly.

Then, with the cable fixed to his shapeless headpiece, he was ready to be lowered into the ocean.

* * *

Within three minutes he had been swung out over the water and was descending at six feet per second; a body within a body, a skull within a skull.

He caught a final glimpse of the grey-green surface, of the sunlight -- then he was going down swiftly into the gloom of the deep Caribbean.

He was in a world of silence; a world of slime-green and swirling darkness.

He spoke into the microphone, his words echoing in the metal confines of the helmet.

"How far down am I?" he needed to know.

"Six hundred feet, sir," came the voice of Vasquez. "Still descending. How do you feel?"

"Not so bad. Give me regular readings."

Curtis recalled the things he had read and heard about the dangers of diving. Faults in man-made suits had resulted in the water pressure closing in -- turning a six foot man into a neat package of bone and flesh -- one foot by one foot!

Suits had been hauled up, seemingly empty -- until they'd looked looked inside the helmets.

So much easier to bury, Curtis thought grimly. If all men died so neatly the undertakers would lose money.

"Seven hundred feet!" crackled the radiophone.

Curtis's headlamp now cut through the gloom. Inky waters swirled on both sides of the incandescent beam as it cut a tunnel of light through the darkness.

Down -- down -- down ...

"Eight hundred feet!"

At this depth a sinking wooden ship would be smashed to driftwood in moments. The pressure would cut it like a sledgehammer smashing a toy.

Under this pressure metal could buckle and twist into shapes beyond all recognition.

Curtis sweated and tried not to think.

"Nine hundred feet!"

Curtis cursed the dead Harben for the hundredth time. He should never have trusted the man. He had only signed him on because Harben had offered to help on board in return for his passage to the Caribbean. Curtis had been low on funds; he'd been glad of Harben's assistance.

Since then Harben had behaved strangely. He'd disappeared on trips to Malibu for a day or more at a time during the four weeks the research ship had been anchored over the Tanaga trench. Curtis had been reluctant to pry into the man's affairs, but only because he'd still been glad of the help; Harben had shown himself a capable and clever engineer.

But why had he taken the bathysphere? What had he wanted to show the other man, Linwood?

Curtis knew there was a legend about a sunken Spanish treasure ship in these parts. But he had already rejected this as a possible explanation. Every island had a similar legend.

Now he could hear his own breath rasping inside the helmet. He could smell his own body sweating inside the confines of the suit.

But all he could see was black, slimy rock as he entered the narrow, marine valley flanked on both sides by tall, underwater mountains -- mountains taller than Everest!

"One thousand feet!"

Curtis started. He said thickly: "Okay Vasquez. Take it slowly. I should see it any moment now."

He felt the speed of his descent level off and began casting about with his lamp as the last hundred feet crept up.

The suit was withstanding the pressure. Would it hold out for long enough? His ears strained for the slightest sound which would betray the creak of metal; the faintest groan of

steel.

Then Curtis's casting beam illuminated something brighter than bleak rock.

It was silver. A great orb of silver light.

He'd found the sphere.

"Hold it!" he ordered. His descent suddenly ended. He hung in the water, w swaying gently from side to side.

Above him was blackness, and somewhere far away, the surface.

Beneath him was blackness again -- and a drop of over five miles!

But he wouldn't drop that far if the cable gave out under the strain. Before he'd fallen a thousand feet he would be pulverised and smashed like an eggshell.

Slowly he worked his metal arms out towards the rocks on his left. The sphere lay on a narrow ledge where it had lodged.

Curtis's metal claws touched the walls of rock. He made them grasp a projection and by careful manipulation worked his way towards the ledge.

On one side of the vessel's ledge there was a space of about three feet, while on the other side sheer rock face soared up into the gloom.

Curtis worked with painful slowness. He got one foot on the ledge and pulled himself upwards.

After what seemed like an age, he was able to touch the sphere. He worked round it slowly, taking care not to disturb its position. Then at length, his face-plate was opposite the bathysphere's porthole.

He pressed his face forward, raised his lamp and shone the beam into the dim interior.

* * *

On the research ship, Vasquez was watching the dials and praying. They were two things he could do simultaneously. His heart pounded and perspiration stood out on his brow.

Suddenly Curtis's voice cracked over the radiophone:

"I'm beside the sphere now. I'm looking in. The equipment has taken some hard knocks but the sphere is okay apart from a small hole near the top -- not much bigger than my fist. Can't be sure what caused it. We can salvage the sphere, I think."

His tone lowered. "I can see one body -- not a nice sight -- it's badly crushed by pressure..."

Silence.

Then: "That's strange..." Curtis sounded puzzled.

Again silence...

"*Great Heavens! It's not possible!*" He suddenly shouted: "There's only one body! The other one has gone! It's unbelievable -- but it's true! One of them's disappeared! No-one can get out of here at this depth --"

His voice broke off suddenly, then. There was a long and heavy silence. When finally he spoke again, Curtis's voice was pitched high with a new note -- a note of hysteria:

"God Almighty! I don't believe it! I must be going mad! I can't believe my eyes--!"

"What is it, sir?" Vasquez cut in with a voice that was shaking with terror. "What have you seen?"

"This body!" Curtis's voice rose to a scream. "This man's been murdered! He's been stabbed in the back! I must be going insane, but I can see it! *I can see the knife! He's been stabbed in the back!*"

Vasquez made no reply to that. In the silent sunlight of the research ship's control cabin he had suddenly ceased to feel the heat of the Caribbean afternoon. Cold sweat had broken out over his body.

Icicles of fear clutched at his heart and bowels as the uncanny implications of the Professor's words registered in his mind.

One dead body was floating in the sphere -- murdered. And the other man had defied the laws of nature and disappeared.

But how?

3. SWEET PERSUASION

Sexton Blake sat at the desk of his office in Berkeley Square and stirred his mid-morning coffee with an abstracted, thoughtful expression on his lean, incisive face.

In one hand he held the latest edition of the *Daily Post* and the puckered frown of his dark, satanic eyebrows was focussed on a front page article headed:

TERRORISM INCREASES IN MALIBA

PRESIDENT NONALES TO SEEK US AID

The Rebel Army of Juan Callas last night struck a new blow at the Government of the trouble-torn island of Maliba, where a party of the "People's Commandoes" pulled off a

well-planned raid on the Carabanos Army garrison, only a few miles from the Carabanos A garrison, only a few miles from the capital of this latest Caribbean trouble spot. Charles Fleming reports:

A spokesman of the island's government said tonight: "This is the fifth successful raid by subversive infiltrators this month. In view of these increasing outrages, the President, Doctor Nonales, is to consult with American representatives with a view to seeking US aid to defend our national sovereignty."

The spokesman claimed that this latest attack, like others preceding it, was communist-inspired and accuses Cuba of interfering in Maliba's domestic affairs.

After the attack tonight the city lay under the an uneasy silence and the streets were deserted except for the rumbling of army tanks as security forces patrolled the capitol...

Blake's eyes ran to the bottom of the column where it said: "See pictures on page 3. More about Maliba in *Around and About*, p. 6."

Blake frowned thoughtfully and turned to page six.

Around and About was the column written and compiled by his old friend Arthur "Splash" Kirby, one of the *Post's* top journalists.

The column ran along usual lines. Blake swiftly scanned through reports of social gossip and bright observations on London life before coming to the sub-heading which read:

MALIBAN MYSTERY

From the latest Caribbean trouble-spot of Maliba comes this report on the latest events in the life of the famous "boy-professor" and marine biologist Hoddard Curtis. Curtis is the man who perfected a new kind of bathysphere in the United States some months ago.

Two of the professor's assistants took the bathysphere out for a joy-ride in the deep, yesterday morning -- while Professor Curtis was away on a trip to Florida. Although they hadn't their boss's permission to use the deep-sea sub, they thought that a quick trip to the ocean-bed and back would do no harm.

Just how wrong they were is shown by the fact that they failed to come back.

Investigating the loss of his bathysphere, Curtis risked his life in an untested deep-sea diving suit and located his brain child more than a thousand feet down.

Then came shock number two for the young professor. When he shone his under-sea torch through the port-hole of the bathysphere, one of its two occupants had disappeared -- leaving the other with a knife in his back!

Experts agree that no-one could escape alive from the bathysphere at even half the depth

How one man came to be stabbed in the back and the other spirited away, presents a mystery worthy of a Holmes or a Blake.

Maliban authorities have so far refused to comment, and in view of the blanket of silence our diplomatic correspondant points out that a political motive might well be involved.

Sexton Blake allowed himself a brief smile at the reference to himself, but as he came to the end of the article his smile became a puzzled frown.

For a moment his fingers drummed thoughtfully on the top of his desk. Then he picked up the telephone.

The company's telephonist and receptionist, Marion Lang, came on the line.

"Yes, Mr. Blake?"

"Marion, get me splash Splash Kirby's office at the *Post*, will you?"

"Right away, Mr Blake!"

Blake replaced the receiver on its cradle and glanced up as his secretary came in.

Paula Dane was the epitome of everything the perfect secretary should be -- and more.

She was tall, sophisticated and extremely beautiful.

The blue, summer dress she was wearing had a wide skirt which swayed gently from the hips of her fine, well-moulded figure as she walked.

Her well-groomed, honey-blonde hair glowed softly in the morning sunlight, and the scent of fresh lavender came in with her as she entered the office.

Deep, the china-blue eyes studied Blake with an air of expectancy: "Ready to dictate?"

Before Blake could answer the telephone rang. He nodded to Paula to take the chair beside his desk, and scooped up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Kirby here," came the bright, breezy voice of the columnist. "What's the problem, sleuth?"

"Good morning, Splash," said Blake. "Listen, I've just been reading your item on Maliban."

"Ah! The bathysphere mystery? I thought that would hook you? Have you solved it yet?"

"No, I haven't," Blake grinned. "I'd like some more information..."

"Shoot," Kirby invited.

"Why did you write it?" Blake asked.

There was a pause. "What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

"On the contrary," Blake smiled. "I'm fascinated by it. But by the same token, so will millions of other readers. I mean, why wasn't it handled by the news boys? This is front page material isn't it?"

Kirby paused again. "You've asked the million dollar question. You're right of course, and we all agree -- but the problem is the story's reliability. Our man in Maliba is having his trouble getting his stuff through. The police hamper him at every stage. There's a lot of unofficial censorship going on and we haven't been able to get confirmation."

"Why the censorship?" Blake asked.

"I don't know," Kirby admitted. "It's hard to see how this can have a political angle -- but presumably it must have. As soon as we get confirmation we'll make a bigger story of it, but in the meantime the Editor's playing safe, and gave it to me to handle as a piece of harmless gossip."

"So you know nothing else about it?"

"Not a thing, old chap! I had to pad it out as it was. As soon as I have any more facts. I'll let you know. Okay?"

"Okay, Splash." Blake thanked him and hung up.

He turned to his secretary, glancing at the notebook, which she held poised above her knee.

"What's on the programme?" he asked.

"A letter to the solicitors and one to Acme Life and Property about last month's fake-suit investigation."

"Can they wait until this afternoon?"

"I can handle them by myself if you're busy," Paula suggested. "But your next appointment isn't until eleven when Sir Gordon Sellingham's due to arrive."

"I know," Blake nodded. "I want to see the file on Maliba before he gets here."

"Maliba..." Paula rose and went to get the file.

She was back a few moments later with a thin manilla folder which she laid on the desk.

"Why the sudden interest in Maliba, chief? Has Sir Gordon Sellingham got something to do with it?"

"He owns several sugar refineries there," Blake replied.

"Is that what he wants to see you about?"

"I don't know yet. But I imagine he must be worried about them. If he isn't he ought to be. Anyway, I'll go through these cuttings until he arrives. Show him in as soon as he gets here."

will you?"

"All right," said Paula, "and I'll handle those letter myself." She whisked elegantly from office.

Twenty minutes later there was a discreet tap on the door and Paula stepped in, followed a tall man who stooped slightly and carried a briefcase.

He was unnaturally pink -- a striking feature, since he was far from being fat. His face was as pink and blank as one of his own famous cheques.

He wore pince-nez and was quite bald, with a pink, shiny scalp. The hands which held the briefcase and an expensive looking hat were also pink.

Blake half-expected the man's clothes to be pink, but they weren't. They were sombre, charcoal grey.

"Sir Gordon Sellingham, Mr. Blake," Paula Dane said formally.

Blake rose and shook hands over the desk. "Sit down, Sir Gordon."

Sir Gordon Sellingham dumped himself into one of Blake's comfortable chairs.

"Thank you," he said in a surprisingly deep and throaty voice.

Blake opened his monographed silver cigarette box and offered it to the millionaire.

"I've got a case for you, Mr. Blake," he announced as he leaned forward to take a light.

Blake allowed himself a faint smile. "You'll appreciate that I don't accept every case that's brought to me..."

"You'll accept this one!" Sellingham said firmly. "I've studied your reputation; I can promise you this has all the ingredients to interest you!"

Blake smiled again. "Tell me about it."

"I want to to undertake a highly confidential investigation, Mr. Blake," said Sellingham. "It concerns large sums of money, the life of a man... and a new troublespot in the cold war."

"Maliba?" suggested Blake.

Sellingham looked momentarily deflated. "Yes, Maliba," he grunted.

"That's a promising start," Blake admitted. "Perhaps you'd like to fill in some details."

"Well," Sellingham said seriously, "this all hinges on the current political set-up in the Caribbean. You know, I suppose, that I own a great deal of the Maliban sugar industry?"

"I've read as much."

"Well the situation in Maliba is this: Doctor Nonales, the President, is the head of a corrupt administration, mainly made up of ex-army officers. The police are more or less synonymous with the army. Crooked as cork-screws, the lot of 'em!"

"They sound as though they deserve to be deposed," Blake said laconically.

Sellingham shook his head. "You'd think so -- but it's just where you're wrong. If the rebels got into power with their high-flown ideologies the country will be paralysed. Everything will grind to a standstill. That country runs on corruption. You can't take away a hundred-year tradition of corruption without bringing the machinery to a halt -- any more than you can take away the ball-bearings of a centrifuge in a sugar refinery."

"Is this your personal opinion?" Blake asked.

"Personal opinion? Great heaven's, no! It's common knowledge. Ask anyone out there -- corruption is the only way you can get anything done! Industry thrives on it!"

Blake sighed. "Go on."

"I'm not a man to mince words, Mr. Blake. The position as it stands is favourable to me. I don't want to see it changed. If Juan Callas -- the rebel leader -- gets into power, there'll be a repetition of the Castro business in Cuba."

"You're worried about the rumours of communist infiltration?" Blake asked.

Sellingham shrugged. "Nonales says the rebels are getting finance from the communists and if it's true my refineries are as good as gone!"

Blake frowned. "This is all very well, Sir Gordon, but so far there's been no real evidence that the communists are behind this particular revolution."

"Maybe not," Sellingham said grudgingly. "But I don't intend to take any risks. I want to know what's going on out there!"

Blake was silent for a moment. Sellingham's "case" appeared to amount to nothing more than a nebulous request for information.

The detective frowned. "I believe you mentioned that a man's life is in danger?"

Sellingham pursed his lips, and something like embarrassment turned his face a shade pinker.

"It's my son. My son Peter. That young idiot will be the ruin of me. I'm already a laughing stock in the City over this! I should have never sent him to Oxford. He's been living in cloud-cuckoo land ever since he graduated."

Blake's brow puckered. "I don't quite understand..."

Sellingham said tiredly, "My son Peter has got a headful of liberal ideas. But what's wo

he's got a bankful of money. And at this moment he's somewhere in Maliba spending it on guns for the rebels!"

"Your son isn't a communist, surely?" Blake's eyebrows arched.

"The young idiot doesn't know *what* he is!" snapped Sir Gordon Sellingham. "But the Communist movement has had the reason to be grateful for his cheque book before now! This is just one hobby horse in a long line of silly frivolities. A year ago he financed a movement for banning H-bombs. Before that it was a movement that ran about denouncing all my life-long friends as Fascists. Before that..."

Sellingham's voice tailed off in exasperation: "I want him brought back to England before he ruins me! I may not be able to do anything about the rebels -- but I'm certainly not going to stand idle while my own flesh and blood helps them steal my fortune. I'm going to stop that young fool giving them money!"

Blake said quietly: "Can't you simply cut off your son's allowance?"

"I did that year's ago!" said Sellingham. "But he still has half a million that he inherited from his mother."

"I see..." Blake was thoughtful. The position was becoming clear at last. Sellingham wanted him to go to Maliba and virtually kidnap his wayward son. The job really wasn't to Blake's taste.

With another frown he said: "What makes you think your son's life is in danger? Merely that he's playing with political dynamite?"

