

Race For Life

ON BOARD a Swedish trawler in the Arctic Ocean a seaman lies writhing in agony, his face contorted with pain. His symptoms are mysterious. No one on board knows how he should be treated. Repeated SOS messages have received no reply from nearby ships; the trawler is caught in a magnetic storm and its radio is virtually useless.

In the Belgian Congo a native radio-amateur switches on his set and starts to turn the dials. Suddenly, by an atmospheric freak, he picks up the message from the stricken ship. After maddening delays he manages to relay the message to another amateur, a smuggler in the bay of Naples....

Back on the ship the tension mounts as first one man and then another goes down with the disease. Panic threatens to gain control. At last radio communication is established, by a relay system of amateur sets, with a doctor at the Pasteur Institute in Paris.

But now there is a new problem. Continually and agonisingly delayed by official apathy, accidents and misunderstandings, can the life-saving serum which the doctor has prescribed be flown to the ship before it is too late?

Race For Life

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Translated from the French by
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SI TOUS LES GARS DU MONDE. . .
(Paris 1956)

RACE FOR LIFE
(London 1957)

21.50 (GMT): In the Arctic Ocean, somewhere to the East of Jan Mayen Island

A SWEDISH TRAWLER, the *Maria Sorensen*, moved slowly over the calm sea. A fine, persistent drizzle covered the deck in a wet mist.

The man of the watch walked up and down in the yellow light of the lantern. He was tall, heavy and bearded; from time to time he shivered and raised the collar of his leather jacket. He spat on the floor and gazed for a long time at the puddle of saliva shining on the tarred planks. Then he crushed it under the heel of his boot.

The boat seemed dead. The door of the captain's cabin opened. Larsen's thick-set figure was outlined against the brightly illuminated interior framed by the doorway. The captain was a middle-aged man, robust and square, hard featured, his face tanned by the sun and wind. He walked down the steps, which creaked under his weight, across the deck, lit his pipe to leeward and stumped into the men's sleeping quarters.

There were twelve bunks, in four three-tiered rows. Most of the fishermen were lying down, one older man was snoring loudly at regular intervals. Others were smoking and playing cards. From time to time they spoke to each other in low voices.

The captain walked to the other end of the cabin. In one of the bottom bunks a man was writhing in agony; pale, hairy, his face contorted by pain. Intermittently, a raucous groan escaped from his lips. His neighbours, who could

not sleep because of him, were sitting on their beds, darting uneasy glances at him.

Larsen put his hand on the man's shoulder: 'Aren't you feeling any better, Erik?'

'I feel worse,' answered the sick man peevishly.

Michel, the cook, whose bunk was just over Erik's, added: 'He's not stopped groaning for the last four hours.'

A black cat was curled up on Michel's pillow, and he went on stroking it mechanically.

Larsen bent over Erik and uncovered his chest. Then he pulled a stethoscope out of his pocket, raised the patient with the cook's assistance and listened to his heart and lungs, back and front. The men's eyes followed his every movement. A pipe dropped to the floor. It was the only sound that broke the silence. Even the old man had stopped snoring.

'Where is the pain?'

Erik pointed to his thigh.

The captain undid a dirty bandage. An angry sore appeared; it was suppurating. Larsen shook his head:

'Do you feel very hot?'

'Just about the same,' answered Michel who was bandaging him up again.

Larsen sighed, left the men's quarters and went back to his own cabin, where his son was waiting. When Olaf had been small, Larsen had been very fond of him. The little boy had been like a miniature Viking, with his golden hair, fair complexion and blue eyes. His proud father had taken him for walks along the streets of the port, with the boy's hand tightly clutched in his own. But with adolescence, Olaf's character had changed for the worse. He had become reserved, hard, quick to take offence; perhaps it had been his father's fault, a matter of handling.

Knut Larsen had wanted to bring his son up as he had been brought up himself, with undue severity. But times had changed and the old system had been abandoned by almost everybody. That at least was what his wife claimed, who was always ready to take the boy's side. Olaf had rebelled. Knut had wanted to tame him, and the gulf between them had widened with the years. They had never become reconciled; father and son had never become friends; they were always getting on each other's nerves. So much so that Knut was beginning to wonder whether he loved his son, and Olaf felt nearly certain that he hated his father.

The captain had taken Olaf on board as his first mate. He could hardly do otherwise. He was a Larsen and, one day, the boat would belong to him. But the boy was no fisherman. His main interest was tinkering with machinery, a landlubber's job. He had a passion for everything mechanical, in particular radio and meteorological instruments.

When the father reached his cabin, he found Olaf bending over the transmitter: 'KTX ... KTX calling all stations. Urgent message.'

'You've been repeating that for hours without getting any answer,' said Larsen. 'I can't understand why you go on trying.'

A trifle impatiently, Olaf once again tried to make his father understand. He was using an amateur transmitting set, as the *Maria Sorensen's* wireless was useless.

'What do you mean? Can't they hear you? With all the boats that must be around us?'

The explanation was too complicated for the captain to grasp. Sometimes a magnetic storm isolated certain zones and prevented them from communicating with nearby receiving sets. But there was usually a corresponding

zone, sometimes very far away, in which reception was perfect.

‘And why do you get no answer from that corresponding zone?’

‘That is what I do not understand.’

Larsen darted a suspicious glance at his son; could Olaf be deliberately trying to keep them isolated? But he realised the absurdity of the thought, as soon as it came into his mind. Olaf was doing his best. Besides, his father was just as helpless. He had not the foggiest idea as to the nature of Erik’s disease. He had had plenty of experience in looking after his men. But he had never been up against such a difficult and ugly case.

He looked at his son, opened his mouth, as if to confide in him; but a senseless timidity deterred him. He sat down at his table without saying anything, mechanically put some papers in order, lit his pipe, which had gone out, got up and went over to the medicine chest; he took out a book, a small textbook on medicine, and started turning over the pages. Now and then he looked up towards Olaf, who was sitting in front of his set, with his back towards his father, continuing to call: ‘KTX... KTX... calling all stations...’

Olaf sensed his father’s distress. He felt as if his own throat were constricted with anxiety. The ship was three days out from the nearest port. He had been broadcasting his appeal for six hours and nobody had answered. They were cut off from the rest of the world. Olaf would have liked to say something, to break down this almost palpable wall between his father and himself, but he could not. Their estrangement had lasted too long. Now, however much they might want to, they could not bridge the gulf. And both of them remained speechless, prisoners of an absurd bashfulness.

22.00 (GMT): In the Belgian Congo; the village of Zobra

Etienne Loiseau, sitting outside his hut, was watching the stream of women coming in and going out of the door. The young negro was seriously worried. As soon as his wife Maria had felt the first labour pains, she had sent for her mother, her aunt, her sisters and her cousins, who were grouped around her bed, and the other women of the village were expected. They were coming and going with basins of water and white cloths. In the past, a birth had been celebrated with strange pagan rites. Etienne remembered having seen his father and his uncles, faces painted with bright colours and bodies covered with feathers, singing and dancing the sacred dance to the sound of the tom-tom. But all that was already a thing of the past.