"No," Sellingham grunted sourly. "It's gone beyond that. He's disappeared. No-one's seen him or heard of him for days. My people out there have been keeping a close eye on him but he's vanished into the blue!"

The millionaire pulled sharply on his cigarette. "I can't make too much noise about it -- otherwise the rebels will be on to me like a ton of bricks -- 'CAPITALIST INTERFERES IN MALIBAN DOMESTIC AFFAIRS!' -- they'd have it on every front page in Latin America."

"So what you really want me to do is go to Maliba and make some discreet inquiries to find your son?"

"And bring him back!" Sellingham added firmly. "By force if needs be."

Blake smiled thinly. "I'm an investigator, Sir Gordon -- but I'm not a strong-arm man. Your son is presumably over twenty-one. I can hardly kidnap him..."

"Look--" Sellingham interrupted, "--all I want you to do is save his life! Even if he isn't already dead, he's caught between two fires. Either Nonales will rumble what he's up to and have him quietly rubbed out as a spy -- or the rebels will bump him off as soon as he's served their purpose. They'll hardly want to be associated with the son of a capitalist when the time

comes for handing out medals!"

"I see what you mean," Blake said noncommittally. He was thinking hard.

"Will you take the case, then?"

"I shall have to give it some thought. Can I phone you back later and let you know?"

Sellingham rose to his feet. "I'm confident you'll make the right decision, Blake. You've been spoken very highly of, and I know you're the man for this job. Good day!"

He shook hands firmly, turned and marched from the office.

Blake sat back in his chair, smoking.

Young Peter Sellingham's life was certainly in danger if he was meddling in subversive activities, there was no denying that.

A trip to Maliba was a temptation, too, for it promised to be interesting.

A revolution was brewing, and in addition there was the stranger item -- the mystery of bathysphere.

He was thinking hard as he turned once more to study the file on Maliba...

4. THE MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN

It was a few minutes before noon when Sexton Blake closed the file of press cuttings and lit another cigarette.

Leaning back behind his desk he drew the smoke deep down into his lungs and considered what he'd read.

The news reports on Maliba's recent history were far from helpful. Drawn from sources over the English-speaking world, they were either confusing or downright contradictory.

Amongst all the terms of abuse in the English language, thought Blake, none had been more over-worked in the last ten years than the words: *Fascist* and *Communist*. They were more than terms of abuse -- they were war-cries.

According to left-wing papers the government of Doctor Nonales was a bastion of fascism while the rebels were merely staunch democrats. According to right-wing papers Nonales was a benevolent paternalist while the rebels were rabid Reds.

The truth probably lay somewhere between the two -- in which case the affair was a purely domestic one did not warrant interference by outsiders.

On the other hand, if the claims of Doctor Nonales and Sir Gordon Sellingham were true and if the rebels were really being backed by Communist infiltrators -- then interference was not

only justified but necessary. And this was an issue on which Blake didn't take chances.

He had to be certain. He needed to know the truth. And there was only one man who could tell him what he wanted to know.

Blake rose from his chair, picked up his hat and coat and went out into the outer office.

Paula Dane and Marion Lang looked up with curiosity.

"I'm going out," Blake said simply. "Expect me when you see me."

Paula Dane nodded but did not say anything. Blake's words were a formula she knew from experience -- they meant he was going to see a man whose name was better left unspoken.

A man who was wizened and old and infinitely wise; a man who ostensibly headed a small Export/Import firm in Belgrave Square -- but whose imports and exports were of a highly specialised kind.

A man whose real title was known to very few -- DIRECTOR OF THE INTER-SERVICE CO-ORDINATION OF STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE AND NATIONAL SECURITY.

His power and knowledge made him a man to be reckoned with. And his name was Eusebio Craille.

* * *

Blake found Craille reading a copy of *Pravda*. The old man sat behind his desk in front of a map of the world, his attention rivetted on the column he was reading by the light of a powerful desk lamp.

One hand rested on the desk, gripping a stubby cigarette holder from which a thin, pencil-line of aromatic smoke climbed steadily towards a ceiling obscured by fog.

It was a frequent habit of Craille's to keep his curtains drawn. It was good for security. But it was also bad for health, and the smoke of the old man's Egyptian cigarettes produced a spasm of coughing from Blake as he was shown in by a full-lipped, softly contoured brunet who spoke with a husky voice:

"Mr. Blake, sir."

Surprisingly, the girl was the same one the detective had seen on his last visit.

"Are you forming an attachment, or getting in a rut?" Blake inquired as the girl disappeared with a rustle of her bright skirt and the door closed behind her. It was rare for Craille to keep any of his beautiful women for very long.

"She's due to go at the end of the week," the old man rasped in his dry voice. A gleam came into his hooded, hawk-like eyes. "Still trying to guess where I get 'em from?"

Blake smiled. "I know you don't get them from a secretarial agency," he said dryly. "What puzzles me is what the neighbours think."

"They think exactly what I want them to think," said Craille. "The price I pay for security is the loss of my respectability. The locals think I'm a white-slaver. It's a nuisance, but it helps explain the secrecy."

Blake grinned.

Craille threw the copy of *Pravda* into his huge waste-paper basket and said, "All right - what's the problem?"

"I've just had a visit from Sir Gordon Sellingham, the millionaire..."

"Does he want you to go to Maliba and find his son?"

Blake paused in surprise. "Yes, how did you know?"

"Have you accepted the job?" Craille ignored the detective's question.

"Not yet. I want to know more about the political situation. It seems young Sellingham has got himself mixed up in it."

Craille nodded. "I know. What do you want from me?"

"I want to know what the political set-up is all about. The newspapers all seem to be in the dark. There's no real information; no hard facts."

Craille nodded. There was a frown on his brittle-skinned face. "I've been thinking of sending someone over there to look into it..." He rotated the cigarette holder between skeletal fingers and drew a lungful of the harsh, perfumed smoke.

"If you took Sellingham's job it would give you a good cover to nose around," he added thoughtfully. "Do you want to go?"

"I'm interested in three things," said Blake. "Sellingham's assignment, providing it's in everyone's interest; an academic mystery surrounding yesterday's murder of a man in a bathysphere; and this so called revolution which is brewing up."

"I'll tell you what I know from H.M.G.," Craille decided. "The man running this revolution -- the rebel leader, Callas -- is no communist. He's to overthrow the present government for one good reason and one alone: it needs overthrowing. On the other hand there's no shortage of communists in that part of the world, and some of them have already jumped on Callas's bandwagon."

"Communist agents?" demanded Blake.

"No," Craille shook his head. "Not yet. But what we've been reliably informed by a country with which Great Britain enjoys a treaty relationship, that communist agents are in the area"

When they'll show their hand is anyone's guess, but--"

"What's your guess?" Blake wanted to know.

Craille looked bleak. "Soon. The government of Doctor Nonales is going to be toppled, everyone knows it. The day can't be far off and when it comes it will be the signal for the communists to move in -- or try to. So far the only thing preventing them is Nonales himself. Nonales has a powerful secret police force."

Craille lit a fresh cigarette from the butt of his old one. "I don't care what becomes of Nonales," he said drily. "And I don't care if Callas takes over. But I do care what the communists will try to do -- and I also care about a little piece of paper which is in Nonales' hands..."

"A paper?"

Craille nodded. "A list compiled by his secret police. A list of communist agents in the Caribbean. Before Nonales is brought low I want a copy of that list. It musn't be lost when government falls -- because the next government that takes over will need it. And so will I."

"You'd like me to get it?"

"No less. Would you accept the assignment?"

"Blake make his customary pause for last minute thoughts, but he hardly needed to think about it. "I accept the assignment."

"Good!" Craille pulled open a drawer. "I want you to take a good look at this." He produced a cardboard file and opened it in front of Blake on the desk. "This man is one of the biggest Soviet fish we've come across for a long time, and he's known to be somewhere in the Caribbean. He's the only big operator the Russians have got there, outside Cuba, and he makes the man at the centre of things."

Blake opened the file at its front page and studied a photograph of a man whose face reminded him of an eagle.

It was a broad and solid face, topped by thinning hair. What gave it the eagle quality was the hooked, beak-like nose and a pair of strangely compelling eyes. The eyes were hypnotic and malevolently calm.

Underneath the photograph it said:

KRASKI, JAKOB

Real name believed to be Borodin. see pp 12-31 of File "B" and for espionage, see pp 43-65.

ORG.: Reportedly formerly employed by both GOSUDARSTVENNOYE

POLITICHESKOYE UPRAVLENIYE - (G.P.U., State Political Department); and : -- MINISTERSTVO GOSUDARSTVENNOI BEZOPASNOSTI -- (M.G.B., Soviet Ministry of State Security).

SPECIAL OBSERVATIONS: This man is not only a very important Master Spy in the Soviet Network : His abnormal degree of personal power and the freedom of action which Soviet authorities have constantly allowed him, indicate that he is one of their most trusted employees. He is believed to hold a very high rank in the Party hierarchy. (Compare photograph above with man in group shot, p. 43, taken at time of 40th Party Conference in Moscow).

There followed a detailed physical and psychological description of the man which Blake memorised as he read it; then an analysis of Kraski's special skills.

The remaining seventy pages were a case history. As Blake skimmed through them he whistled softly.

"An impressive record, isn't it? Craille demanded in his cracked voice. "And we've read to believe the Soviets are grooming him for bigger and better things!"

"How d'you know he's in the Caribbean?" Blake asked.

"The last report we had was from an agent in Brazil. Kraski was seen there several times and the last news we had of him he was using the cover of a marine engineer, making enquiries about jobs; it seemed he was trying to work his passage to Jamaica under the name of Harben."

"Harben?" Blake echoed.

"Harben," repeated Craille, "Jules Harben."

* * *

"If Jakob Kraski turns up in Maliba," said Craille grimly. "I want him dealt with. Dealt with--" he rasped "--by *any means!*"

"And if he doesn't?"

"If he doesn't, then your job is purely Intelligence. I want you to get me a complete run-down on communist infiltration, using Sellingham's assignment as your cover -- and then, using any means you like, I want that list of Soviet agents!"

Craille paused. "I don't know whether you'll succeed in all three items, but if you succeed only one, the trip will be worthwhile. The usual conditions apply to your assignment. Bring back the goods and the Western World will have cause to be grateful to you."

Blake smiled. "What happens if I don't come back?"

"The Western World will give you a decent obituary."

5. SOUTHERN DEPARTURE

Eighteen hours later, armed with two letters by Sir Gordon Sellingham, a wallet full of American dollars and Maliban currency and a detailed mental record of his instructions from Craille, Sexton Blake fastened his safety belt as the Comet IV airliner prepared to land at Maliba.

The flight through the long night had been uneventful, but Blake had had a great deal to think about.

Before leaving London he had barely had time to brief Paula Dane on his movements, write a couple of notes for Edward Carter and book his passage on the plane. Everything had depended upon his reaching Maliba as soon as possible, while the scanty information available was still fresh.

Now, as the island of sugar-cane, palm trees and coral white beaches loomed up on a sea of blue in the path of the aircraft, he was conscious that he had a lot to do -- and that a lot depended on it.

Brilliant sunshine shone down on the tropical world beneath, and the sea was a dazzling sapphire blue.

It looked deceptively calm. Blake wondered what the next few hours would bring.

The Airliner was soon landing.

Its wheels bumped once, gently, at the end of the airport's main runway, then it settled -- taxi-ing ...

* * *

The passengers disembarked into a sultry atmosphere of Caribbean summer. Heat embraced them, soaking immediately into every pore as they stepped from the air-conditioned coolness of the jet-liner.

The airport buildings were modern, white and dazzling, giving an extra glare to the morning heat as they were cleared through customs beneath the watchful eyes of armed guards.

Outside the rear of the buildings Blake saw another reminder that all was not well in the Republic of Maliba -- soldiers in olive drab uniforms manned machine guns at the perimeter of the parking area where sandbag emplacements and barbed-wire had been hastily thrown up. The airport was a forbidden zone to Maliba citizens ... and a strategic keypoint to anyone planning insurrection.

Ironically, the uniforms worn by the troops were American; as were the jeeps and machine-guns. A smooth, gleaming American-built airline bus stood waiting to whisk the late arrivals from the airport to the island's capital.

Soon they were aboard, and a warm breeze was fanning the detective's face as he sat behind the driver getting his first view of the island's scenery.

Tall, incredibly-green palms swayed gently on a distant beach where a cobalt blue sky met the deeper sea in a blaze of morning sunlight.

The coast grew nearer, for their destination -- the island's capital, Carabanos -- was a city which hugged the harbour for its livelihood.

Carabanos was a tightly packed city; packed with buildings and packed with people. It seethed with humanity as only a Latin city can.

Soon Blake was watching its decaying suburbs flash by.

The road from the airport was good, but the reason was not far to seek. President Nonal had obviously recognised the value of the tourist trade. All the signs were there; large, lurid posters advertising American and European luxury products -- the finest Havana cigars and Caribbean rum...

But it wasn't hard to see why a man like Juan Callas should want to change things in Maliba.

The houses he saw were mean hovels. Pitiful attempts at whitewashing had only made them look worse -- more sleazy and decrepit than they already were.

The whitewash blistered and flaked in the sun.

Restaurants, bars and shops of all descriptions began to appear as they approached the city-centre.

Soon the bus slowed and stopped outside a large hotel. HOTEL PALMA, the sign said simply, and to justify its name the building had a pair of faded palm-trees shading its entrance.

Blake disembarked, thanking the driver. He picked up his light suitcase and entered the hotel through its misty glass doors.

The lobby was decorated like a late Edwardian ballroom. Red plush, somewhat worn, was everywhere; and wherever possible the woodwork was ornately carved and painted gold.

The lobby was dark, but a roof-fan turning lazily overhead kept it thankfully cool.

A wizened porter came smartly towards him. He was a small man, a half-caste mixture of Spanish and Carib. He wore a white uniform with tarnished brass buttons. There was a peaked cap sitting firmly on top of his head, pressing his ears down at the side.

"Señor?"

"I have a room booked," said the detective. "Mr. Blake."

He was deliberately using his own name. If anyone knew him in Maliba they would recognise him; the age of the television newsreel had placed strict limitations on the use of pseudonyms, and it was better to appear to be hiding nothing than to stimulate curiosity among the Maliban authorities.

If it became known he was a private investigator looking for Sir Gordon Sellingham's son would be unfortunate, perhaps, but not disastrous.

On the other hand, too much official curiosity about his identity might imperil the mission he'd been given by Craille.

The porter took his bag and led him to the reception desk.

A pretty, raven-haired girl in a costume which was the nearest thing Maliba had to a "national dress," greeted him with an intimate smile.

She wore an off-the-shoulder blouse and a flaring, scarlet skirt edged with blue. Her trim legs terminated in small feet pushed into shoes which were black and tall in the heel.

Her wide, sensuous lips curved in welcome. She laid her hands on, with their crimson-lacquered fingernails, on the desk. Between them was a reservation book.

Her large brown eyes appraised Blake and approved of what they saw. "Welcome to Maliba, Señor Blake."

Blake returned the smile and signed the book. "Thank you."

The girl took a key from the hooks behind her and gave it to the porter. "Room twenty-six."

Blake turned and followed the porter towards the lift..

* * *

Over a late breakfast in the hotel restaurant, Blake read the day's local newspapers. A brief analysis of the main news stories told him that Maliba's unofficial censorship was not confined to foreign correspondants.

There was no mention of any political disturbance. Instead large feature articles were devoted to explaining to the population the nature and purpose of the latest "army exercises."

No expense, said one editorial, was being spared to train Maliba's gallant troops in the most realistic conditions, to guard the Republic against any future threat of Communism.

The only reference to the recent rebel attack on the island's main army garrison, was a brief paragraph which spoke of "recent acts of hooliganism committed by a fanatic minority of subversive foreigners."

Doctor Nonales had evidently decided on a policy of "no publicity, no public interest" towards the rebels.

Blake folded up the papers and finished his breakfast. He decided that his first move should be to trace Peter Sellingham's movements and to begin by visiting the hotel from which the young man had last written home.

A few minutes later, dressed in a light, tropical suit, Blake left the hotel on foot and set out towards the centre of the city.

* * *

The day was already uncomfortably hot, and the streets themselves radiated heat. It came at Blake from all sides; from the verandas and walls above; from the pavements and gutters beneath.

Like the noise, it was inescapable.

And the noise was everywhere.

Guitars and maraccas sounded from every small bar and café in the narrow, twisting thoroughfare. Roadside vendors cried their wares; beggars kept up an interminable wail for money.