Zobra was now a Christian centre. A church had been built and the natives wore European clothes. But the medicine-man had not been altogether forgotten. The old people still believed in him, and the young people, to be on the safe side, sent for him on all solemn occasions. Sometimes priest and medicine-man were sent for simultaneously. Both 'holy' men were used to it, had learned to tolerate each other, and these meetings never led to any disagreeable incidents. At the moment, the medicine-man was in the act of nailing up on Etienne's doorpost the talismans necessary for the protection of the baby against the evil eye. Etienne disliked him intensely and his expression betrayed his sentiments. He had been careful to explain to his mother-in-law that, as a devout Catholic, he could not allow the man near his house.

But it was impossible to drive superstition out of these old women's heads. Etienne told himself that he ought to do something to show his anger and contempt, but he felt, today, bereft of all authority. A man usually felt more useless when his wife was having her first child than at any other time. He hoped that it would be a son, it must be a son! Etienne was a good Christian. He knew that all His creatures were equal in the sight of God. Nevertheless, he would be very disappointed if Maria gave him a girl.

The women were bustling to and fro, draped in their self-importance. Here was his mother-in-law, enormous and pot-bellied, with flapping pendulous breasts. She had jostled him on purpose with her calabash of water. Etienne sighed, rose to his feet and went around to the back of the hut.

He knelt on the ground in the shade of a lean-to, in front of the wireless set he had inherited from Father Gross. The old missionary who had converted the village had been very fond of Etienne. He had made him his secretary and had taught him, among other things, how to use his short-wave radio. After the father's death, Etienne had kept the set. He was legitimately proud of it and spent all his spare time manipulating it.

He turned the knobs. A loud hubbub of discordant sounds filled the air and startled the medicine-man and the women. After a few seconds, a chamber music concert came through faintly, to be replaced immediately by a nasal voice which, in its turn, was brutally interrupted by a hideous metallic crash.

A sound, rather like a guttural titter, escaped from the medicine-man's lips, extremely offensive to Etienne, the defender of progress. He became angry and twiddled the knobs furiously, but the loudspeaker merely poured out

sounds which were even more cacophonous. Tonight, the elements seemed to be running riot. Etienne could not remember ever hearing such a chaotic medley of discords since he had learnt how to use the wireless. Suddenly, over and above all the noise, an astonishingly clear voice could be heard: ‘KTX ... KTX ... calling all stations. Can you hear me?’

Etienne could not speak English, but he was familiar with the S.O.S. signal of amateur radio transmitters. But he could not answer. His own set was only a receiver and could not transmit.

An old negress had just come out of his hut. It was Etienne’s mother. Showing all her teeth, she gave him a dazzling smile to reassure him; everything was normal, so far. At that very moment, Maria uttered a piercing cry. Etienne was startled. His mother burst out laughing. Of course Maria was in pain. That was how it should be. All women suffer in childbirth. The little old woman’s eyes were glittering with mirth. She chuckled and trotted off, wriggling and swaying, delighted at the idea of becoming a grandmother.

Once more, Olaf’s voice came through, surprisingly clear: ‘KTX ... KTX calling all stations. Can you hear us?’

Etienne got up.

He hurried towards the village, ran along the straight new road lined by white houses. He stopped near a gate in front of which a jeep was parked. He pushed open the gate, sprinted through the lush tropical vegetation of the garden, as far as some cement steps.

Two men were lolling in armchairs on the terrace, smoking long cigars. They were both over fifty, fat and paunchy, with no interest in life beyond money and drink, as the table in front of them, littered with papers and bottles, bore witness. Dorzit, planter and owner of the

house, was flourishing his glass. He was celebrating the sale of his crops with his old friend Van Rielst, buyer for the Compagnie Générale du Coton. They were more than a little tipsy. So much so that it was some time before they were able to understand what Etienne wanted. The young negro patiently explained that he had picked up a call for help to which he could not respond, but that there was, at the Tituia mine, a transmitter powerful enough to be able to get through to the mysterious KTX. The mine was about twelve miles away. In a car, it would not take long to get there. Fortunately, their drinks had made the two drunkards feel merry. That anybody should be in distress seemed a marvellous joke and the drive to Tituia an amusing jaunt. Shouting with ribald laughter, belching, staggering, swearing, they followed Etienne out to the jeep. They kept slapping him on the back in a friendly manner. Van Rielst was the first to clamber into the vehicle, not without difficulty. Dorzit was about to sit down beside him, when he remembered that he had not satisfied a pressing need. He got down and relieved himself in the middle of the road. A negress happened to be crossing the square. Dorzit, in a loud voice, cracked a joke in questionable taste. The woman answered back, in even cruder terms. Van Rielst roared with laughter. Etienne was seething with impatience. Every second lost seemed an unpardonable wrong to those whose S.O.S. he had picked up.

22.10 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Olaf had stopped calling. Why persist if no one answered?

His father was still there, sitting in stolid silence. Olaf pulled his pipe out of his pocket, filled it and lit it, equally

stolidly. The pipe-stem gripped between his teeth, his hands folded underneath his chin, the young man was staring straight ahead at the wooden partition, beyond which his imagination conjured up a female figure; fair hair with untidy ringlets, large teeth, white and irregular, a round chin and clumsy hands, short and square like a man.

Larsen stopped thumbing through his textbook and shrugged his shoulders. That imbecile of an Olaf would start dreaming when there was some serious illness on board! He, Knut, would have to face it alone. In a way, that was to be expected, seeing that he was the captain, but he might have hoped for a little more sympathy from his son. When he himself had been a young man and had gone to sea with his father, he had taken a very different attitude. At that time, the Larsens had not yet owned a boat but sailed in other people's ships. The captain got up and walked over to the medicine chest, which was nailed to the wall. The damned thing was always untidy. Larsen unhooked it and emptied the contents on to the table. A miscellaneous collection of bottles, boxes, ointments, pills, vaccines and dressings came tumbling out. There was never anything one needed in those infernal packages! Larsen looked for the list of drugs which every boat was supposed to stock. In the end, he found a sheet which had not been unfolded for so long that its edges were stuck together and had to be torn apart. He sighed; his stock, like that of practically every other ship, did not comply with the health regulations. What rot the regulations were, nonsense thought up by some stupid bureaucrat! He had always given his men the treatment he had learnt from his father: aspirin and a string of good honest swear words. It had worked for so many years, why did it fail him now? Larsen rapped out an oath. And that fool of a boy who

looked through him as if he were transparent.... Right through his father, Olaf could still see the slender figure, the firm breasts and the long legs of his Christine.

Larsen suddenly remembered something and spoke his thought out loud: ‘My God, Erik is not a member of our regular crew. He came on board at Antwerp. But he must have had a medical examination.. . .’

Olaf, annoyed at being aroused from his reverie, shrugged his shoulders: ‘It was De Witt who came on board for the medical inspection,’ he said with a sneer.