And if they didn't receive their few centavos they weren't about picking up stones or refuse from the gutters and hurling them at any unfortunate tourist who had the strength of mind to refuse.

Donkey-carts, horse-carts and hand-carts were everywhere, piled high with fruit, colourful sweet-meats, black cheroots and cheap *cigarillos*.

Garishly-painted plaster figures of innumerable saints looked down on display from every corner shrine.

And everywhere Blake saw flaring oil stoves, black and greasy, upon which pans of dough were fried and bubbled and sizzled until they were sold for a few centavos.

Ragged urchins ran between the crowds of adults. Urchins with worldly eyes which had seen too much, too soon...

The aromatic, bitter-sweet smell of coffee penetrated everywhere, disguising the less wholesome odours -- the stink of greasy food, garlic and dirty lavatories.

Over all lay the smell of sweating grubby bodies; for humanity seethed everywhere.

There was no apartheid in Carabanos -- no racial discrimination. It was impossible to discriminate at all.

Faces of every shade were there, from the light tan of Europeans and Americans to the shiny-black of full-blooded negroes.

Creoles, Spaniards, Carib-Indians, negroes, Britons, native Malibans and Americans --

were there. Jostling together, their very bulk allowed for no niceties of distinction. Social standing was judged by the cut of one's suit and the girl on one's arm.

The girls were certainly worth looking at. And there was no shortage of lookers. Hot, greedy eyes were everywhere darting to-and-fro so as to never miss the sway of a wide skirt or the flash of a bright blouse.

Many of the women had the dark, sultry Latin beauty which Hollywood has used to represent the tropical American image all over the globe. Seeing these women in the flesh was like stepping into a wide-screen movie-spectacular. Their beauty was arresting, powerful and as Hollywood has demonstrated, intensely visual.

It was the kind of beauty which would stay with them until they were thirty ... if they were lucky.

They wore off-the-shoulder blouses and wide, flaring skirts. Their heels were high and their hair was black. Golden ear-rings flashed in the bright sunshine.

The overall impression was of vitality; of enjoyment of life. For all the squalor, poverty and corruption -- for all the dictators who had ruled Maliba and still did, the people lived to capacity. They still had zest.

Blake couldn't help but wonder how they would react if grim, grey communism took control. Could such an alien system of government -- a system of the cold, arctic north -- thrive here?

The question lay heavy in Blake's mind as he turned a corner and came in sight of his first port of call.

He had reached the poorest, dirtiest part of Carabanos where the hotels tried to compensate for their abysmal sleaziness by adopting the most grandiose names.

Young Peter Sellingham's last dwelling-place must have been the sleaziest of all, for it boasted the most pretentious possible name --

HOTEL MALIBA.

Peter Sellingham had obviously elected to suffer with the poor. It looked just the place a young idealist might have chosen to live in -- especially if he had money.

But whereas the poor were used to the tatty squalor, Blake guessed that the rich man's son had *really* suffered.

Strong garlic greeted the detective as he pushed open the wooden door of the hotel and went inside; but at least it was cooler in the narrow, distempered hallway.

There was a bell, but no reception desk.

Blake rang the bell.

No-one answered. Blake rang again.

Eventually a greasy man with a greasier smile shuffled in, wearing a dirty vest and filthy blue jeans. He sported a partly waxed mustache and a chin in need of a shave.

"*Buenos dias, señor,*" he said through thick, bestial lips.

"I understand that a Señor Sellingham resides here?" Blake spoke the formal Spanish of Castille.

"Before two or three days. He departed. He did not return." The voice was surly, insolent.

"I was supposed to meet him here this morning." Blake feigned anxiety. "Where could he be?"

The other shrugged.

Absent-mindedly Blake drew a ten peso note from his pocket and released it into the man's greedy clutch.

"Perhaps the *señor* will find the man he seeks at the *Ostra...*"

"*Ostra?*" Blake frowned. The word meant oyster.

"A *cantina,*" the bestial lips muttered, "a drinking-bar two streets from here on the right. You will see it."

Blake nodded his thanks and left.

Out in the sunlight he glanced at his watch. It was unlikely that young Sellingham would be in the bar suggested by the man in the hotel.

A visit to the *Ostra* could wait.

Before the fatal hour of *siesta* descended to paralyse the island and bring his inquiries to a halt, the detective wanted to form some idea of how he stood with the authorities.

Moving instinctively away from the seamier part of the city, Blake headed towards the distant main streets in search of the Police Headquarters.

6. END OF A MASTER SPY

The headquarters of the Maliba State Polica were situated, as Blake had instinctively anticipated, in the most grandiose building on the island. It stood in the capital's main plaza directly opposite the Presidential Palace; a high, multi-storey building of immaculate white concrete, elaborately adorned with rococco guttering and ornate facing.

Once again, Blake found himself at a strategic key-point. The building was surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence along with sand-bag emplacements stood at intervals, bristling with

machine-guns.

A Sherman tank stood at each corner and soldiers with rifles watched warily as Blake entered the narrow gate to the main steps of the building.

Police guards, armed with submachine-guns mounted watch inside the entrance, but the detective was allowed to approach the reception desk unhindered.

The sergeant behind the desk wore a bottle-green uniform with abundant gold braid and more medals than had ever been won on any western battlefield. He greeted Blake with a wide-mouthed smile and eyed the investigator's suit with envy.

"How can I help you, senor?"

"I wish to see the Chief of Police," Blake said crisply. He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to the man. It was addressed to the Chief of Police in person. The sergeant looked impressed.

"Please wait one moment." With a gesture of reassurance he disappeared down a corridor. A few moments later he returned -- smiling.

"Captain Tarratona will be very pleased to see you, senor."

Blake allowed himself to be ushered along a corridor and up a flight of stairs, where the sergeant came to a halt before a highly-polished double-door and knocked.

A languid voice called: "Enter."

Blake entered -- and the sergeant withdrew.

The room was large and high-ceilinged. In the centre was a desk which any Victorian industrialist would have been proud of, and against one wall stood a row of gleaming metal filing cabinets.

A white, gold-edged cap hung from a rack on one wall.

A big man got up from behind the desk as Blake entered. He was handsome in a dark, Latin way, but fast running to fat. He was in his forties and his thick, dark hair ended in sleek side-boards at the temples. A large moustache curled widely round his upper lip above a big-toothed smile.

His uniform was the same bottle-green as the sergeant's, but with more gold braid and more medals.

He shook Blake's hand warmly and drew up a chair for the visitor. "I am Captain Juan Tarratona, Mr. Blake -- Welcome to Maliba!"

As Blake sat down the police chief glanced again at the letter which the sergeant had delivered.

It was one of the letters which Sir Gordon Sellingham had provided for Blake before he left London. Blake knew what was running through the police chief's mind because he knew what the letter said. It read:

Dear Captain Tarratona,

This is to introduce to you Mr. S. Blake, a personal friend of mine who is visiting Mallorca on business. Anything you can do to make his stay a pleasant one I shall regard as a personal flavour.

Yours, etc.,

Gordon Sellingham

The police chief scratched his chin thoughtfully before putting the letter aside and giving Blake another smile.

"Sir Gordon Sellingham is a great man in these parts señor. He has brought much prosperity to the island..."

And, Blake thought, to you in particular.

"...Any friend of Sir Gordon's is a friend of mine," the policeman continued, "and I shall be only too glad to do what he asks -- to give you any help you need while you are here on business. Although --" he went on with a quizzical frown. "--Sir Gordon has omitted to say what business you are in..."

It was a question.

"I'm here on behalf of a marine insurance company," Blake replied blandly. "I'm an investigator."

"Ah, so!" the captain smiled. "I thought I knew your name. How can I be of service to you?" He sat down and proffered a box of cigars.

"Just general information," Blake said easily. "Thank you." He took a cigar. "I arrived this morning, so I haven't had time to get my bearings, yet. But before I left London I heard there was some kind of political trouble here; so I thought I'd come to have a talk to you, just to be on the picture. I shouldn't want to infringe any of your emergency laws or security regulations through not being acquainted with the facts..." Blake made his voice sound anxious.

"What charming courtesy!" Tarratona smiled broadly. "And what a pity that the rest of our island's visitors so not show such thoughtful consideration..." He struck a match and leaned over to light Blake's cigar. "However, I am pleased to inform you that there is no cause for anxiety..."

"No?" Blake's eyebrows arched.

Tarratona shook his head with another easy smile. "There is no trouble in Maliba. A few hotheaded students, no more."

"I'm pleased to hear it," Blake said. "The newspapers made it sound quite alarming..."

"Newspapers are the same the world over, Mr. Blake! They always exaggerate!" He grinned.

Blake forced a smile of relief. "Well, that's very good news."

"What else can I do for you?" the police chief asked.

"I don't think anything..." Blake began. Then: "Oh -- yes, there is one thing. Before I left London I promised Sir Gordon I would look up his son, Peter. He was supposed to be staying at the Hotel Maliba -- but when I went there just now they said he'd left three or four days ago. Have you any idea where I might find him?"

Tarratona gave a massive, Latin shrug. "He may have gone fishing, Senor Blake -- for a cruise perhaps -- he may have visited Havana, possibly. I have no idea, I assure you."

Blake nodded thoughtfully.

On the face of it if he got the impression that the Maliba police would not be likely to hinder his investigations. But in view of Tarratona's flat denial of any 'political trouble' it seemed pointless to pursue questions on which the Maliba government had already imposed censorship.

He decided to leave it at that.

"Very well, captain," Blake rose. "Thank you for seeing me and sparing your time..."

"A pleasure," the police chief rose, smiling to shake hands. "If you need anything -- any of help..."

"I'll call you!" Blake promised.

It was only as Blake was leaving that Tarratona asked casually: "You mentioned an insurance investigation -- a marine insurance claim was it...?"

Blake hesitated as Tarratona opened the office door. On a sudden impulse he said: "I'm trying to locate a witness in an arson case. We need him for a lawsuit which is coming up in Brazil, and we heard he was in Maliba."

"What name?" Tarratona asked interestedly.

"Harben," Blake said evenly. "Jules Harben."

"*Harben?*" The police chief frowned with sudden recognition.

"You know the name?" Blake's surprise was genuine.

"Jules Harben?" repeated Tarratona. "A marine engineer who sailed here from Brazil?"

Blake tried to suppress a sudden surge of excitement. "That's right," he nodded calmly. "I don't know what ship he signed on with, but we know he was trying to go north..."

"The *Gorgon*! Tarratona exclaimed. "The *Gorgon* sailed here from Brazil four weeks ago. There was a man called Jules Harben on board! But --!" He broke off.

Blake frowned. "What is it, captain? What's wrong? Do you know this man--?"

Tarratona looked shocked. He faltered: "I knew *of* him. Mr. Blake. He was one of the *Gorgon's* crew -- but --"

"Was?" Blake frowned suddenly.

"The *Gorgon* is a research ship. Mr. Blake -- there was an accident -- only two days ago. He broke off looking anxious and worried.

"Mr. Blake, this is going to be bad news for you. Two days Jules Harben was killed. He went down in a bathysphere, over a thousand feet down in the sea. No-one knows yet what went wrong -- my men are still investigating; that is why I know Harben's name -- but the bathysphere failed to return. When it was located Harben's body was found inside. He had been stabbed in the back -- *murdered..!*"

7. DEEP SEA MYSTERY

Blake's mind was reeling as he walked away from the Police Headquarters in the blaze of the Caribbean noon.

Was Tarratona right?

Had the man really been killed?

Had Jules Harben, alias Jakob Kraski, Soviet Master-Spy actually departed this life?

It seemed incredible. Beyond all belief.

Could one of Craille's arch-enemies actually have perished so easily?

If true it represented an ironic twist of fate -- and a tremendous stroke of fortune.

Of all the bizarre ways for a Soviet Master-Spy to die -- *in a bathysphere!*

And yet, beneath the sudden elation Blake felt a strange uneasiness ... a puzzling insecurity

...

Another hand had intervened somewhere; an unknown quantity was at work; either that or the long arm of coincidence.

If the Harben who had died in the bathysphere was the Harben he was looking for, how he come to die in such intriguing circumstances?

How had he been killed?

Who had murdered him?

And above all, why had he been murdered?

Blake didn't know the answers to these strange and disturbing questions. But one thing he did know: he had to find out!

The questions were burning relentlessly in his mind as he strode swiftly away from the city's main plaza, heading for the waterfront in search of a boat that would take him where he wanted to go -- the offshore anchorage of the research ship *Gorgon*...

* * *

The harbour of Carabanos had been built of granite by the Spaniards, two hundred years before. Slave labour had constructed it and Spanish soldiers had garrisoned it.

It was the harbour that Sir Henry Morgan had taken with three small English frigates.

When the Conqueror of Panama had taken Carabanos the port had become the haunt of every freebooter on the Spanish Main. The harbour district was rich with legends concerning Blackbeard, Kidd and Morgan himself.

But now a different kind of pirate had taken over the port -- pirates who called themselves boatmen and hired out motor-vessels to the tourists.

Blake's mind boggled as he saw the prices of hiring. But eventually he got hold of a motor-boat which looked seaworthy, and inquired as to the position of the *Gorgon*.

Minutes later he was steering the craft out to sea at a steady twelve knots.

The deep waters of the Caribbean were an unusually beautiful turquoise in the noonday sunshine.

Soon, Carabanos lost its appearance of squalor, dirt and disease; from a distance it began to look like a fairy city as Blake's boat throbbed away from the shore.

The sun flashed on white walls and roofs. It was mirrored in the blue-green ocean.

Soon too, the squat, solid ship which was Hoddard Curtis's deep-sea laboratory, came in sight. Lines dangled from derricks over the bow, and the deck-space was littered with diving equipment of all kinds.

A few men dozed among the gear, taking their *siesta*, but Blake could make out the figure of one man who was hard at work -- a man in white shirt and trousers who was carrying a

clip-board and pencil and moving towards the stern.

As Blake drew near he saw that the man was tall and quite young. He had sandy-blond hair and his skin was flayed brown by the wind and sun.

Blake cupped his hands to form a megaphone and shouted over the water: "Ahoy there! I come aboard?"

The man stopped and stared at the newcomer for a moment before shouting back: "No reporters allowed!"

Blake drew alongside before replying.

"My name's Blake! I'm not a reporter -- I want to see Professor Curtis!"

The man shrugged. "I'm Curtis -- all right, come aboard."

Blake brought his motor-boat alongside a steel ladder which ran up to the ship's deck. He moored it to one of the rungs and climbed dexterously up the ladder to be greeted by the biologist.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work professor," he held out a hand to the tall man. "How do you do?"

"What can I do for you, Mr. Blake?" Curtis inquired. He was not smiling. His mouth was in a grim, tense line and he was obviously under a great deal of strain.

"I'm interested in a man who signed up with you in Brazil some weeks ago," said Blake. "The name's Harben. I understand from the police that he met with an accident--"

"The police told you?" Curtis frowned. "You must have powerful friends! No-one else has been allowed anywhere near the ship. The information's under censorship and I've been forbidden to talk to the press..."

"Why?" Blake interrupted.

"Search me!" Curtis gave an exasperated shrug. "But it's all so secret no-one knows what's happening. There are two other men here now, searching Harben's cabin -- FBI detectives. Are you from the British police?"

"No," Blake denied. "I'm an insurance claims investigator. I was trying to find Harben because we need him as a witness in a case of arson that happened months ago."

"Well you're too late now," Curtis said grimly. "Harben's dead. And he took all my money with him -- my efforts of years. If you want to see him you'll have to dive a thousand feet down. That's where he is -- in my bathysphere somewhere in the Tarangas Trench... with a knife in his back!"

"How did it happen?" Blake wanted to know.

Curtis told him of the incident and related in bitter terms how he had gone down and fouled the sphere.

"Maybe I sound callous about Harben's death, but it was his own fault. I wouldn't have minded him killing himself or getting himself killed -- but he had to do it with my sphere!"

"Who was the other man?" Blake demanded.

"A man called Linwood -- Jim Linwood. I never met him. He was an assistant Harben h while I was away. Some bum mechanic who used to hang around the waterfront cafés."

"That's all you know about him?"

"That's all I *want* to know. All I want to do is get my sphere back before the water rusts much of the equipment away."

"You're going to bring her up?"

"As soon as the salvage equipment arrives from the States."

"When will that be?"

"Tomorrow, I hope."

"You mentioned water damaging the sphere -- was the sphere holed?"

Curtis nodded. "Yes -- a small, jagged hole near where the cable was. It looks as though some explosive caused it -- blew the cable apart and sunk the sphere."

"You're sure it was explosive?"

"I'm not sure of anything. For all I know the men may be right. They say it was a sea monster, for Pete's sake."