De Witt was an old friend. Larsen and he had exchanged drinks and tobacco for as long as he could remember. They had gradually come to a tacit agreement. Now, De Witt never bothered him with medical formalities. He was a fat and lazy fellow and it suited him to loll back in the captain’s armchair, empty his glass and keep his feet warm. He and Larsen discussed politics. De Witt’s dream was to become a member of the municipal council. This ambition would have been fulfilled long ago if he had not played the fool during the occupation. Whilst De Witt spun his yarns, Olaf prepared the papers. Then De Witt signed and the inspection was over. That was how it was done. Then Larsen, chuckling with glee, accompanied him back to his yawl. Larsen was not going to allow himself to be pestered by bureaucrats, not he! Only, this time perhaps, the scribblers were going to have their revenge.

22.30 (GMT): On the road between Zobra and Tituia

Van Rielst’s jeep gave a sudden lurch. Dorzit and Etienne clung to their seats. The cotton buyer was driving in a most erratic manner. The vehicle was zigzagging from side to side of the narrow track, just missing the trees and brushing against the bushes. He plunged at full speed into

the pools and drenched its occupants. The drunkards were singing at the tops of their voices and drowned the noises of the forest. The fresh night air was beginning to have an effect on them. They were sobering up and beginning to think. What on earth were they doing driving to Tituia? Etienne's story was all moonshine. How could he possibly be the only one to have picked up the distress signal? Was it reasonable to suppose that the men who were in danger could rely upon a nigger?

Etienne Loiseau brought all his powers of persuasion to bear on the two men. He explained everything he knew about wireless amateurs and their international code of honour, the closely-knit bond of solidarity which bound them from one end of the world to the other, the rules which made it essential to respond immediately to any call for help; he explained magnetic storms and wavelength vibrations. But his companions became more and more suspicious.

Van Rielst stopped the jeep and was about to turn around, whilst Dorzit repeated, threateningly: 'You are making fools of us, you ape. But we shan't let you get away with it.'

Etienne was in despair. He jumped out of the jeep.

'Where are you going?'

Never mind. He would push on to the mine on foot. He seemed so determined that the two men were impressed.

And how will you get back?'

Etienne shrugged his shoulders. On foot, of course. At that moment a sudden devastating thought flashed into his mind. He had forgotten Maria, he had forgotten the baby, his child. What had happened to him? He could not explain it. He stopped, feeling petrified with shame. He must go back, go back at once.

He remembered his wife's cry of anguish, his mother's amused laughter. He felt an irresistible urge to go back to his hut. What did the strangers, whose signal he had picked up, matter to him? But, with the versatility of drunkards, his companions' mood had changed: 'There is an engineer at Tituia who knows how to use a transmitter, did you say? Well, we'll go and see him. Get back in the car.'

Etienne obeyed. Dorzit pulled him up, chuckling: 'If you've told us a lie, we'll boot you back all the way to Zobra.'

The idea tickled Van Rielst's bibulous sense of humour. He was full of hope that Etienne had been pulling their legs, and he repeated with great gusto: 'We'll boot you all right, every inch of the way. Come on, get in.'

And as the jeep started up again, Dorzit gloated: 'One of us will drive and the other will kick your miserable bottom. We've got plenty of time. We're in no hurry.'

Van Rielst has discovered a new prank; he takes both his hands away from the steering wheel and grasps it again at the very last moment when the vehicle is about to crash into an obstacle,

This game made Dorzit roar with laughter. He was delighted at Etienne's expression of terror.. 'You'll laugh on the other side of your face on the way back. Your bottom will be pounded into pulp.'

Imagination was not their strong point, and they went on laughing for a long time at this simple joke.

23.00 (GMT): At the Tituia mine

When they arrived at the mine, the village was asleep. Van Rielst drove the jeep towards a solidly constructed house surrounded by a garden; the engineer's house.

A boy who had been dozing on the terrace came to meet the visitors. His master was ill.

Gilles Lalande, the engineer, had been confined to his bed for two days by a severe attack of malaria. His highly feverish state had prevented him from closing an eye. In the small room, in which the slightest noise was magnified, he had been tossing and turning underneath the mosquito netting. His fevered imagination made him see remembered forms mingled with creations of his over-excited brain executing a weird and ghostly dance around his bed. Some of them seemed so real that he felt that he could touch them. Other shadows disappeared almost as soon as they leapt into his field of vision.

What had driven Lalande so far afield in search of a successful career? He tried hard to remember and could not succeed; the rain, the greasy pavements, the flickering lights of the drinking-dens of Antwerp haunted him; he was swept with a piercing nostalgia, as acute as any physical pain, and he gave a long, loud groan. If he had been in bed in Europe, Gilles might have controlled himself. His mother would have heard him in the next room. But what was the use of trying to exercise self-control here? There was nobody to consider, nobody to talk to, nobody existed as far as he was concerned. He tossed and turned on his burning bed. He began to see women. Little by little, they filled the room and surrounded his bed. There were too many of them to count. Or, perhaps, he was seeing multiple forms of the same woman. Her hair was dark and fair at the same time, even red, but it was always the same woman. Her arms, her breast, her shoulders and her rounded thighs were naked, except for the line of her garters and a profusion of white lace.... Here, there were nothing but regresses, all oily with black skins on which

your hand slipped. But, at the same time, the flesh was hard, firm, disgusting. Lalande sighed at the memory of the bodies of Flemish women, whose flesh was soft and plump. These blacks, he wanted to lash them. One day, he had surprised a foreman in the act of flogging a woman with a riding-whip. The blows sounded, flac, flac . . . He had interfered and reprimanded the foreman, who had apologised. And now Lalande wanted to imitate him. Lash... the black skin, as hard as he could.

There was a knock at his door. His boy poked his face, with an expression of comical dismay, through the door. Some white men had arrived and wanted to see his master. The engineer looked at his watch; it had stopped. In this infernal country, nothing worked. Not to be able to tell the time seemed unbearable torture to Lalande. He got out of bed and his long, thin legs with their fair hairs immediately collapsed under him. He sat down on the edge of the bed and cursed feebly. He had torn the mosquito netting. The boy would mend it, although he was so clumsy he would spend hours wrestling with the needle and thread. In the meanwhile Gilles would not be able to get back to bed. This was the last straw! He felt like weeping. Before venturing outside his room, the engineer threw a Scotch plaid rug across his shoulders. In spite of the added warmth of the wool, he shivered in the tropical night.

Dorzit and Van Rielst had made themselves comfortable on the terrace and did not even get up from their armchairs when he arrived. They went on calmly drinking his whisky, which they had ordered from his boy. When he was in the toils of an attack of malaria, Lalande hated not only the blacks but also his own white brethren. These two specimens with their red and puffy faces were particularly loathsome. He listened to Etienne's story with bored

indifference. He did, in fact, possess a transmitting set, but practically never used it. He would have liked nothing better than to send them all packing with their distress call. How could these unsavoury specimens possibly be interested in a call for help? Were they not all in distress, in this god-forsaken country? But Gilles managed to put a curb on his tongue. After all that he had suffered in Africa, he could not risk even the remotest chance of having an unfavourable report sent to his superiors. His experience had taught him to beware of his fellow white men. One never knew who their contacts were. He wiped his forehead, which was dripping with sweat, with a moist and tremulous hand. He had a blinding headache, beating away in his temples. Then, with the boy's help, he fetched the set from the shed in which it had been stored away. They brought it on to the terrace. Etienne helped him to assemble it. Lalande sat down in front of the set and turned the knobs. When a buzzing and crackling came from the set, he sighed with relief. He had been afraid that the set might have been completely out of order. Little by little, the sounds became more distinct. A wave of jazz music filled the night. The high wailing note of the saxophone aroused Dorzit who, as the result of his last glass of whisky, had been dozing in his chair.

Lalande tried to tune in to another station. A Chevalier song came through; an old record, deeply grooved and scratched; a song which had been popular twenty years ago.

Brief fragments of different programmes followed each other. At first there was music, then news in Spanish, then the nasal twang of an American announcer, all interspersed with crackling and high pitched buzzing noises.

Lalande kept on turning the wave-length knob.

And, all of a sudden, an astonishingly clear voice, the one which Etienne had heard, repeated: 'Hallo, KTX here... KTX ... calling all stations. Can you hear me? I am switching over to reception.'

The two white men were galvanised into action, and they stood up. That distant voice had become as real to them as it had to Etienne. They were bending over the set, and even Lalande was sitting up and switching over to transmission: 'Calling KTX . . . KTX . . . KTX TRZ here . . . TRZ . . . have picked up your message . . . I am switching over to reception. . .'

23.10 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

Olaf was so astonished that he hesitated for a few seconds before answering. He had repeated his call every fifteen minutes for so long without any result that he had, finished up by not expecting any answer and by convincing himself that they were permanently isolated in the fog and darkness of the Arctic night. The voice which had finally answered was the voice of a sick man exhausted by fever and fatigue. And nevertheless, it seemed extraordinarily warm and friendly to Olaf. Larsen had risen to his feet and was bending over the set. He was barely conscious of what he was doing; he had put his hand on Olaf's shoulder. Olaf found this sudden physical contact irksome, it seemed almost indecent. The hand was like a heavy foreign body and it required considerable self-control not to shake it off. Larsen felt Olaf tensing himself and realised that the boy felt a sort of repulsion. He let his large hairy paw with its long red hairs fall back on to the table; Olaf, embarrassed, lowered his eyes.

While these mute undercurrents were flowing between father and son, Lalande was explaining who he was and

where he was talking from and asking what he could do for those who had sent out this distress call, Larsen and Olaf had turned their heads simultaneously and were looking for the Belgian Congo on the map tacked to the wall. A bearded face appeared at the window of the cabin. The man of the watch had realised that their wireless message had at last been picked up. He smiled; his teeth, blackened by chewing tobacco, could hardly be distinguished from the heavy growth of hair on his face.

‘I want a medical opinion,’ explained Larsen, ‘I have a sick man on board whose condition seems very bad to me. Do you understand?’

He signed to his son to switch over to reception.

They had some difficulty in understanding each other. Lalande spoke a little English, so did Larsen, but his accent was atrocious. In the end, he became impatient and had to pass the microphone to his son.

It was Dorzit who spoke next: ‘What are the symptoms of the disease?’

This infuriated the captain. What business of their’s was it? It was a medical matter. Let them find a doctor and bring him to the microphone. Then he would give all the necessary details. Olaf refused to transmit such an answer, and he was right; there was no point in antagonising the only radio amateurs who had been able to pick up their call for help.

He explained: ‘The sick man has a very high temperature, pains all over and a swelling on his thigh.’

‘Where does he come from?’

Once again Larsen stifled an outburst of rage. Why were these people wasting time? Were they or were they not going to call a doctor?

Olaf answered: ‘The sick man came on board at Antwerp, but he had come from the Dutch East Indies.’

23.15 (GMT): At the Tituia mine

Lalande, when he heard them mention the name of his home town, reacted as if the appeal was a message addressed to him personally. Antwerp; the two syllables had an almost magical power of evocation; the quays, the dense crowds milling along the streets which led to the port, the silhouettes of the ships riding at anchor.

The others found the Dutch East Indies so significant as to be diagnostic. As colonials, they were convinced that, with the symptoms described, it could only be a case of tropical disease. Who should they consult? They were both agreed as to the unsuitability of the local doctor, Dr. Leuwels, who was demoralised and stupefied by the climate and too much drink. His ignorance was proverbial. They decided to try and contact a specialist by wireless.

‘Hallo, KTX . . . TRZ here ... Keep listening. We are going to try to contact the Pasteur Institute in Paris . . .’

23.20 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

A fishing-port with the houses huddled together all the way up the hill. The streets were deserted under the moon. A dog crossed the square and jostled a late passer-by. The wind flapped the sails of the boats about to put to sea, with their stern lanterns shining brightly. A fish leapt out of the water and splashed sonorously back on to the smooth surface of the sea.

At the very end of the village, there was a modern building. One of those hideous cement buildings which have pushed themselves up like mushrooms, these last few

years, at the end of old villages, the houses of which blend harmoniously with the countryside. A window was illuminated on the third floor of this excrescence. Domenico d'Angelantonio was sitting in front of his transmitting set. He was about fifty, tall, thin and haggard, his long face and waxy complexion broken by his short black moustache. He wore a hat and was wrapped in a long, dark red dressing-gown which time had worn at the elbows and frayed at its hem.

Two fishermen, father and son, were by his side, watching him closely.

'Hallo,' called d'Angelantonio, 'the *Lola-Lola*?'

The privateer yacht, the *Lola-Lola*, was cruising along the boundary of the territorial waters of the Bay of Naples, her holds stuffed with cases of smuggled American cigarettes.

D'Angelantonio's wireless served as a relay between the boat and the fishermen who were to take delivery of the cigarettes.

For a few moments the clicking noise of the Morse code filled the room.

'What are they saying?' asked one of the fishermen.

D'Angelantonio put up his hand to bid him hold his tongue.

He started as a violent crackling noise came from the instrument. Increasingly loud parasitic noises followed. Anxious not to arouse the neighbours, he turned down the volume control.

Immediately afterwards, an extremely distinct voice could be heard: 'TRZ here ... TRZ . . . an urgent message . . . We want to establish contact with Paris. If you have heard us, please answer. . .'

Domenico turned the knob impatiently. He was concerned with more important matters. He had no time to

listen to the babblings of amateur radio fans.

He was trying to re-establish contact with the yacht.

‘Hallo, captain, can you hear me?’

But the captain could not hear him. Between him and d’Angelantonio there was that importunate fellow repeating: ‘TRZ here . . . TRZ . . . urgent message . . .

We want to establish contact with Paris. I am switching over to reception.’