"A sea monster?" Blake frowned. "That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it?"

Curtis eyed him evenly and shrugged. "Who knows? Strange things have been found in the lower ocean. Dead fins and tentacles, five hundred times bigger than any known beast have been washed up on the beaches before now. Fragments of bone and scales the size of dinner plates... We don't know what lives at the bottom of the Tanangas Trench, Mr. Blake. I've spent years of my life and thousands of dollars trying to find out!"

* * *

As Blake frowned thoughtfully at this theory, Curtis went on: "Listen -- I'm not saying it was a prehistoric monster but stranger things have happened. All the evidence suggests that even well-known sea-creatures -- whales and dolphins -- may have brains not so different from our own. It's not impossible that some form of higher intelligence lurks down there unknown to us. The point is we really don't know!"

Blake said thoughtfully: "And if it were true--"

"If it were true it would explain what otherwise remains insoluble -- *who killed Harben and how did Linwood disappear!*"

"You're sure there's no way Linwood could have killed Harben -- and then got out of the bathysphere?" Blake asked.

"Impossible!" said Curtis. "Harben was more than seven hundred feet down before he suddenly started screaming for help. No man could have got out at that depth. It isn't just a question of surviving -- he could never have got the hatch of the sphere closed again!"

Curtis glanced towards two nearby Indians who were members of his crew. He lowered his voice.

"In any case, Harben's cries for help gave no indication he'd been stabbed. He screamed because he'd seen something -- something uncanny and terrifying, something he called horrible and disgusting -- outside the sphere! Then contact was severed and the sphere sank."

Blake nodded grimly as he digested these facts. Whatever the ultimate explanation of the mystery, it seemed an inescapable certainty that both Harben and Linwood were dead.

Just then two men came up on deck and walked towards the detective and biologist.

They both wore fedora hats and highly-polished tan shoes; light-weight grey suits and purple coloured ties.

They were obviously the two FBI men Curtis had mentioned earlier.

One was lean and looked as though he had been carved out of rock. There wasn't an ounce of surplus fat on him. His skin was swarthy and he was obviously an emigré from the south of the US border -- a Mexican. He walked delicately, like a girl, but there was nothing feminine about him for all that.

Probably the FBI had recruited him because he spoke Spanish. His companion was taller, beefier, with cynical grey eyes.

As they approached, the Mexican confronted the biologist and jerked a thumb at Blake. "Who's this?"

"My name's Blake," the detective spoke up with an edge on his voice.

"Didn't the local cops tell you this ship's off limits to the Press?"

"Mr. Blake isn't a newsman," Professor Curtis put in. "He's an insurance investigator."

"Okay, we'll handle this," the Mexican told him.

To Blake's surprise, Curtis merely nodded to the FBI man and moved off! He went about

work leaving Blake to face the questioners alone.

"I think we'll maybe ask you some questions, Mr. Blake," said the Mexican.

Blake smiled easily. "By all means, Mr. --"

"Navarro. Lieutenant Navarro. This is my colleague, Lieutenant Kellaher, FBI."

"How can I help you?" Blake inquired.

"What are you doing aboard this ship?" demanded the beefy man, Kellaher.

"I'm a private investigator," Blake produced one of his professional cards. "I'm here to represent a client in London."

The two men examined the card suspiciously. "British, huh?" Kellaher looked at him. "Investigating what?"

"Trying to trace a seaman who's needed as a witness in an arson case. We heard he'd signed on with the *Gorgon*..."

"What name?"

"Harben," Blake said evenly. "Jules Harben."

The two men looked at each other. They both looked at Blake.

The Mexican said grimley: "Come into the cabin."

* * *

Inside the cabin, stacked high with electronic equipment, diving gear, winch meters and regulators, and Sonar, the underwater radar, Blake realised what the loss of the sphere really meant to Curtis. Without it, most of the other equipment was useless.

He seated himself casually upon a small table and said: "Very well, Lieutenant Navarro, what do you want to know?"

"Who you're working for?" demanded the Mexican.

Blake paused. He studied the coal-black eyes of the fierce Mexican and said slowly: "I'd like to see your means of identification."

The Mexican glowered. "We'll ask the questions!" He snarled. "We're agents of the Federal Government and this is a United States ship!"

Blake said slowly: "This ship is moored in Maliban territorial waters -- and outside the American jurisdiction. I'm not obliged to answer your questions."

The Mexican's face turned ugly but the man called Kellaher intervened smoothly. "The

man's right. Mr. Blake is not obliged to answer us..." He addressed Blake. "All we are asking for is a little friendly co-operation, Mr. Blake. We have reason to believe that Jules Harben was murdered by communist agents who are plotting to overthrow the Maliban Government. If you know something about Harben we may be able to exchange information ... as between friendly allies, huh..."

Blake thought grimly that it would be a poor exchange. The suggestion was also an unorthodox one, to say the least. Craille's security regulations did not permit him to do arbitrary deals with foreign agents -- even FBI agents; but in any case the detective wasn't convinced that these two men were actually from the FBI.

He said: "I know nothing about that. I'm just a private detective visiting Maliba to represent various clients in London. I was trying to find Harben for the Amethyst Insurance Company."

Kellaher turned to Navarro with a shrug. "Could be true, Navarro."

The Mexican looked suspicious. "Who else are you working for?"

"Sir Gordon Sellingham, the sugar magnate. I've been commissioned to trace his son Peter."

"Peter Sellingham?" Kellaher frowned.

"You've heard of him?" Blake asked.

"Sure. He used to hang around the skid-row area. Tried to look the part of a hobo, but it didn't come off. Stuck a pair of shades on his nose and played at Secret Agent X. Sure, I heard of him."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Nope. Maybe the Maliba Government had him bumped off -- he was pretty free with his dough and gave a lot to the rebel riff-raff around the waterfront. I wouldn't know. He may have gone into hiding... we're not interested in Sellingham."

Kellaher turned to the Mexican. "I think this guy's straight, Navarro."

The Mexican still looked suspicious but he said: "Okay, Blake, you can go. But keep your nose clean, huh?"

Blake rose. He nodded to Kellaher then turned without a word and left the cabin.

On deck he found Curtis leaning over the ship's rail. The Professor turned with a faint smile.

"So you're in the clear?"

"Yes -- some misunderstanding." Blake hesitated. "Just so there's no mistake about the man's identity -- do you think I could be here tomorrow when you salvage the sphere?"

Curtis shrugged. "Why not?"

Blake smiled and thanked him.

"Okay," Curtis said, "I'll see you." His face was grim as he watched Blake go.

Blake was deep in thought as he climbed down the ladder into his motor boat and began his return journey to the harbour.

If Professor Curtis's account of the bathysphere incident was true, there could no longer be any doubt about Harben's fate.

Jules Harben alias Jakob Kraski, Soviet Master-Spy, was dead. In twenty-four hours, and if everything was being well, Blake would even be able to see him buried!

That would be good news for Craille.

But meanwhile, other problems remained.

Blake had still to locate Peter Sellingham; he had still to get the list of Soviet agents Craille had asked for; he had still to learn exactly how Harben had died; and he had still to learn why the Maliba police had imposed censorship on the bathysphere incident.

Had Captain Tarratona censored news of the bathysphere at the request of Navarro and Kellaher? Where did the two FBI men fit in -- if indeed they were FBI men?

The business of the censorship was puzzling.

But even more puzzling was something else:

If Captain Tarratona was so anxious to suppress all details of the bathysphere incident, why had he been so ready to reveal the name of the murdered man -- Jules Harben?

8. OUR MAN IN MALIBA

The question uppermost in Blake's mind was one that had to be answered without delay. And it was to answer it that Blake made steps, as soon as he was ashore, towards the Consulate of Her Britannic Majesty's Government.

It was very rarely, on Blake's missions for Craille, that the detective could allow himself the luxury of indulging in "feedback" -- of communicating directly with his superior and passing his problem back to London.

But in certain circumstances, when the situation warranted it, an emergency means of communication did exist.

And it was to use this emergency system that Blake arrived in the early afternoon at the large white villa which stood in a well-kept garden on the western sea-cliffs above the city.

A small Union Jack flew from a discreet white flagpole above an immaculate lawn, and gleaming Rolls-Royce stood in a wide, adjacent garage.

Blake entered an air-conditioned reception and was greeted by an English girl in her twenties who looked up from her desk with a pleasant smile. "Yes?"

Blake showed her a business card. "Have you a full time security officer?"

The girl's eyebrows arched imperceptibly. "Just one moment sir, ..." She rose and crossed the marble hallway, disappearing into a nearby office.

A moment later she was back. "Will you come this way, please?"

Blake followed her into the office. A lean, middle-aged man with a pipe rose from a paper-strewn desk. "All right, Judy." He dismissed the girl with a nod.

He shook hands with Blake. "We've no permanent security man. I'm Henderson, the Vice-Consul..." His eyes were thoughtful. "What's the problem?"

"Sexton Blake," replied the detective. "Special Service Operative, PANSAC. I want to send a message to London."

"Hmm..." Henderson frowned. He took a bunch of keys from his pocket and crossed to the safe behind his desk. "Is it urgent?"

"Very."

Henderson opened the safe and pulled out a thick file.

He skimmed through it and found a page. "What's your service number?"

Blake told him.

Henderson nodded and closed the book. "All right, Mr. Blake. Come through into the communications room." He closed the safe, locking it. Then with another key from the bunch he opened the door of a small adjoining office and led Blake inside.

Two teleprinters stood side by side beneath a shelf of radio equipment.

"We only work to London once a day," said Henderson. "I'll set it up for you..." He began switching on power circuits and adjusting dials. "... You want to use the keyboard yourself?"

"Yes please."

"All right. Just a moment..." He leaned over one of the keyboards and tapped out half a dozen code words. "Who's your addressee?"

"DISCO/SINSEC," Blake told him.

Henderson tapped it out. A moment later the red light went on. "Okay, you're through."

Blake took the seat behind the keyboard as the printer began to chatter:

SINSEC SINSEC GO AHEAD MALIBA

Blake typed:

EMERGENCY FOR CRAILLE PERSONAL

There was a brief pause before the keys chattered back:

STAND BY

Then Blake waited, knowing that the girl at the other end had gone to fetch Craille. He wondered grimly what the old man would be thinking. He certainly wouldn't be pleased.

Blake was right. A moment later Craille was on the other end tapping out tersely:

WHAT'S WRONG?

Blake sent his message:

PLEASE ADVISE URGENTLY ON SECURITY REPEAT SECURITY OF SOURCE
INFORMING YOU OF HARBEN'S TRUE INDENTITY

There was another brief pause before Craille came back:

SOURCE WAS AGENT OF FRIENDLY BUT BACKWARD SOUTH AMERICAN
REPUBLIC OKAY?

Blake pursed his lips. What did Craille think he was, a mind-reader? He tapped out:

NO. PLEASE ELUCIDATE: A--RELIABILITY B--SECURITY

Craille replied tersely:

A--AS IN ALLIED COUNTRY

B--AS IN BANANA STATE

WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

Obviously Craille was exasperated. But just as Blake was about to reply, the old man a kindly:

INFORMATION IS RELIABLE BUT NOT SECURE STOP YOU MUST ASSUME
HARBEN KNOWS HE IS COMPROMISED STOP DOES THAT ANSWER YOUR
QUESTION?

Blake grinned. It told him what he wanted to know. He replied:

GOT IT THANKS GOODBYE

Craille signed off:

GOOD LUCK GOOD HUNTING

The red light went off and Blake rose from the chair.

"All right?" Henderson asked.

Blake nodded. "Yes, thank you. I'll try not to bother you again."

Henderson only nodded. "Were you seen coming here?"

"No." Blake was definite.

"Okay," said Henderson. "I'll show you out the back way."

* * *

Now, more than ever, Blake had to find Peter Sellingham! He had to make contact with rebel forces of Juan Callas -- and young Sellingham was his only link.

Blake didn't like what he had learned from Craille.

There was an old axiom of British Intelligence which had sprung to mind at Police Headquarters and had kept running through his head ever since:

"Believe nothing you hear and only half of what you see!"

Blake thought it was time to obey that axiom.

After leaving the British Consulate he returned to the centre of town where *siesta* was a last drawing to a close and the city was beginning to come to life again.

Blake located a car-hire firm and succeeded in hiring an Oldsmobile convertible for a not-too-exorbitant fee.

Once behind the wheel, he took the main road out of town towards the airport and Sir Gordon Sellingham's main sugar refinery which was situated three miles inland.

There was a refreshing breeze in the open car, and the afternoon was pleasant. But the day was short-lived.

Six minutes after leaving the city centre he was driving through the gates of the large sugar plant, and a moment later he brought the convertible to a halt outside the main building.

It was a tall, modern, steel and concrete structure of the functional American pattern, and was signposted:

ADMINISTRATION BLOCK.

Inside, a pretty American girl in a blue, halter-style dress, smiled up at him warmly. She

had wispy auburn hair which haloed a pleasant, oval face, large blue eyes and a big smile.

"Can I help you sir?" p>Blake produced the second of his letters from Sir Gordon Sellingham. "Where can I find--" he glanced at the envelope "--Miss Amelia Tucker, the manageress?"

The girl pointed to a grey-carpeted stairway: "First floor, sir -- you can't miss it -- her name's on the door."

Blake saw the doubtful look on the girl's face and explained: "My name's Blake -- I believe Miss Tucker is expecting me..."

"Oh -- yes sir. Go right on up." The girl smiled again.

News of his coming had gone ahead of him, then...

Blake took the stairs two at a time and found himself on the landing of the first floor. A sign directly in front of him bore the words: A. R. TUCKER -- MANAGERESS.

Blake recalled that Miss Tucker was a distant cousin of Sir Gordon Sellingham's late wife. He crossed to the door and was about to knock when a violent sound reached him from beyond the door.

A man was yelling angrily. He was furious about something and was making no bones about it:

"You lousy, rotten slave-driver! I'm glad I'm getting out!"

"You have no choice, Worple!" Their was a fruity, female voice which rose stridently above the torrent of already strident sound: "You have no choice at all! Collect your money downstairs and then leave! There is nothing more to be said!"

"Oh, isn't there, you old hag?" The man's voice was that of someone who had been goaded into a fit of bitter fury. "Nobody calls me a liar and gets away with it like that! I've got *plenty* to say -- and I'm going to say it, *Miss* blasted Tucker!"

"The company has heard quite enough of you, Worple! You've been given notice for spreading disgusting scandal! When you begin making up lies about the son of our managing director it was clear you were no longer to be trusted--"

"*It was true!*" shouted the man called Worple. "*All true!*"

Blake had been about to step away from the door and wait on another part of the landing until it was all over. But suddenly his attention was captured.

"It was a pack of lies!" came the voice of Miss Tucker. "We've no room for gossips in this company!"

"You're lying!" snarled Worple. "And well you might! I saw you with young Sellingham

night! And you're not the only woman I've seen with him. Every tart on the island knows Lover-boy-Sellingham! He hangs out in all the filthiest parts of the city -- and you were with him!"

The appeared to be Worples parting shot. The door was flung open from inside. A small man with a face redder than a pillar-box regarded Blake's chest without comprehension. His expression was one of righteous indignation as he blindly circum-navigated the detective and marched off down the corridor.

Miss Amelia Tucker saw Blake standing there. She said coldly: "Can I help you?" She looked worried, almost scared.

She was a large, angular woman with grey hair. There was a masculine quality about her lumpy, prissy features and her wide shoulders. She wore a dress which reached well below knee-length and her flat-heeled brown shoes were of the kind generally described as "sensible".

"My name's Blake." The detective stepped inside. "I'm here on behalf of Sir Gordon Sellingham."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Blake." Her tone altered. She tried to smile. She walked fussily over to her desk and lowered herself carefully into her chair.

"I am Miss Tucker."

Blake gave her the letter from Sir Gordon Sellingham which she read carefully before looking up. This time she managed a smile which creased the skin of her face until it seemed it would crack. "And how can I help you Mr. Blake?"

"I want you to tell me what you know of young Peter's movements."

Miss Tucker sighed. "Precious little, I'm afraid. I knew he was on the island, of course. Gordon asked us to keep an eye on him and see that he didn't get into trouble. But--" She shrugged, "--you know what young men are these days, Mr. Blake. Peter goes running about over the world and it's really quite impossible to keep up with him..."

"What was he doing here, do you know?" Blake asked.

She shrugged. "Seeing the island, meeting the local inhabitants... He mixes with rather -- unsavoury company, at times... The last news I had of him was when his bank manager in Carabanos phoned me to say he hadn't been in for a while and did I know where he was..."