The Morse code, distant and faint at first, came through more distinctly and gradually dominated all other sounds. The dots and dashes were recorded in the form of a curve on the drum of a police detector van.

Inspector Ippolito had laid both hands flat on his fat thighs.

‘That’s them, all right,’ said the operator.

‘Start her up,’ ordered the inspector.

The van drove off. Ippolito was trembling with eager anticipation. He was very keen on his job. He had been tracking this particular game for months. Would he be able to pounce at last? Ippolito was only forty and already an inspector. He would have been justified, in most cases, in letting his subordinates go out on the job and simply organising their work from his office. But that was altogether contrary to his habits – partly because he was ambitious, and partly because action was an indispensable outlet for his energies, which might very well have brought him into the dock himself if he had not chosen to hunt others and bring them to justice.

‘We’ve got the clandestine set, this time,’ repeated the operator.

The inspector gave a broad smile. This mysterious transmitter had been a thorn in his flesh for some time. Unfortunately, they were still far from being able to

pinpoint its position. These people were as cunning as they were cautious. The set transmitted for only a few minutes every night. It operated over a vast territory. The preliminary attempts at locating it still left them more than sixty square miles to explore.

Suddenly, the van shuddered to a stop. The fellow had stopped transmitting. Ippolito unfolded a map. He marked the present position of the van with a cross. Then he lit a cigarette and settled down to wait without much hope for any possible further signs from his mysterious enemy.

Domenico had finished his wireless conversation with the captain of the privateer and repeated the instructions to his two companions.

‘The meeting is fixed for three a.m. If you leave at two-thirty you should be able to reach the *Lola-Lola* exactly on time. The cases will be unloaded at sea. The trucks will be waiting at the usual place ... I shall stand by here and shall be listening in. If there are any changes in the orders, I will see to it that you are informed.’

He had not switched off the receiving set and the call from Africa came through again, imperiously: ‘TRZ here ... TRZ . . . urgent call . . . We ask you to help us establish contact with Paris. . .’

Domenico shrugged his shoulders and called: ‘Carmela!’

A girl appeared in the doorway. It was difficult to believe that an ugly and sickly man like d’Angelantonio could have fathered such a glorious creature. Carmela was sixteen. She already had magnificent curves and was solidly planted on her two strong legs. Swarthy complexioned, with big, liquid, dark eyes, she looked men in the eye with a defiant expression.

‘Go with them,’ said her father.

The fishermen followed the girl. She swayed her hips a little as she walked, a bad habit which she had acquired recently. D'Angelantonio returned to his set: 'TRZ here ... urgent message...'

23.30 (GMT): At the Tituia mine

Lalande became increasingly irritable. That his appeal should be met with silence seemed a manifestation of hostility. During these attacks he became so hypersensitive that the slightest opposition sent him into paroxysms of exasperation. The rug on his shoulders felt as heavy as lead. He scowled with impotent rage at the impenetrable veil of darkness which surrounded him. His fingers tightened their hold on the switches of the wireless, his whole body trembled with fever and his knee jerked up and down convulsively. The rug slipped to the ground. Lalande picked it up.

'Perhaps we are in a zone of silence here too,' suggested Etienne.

Lalande shrugged his shoulders. Stupid nigger boy! just a few minutes ago he had picked up at least ten stations one after the other! He was certain that he had been heard somewhere, but where?

'I am switching over to reception.'

Silence. Nothing but a monotonous sound of snoring which came from that bladder of lard, Dorzit, sprawled out in his chair with both legs stretched out in front of him and widely apart. Van Rielst was not asleep. He was gazing about him, stupidly, with a glassy eye, Lalande wondered if the man would even notice, if he suddenly smashed his fist into his face. And if he did notice, would he be capable of reacting? The engineer felt like trying. But the idea went no further than the stage of temptation. The very idea of having to raise an arm brought a painful rush of

blood to his head. He had another look at Etienne. As a matter of fact, he looked intelligent and thoroughly wide-awake. Ape, dirty ape, Lalande repeated to himself, as if to reinforce his fever-borne convictions; the more enlightened they seemed, the more dangerous they were. They might have learnt to put on shoes, but their feet were still prehensile. I should not be surprised if this particular specimen had taken part in more than one cannibal feast. And now he pretends to be worried about saving some fishermen whom he does not know from Adam and who, logically, mean absolutely nothing to him. Lalande was quite aware of the fact that he was being anything but objective, in fact, most unfair to the negro. So what? He had a headache and a backache, he was aching all over, he was shivering with cold and fever; he had been in this accursed jungle for months without a break and would probably croak in it. And now they had pulled him out of his bed and made him broadcast an appeal for help to people who would not answer, and was he expected to keep his head and remain objective? Why?

23.30 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

Carmela accompanied the fishermen as far as the gate from the garden into the street. One of the men felt tempted to risk an insolent gesture, but the girl was too quick for him. Her expression was so forbidding that the man felt guilty and grunted that he had not done anything.

The gate creaked. Carmela closed it gently as the fishermen disappeared down the street. Gennaro emerged from the shadows. He was short, thick and muscular; as black as coal; black, greasy curls, melancholy eyes, swarthy complexion.

Carmela laughed: 'You frightened me.'

Gennaro put out his hand and dug his fingers into her arm.

‘You are hurting me,’ she exclaimed. But she made no attempt to pull her arm away. On the contrary, she leaned towards him and nestled her body against his. Gennaro liked hurting her. He preened himself on his strength and wanted all the girls to be frightened of him. Carmela was whispering to him, her lips almost touching the young man’s mouth: ‘I must go upstairs. Father is transmitting tonight. Don’t come before three o’clock.’

Gennaro put his arm around her waist. She arched her body back and responded avidly to his embrace. She had turned mechanically towards the lighted window, and he reassured her: ‘Don’t worry, he’s not looking.’

And even if old d’Angelantonio, the ‘doctor’ as they called him in the village, had seen him, would Gennaro have cared? He feared no one. Besides, Carmela did exactly as she pleased without even consulting her father. On the other hand, the conventions would be against them, the laws of respectability, as conceived in the village, and these were far more frightening than the anger of an old bandit.

Carmela threw his arm off and stepped back: ‘See you later. I’m going up now.’

No answer from Gennaro. It was Carmela who stopped after taking a few steps: ‘What are you going to do? It’s a long time to wait.’

‘I shall find something to do all right.’

‘Meaning?’

‘I shall go for a walk.’

‘Where?’

‘Over there.’

He made a vague gesture towards the beach.

‘Alone?’

Gennaro’s insolent smile exasperated her. She walked back to him, put her hand on his face and then dug her nails into his cheek: ‘Do you love me?’

‘You know I do.’

‘I want to hear you say so.’

‘I love you.’

Carmela suspected that he was only pretending that her nails had hurt him and leaned forward, as if to kiss him: ‘If you’re unfaithful to me. . .’

A cry of pain. Gennaro was rubbing his ear. She had bitten him, the bitch! This time, Carmela darted off at full speed. A tinkle of laughter came from behind the door as she slammed it.

23.40 (GMT): At the Tituia mine

Loiseau looked at his watch (a Swiss watch; he had managed to persuade a lorry driver to part with it after a prolonged argument). What was happening to Maria? Perhaps the baby was born. Why did I leave her? Etienne asked himself. He was so anxious to go back to his wife that he would have gladly walked the twelve miles. But would they let him go?

As if in answer to his thoughts, Dorzit opened his eyes, looked at him suspiciously and jeered: ‘Are you in a hurry to find out whether she has been unfaithful to you? I can tell you; the brat will be coffee-coloured, there’s no doubt about it.’

Etienne did not answer. Such a thought had never entered his head. He felt that he could visualise his wife, and he was swept by a wave of tenderness. At that very moment she was certainly in pain, crying out with pain. His mother had said that this was the common lot of women. And here he was, so far away from her. The

matrons claimed that the labour would last all night. But what did they know? Every birth was a new miracle, different every time. God watched over the earth and blessed each home. Loiseau's home was pure and honest. It was a Christian home. The sin of which Etienne accused himself most often at confession was the sin of pride. Had he the right to consider himself superior to his blood brothers because they had remained pagans whereas he had seen the light? He should have learnt the lesson of humility. Alas, he had not been able to. With the best will in the world he had not been able to prevent himself from being convinced that Dorzit and Van Rielst, for instance, were sinners bound for hell and that he himself would certainly go to Purgatory and from there to Paradise.

Lalande allowed his head to fall back against the chair. Perspiration ran down his face. A large drop flowed down the bridge of his nose. He did nothing to stop it. The drop went on falling, hesitated at the tip of his nose, grew larger and finally dropped on to the plaid rug. Lalande was at the end of his strength. His reactions were paralysed.

Etienne took up the microphone: 'Hallo ... TRZ here ... If anyone can hear me, I beg of them to answer me. Do not say to yourselves that my message may have been picked up by others. On such a night as this, it is probable that you are the only ones I have been able to contact. Listen to me: a human life is in danger. A man is seriously ill on a ship. We are trying to help him. Help us ... TRZ, TRZ... call TRZ...' Dorzit and Van Rielst were now sitting up and staring at the negro. There was no longer contempt or mockery in their eyes. Even Lalande seemed to be shaking off his torpor. He managed to articulate: 'Perhaps they cannot understand French. I will repeat what you have just said in English.'

23.41 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

D'Angelantonio and Carmela were leaning over the set. 'What are they saying? I cannot understand a word.'

His daughter signed to him to be quiet. Too late. He had prevented her from hearing the English words. Carmela had trotted around after American sailors at an age at which one easily picks up languages.

'They are talking about a man being in danger . . .'

'We must answer, then.'

D'Angelantonio's first instinctive reactions were always praiseworthy. He had been forced by circumstances to resort to his present shady transactions. That, at any rate, was what he claimed. And it was true, if a weak character could be considered the result of circumstances. D'Angelantonio's family had been an honourable one. At least it had been until Domenico had squandered the family possessions. Incapable of working, never having been taught a specific job, he had spent his life devising one wild-cat scheme after another, not one of them based on a realistic appreciation of the facts. He had not been discouraged by the inevitable failure of all his enterprises. On the contrary, he had set out each time with renewed ardour, with the same blind optimism; but little by little his fine principles had evaporated and he had gradually degenerated, his transactions becoming more and more disreputable and shady. It was by chance that he had sunk to becoming the accomplice of smugglers. At first, these outcasts had treated him with considerable respect and he, in his turn, had treated them with a cordiality tinged with

aloofness. But he had made so many blunders that they had soon begun to despise him, and now they no longer bothered to treat him with even ordinary courtesy. Nobody was more conscious of his humiliation than Carmela. As a small child she had been abandoned by her mother, who had left Domenico for a rich Calabrian merchant. She had grown up like a wild flower. She did as she pleased. She adored and at the same time despised her father, and always treated him as if he were a child. To please him, she had embroidered the family crest on his handkerchiefs, but she laughed and joked about it to Gennaro and his friends.

Domenico had decided to answer the appeal.

23.42 (GMT): At the Tituia mine

The four men were beginning to despair of ever getting an answer.

‘Repeat the message in both languages,’ proposed Dorzit.

They repeated it. Etienne could not help realising that his own words sounded less convincing than the first time, when he had pronounced them with spontaneous enthusiasm. He was sorry that he had not been heard. He might have shaken some wireless amateur out of his indifference.

He trembled with excitement. Lalande, after repeating the appeal in English, had switched over to reception; a nasal voice came through: ‘TRZ TRZ ... I am calling TRZ. Message picked up.’

23.43 (GMT): Somewhere in the Bay of Naples

In the detector van, Inspector Ippolito spread out a local map. He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and marked the three places where they had picked up the clandestine

transmitter with a cross. He then drew a circle around the region which had to be explored and made a face. About nineteen square miles! He could obviously not expect to locate the set that night. And tomorrow, perhaps the set which was transmitting to the smugglers might be far away.

‘They are still talking,’ said the operator, pointing to the curve which was being traced on the recording drum.

‘Let’s hope that they’ll go on talking for a long time.’ Ippolito leaned forward towards the windscreen as if he wanted to make the van go faster.

‘Get a move on!’ he ordered, through clenched teeth.

The van accelerated and bounced over the ruts.

Domenico had not wasted any time. He had managed to establish contact with Paris, as requested.

‘Hallo, hallo, Paris. Can you hear me?’

23.45 (GMT): In Paris

An enormous room in a flat on the Champs-de-Mars. Through the large bow-window, the Eiffel Tower could be seen and an expanse of grey roofs, beneath which glittered thousands of lights.

A man was sitting in front of his wireless set. He was about forty. His eyes were peculiarly expressionless in his pale, narrow face. He said in a dry voice: ‘Very well. I will try to establish contact with the Pasteur Institute. Where are you speaking from?’

‘From Italy.’

‘What part?’

‘Southern Italy.’

‘What is your code number?’

‘IRP 45.’

D’Angelantonio had thought of a code number at random.

He then switched off so as to avoid any further awkward questions.

Paul Corbier turned towards his wife. His eyes were empty and motionless. He was blind.

‘A funny sort of amateur,’ grunted Corbier, ‘he couldn’t or wouldn’t give me his proper code number.’

Laurette was knitting on a low chair. She was in a dressing-gown; folds of pink nightgown showed below it and above her faded red slippers. In the old days, when she had stayed at home in the evening, she had been in the habit of smearing her face with cream; it was good for her skin. She had given it up because, if one took pride in one’s appearance, it was usually for somebody else’s sake. And as that somebody else was blind, Laurette no longer cared. Why primp yourself up for a husband who could not see you? That was why Laurette now looked somewhat faded, though she was not more than thirty-five.

‘We must get in touch with the Pasteur Institute,’ said the husband, ‘they are asking for a medical opinion.’