"Did you?" Blake demanded.

"No," Miss Tucker said firmly. "I've seen him only once. He called here on the day he arrived in Maliba. But I haven't seen him since."

"I see," Blake murmured. "Are you sure there is nothing you can tell me?"

"Nothing that will help you, Mr. Blake." She met his gaze calmly.

"I see," said Blake again. "Then I won't waste any more of your time. Good day, Miss Tucker." He made for the door.

"Good day, Mr. Blake."

The woman watched him leave. Then with a dark frown on her face she turned to one of two telephones beside her and picked up the receiver. She dialled a number and waited.

One hand clasped the edge of her desk with a grip that made her knuckles turn white, as she waited for the call to go through. Then someone answered and she began to speak in an urgent low voice:

"It's me -- Amelia! I've just seen him and he's asking questions! It looks as though the trouble's started..."

* * *

At the foot of the grey-carpeted stairs Blake paused in front of the company notice-board in the lobby.

Amelia Tucker had been covering something up. Blake had no doubt about that -- and he wanted to know what it was.

A moment later he saw what he was looking for -- a list of the home addresses and telephone numbers of the company's executive staff.

Halfway down the list was the name: *Worple, A., Hotel Europa, 57 Avenida Santa Maria, Carabanos.*

With a grim smile of satisfaction, Blake turned and left the building. He got into the Oldsmobile, reversed and drove out on to the main road -- back towards Carabanos... and Avenida Santa Maria...

Would the man called Worple be able to tell him what he wanted to know?

9. MAN WITH A GRUDGE

Blake had reached the centre of Carabanos when a backward glance through his driving mirror told him he was being followed ... by a sleek, black limousine of the Maliba State Police.

Thoughtfully, the detective drove on through the town past the Presidential Palace and Police Headquarters.

The police car made no attempt to turn off. It stayed doggedly on his tail.

The Avenida Santa Maria came up on Blake's left. He did not turn into it but drove on past, coming to a stop three blocks further on, outside the International Press Club.

He got out of the car and crossed the pavement to a tobacco kiosk. Casually, he turned back to glance at his car and from the corner of his eye saw the sleek, black car with the State Police insignia glide to a halt at the kerb.

Blake did not hurry. He bought a packet of cigarettes at the kiosk and was strolling back towards his car when a peaked-cap was poked out of the police car window and the sleepy voice of Captain Tarratona called out:

"Ah -- Señor Blake."

"Good afternoon, Captain."

"Good afternoon -- just a word, señor -- a friendly word of advice..." The Police Chief smiled. His voice was a soft purr in his throat: "Stop your prying -- leave Maliba as soon as possible..."

"What d'you mean?" Blake's defences were up. He was puzzled.

"I mean't no offense, señor -- but someone high up, a very important man, has suggested you are becoming a little too curious about -- ah -- internal affairs..."

He flashed his teeth. Saluted extravagantly and signalled his driver to leave.

The car glided away, leaving Blake standing on the pavement -- a dark, grim expression forming on his face.

* * *

Blake got back in the Oldsmobile and drove as far as the next intersection before turning back to double-back on his tracks.

A few moments later he was once more approaching the beginning of the Avenida Santa Maria. There was no longer any sign of the police car.

Blake turned into the avenue and began cruising along the pavement in search of number 1234.

This was the select area of Carabanos where the European and American employees of foreign-owned industries lived.

Soon the detective spotted the number he was looking for. A sign said *Hotel Europa*, and there was a small neat building nestling back from the road, reached by a narrow, semi-circle of pebble drive.

Blake turned in through the gates and parked his car beneath the shade of some tall palm trees. He got out of the Oldsmobile and walked across to the hotel entrance.

It was clean and well kept -- a reminder that Europeans in Maliba drew substantial salaries. Only Worple was no longer drawing his, Blake thought wryly as he walked up the three steps and entered through the plate-glass doors.

He found himself in a small, cool lobby. A large fan spun mutely on the ceiling overhead.

A lean, erect, grey-haired European stood behind a small reception desk. Blake guessed he was ex-Indian Army; he wore a lightweight white jacket and trousers and an open-necked white shirt with a regimental, silk cravat. He had a bushy, white moustache and a florid face.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Blake smiled at the barking precision of the voice.

"You have a Mr. Worple resident here?"

"That's quite right, sir..." The man's eyes quickly took in the detective's expensive tailoring.

"Perhaps you could tell him I'm here. I'd like to see him for a few minutes -- the name's Blake."

"Just a moment, Mr. Blake." He moved to the telephone switchboard, picked up a receiver and dialled a single number.

For long seconds there was no reply, but at last the buzzing stopped and a confused torrent of sound flowed over the line. It sounded like maudlin abuse. The man at the desk had to raise his voice about the incoherent noise. "Mr. Worple! Mr. Worple, sir! There's a gentleman here to see you! A Mr. Blake!"

The torrent flowed on for a few seconds, then abruptly stopped.

Blake heard a slurred voice say: "You tell him I'll be right down... right down..." The line went dead.

Worple had evidently been drinking.

Blake waited in the lobby. It was some time before the man appeared, but eventually he stumbled on the stairway and Albert Worple loomed into sight carrying a bottle marked: *Old Kentucky Bourbon*. He clutched the bottle in one hand while the other gripped the banister.

"Sorry I couldn't get her sooner -- Mr. Blake," he said gravely, his voice slurring. The bottle of Old Kentucky was less than a quarter full.

Blake had met some hard drinkers in his time, but he was amazed at the amount of Bourbon Worple had apparently managed to consume in the short time since leaving the refinery.

"That's all right, Mr. Worple," said Blake. "I'd like a word with you, if I may..."

Worple weaved towards the detective. "Of course, Mr. Blake. Been 'specting you! Hear..."

the rumour at work -- come to check up on old Tucker, haven't you? Have you decided to give me my job back? That's what it is, isn't it? You heard what I said to her and you've come to give me back my job..."

Blake reached out an arm to steady him. "What *did* you say, Mr. Worple? I didn't hear a word of it..."

"I told her -- I said: 'Tucker, you ol' hag -- you're finished with this firm. Your days are numbered! It is jealousy -- jealousy -- which causes you to give me the sack -- sack...' I said 'nothing but rotten jealousy because your job needs a man to do it -- and I'm him! We all know that! Sellingham only gave you the job because you were a crumby relative...' that's what I told her!"

"Let's go in here, shall we?" Blake took Worple's bottle from him and guided him toward the door marked *Lounge*.

It was a room furnished in a style reminiscent of boarding houses Blake had seen in Bournemouth and Cheltenham.

He helped Worple to sit down on a lumpy, overstuffed settee, then said softly:

"What do you know about young Peter Sellingham, Worple?"

The urgency of his tone had little effect on the drunkard who said with a mysterious wink: "What *don't* I know! I saw old Tucker with young Sellingham -- mucking it in the dirtiest bar in the city. Everything's true. True... true... true..."

His voice became fainter, his eyes glassier.

"What else do you know about Sellingham?" Blake asked.

"What don't I know," repeated Worple, a foolish grin adorning his insignificant features. "I know about his friends -- I know about the rebels -- I know about the police. Oh, there isn't much I don't know..."

Blake said impatiently: "About Sellingham -- where did you last see him? *Where?*"

"Where?" Worple sat up and looked at his right hand in startled bewilderment.

"Yes -- where?"

"Where," said Worple with an air of resigned patience, "is my bottle of 'Old Kentucky'?"

"I don't know," Blake lied. "But I'll get you another one if you answer me truthfully."

"Okay."

"*Where did you last see Peter Sellingham?*"

That bar... the one where the rebels hang out -- where he took that old hag Tucker -- and

where he used to meet his girl friend."

"His girl friend?" Blake demanded sharply.

Worple nodded owlshly. "Nice girl, too. Wasted on young Sellingham. Don't know what she saw in him..."

"Which bar, Worple? And which girl? Pull yourself together man -- tell me!"

"I'll take you there if you like," Worple said. "If we go there you can get me a new bottle of Bourbon, can't you?"

Blake sighed. "Come on, let's go."

* * *

Ten minutes later, as Blake drove back across the centre of Carabanos with Worple in the seat beside him, he became conscious for the second time that afternoon, of being followed.

Another police car had appeared discreetly in his driving mirror and was tailing him, though keeping well to the rear.

Blake made several turns through a network of side-streets to see just how badly the Malibian police wanted to keep him under surveillance.

At first the police car stayed doggedly on the tail of the Oldsmobile, but when it became clear that Blake was aware of being followed, the car dropped back and allowed itself to be shaken off.

Blake emerged once more into the main streets, wondering...

What were they trying to do?

Were they really anxious to keep an eye on him or were they just trying to frighten him?

Captain Tarratona's warning had been firm enough: "*Stop your prying -- leave Maliba soon as possible...*"

But why had he given it? He had greeted Blake cordially enough that morning -- and only a few hours later he was telling him to leave the island. Why? What had happened in that time?

One thing was sure. Someone had alerted Tarratona. Someone had spoken to the police chief and used some kind of influence.

Someone who was trying to stop Blake's investigations!

Why? Had he stumbled onto something that imperilled someone? If so, what was it? And who wanted the detective out of the way?

The last question was the most intriguing one of all, because Blake was sure that the per-

who wanted him out of the way was someone he had already spoken to.

And the list of possibilities was very short. Barring the marine biologist, Professor Curran and the people who merely worked at hotels and reception desks, Blake had spoken to only three people:

Navarro and Kellaher of the FBI -- and Miss Amelia Tucker.

One of those three people had put the finger on him. And Blake had a shrewd idea which one it was...

10. FRANCESCA

The heat of the afternoon was fading fast as Worple's befuddled mind eventually succeeded in guiding the Oldsmobile to the correct part of the city.

The bar, when they found it, was the one Blake had heard about previously. It was the one mentioned by the hotel keeper at Peter Sellingham's sleazy guest-house. It was called the *Oyster* -- The Oyster -- and it was a fifth-rate barrel house.

Blake helped Worple out of the car, made sure the doors of the Oldsmobile were locked and with one arm supporting Worple crossed the murky threshold of the bar.

It was dark inside after the brightness of the streets; the late afternoon sunlight scarcely penetrated the narrow slits in the walls which served as windows, and the candles dotted sparsely on the tables in the bar had not yet been lit.

The only real light came from behind the bar itself where an illuminated display of cheap wines and doubtful looking rum glowed garishly in a dozen different colours.

The tables were arranged mainly in booths along the right hand side of the room opposite the long bar.

A few couples snuggled furtively together in the murkier booths, while at others men played cards, threw dice, talked in low voices, swore, spat and drank.

The men, from what Blake could see of them, were an uncouth lot. The dregs of Malibu society. Pairs of narrow, furtive eyes darted looks of fear and hostility towards the door as two men entered -- then looked away.

In the darkest booth of all Blake could see a figure indistinctly outlined. Someone sat there alone, in silence.

Worple broke away from Blake and headed like a setter on the scent towards the bar. He clamboured unsteadily onto one of the stools. Blake joined him.

"A bottle of 'Old Kentucky' for my friend," Blake told the droop-faced man behind the bar.

"And for me, cola."

"*Si.*" The barman reached dejectedly for a bottle and set it on the counter with a thump. He poured a glass of cola for Blake who handed him a twenty pesos note and murmured "Keep the change."

The barman gave Worple a glass and poured the first measure of Bourbon for him.

Worple eyed it morbidly, picked it up and sank it at one gulp. "I know 'em all --" he said loudly, picking up the conversation where they left off: "--I know the rebels, and the police and the people from the sugar plant..."

"Keep your voice down," Blake cautioned. "Is Sellingham or the girl here?"

Worple looked around, blinking owlishly. He pointed a wavering finger towards the dark booth. "There," he said, "that's the girl. Can't see Sellingham, though."

Blake made for the booth. Dutifully, the barman refilled Worple's glass.

Blake reached the booth and sat down. He could see better now. The girl was certainly worth seeing. She was startlingly beautiful, even in the gloom. She looked as out of place in this grubby bar as a diamond in a coal-pile.

She had long, black hair which curled around her shoulders, dark eyes which were, at that moment, wide with irate surprise at Blake's intrusion on her privacy.

Her blouse was white, stretched taut over her full figure. A silver crucifix hung at her shoulder, just above her throat.

"What do you want?" she said tremulously.

"I want to talk to you," Blake said firmly. "It's about Peter Sellingham -- I believe you know him?"

"No. I know no Peter Sellingham. I am sorry." She spoke with an air of certainty; an air of finality. As far as she was concerned the conversation was over.

But for Blake it had only just begun. He said:

"Tell me the truth, señorita."

"I told you the truth, señor. Now please go."

There was an angry light in her eyes -- but fear was there, too.

"Please go!"

"It's a matter of life and death!" Blake insisted. "This man's life may depend on you!"

"I know no-one called Peter Sellingham," the girl said heatedly. "I have never heard of

him!"

Suddenly the girl was on her feet. Before Blake could stop her she was striding swiftly the door of the bar.

Blake rose and crossed to the bar stool where Worple was sitting.

"Worple!" he snapped. "Take a look at that girl! Are you sure that's her?"

Worple turned on the stool and blinked towards the doorway. The girl was just whisking out.

"Thass her," Worple grinned. "Yesiree thass the girl! Know those legs anywhere...!"

Blake strode away from the bar, heading for the door in pursuit of her.

It was only as he reached the door that he became aware of the figure which had emerged from one of the booths and was striding across the floor to intercept him.

A heavy hand descended on Blake's shoulder, jerking him round: "Pardon, señor--"

The voice was ugly and it matched the face. Blake found himself looking up into a pair of dark, slanting eyes which were set above bulging cheek-bones in the mahogany-skinned face of the tallest Carib-Indian he had ever seen.

The man was evidently proud of his extraordinary height, for he cultivated it by wearing a slim-tailored suit of black sharkskin. A silk cummerbund encircled his slim hips and a tall, sombrero style hat stood high on his head.

"Yes?" Blake demanded.

"Señor," the man said softly, ominously, "you are a visitor to our country... you do not understand all our customs... There are many beautiful women in Maliba. Take your pick of them -- but not Francesca! Francesca belongs to someone special..."

Before Blake could answer, something else crept into his field of vision. From the corner of his eye he saw a stealthy movement -- as the men who had been playing cards rose and moved towards the Carib-Indian.

They were evidently bent on making a show of force.

Blake was out-numbered.

There was no point in starting a fight. He gave a polite shrug. "Of course I respect your customs... In any case my friend and I are just leaving..." He turned and crossed to the bar to collect Worple. As he returned to the door the Carib-Indian was still standing there, closely surrounded by the rest of his group of thugs.

"Remember what I said, señor," he repeated quietly. "Take your pick of the other women..."

but leave Francesca alone. She belongs to a very special person..."

* * *

Once outside the *Cantina*, Blake's brows puckered into a narrow frown. Scanning the labyrinth of neighbouring streets he was just in time to see the figure of the girl called Francesca hurrying out of sight along a narrow, paved alleyway.

Who was she? He wondered. And who was the "very special person" to whom she belonged? Surely not Sellingham?

He would have to be a very special person indeed to have inspired respect for his girl friend amongst such an unfriendly bunch of social misfits.

Blake guided Worpel swiftly towards the Oldsmobile and bundled him firmly into the back seat. "Stay there, Worpel. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Worpel waved his bottle carelessly. "See you..."

Then Blake was away, striding swiftly towards the alley down which the girl had disappeared.

An once in the alley he was running.

Twenty seconds later he caught up with the sound of fast-clicking heels, and rounding a bend in the narrow passage-way he saw the girl only a few yards ahead of him.

As he bore down on her she spun to face him, a look on angry defiance on her face. "Why do you follow me?" she demanded.

Blake pulled up, "Señorita, I only wish to talk to you... about Peter Sellingham."

"I know no one of that name!"

"Then why did you run away?" Blake asked grimly.

Before she could reply he took a photograph of Sellingham from his pocket and held it out to her. "Does this help?"

The girl looked at the picture and the expression on her face changed sharply. The eyes lit up with sudden recognition.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded.

"Never mind where I got it from. You recognise him; that's enough. Where is he?"

"I don't know. Let me go--" She turned hurriedly to make off, but Blake intercepted her, blocking her path.

"Listen! I've got to find him! I believe this man is in great danger!"

She looked up into his eyes. "What do you know about this man?"

"I know that he's been trying to help Juan Callas and the rebels," Blake said quietly. "I've been sent here from England by his father -- to find him. His father believes he may have been caught and imprisoned by the government."

A look of scorn spread across the girl's face. "If he had been caught by those fascist beasts he would not have been imprisoned," she said contemptuously. "He would have been executed like all the others!"