Automatically, Laurette had risen to her feet, obliging and indifferent, as always during the last few years.

‘Do you want me to ’phone?’

He put up his hand to interrupt her: ‘Quite useless; they won’t answer.’

A short silence. Laurette had long since learnt to interpret her husband’s thoughts.

Embittered by his misfortune, everything irritated him and whatever he said was in a grumbling tone of voice: ‘I know these doctors. Everyone can croak, as far as they are concerned.’

If the military doctors had operated in time when he had been wounded, they might have been able to save his left eye....

Corbier sighed; he had no luck; he would have to be the one to pick up this particular message, which revived his most unpleasant memories. 'How exasperating he can be,' thought Laurette. 'He spends his days fiddling with this wireless set which he has built for himself; it's all he lives for now and he has often regretted not having been able to take part in one of those enterprises of international inter-aid which are the only justification for the existence of wireless amateurs.' Laurette waited for her husband's reaction. It was not long in coming. Corbier had decided to send Laurette to the Pasteur Institute to try and persuade one of the doctors to come to the flat and speak over his set.

She had gone into the next room.

'Are you dressing?'

There was no need for her to answer. He was so intimately acquainted with all her gestures and all her movements, that he might have been considered capable of seeing them. Ever since he had been blind, his horizon had been confined to Laurette and her life. He cocked his head and listened intently to the rustling of her clothes.

'Are you going to wear your blue dress?'

It was more of a statement than a question.

His sensitive fingers felt the double row of mother-of-pearl buttons on her bodice. The fourth button was loose and needed sewing on. Corbier tugged at it to make sure that it would hold, at least for that night.

Laurette sat down in an armchair and proceeded to pull on her stockings. The lace hem of her slip was frayed at several points.

Corbier explained: 'The quickest way to go to the Pasteur Institute is to take the Boulevard de la Tour Maubourg and then the Invalides . . .

23.50 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

The correspondent in the Belgian Congo had just announced that contact had been established with a French wireless amateur and that he proposed to take the necessary steps to get hold of a doctor at the Pasteur Institute.

‘All the better,’ sighed Olaf.

Olaf uttered this very natural remark in a peculiar tone of voice which annoyed Larsen, who asked: ‘Why do you say: “all the better”?’

‘The men are worried.’

‘It’s no concern of theirs. If there is a sick man on board, it’s entirely my business.’

No answer from Olaf. A female form floated between them. Why had they both thought of Christine at the same time?

This ghostly vision infuriated Larsen. To banish it he said: ‘Next time, I’ll have my contract with the Company revised. They pay too little for the trouble and worries we have.’

‘Just now, they are laying up quite a few boats, you know.’

Olaf’s answer, which sounded sensible, was really motivated by the spirit of contradiction – his reactions were the same as his mother’s – and caused the captain to fly into a rage.

He banged his fist on the table: ‘People have got to eat fish. The Company will always need fishermen. I’m damned sure they won’t leave us in port!’

Olaf did not answer. There was no point in being angry,

and Larsen added, without any apparent connection: 'Have a ration of rum distributed to the men. . .'

'To which of them?'

'Who the hell do you think? The whole crew, of course.'

When Olaf went out of the cabin, he found Michel, the cook, sitting on the floor with the cat in his arms. Before Olaf could ask him, he answered: 'He keeps on getting worse.'

A can of food rolled across the deck and finally stuck between two coils of rope. After following it with their eyes, they raised their heads and Olaf announced: 'A special ration of rum.'

Michel gave a long whistle. Then he put down the cat, which ran towards the can, and followed Olaf down the stairs to the sleeping quarters.

Peter, an old sailor, was sitting on his bunk, hammering some nails into the sole of a boot: 'In all the years I have been at sea, I have never seen a whale caught in this sort of weather.'

The others listened in silence. Most of them were lying down on their bunks, but no one was sleeping. One fisherman was playing patience with a greasy pack of cards, two others were playing crap.

The old man added: 'In this weather, the whale dives down into the depths of the sea. Try and catch him. . . .'

He stopped talking when he saw Olaf.

The young man walked up to the sick man's bunk. Erik's bedclothes were pulled up to his nose. Nothing could be seen of him except his forehead and his eyes glittering with fever.

Olaf gazed at him without speaking: 'He's not groaning anymore?'

'No, not for some time,' answered Edmund, the ship's

boy, who was small for eleven. He was a red-head, with matted, disordered locks, a big flaring nose and enormous nostrils. Large, limpid green eyes contrasted with the ugliness of his face, which was covered in large freckles.

Olaf uncovered the sick man, but pulled the blankets up again almost immediately. The man gave a prolonged groan. A heavy silence settled on the room. The only sounds were the creaking of the deck planks, the whistle of the wind, the breathing of the men and the dice rolling on the floor. Then Michel brought in the rum bottle which tinkled against the glasses which he held in the same hand. As he ducked his head to come in at the door, he called out: ‘Your mugs . . .’

The fishermen held out their mugs; Michel went from one to the other, raising the heavy bottle and pouring the golden-brown liquid. Edmund was entitled to enough rum to cover the bottom of his mug. The cook had found the sick man’s mug, but Olaf put out his hand and prevented him from filling it.

00.10 (GMT): In Paris

At the Pasteur Institute.

The medical officer on duty, Doctor Guy Mercier, was in his office reading a report which he found engrossing. The results arrived at in Canada by specialists in the technique of hibernation were extraordinary. Mercier had always been an advocate of the therapeutic use of low temperatures. He stopped reading for a moment to speculate whether he might be able to persuade Laine to use these new methods for treating a child who had just been admitted to one of his wards. But he knew in advance what his chief would answer. Laine was too much of a conservative. It would be useless even to mention the subject. Mercier returned to his report. He was about

thirty, neither handsome nor ugly; short, with chestnut hair in a crew cut, irregular features, high forehead, he was dressed neatly but obviously cared little about his appearance. His shirt collar was frayed, his jacket was wrinkled and his trousers had not been pressed for some days. Altogether, he would have made an inconspicuous and shabby figure if it had not been for his extremely intelligent expression.

The nurse came in without knocking.

‘It’s that mad radio woman again. She won’t go away. She says that she must speak to you.’

Mercier smiled at the young woman, a brunette whose bulging overall showed that she was not lacking in curves.

He got up and walked to the door. As he passed the nurse, he could not resist the temptation to pinch her bottom. She smiled, came close to him and pushed her body against his, without a word.

‘What is the woman like?’

‘Nothing special.’

She had answered mechanically. But she corrected herself at once and said indignantly: ‘What does it matter to you?’

‘I just asked.’

‘Well, off with you, then. I’ll forgive you this time. But don’t you think it’s going a bit strong to be unfaithful to me in the hospital, under my very nose?’

They both burst out laughing. Mercier put his arm round the young woman’s waist. He tried to kiss her, but she pushed him away and pointed to the open door:

‘Be careful.’