"Then he's *not* in prison?"

"Nor executed," she said. "You must tell his father that he is alive and well. Now let me pass--"

"Where is he?" Blake asked.

"I do not know."

"Did you know he was trying to help the rebels?"

The girl hesitated. "Who are you?"

"I'm a British private detective."

There was a long pause. The girl Francesca looked at Blake -- and it was a long, searching look. Then a smile came to her dark eyes.

She liked what she saw; somehow she felt she could trust this tall, handsome stranger. There was sincerity and honesty in his voice, and his blue-grey eyes did not look at her in the way that other men who were strangers.

She said quietly: "Certainly I knew that the man you call Peter Sellingham was helping the rebels. It was I who put him in touch with Juan Callas!"

"You?" Blake's eyebrows arched.

"Why else do you think I frequent that filthy *cantina*?" The girl demanded. "I am a recruited agent for the rebel army. It was there that I met your friend. I have met him there often and we have worked together -- but I did not know his name was Peter Sellingham. Now let me go."

Again Blake blocked the girl's path.

"Are you in love with him?" he asked.

"I am betrothed, señor."

"To Sellingham?" Blake frowned.

"No, señor, not to Sellingham," the girl sighed wearily.

"Then who?"

"I do not see that it is any business of yours, but if you must know, I am engaged to Juan Callas, the Leader of the Maliban Liberation Forces."

* * *

"Callas!" Blake exclaimed. It was a genuine shock, despite the warning words of the man at the bar. Then suddenly excitement seized the detective at the importance of his find.

"I've got to talk to you! It's vital to you and Callas and the whole of your movement and the future of Maliba -- I must talk to you!"

"You are talking to me, señor," the girl said dryly.

"Not here!" snapped Blake. "Where are you going?"

"I am trying to reach my car," the girl said tiredly. "It is parked on the public square at the end of here..."

She began walking and Blake fell into stride beside her.

"You ask a lot of questions, señor," she said.

"I need a lot of answers," Blake replied grimly. "And I'd like to start with you. How do you come to be engaged to Juan Callas? He's been an outlaw in the hills for three years now..."

"And we have been engaged for four," she replied. "We were to be married a few days after Doctor Nonales and his thugs assassinated President Vanan and seized power."

"Go on."

"On that day," she explained, "both Juan's family and mine were wiped out by the gunmen of the Nonales gang. Both our fathers were ministers in President Vanan's government. Nonales destroyed the government because President Vanan had drawn up a programme of reform and modernisation. He wanted to do away with poverty and disease. For that, Nonales destroyed him and all his cabinet. And on that day, Juan swore to me that he would not rest until Maliba was free. He left for the hills with only a rifle and two friends."

"And now?" Blake demanded.

"Now he has an army of thousands. Properly trained and armed with modern equipment. Soon -- very soon now -- the Army of Liberation will strike. And I shall be by Juan's side when he speaks to the people. As soon as Nonales is dead, Juan will broadcast to the Maliban people and his army will march into the capital..." Her voice tailed off as she dwelt on the rapture of it; her long-cherished dream of the future.

Blake wondered bleakly if it would be as she imagined -- or if Craille's predictions about communist infiltration would turn it into a very different story...

They had reached the end of the alleyway and now they entered an open square of fountains and maple trees.

The swift dusk of the tropics was falling, and soon it would be dark.

A long, white, American convertible stood at one corner of the square. The girl led Blake across to it and they both got in.

"We can talk quite freely here, señor," she told him. "No-one can hear us. Now what is you wish to say?"

"I want to make contact with the rebel forces," Blake said quietly. "I want to see Juan Callas, and you can help me -- you can get a message to him."

"Why do you wish to see Juan?" she asked.

"I want to tell him something."

"What?" the girl eyed Blake steadily.

"I want to warn him," Blake said grimly, "that his organisation has been penetrated by communist agents who are determined to take it over."

11. "THE CHARGE IS MURDER!"

Francesca regarded him steadily for fully ten seconds before saying quietly: "I thought you said you were a *private* detective, señor?"

"I am. But I happen to have some political information which your movement needs and hasn't got. Unless I can talk to Juan Callas his revolution is going to hand Maliba to the Russians. There is a Soviet espionage network operating here which is just waiting for you. Juan to do all the hard work -- all the fighting -- then step in and take over control of the new government."

The girl said thoughtfully : "How do you know all this, señor?"

"It doesn't matter how I know it," Blake said grimly. "What matters is that it's the truth!"

There was a brief pause before Francesca looked at Blake again and gently shook her head. "It *was* the truth, señor. But it is true no longer. All the communists were dealt with -- forty-eight hours ago. Thanks to your Mr. Sellingham and his friend."

"Friend?" Blake frowned. "What friend? And what do you mean, dealt with?"

"I will explain," said Francesca. "When I first met your young Englishman at the *Ostra*, he had already recruited enough men for Juan's army. What we needed was guns -- but we had no money to buy them and no means of shipping them into the country. The young Englishman was a gift from heaven -- he not only had the money, he actually wanted to give it to us! He wanted

to buy arms for the Liberation."

"That sounds like him," Blake nodded.

"Only the shipping problem remained, and fortunately he had another English friend who was very experienced in such matters. Within two weeks we had all the weapons we needed..."

"Who's this friend?" Blake demanded. "This other man -- what's his name?"

"He is not a man, señor," Francesca smiled. "It is a woman. A woman called Miss Amelia Tucker."

* * *

"Tucker?" Blake exclaimed in alarm. "Good grief! Surely she's the last person you should have trusted?"

The detective was now almost convinced that the only person who could have denounced him to the police was Sellingham's waspish, female relative, Amelia Tucker.

Again Francesca shook her head with a sad smile.

"Señor -- it was Miss Tucker herself who warned us about the communists, so that we could take action in time."

"How?" Blake demanded, frowning.

"When the first shipment of arms arrived we found that they were communist weapons -- Czech rifles and Polish mortars. We weren't worried where they came from, but Miss Tucker decided to investigate on her own."

The girl paused: "Three days ago she told us that the ranks of our Liberation Army had been infiltrated with communist agents. At first we didn't believe her, but then she told me where we could get a list of their names."

Blake's frown darkened. "Where?"

"A list had been made by the Maliba secret police -- the Gestapo of Doctor Nonales."

The girl looked at him. "You remember the rebel raid on the Carabanos Army garrison ten days ago? That was when we got the list -- we raided the garrison to get it. And as soon as we got it Juan placed all the communist infiltrators under arrest. The communists were very clever," she added bitterly. "Some of them had become Juan's most trusted lieutenants. We were lucky to find out in time. If it hadn't been for Miss Tucker and the young Englishman we would have never known. The communists would have taken over and Maliba would have become a Russian satellite like Cuba!"

"Did Sellingham take part in the raid on the garrison?" Blake demanded.

"No. He had a very special job to do. He and Miss Tucker had discovered the name of the communist ringleader -- a Soviet agent who was not in the hills with the others, but here in Carabanos. He had to be dealt with before we raided the Army garrison and so..."

"So Sellingham dealt with him? Killed him?"

"Yes."

Suddenly Blake was beginning to see daylight. "Listen," he said grimly, "when I first spoke to you you didn't recognise young Sellingham's name. You didn't recognise him till I showed you his picture. What name's he been using?"

"We always call him Jimmy," said Francesca. "Jimmy Linwood."

So that was it! Blake sank back in the car seat. It was true after all!

"The man he killed -- what was his name?"

"Harben," said the girl. "It was Jules Harben."

Blake whistled softly. It seemed there couldn't be any doubt.

Jules Harben, alias Jakob Kraski -- Soviet Master Spy -- had been liquidated -- *by an amateur!*

The man who had stabbed him to death in the bathysphere and then miraculously escaped -- the man called Linwood -- was none other than Peter Sellingham!

"Where is he now? Sellingham, I mean?" Blake demanded.

Francesca shrugged. "I have already told you, señor -- I do not know. As soon as his job was done he had to get out of sight. He may have left the country; gone to another island. But Miss Tucker says he is all right. If you wish, I will find out from her where he is -- I shall be seeing her tonight."

"Do that!" Blake said firmly. "You can phone me at the Hotel Palma as soon as you have some news!"

Blake now had yet another reason for wanting to find Sellingham. It was a matter of major importance to every Western Intelligence and Security agency, that Harben's death should be authenticated.

Blake had to have the final confirmation from the man who had killed him.

After that the detective had only one more task. He broached it now:

"Señorita--"

"Call me Francesca -- Francesca Cardenez." She smiled.

"Francesca," Blake smiled in return, "that list of agents. It is no longer any use to you if the agents have been arrested. But I know people to whom it would be invaluable, even now. Do you have a copy?"

The girl hesitated for barely a fraction of a second before nodding. "We have no need to keep it secret. I will give you my copy." She picked up a small white handbag from the glove compartment and took from it a folded sheaf of papers.

Blake opened the document and ran his eyes briefly down the list. There was more than a hundred names in all, each followed by short descriptive notes written in the traditional style of police dossiers.

It looked like a valuable document. Miss Amelia Tucker had done a good day's work in ear-marking it for the rebels. Blake wondered where she had got her information.

He said: "I must make a telephone call. Is there a booth near here?"

"I will drive you to one," said the girl. "I am going across town and can drop you in the centre if you wish."

Blake nodded. He thought that Worpel could have come to no harm waiting in the Oldsmobile. The Old Kentucky would keep him happy for at least another half hour.

Francesca gunned the engine to life and swung the white convertible towards the brightening neon lights of the city centre.

* * *

Within ten minutes Blake was in a telephone kiosk speaking to the man he had met that afternoon at the British Consulate -- Henderson, the Vice-Consul.

"I want to see you -- personally," Blake said simply.

"Urgent?" Henderson asked.

"Very. I need the earliest possible rendezvous."

There was a pause before Henderson replied: "Meet me in the cocktail bar of the Astoria Hotel. It's on the Avenue San Cristobal, about a minute's walk from where you are. I'll be there in a quarter of an hour."

Blake hung up and pushed his way out of the booth. He began to walk along the neon-lit street towards the Astoria Hotel.

He had a lot to think about after what the girl Francesca had told him. It seemed that the revolution was due to take place any day -- if not any hour... He hadn't been a moment too soon in getting the list of communist agents for Craille -- even if the communist elements had been purged from the revolutionary forces, as the girl claimed.

A lot of the puzzling details of this assignment were now becoming clearer in the detective's mind, but several loose ends still remained to be tied up.

He now understood why Miss Amelia Tucker had been evasive about the whereabouts of Peter Sellingham; why she had lied about not having seen him. But this fact itself gave a rise to yet another baffling problem:

If Amelia Tucker was secretly working for the rebel movement, it could not have been she who denounced him to the police chief, Captain Tarratona.

Therefore it had to be someone else who was trying to sabotage Blake's investigation. And the question was, *who?*

* * *

The Astoria Hotel was a cosmopolitan place; a luxury hotel owned by an American company and built primarily for American customers. But amongst the tourists in the cocktail bar, Blake noticed a liberal sprinkling of Europeans, and observed that many of them looked like press correspondants.

Blake reflected that one of the surest signs of a revolution brewing was the sudden swelling of foreign press-corps. Another was the disappearance of bar girls and hostesses. When prostitutes started to leave and journalists to arrive, it was time to quit the country. He'd seen the signs before and he could see them now.

It was an ominous reminder that time was running out.

The days of the Nonales government were numbered.

Blake chose a corner table. Over a brandy he drafted a concise Intelligence appraisal of the island's political situation on a page of his notebook, and by the time Henderson arrived he was ready to make his business brief.

"I want you to pass three items to London for me," he told the Vice-Consul quietly. "High priority for the personal attention of the Director of SINSEC."

Henderson nodded.

"The first two may be teleprinted exactly as they stand, and need no reply--" Blake gave Henderson the list of communist agents and his own Intelligence report "--the third is a request for authentication on the identity of two men claiming to be agents of the FBI. Lieutenant Navar and Lieutenant Kellaher -- both currently operating in Maliba."

"Got it," Henderson nodded as he slipped the papers into his pocket. "How soon do you want the reply? Before morning?"

Blake calculated rapidly. "You'll be through before midnight... London will be able to answer my query sometime during the night... You'd better arrange to contact them again before

breakfast tomorrow. I'll get in touch with you any time after that."

"Right." Henderson rose to his feet with a swift but casual glance round the room. No one had paid any attention to the two men.

Henderson gave Blake a cursory nod and left for the Hotel entrance.

Blake allowed four minutes to pass before draining his brandy glass and making for the same exit.

* * *

Once in the street, the detective set off at a brisk pace to walk back to the spot where he had left the Oldsmobile with its drunken occupant, Worple.

On the whole, Blake considered he had done a good day's work. But he still wasn't satisfied that he knew the whole story.

Frowning thoughtfully as he strode along the pavements crowded with late-night sightseers, he wondered again about the beautiful partisan girl, Francesca.

She was an unlikely kind of recruiting agent, even for an army of the sort raised by Juan Callas. Blake guessed that Callas's army relied more on enthusiasm than military training.

It was strange that such amateurs should have bested the powers of Communism. Indeed, the evidence showed that they would not have done so except for the aid of Miss Amelia Tucker.

Blake found himself wondering more and more about the odd, masculine Englishwoman as he strode towards the poorer quarter of the town.

His instincts told him that the communist infiltrators had been subdued all too easily.

Was Miss Tucker, like Peter Sellingham, merely an enthusiastic amateur -- or was she something more...?

Was she a professional? If so, who was she working for?

Beneath these questions lay an uneasy feeling which had dogged Blake ever since his teleprinter conversation with Craille, that afternoon.

There was one small detail of this case which didn't ring true.

Jakob Kraski, the Soviet Master Spy, had been aware -- according to Craille -- that his identity was compromised.

His cover-name, Jules Harben, was known. Therefore by all the laws of espionage he should have changed it.

But he hadn't?

Why not?

Again, Blake came to the question of Captain Tarratona -- the sudden interference and hostility which the police chief had shown.

Who or what had made Tarratona suddenly adopt that attitude?

It was a timely question.

For that moment, above the sound of the traffic, Blake heard the growling wail of an approaching siren.

Barely a moment later, garish headlights lit up the narrow street behind him and the siren died to a stop as a long, sleek limousine of the Maliba police glided to a stop at the kerb beside him.

Car doors opened and uniformed men were suddenly swarming out onto the pavement to surround Blake.

"Come with us!"

Blake was seized and manhandled into the car.

"Good evening, Señor Blake..." Tarratona's lazy drawl greeted him on the back seat.

Blake's jaw hardened and his blue-grey eyes glittered dangerously as he looked at the police chief's mocking smile.

"What is this for?" he demanded.

"This, señor... is an arrest." Tarratona nodded to the driver: "*Despátchense!*"

The car lurched away from the kerb. It did a sharp turn in the centre of the road and drove off, sirens wailing again as it returned in the direction of Police Headquarters.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Captain." Blake's voice was quiet, threatening.

"But certainly," said Tarratona. "I am arresting you. That is to say... *you* are under *arrest*. Good English, no?"

"On what charge?" Blake was bleak.

"The charge, señor?" Tarratona said lazily: "The charge is... murder!"

* * *

Blake was silent for fully half a minute before demanding grimly: "Who am I supposed to have murdered? The President?"

Tarratona chuckled. "Your English sense of humour does you credit, señor Blake! If I w

in your shoes I would not be making jokes. I would be making my prayers!" He chuckled again before adding absently: "No, señor -- not the President."

"Then who?" Blake snapped harshly.

The police chief smiled. "If you persist in this farcial pretense of not knowing your victim, then we must show you--"

The car turned in through the main entrance of the Malibu State Police Headquarters. Tarratona leaned forward and gestured to the driver to pull up beside a car which was drawn up under a glare of temporary floodlights.

Uniformed detectives were swarming around the car taking photographs and making measurements.

As the police car drew beside it, Tarratona jumped out and held open the door for Blake. "This way, señor."

Only as Blake stepped out onto the concrete yard did he recognise the vehicle which was the centre of all the fuss.

It was his own, hired Oldsmobile, brought here from the street outside the *Ostra*.

Tarratona strode across to it and with a dramatic gesture towards the back seat announced: "You are under arrest, Señor Blake, for the murder of this man!"

It was Worple.

He lay face upwards on the back seat, a fatuous grin on his insensible features, and a large red stain covering the front of his shirt -- where a black-handled stiletto was buried up to the hilt in his heart.

Across his chest, his two hands still clutched tenaciously on to the neck of a bottle.

An empty bottle.

A bottle with a label that said: OLD KENTUCKY -- PUTS LIFE INTO THE PARTY.

12. A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Sexton Blake spent the night in a police cell. It wasn't the first cell he'd slept in, but that didn't make it any more pleasant. Besides, he had work to do, and every hour he lost could have ominous consequences.

At first the detectives had tried to remonstrate with his captors -- challenging them to prove his guilt. But his repeated demands for an explanation were greeted first with polite evasion and finally with unconcealed indifference.

The police attitude was simple; a man had been found murdered -- and a suspect had been pulled in. In due course the suspect would be tried and executed. The fiction of Maliban justice would be maintained. What more was needed?

Grimly, Blake realised that Captain Tarratona was no more convinced of Blake's guilt than the detective was himself.

But it wasn't simply a case of Blake having been the easiest suspect. In view of earlier events that day, this explanation was too much of a coincidence -- and so was the convenient appearance of a dead body in his car.

Tarratona obviously had another reason.

Worple's death had only been the pretext -- a useful exercise for throwing Blake into jail.

Someone wanted Blake out of the way -- badly. Either Tarratona himself or someone who had a lot of influence at police headquarters!

Someone who had been prepared to frame him on a capital charge -- and commit murder to provide the evidence.

Who was it?

Who was Blake up against?

One thing not in doubt was the person's ruthlessness. Because whoever it was was doing his level best to make Blake's life as difficult as possible.

* * *

It was shortly after dawn when Blake was roused by the sound of a key turning in the lock of his cell door.

The door swung open. Two armed escorts stood there.

"Come!"

Blake rose from the filthy, naked mattress that served as a bed and stepped out of the cell, eyeing the pair bleakly.

"Do I go to the wall without even the *pretense* of a trial?" he demanded acidly.

The police guards made no reply except to urge him forward along the corridor. "March Quickly! Hurry!"

He was hustled out of the cell block and up a narrow flight of stairs.

Suddenly, he realised his whereabouts -- he was in the police headquarters main administrative-block directly outside the office of Captain Tarratona himself.

Even as he grasped this, the guard in front opened Tarratona's office door and Blake was marched in.

The freshly-shaven face of the police chief looked up from the desk as he entered.

"Ah, señor Blake..." A sleepy smile of welcome lit up Tarratona's face. "Please come up and take a seat." He rose and brought a chair forward for the detective, dismissing the two guards with a nod.

"I hope your stay here last night was not too uncomfortable, señor..." He wore a look of genuine concern.

"Let's cut the comedy," snapped Blake. "What's all this?"

A pained expression spread across the police chief's features. "Señor, believe me, I apologise for the way you have been treated -- I apologise sincerely! But--" he shrugged massively, "you could have saved yourself all this unnecessary discomfort, if only you had been frank with me in the first place!"

Blake frowned. "Oh?"

"Si, señor--" Tarratona nodded vigorously. "Why did you not explain that you were looking for the young Englishman, Peter Sellingham? Last night you were seen fraternising with rebels and subversive riff-raff at a notorious den of vice in the filthiest part of the city! We had no reason to account for it, so clearly your behaviour aroused deep suspicion... we were obliged to conclude that you were a subversive infiltrator -- a political agitator -- a communist -- the kind of person who would not hesitate to murder an innocent European..."

"You mean you've now changed your mind?" Blake demanded bleakly.

"But of course, señor! Now the situation has been fully explained!"

"Only yesterday," Blake interrupted harshly, "I took the trouble to come here to you with a special letter of introduction from Sir Gordon Sellingham--"

"Si, si!" exclaimed Tarratona. "But you did not tell us you had been sent here to locate his son! Now I can understand what you were doing in that iniquitous part of the city. Your friend has explained everything!"

"My friend?" Blake frowned suspiciously.

"Se, señor! The lady who has just arrived to vouch for you and is now waiting for you in the car outside -- Miss Amelia Tucker, Sir Gordon Sellingham's personal representative in Maliba!"

* * *

It was, Blake realised, only to have been expected. As he walked down the stairs, a free

man, after leaving Tarratona's office under an effusive shower of apologies, he recalled that Francesca Cardenez had told him she would shortly be seeing Miss Amelia Tucker.

And once Francesca had convinced the English woman of Blake's *bona fides*, it was only a matter of time before the surprisingly resourceful Miss Tucker could have been expected to take action.

He found the woman waiting in an open car, outside the police headquarters gates.

She greeted him with a smile and opened the door for him.

"Good morning, Mr. Blake! Please get in. I owe you an apology."

Blake got into the car. Amelia Tucker started up the engine and they drove off without a moment's pause.

The woman drove skilfully. Within half a minute she had negotiated the traffic in the centre of town, and they were heading out of Carabanos towards the refinery.

Once on the main road, she threw him an anxious glance and asked: "They didn't treat you badly in there, did they?"

Blake smiled. "I've known worse places."

"I bet you have!" said Amelia Tucker. Then she confessed: "The truth is, I've just realised who you are. You're *the* Mr. Blake, aren't you? I knew you were a private detective, of course, but knowing Sir Gordon I wasn't sure I could trust you, until the police framed you for that murder last night..."

She gave him another smile: "You see, it's been a rather tricky situation. Sir Gordon is very much in favour of the present corrupt regime, and the kind of detective he'd be expected to employ here would be an out-and-out Fascist, by all normal expectations. Obviously I couldn't allow you to locate his missing son if there was any chance you'd try and meddle in the politics here. Things are too delicately balanced. It wasn't until I spoke to Francesca last night that I realised you have your own independent views about the revolution and what we're trying to do here."

She paused for a moment, her eyes on the road: "But then," she continued, "Francesca told me all about you, and it became clear that you really sympathise with us. It was only when we tried to find you, late last night, that we heard you'd been picked up and thrown into the city cooler. Francesca wanted me to come and get you out right away, but I didn't dare..."

She paused for a moment as an army truck roared by, then explained:

"My influence with the police can only last as long as they trust me. If I'd come along right away to get you out they'd have wanted to know how I knew about your arrest, and it might have been awkward because the information came from a rebel informer."

"I'm grateful you got me out when you did," Blake told her warmly.

"It's nice of you to say so," Miss Tucker smiled. "But if I'd used my brains I'd have realized the truth about you much earlier. I'm sorry I was wrong about you."

"Please don't be," said Blake. "The truth is I've been thinking equally nasty things about you."

"You must have had me figured for a communist..." Miss Tucker smiled faintly. "We live in a nasty suspicious world, don't we?"

"It's better than living in a nasty Nonales jail," Blake said grimly. "And I still think you did very well to get me out in less than twenty-four hours."

"No choice," Miss Tucker said tersely. "Once I knew the truth about you I simply had to get you out before the balloon went up. Police Headquarters is the worst place to be when the shooting starts. I know -- I've seen these revolutions before."

"You mean it's imminent?" Blake demanded.

Miss Tucker threw him a mysterious smile. "Did you notice that army truck we just passed?"

Blake nodded. "It was full of troops."

"Nonales has got the wind-up!" the woman grinned. "He's begun pulling his troops into the capital. His time's running out and he knows it!"

"When is H-hour?" Blake asked.

"That," said Miss Tucker, "is a closely guarded secret. But I can promise you it won't be much longer. The signal will be the assassination of the old swine Nonales himself. When that happens you'll know it's over bar the shouting. Juan Callas will be on the air in minutes telling the population to stay calm -- the Liberation Army will march into the city -- and if everything goes according to plan the government troops will offer only token resistance. We may have to fight for the police station and the palace, but no-one else wants to shed blood for Doctor Nonales."

"Where are we going?" Blake asked.

Again Amelia Tucker threw him a confident smile. "You came to Maliba to find Peter Sellingham, didn't you? Well, I'm going to take you to see him -- at the rebel camp in the hills."

* * *

A moment later the car reduced speed as the Sellingham sugar refinery loomed up ahead.

"I'm going to call in here first," Miss Tucker explained. "It will give you a chance to clean up, too, if you like. There's a bathroom adjoining my office and I think you'll find an electric razor there."

She drove the car into the Refinery compound and pulled up outside the main block. "I'm going across to the cable centre. If you go up to my office I'll join you in a few minutes. Help yourself to anything you need. If you want a cup of coffee ask one of the girls."

Blake thanked her and went up to her office, grateful for the chance of a wash and brush.

He found an electric razor in the bathroom and shaved off his twenty-four hour growth of beard.

A few minutes later one of the girls in the neighbouring office brought him a cup of coffee and some biscuits, and the detective sat down at Amelia Tucker's desk to await her arrival.

Miss Amelia Tucker, he decided, thoughtfully sipping the coffee, was a very remarkable woman. She had a lot of guts and a lot of brains. But above all, she had a lot of nerve, and Blake thought he knew why.

The detective still had a lot of questions to ask the woman -- and one question in particular. But before he asked her there was something he had to check.

Blake reached for the telephone.

He dialled the number of the British Consulate and asked to speak to the Vice-Consul. A moment later Henderson's voice came on: "Blake! Is that you? I've been waiting--"

"This is an open line," Blake cut in warningly. "Just answer my questions. What's the word on my two American friends?"

"Positive," came the reply. "Definitely working on your side of the industry."

"And the price-list I gave you?"

"Your London office says negative. Repeat, negative. Trade references won't stand up. Regard it as spurious."

"Got it. Thanks, Henderson." Blake hung up.

He knew then.

In that moment he knew for certain that he'd been right all along.

He knew for certain, and beyond all doubt, that Peter Sellingham was dead!

* * *

Blake was standing by the window when Amelia Tucker entered the office. He did not turn around immediately. He was staring out across the compound of the refinery and was thinking what a marvellous set-up it was.

What a brilliant headquarters.

An island within an island. A state within a state.

It was a classic location -- one for the book. But his admiration would have to wait. Right now he had to ask his question.

Blake turned round and regarded Amelia Tucker with eyes that were cold and hard and blue. With a face that was grim and remorseless and in a voice that was bitterly taut, he asked his question:

"When," he demanded softly, "*did you join the Communist Party?*"

13. THE CORPSE IN QUESTION

Amelia Tucker gave a short, nervous laugh.

"Communist Party?" Her voice was pitched high; a fixed smile played about her mouth.

"That's right," Blake said grimly. "When did you join?"

"Wha--?" She went white.

Sexton Blake's eyes burned brightly. "That list of communist agents you gave the rebels is false. The real communists are still at large! Juan Callas has made prisoners of his most loyal supporters. You set it up like that. Deliberately. You've been getting your orders from the Soviet agent -- Harben!"

"Harben...?" she echoed, numbed.

"And now that Jules Harben isn't around any more," Blake went on savagely, "you're giving all the orders yourself! That makes you a pretty big fish in the Soviet millpond. I'd say you've been a member of the party for a long, long time..."

"You are calling me a communist?!" Amelia Tucker rallied her strength for a sudden show of vehemence. "*You calling me a communist? You're being utterly fantastic! Would I have gotten you out of that Fascist gaol if I was Red--?*"

Blake gave a slow, grim nod. "Yes, you would. First you framed me for Worples's murder, got me in -- and out of the way -- but then you met Francesca who told you how much I'd already learned. From then on you were frightened because I knew too much and you were scared I'd talk to the authorities. So you had to get me out again -- and get rid of me some other way. You were going to have me quietly killed -- just as you killed Sellingham when he found out that the list of agents you planted was phoney! Is that how it happened? Did young Sellingham stumble on the truth?"

Amelia Tucker had gone as white as chalk. Faltering, almost groping, she reached for her desk and leaned against it for support. "It's not true---" she choked. "It simply isn't true--" She began pulling herself together.

Too late, Blake saw the swift, sharp movement of her left hand as it sped at the heavy cigarette case beside the desk blotter...

In the next instant the woman had spun around, all trace of her distraught condition gone, and she flicked up the lid of the box and grabbed the midget-sized automatic which lay inside.

The gun pointed steadily at Blake's abdomen.

"All right, Mr. clever Blake--" a leer of triumph was spread across the woman's face "-- you're a very smart detective! It's a pity you weren't smart enough to stay out of other people's business! You're right -- I am a communist! I've been communist since nineteen forty-five and I'm proud of it!"

She paused for breath, her eyes glittering. "We're going to take over this country and clean it up. Juan Callas is a fool; he wouldn't know where to *begin* reforming this hotbed of corruption. This country's going to be cleaned up the proper way -- only you, Mr. smart-alec Blake, are going to be around to see the results!"

"Killing me," Blake said quietly, "isn't going to solve anything. I'm not the only person who knows about you. Your days are numbered..." It was a desperate lie, but Blake knew it was one slim chance that might save him. "You can't get away with it! The real list of Red agents is already in Western hands--"

Amelia Tucker threw back her head and laughed in scorn. "You fool!" she exclaimed. "You poor, idiotic fool. The real list of agents will never be found by anyone. It died with Peter Sellingham -- the only copy in existence! He died because he found it; stumbled on it by pure chance. But you, Mr. Sexton Blake -- you are going to die for *nothing*!"

With a final hiss of venomous triumph, Amelia Tucker gripped the midget pistol. Her fingers tightened on the trigger.

Blake braced himself for the end.

He heard the shot ring out; stunningly loud, like the crack of a whip. But he felt nothing. Nothing touched him.

Then incredibly, unbelievably, he saw an expression of blank, choking astonishment on Amelia Tucker's face.

She lurched forward. Steadied herself. She clutched a hand to her neck which was suddenly pulsing out blood.

Then with a final, unbelieving gasp she rocked backwards, tottered for a bare instant -- and crashed earthwards in a lifeless heap.

Blake's eyes slowly rose and moved towards the door.

In the open doorway, Captain Juan Tarratona of the Malibu State Police stared at the corpse.

with a faint, quizzical frown before blowing the smoke from his revolver and slipping it into the holster at his belt.

"It is amazing, Señor Blake," he said thoughtfully, "how much trouble in this world is caused by misguided idealism."

Still frowning thoughtfully he looked back at the dead body and added: "Of all the people Maliba, she was the last person I ever suspected. It would seem," he sighed, "there are no more ladies any more."

* * *

"How much did you hear?" Blake demanded as soon as he recovered from his surprise.

"Enough to justify the expenditure of my bullet," said Tarratona. "Perhaps I should explain my presence: just after you left headquarters, a report came in from one of my informers that Miss Tucker was observed at the scene of the murder last night. I thought it odd that she did not mention it to me. Even so, I only came here to ask. It did not occur to me that such a woman could have committed the crime. She must have been a very clever woman..."

"A very highly-trained one," Blake said grimly.

"*Si*," Tarratona nodded. "I never suspected that it was she who was controlling the Communists..."

"I'm not sure that it was," Blake said bleakly.

Tarratona looked at him sharply. "You mean there is someone else?"

Blake nodded. "There must be. And we've got to find out who before--" He broke off hesitating.

Captain Tarratona said tiredly: "Señor Blake -- you make speak freely. It is no secret to me that the present government is about to be swept from power. Revolutions come and revolutions go... but Tarratona always stays. No-one can run this country without me; therefore I bow willingly to the inevitability of progress. In any case, the country is due for a cleaning up. Revolutions are always invigorating."

Blake smiled thinly. He had no intention of divulging any confidences to the police chief. But for the moment their interests coincided.

Blake said: "I'm not sure who is controlling the Soviet network here -- but I'm pretty sure I know where I can find out..."

"My car is waiting outside," Tarratona said suavely.

"It's going to take more than a car," Blake said grimly. "We've got to get to the research ship, *Gorgon* -- and we haven't a moment to lose."

* * *

A high-speed police launch took Blake and Tarratona on the second lap of their journey to Professor Hoddard Curtis's *Gorgon*.

In the bright, sharp morning sun the sea was a molten silver. The waves slapped viciously against the side of the launch, for it was a rough sea despite the heat, and a strong breeze was blowing.

Curtis himself met them as they climbed the ladder and reached the deck. The salvage operation was under way.

Hanging from the derricks on the opposite side of the ship, the bathysphere swung in its cradle like a great egg -- the spawn of the monster like-ship.

The sphere was just being swung onto the deck.

Crew-men sweated with hawsers to secure it as the winches lowered it on to a cleared space.

Curtis nodded to his two guests to approach. "Don't go too close," he warned. "I'm going to have to use this." He indicated an oxy-acetylene welding kit which was being wheeled up by the mate. At the same time he donned a pair of goggles, explaining: "The sphere can only be opened from the inside. We built it that way as a safety precaution."

A moment later the torch was flaring incandescently in the young professor's hands as he went to work on the bathysphere's hatch.

It took several minutes before the door swung inwards, but finally it yielded.

The young biologist switched off the torch and stared into the murky confines of the sphere. He shuddered and looked away. His face was pale. "Worse than ever," he gulped. "The eel have had a pretty good meal... it's ugly..."

Blake and Tarratona moved forward. Blake was there first. He peered into the sphere. He had to fight down a surge of nausea at what he saw. It was gruesome. The corpse inside was unrecognisable. But the knife in the back was plain to see. The man had been murdered all right.

Then Blake saw something else. Something which set his mind thinking swiftly -- until suddenly he realised what it was. And then, at last, the answer to all his questions began to click into place. He knew how the murder had been committed!

* * *

It took the best part of twenty minutes to empty the complete contents of the bathysphere to the deck. By the time Curtis had completed an initial check of all the equipment, the spectators had been joined by the two FBI men, Navarro and Kellaher.

There was a grim silence as they all gazed at the dead body.

Curtis turned to Blake: "Well, Mr. Blake ... You wanted to be here to identify the corpse. Can you make anything of it? Are you satisfied this is Harben?"

"I'm satisfied," Blake said quietly, "that this *isn't* Harben."

"*Whatsat?*" Lieutenant Navarro suddenly turned a pair of fierce eyes on the detective.

"I said," Blake repeated quietly, "it is not Harben."

"Not Harben?" demanded Kellaher. "What do you mean, not Harben?"

Blake said grimly: "Was there ever any reason to assume it was Harben? When this bathysphere went down there were two men aboard. Only one body has been recovered and we can all see, it's unrecognisable. Why should we assume it belongs to one and not the other?"

"For one very good reason," interrupted the American Professor. "Harben was the one who heard screaming out for help just before the bathysphere broke loose -- at more than seven hundred feet."

Blake nodded. "And that's precisely what tells me you've picked the wrong man. Professor, take a look at all the equipment. Are you satisfied that it's all here?"

"It's all here," Curtis said firmly without looking.

"Very well," said Blake. "Consider this: when the impossible has been eliminated, what remains must be the truth, agreed?"

Curtis nodded.

"We all know that no-one could have left the bathysphere at seven hundred feet," said Blake.

"Check," said the biologist. "At that pressure no-one could open the hatch."

"And even if they could, they'd die as soon as they did?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then it follows inevitably that the man who left the bathysphere must have done so much earlier -- at not more than say fifty feet?"

Curtis frowned. "True... with an aqualung it could be done..."

"Then that's what must have happened," Blake said flatly.

The FBI man, Kellaher, interrupted with an exasperated snarl: "If the killer left the bathysphere at fifty feet, how could he have killed the other guy at seven hundred?"

Blake looked at him calmly. "He couldn't, could he? So that's one possibility eliminated -- must have killed his victim before reaching fifty feet."

Curtis looked at Blake with a baleful glare. "We're going around in circles! If this guy was dead at fifty feet, how come he was heard screaming at seven hundred?"

Blake said patiently: "Once again, the answer is he couldn't have been. Therefore he wasn't."

"The mate was on the radiophone!" snapped Curtis. "He heard Harben screaming when the bathysphere was at seven hundred feet!"

Blake nodded patiently. "And this proves what I've been saying all along: Harben's screams were heard after the murder had been committed -- therefore Harben could not have been the murdered man -- so by a process of elimination he must have been the killer."

"Now wait a minute--" Curtis began to get angry.

Blake cut him short. "Professor -- take another look at the equipment. You say it's all here?"

"It's all here!" snapped Curtis.

"And if you look carefully," Blake insisted, "I think you'll see something that *shouldn't* be there."

Curtis frowned suddenly. His gaze flicked across the deck. It began scanning the piles of equipment. And suddenly, sharply, he let out an exclamation.

"I thought so!" Blake strode grimly across to the object and picked it up.

It was a small, battery-powered tape recorder. "What the mate heard on the radiophone," Blake said grimly, "was not a man at all -- it was this. When the tape is dried out and played back you'll be able to hear the spine-chilling commentary designed to simulate the dying agony of a man being consumed by an unknown sea monster. All it need to complete the crime was a small charge of explosives to cut the sphere adrift -- to sink it to the ocean bed and destroy the evidence."

Blake paused, eyeing the listeners bleakly.

"The tape recording was made by the murderer long before the sphere sank -- and played back after the murder had been committed. Since the voice was identified by the mate as that of Harben, it follows simply and clearly that Harben was the killer."

There was a stunned silence before Curtis demanded: "Then who's this?" He pointed at the mutilated corpse.

"This is a man called Linwood -- whose real name is Peter Sellingham."

Curtis looked dazed. "But why?" he demanded fiercely. "Why did Harben have to kill

him?"

"The reason for that is probably here..." Blake strode across to the corpse and unbuttoned the pockets on what remained of the dead man's denim overalls.

In the third pocket he found what he was looking for -- a sheaf of sodden, but still readable typescript pages.

"Harben," Blake explained quietly, "was a Soviet agent plotting to infiltrate the Maliban Liberation Movement with a view to turning this island into a Russian satellite. The murderer here, Sellingham, had found out; he also found out the names of every red agent on the island -- here on this list."

Blake held up a pulpy mass of papers.

"This list was originally compiled by the Maliban Secret Police. Later it was stolen by communists who substituted it for a phoney list -- knowing that the phoney list, in turn, was to be stolen by the rebels."

"Because Sellingham sympathised with the rebel movement and had learned of the communist scheme, Harben had to kill him. At the same time, Harben had to arrange for himself to disappear. The bathysphere offered a foolproof way of killing two birds with one stone. Sellingham, being an amateur in the espionage game, wasn't aware that Harben knew how to disappear. He'd learned. It must have been easy enough to lure him out there with the promise of a deep dive..."

Blake broke off. He concluded thoughtfully: "Only the purest chance -- a ledge of rock eleven hundred feet down -- prevented the crime from remaining a perpetual mystery. It was very nearly the perfect murder."

Lieutenant Navarro of the FBI was looking at the detective with narrow eyes. "Mr. Blake, I'd like to see that list..."

"I'm sure you would," Blake smiled. "But I need it. You needn't worry though -- your government will be getting a copy in due course."

For the first time Blake produced his official credentials and showed Navarro his PAN-SAC card.

Navarro whistled. "I'm sure glad you're on our side! I thought you were going to be a sticking point. Listen, there's something I've gotta know -- how did the Reds manage to switch the list of agents?"

"They had an agent working inside the Nonales government," said Blake, "the same man who imposed press censorship on the bathysphere story to cover up the murder."

"Who?" demanded Navarro. "Where is he? We've got to get him!"

"You've got him," Blake said with a thin smile. "He's right here -- aren't you, *Captain Tarratona!*"

14. VIOLENT FINALE

Captain Tarratona's eyebrows arched in sleepy, Latin astonishment. "Why! Señor Blake! What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you're a communist," Blake snapped. "You were the man who imposed press censorship on the bathysphere story. You're the man who did all the inside work for Amelia Tucker, and you're the man who's been trying to impede my investigations ever since I arrived!"

"But this is rubbish!" the police chief protested. "It was I who allowed you to visit this ship in *spite* of the censorship--"

"Because you wanted me to report back to London that Jules Harben was dead! You even tried to tell me he was!"

"But it was I who saved your life just now -- by killing the communist woman, Miss Tucker--"

"You killed her because she was compromised," snapped Blake. "Because if she'd lived she could have compromised you! You suddenly saw where your own interests lay!"

Something glittered behind Tarratona's eyes.

"Get his gun!" Blake shouted.

Kellaher was nearest. He leaped towards the cornered police chief. But long before he could reach there Tarratona's gun was clearing its holster.

Something else moved then.

From the corner of his eye Blake saw the man beside him move -- Navarro the Mexican. His right arm flashed up with the speed of a cat, to his shoulder. It flashed back down again, held something black and small -- something that barked out three staccato shots before Tarratona even fired one!

The Maliban Police Chief froze and shuddered in one great convulsion; his eyes popping from his head, bulging from their sockets in stark disbelief.

Then, very slowly, he leaned over, staggered and pitched headlong on the deck -- a lifeless corpse.

Sexton Blake looked at the gun in the Mexican's hand and it was his turn to say fervently "I'm glad *you're* on our side."

Navarro looked grim. "I hope you're right about that guy. A G-man needs a good reason shooting a foreign police chief. Are you sure he's the right guy?"

Blake nodded grimly. "I knew as soon as I was sure why he tried to make me believe Harben was dead -- because Harben is really alive."

"Where is he now, this Harben guy?"

"He's with the rebels waiting to seize control," Blake said bleakly, "and I've got to get there before it happens!"

* * *

Blake took the police launch back to the harbour and hailed a taxi on the waterfront. He had to get to Juan Callas to warn him that the communists were still a very real menace -- that the rebels were still at large!

"Drive me to the *Ostra*!" he told the cab driver.

Somehow he had to find the girl, Francesca. She was his only link with the rebels.

The cab lurched away from the quayside and soon was tearing towards the centre of town.

It was when they reached the town centre and were turning off towards the narrow slum quarter that Blake heard the shots...

A staccato burst of machine-gun fire, fifty yards away across the main square.

A low-slung, gleaming Cadillac had just come down the central avenue from the Presidential palace, flanked by a police escort of motor-cycle out-riders. One moment it was a serene, swift-moving convoy -- and the next, all hell had broken loose!

Blake's cab lurched to a halt as the driver stabbed the footbrake, his eyes bulging in shock towards the scene ahead.

Burst after burst of gunfire raked the Cadillac. It rained down from rooftops on all sides. And the heavy crunch of grenades was added to the din as explosives were thrown in for good measure.

The Cadillac held to its course for a moment, its windscreen shattered and its paintwork punched with bullet holes. Then it went mad.

It veered crazily off the road, swung around in an arch towards the Municipal Museum. It crossed the road, felling and crushing one of the police out-riders. It shot straight across the pavement and began mounting the museum steps.

It got halfway up before gravity brought it to a halt. Then it stood poised. For a bare instant it hung balanced on the side of the steps while the gunfire continued to thunder into it. Then the left side rose slowly from the upper steps as the other began to slide.

It did a slow motion somersault and went crashing down to the pavement, its four wheels pointing towards the vacant blue sky.

It began to burn.

* * *

Sexton Blake watched grimly as the flames licked hungrily upwards from the naked underbelly of the Cadillac. No screams came from the overturned vehicle. Nothing inside it lived.

Blake knew that President Nonales was dead.

And then he knew something else. From the distant outskirts of the town he heard the first rolling salvo of artillery fire -- and he knew the revolution had begun.

The fighting had started and when it stopped there could only be one outcome: the communists would be in control of Maliba! The Caribbean island would be another communist satellite.

Unless someone could intervene -- and only one man could.

Blake!

He was the only man who knew. But what could he do? How could he warn the rebels that the communists were in control?

The answer was he couldn't. Because one thing he knew for sure -- he would not find Francesca Cardenez at the *Ostra* bar. This was her day of days -- the day she wouldn't be there.

Where was she?

* * *

Suddenly Blake knew. The answer leaped into his mind. He knew exactly where Francesca would be because she had *told* him: "*I shall be by Juan's side when he speaks to the people*"

And suddenly Blake knew exactly where and when the Soviet agents would carry out their *coup*.

The detective leaned forward in his seat and slapped the stupified driver on the back: "Radio Station! Drive me to the Radio Station!"

"Si, señor!" The driver suddenly came to life. He slammed the cab into reverse and did a three-point turn in the road. He needed no second bidding to leave that scene of devastation. A moment later the cab was careering wildly through a network of narrow side streets.

Blake saw in his mind the beautiful simplicity of the communist plan. Once Juan Callas

made his broadcast and consolidated the loyalty of the population, he would be expendable. Therefore that would be the moment chosen for his liquidation. As soon as he'd finished his speech!

Blake wondered if the Radio Station had fallen or was still being fought for. He leaned the seat in front to reach the dashboard and switched on the radio.

Then he heard it. His blood ran cold. Juan Callas was already on the air:

"...the time has come to throw off the yoke of dictatorship and to throw it off forever! People of Maliba, on this glorious day of revolution you have not only lost a corrupt, totalitarian demagogue -- you have lost your chains! From this day on..."

Blake's heart missed a beat. Callas was already winding up his speech. When he stopped talking he would die! Could Blake get there in time to save him?

* * *

In Number One Studio of the Maliba State Radio Building, Francesca Cardenez sat watching the man who stood by the microphone talking, with a glow of pride. Juan Callas had never looked more handsome in his crisp, starched uniform of Commander-in-Chief of the Liberation Army.

He spoke with sincerity, passion and conviction, as no-one in Maliba had ever spoken before. He was building a whole new future for the island's people -- there before the microphone.

Sitting at the desk behind Francesca was Ramon de Vega, Callas's newly appointed second in command. Francesca looked at him with a warm smile, but de Vega was paying careful attention to the speech, listening to every word with cold-blooded detachment. He did not smile.

The door of the studio opened quietly and a soldier of the Liberation Army came in with a message. He handed it to de Vega who read it with a frown.

"Blake?" he whispered.

Francesca, suddenly alert, took the message and read it. To de Vega she whispered: "Let him in -- he's a friend of ours."

De Vega looked at her with narrow eyes. He nodded thoughtfully to the soldier. "Admit him," he murmured.

The man went out and in a few moments returned with Blake. Blake came in quietly with his arms folded. He gave Francesca a smile and nodded to de Vega. They all listened quietly as Juan Callas came to the end of his speech:

"...and brought to justice in the name of the Council of Revolution! And when the last

*traitor is purged from our midst we shall go forward together towards the broad upland
a new and better age!"*

The red transmission light went off. Somewhere in another part of the building the strain of the Maliba national anthem began to play as Callas turned round from the microphone, a tall, lean young man with a tanned, handsome face.

Francesca was on her feet and running towards him. She threw her arms about his neck and embraced him passionately.

"Magnificent Juan! You were magnificent!"

Callas turned to his lieutenant. "What do you say, Ramon?"

De Vega nodded. "Quite adequate, Juan," he said. "Quite adequate..."

"Adequate?" Callas looked astonished. "Is that all?"

"What he means," Blake put in grimly, "is that you were quite adequate for the purposes of communist propaganda."

"*What?*" Callas exclaimed. "Ramon! What is this?"

"His name isn't Ramon," Blake said grimly. "His name is Kraski -- Jakob Kraski. Recently known as Jules Harben. He's the man who murdered Peter Sellingham and he's wanted for crimes against humanity all over the Western World!"

Kraski gave the detective a polite, cynical bow. "Quite right, Mr. Blake. I suspected you knew too much. That is why I allowed you to be admitted. Now you can stay here to perish at the same time as these two fools!"

Kraski drew a revolver from the low-slung holster at his belt. "You see, Callas," he said coldly, "you have served your purpose. Your continued existence is an embarrassment to the process of true revolution. From this point onwards, we take over!"

"No, you don't," Blake said grimly. "Put the gun down!"

Kraski looked at him in astonishment. "You are threatening me?" he said with a quizzical, puzzled smile.

"I don't want to have to kill you," Blake said bleakly. "I want to take you alive."

"You're not taking me anywhere!" Kraski exploded. He moved the gun towards Blake.

Blake shot him. Shot him dead from where he stood with his arms folded. A mere jerk of his shoulder was all it took. Then Blake unfolded his arms for the first time -- with Lieutenant Navarro's snub-nosed automatic in his hand.

Kraski slumped in his chair, a neat red bullet hole in the centre of his forehead.

"Pity," Blake murmured grimly. "We could have got a lot of valuable information out of him."

Juan Callas was staring white faced and stunned. "I don't understand--" he began "--I just don't understand!"

"You don't have to," Blake said swiftly. "First of all you've got something more important to do." He produced the sodden list of agents from his pocket. "Broadcast an immediate operational order for the arrest of these men -- and an order releasing the men you arrested by mistake."

* * *

By the middle of the afternoon it was all over. A cease-fire was officially declared at three-thirty and the victory parade began at four o'clock.

It had been a busy day,

It was a busy day for Juan Callas and Francesca, a busy and joyous day for the people of Malibu, and a busy day for Sexton Blake.

The detective took his leave from the young couple after the official reception at the Presidential palace.

The take-over had been smooth; casualties had been light. Callas was already drafting provisional plans for the holding of new elections.

And Blake had only one more task to do. He had to send three cables.

One was to Paula Dane at Berkeley Square; it would say:

ARRIVING LONDON AIRPORT ELEVEN A.M. TOMORROW.

The second to Sir Gordon Sellingham:

SON DIED -- TO MAKE SUGAR SAFE.

And the third for Eustace Craille. It would be to the point. It would say:

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED ON ALL THREE COUNTS.

THE END