Laurette was waiting outside in the corridor. When she caught sight of the doctor, a smile lit her pale face. She ran towards him. ‘It’s you, Guy?’

He had not recognised her. She refreshed his memory: Juan-les-Pins, the summer of 1942 . . . They had both belonged to the same set of young people. She had been an intimate friend of the doctor's cousins, Jacques and Colette.

It all came back to him, now. He remembered the superb young blonde with whom he had fallen in love and whom all his friends had admired. On one occasion, she had consulted him medically. She had undone her blouse to allow him to examine her. He had been so stirred when he put his ear on Laurette's chest that he had stammered and almost made a mistake in his diagnosis. She was still just as tall and fair and slender, her figure was still perfect, but she had lost all her glamour. He was surprised to find himself comparing her to a tall, faded lily. She smiled at him and he gave an answering smile. But he noticed that her teeth were no longer white, but definitely yellow. He thought, with a twinge of compassion, that she would be an old woman in three or four years. Almost against his will, he found himself asking: 'Laurette, what on earth has happened to you?'

00.15 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

The needle of the detector, pitiless and infallible, led the police van to the village in which Domenico d'Angelantonio lived. It stopped in front of the big concrete building. Ippolito and his men jumped out. They clattered up the stairs. After ringing at the first two doors and questioning the house-porter, they made a bee-line for the 'doctor's' door. The inspector pressed the bell long and hard and Domenico opened the door. He looked very dignified in his long dressing gown. Ippolito pushed him brutally to one side and went in, followed by his men.

As soon as they started asking him questions, d'Angelantonio raised his arms to heaven and indignantly denied everything. A wireless transmitter? What would he do with such a thing? In any case, his means would not permit him to indulge in such luxuries. If he had enough money to buy one, would he be living as he was? The inspector could see for himself how modest the flat was and how dilapidated his few poor sticks of furniture were.

Ippolito interrupted him: 'Don Domenico, you are the only educated person in this village of illiterate peasants. I know everybody here. You are the only man capable of using a wireless set.'

Education, to be sure; the policeman has found the 'doctor's' weak spot. But Domenico was far from being disconcerted. On the contrary, he felt himself on firm ground and appealed to the inspector's sentiments of class solidarity. People of a certain level should be able to understand each other. If those who, like himself, had been to a good school, could not understand him, from whom could he expect any degree of comprehension? Domenico poured out an endless stream of words. It was difficult to stop him. He spoke of his childhood, of his peaceful youth spent in the bosom of an honourable family. Ippolito was beginning to lose all patience. But d'Angelantonio was inexhaustible. He proceeded to describe his studies at the University of Naples, one solitary year of law, after which he assumed the title of doctor, without a shadow of justification; then he unfolded the endless tale of his misfortunes; a war, two wars, the Fascists, the Germans, the Americans. Anyone listening to him would have thought that fate had directed all these blows specifically and solely against his person; a veritable plot. He described his business deals, his innumerable failures, without omitting a single detail; he took some files out of

a drawer and flourished documents as if they were flags.

Ippolito had given up hope of stopping the flow of words and ordered his men to start searching the premises. They had been impatiently waiting for this order and revenged themselves for the long delay by literally sacking the sitting-room which, in a few seconds, was transformed into a battle-ground. They had found nothing. 'What is behind that door?'

At this sacrilegious question, d'Angelantonio raised his arms in a gesture reminiscent of St. Ambrose barring the door to the church which bears his name today and preventing all armed Barbarians from crossing its threshold.

'My daughter's bedroom.'

Neither the gesture nor the tone in which these words were spoken made any impression on Ippolito.

'Tell her to get dressed and come out here.'

'But you cannot make her do that, Inspector, sir. She is an adolescent girl!'

The policeman remained unmoved: 'Tell her to come out, unless you want me to open the door myself.'

He knocked on the door and shouted: 'Police. I give you five minutes to get dressed and come out, miss. After that, we shall go into your room.'

Domenico caught hold of one of the buttons of the inspector's jacket: 'If you have a daughter, I implore you . . .'

'I have no daughter. I am a bachelor.' D'Angelantonio spread his arms out wide: 'Do your duty, do what you have to do. I can but agree. *Dura lex, sed lex.*'

He opened the door himself and switched on the light. Carmela was revealed in bed, admirably playing her part

of a young lady brutally aroused from her dreams: 'Who are these men?'

'Police. I told you so just now. We shall leave you for a second, enough time for you to get out of bed.'

The enormous bed, with its flounce down to the floor, immediately attracted the inspector's attention.

Domenico made one further attempt: 'Sir, I think that I have done everything in my power to fall in with your wishes. But, in this respect, I consider that you are asking for something which is incompatible with the modesty of a young girl and the honour of my family.'

'I said five minutes; we are leaving now.'

For the first time, d'Angelantonio rebelled: 'You can do what you like. Carmela is not going to get up.'

And to his daughter: 'I forbid you to move.'

But Carmela had already abandoned her attitude of modest virgin. She declared: 'If you want me to get up, you will have to use force to drag me out of bed.'

The inspector hesitated. Her obstinacy made him even more suspicious. But a young girl was a young girl, and he was wondering how he could search, the bed without too flagrantly violating the conventions. He made a final appeal to her: 'Will you kindly get out of bed?'

'In front of all these men,' screamed her father, never!

'Well then, as you refuse . . .'

Ippolito signalled to his men. He himself took hold of one corner of the mattress. Four of them lifted it and lowered it to the floor with Carmela still lying on it. As the mattress bumped on the floor, a distinct metallic clatter could be heard, coming from under the sheets. There was no under-mattress. Instead, inside the bedstead itself, the

parts of a wireless appeared, and in the middle, the headpiece with the earphones.

‘It’s all there,’ remarked the inspector, ‘everything except the aerial.’

He looked at Carmela. She hesitated for a moment, then put her arm under the covers and, without speaking, handed the aerial to the policeman. In the process she had raised her body a trifle and her firm breasts were outlined under the tight-fitting nightdress. All the men turned their eyes at the same time in the same direction.

‘Put some clothes on and follow me,’ said Ippolito to d’Angelantonio.

Domenico obeyed in silence. But, before taking off his dressing-gown, he ordered his daughter: ‘Carmela, turn round.’

She shrugged her shoulders and obeyed.

As he pulled on his trousers, the ‘doctor’ made an attempt to exonerate himself: ‘I did have a transmitting set. I admit it. It was my one form of pleasurable distraction to be able to talk with friends dispersed over the four corners of the universe. It consoled me for my lonely state, and with all the misfortunes which have dogged my footsteps. . .’

The inspector cut these protestations short: ‘All right, that’s enough. Hurry up.’

‘I am quite ready to pay my licence fee. I realise that I have broken the law. just tell me the amount of the fine, and I will do my best...’

‘And the smugglers, how much did they pay you to act as a relay for them?’

‘What smugglers?’

Domenico seemed genuinely hurt by Ippolito’s suspicions: ‘I know no smugglers. How can you think such a thing? I am an honourable citizen. I was acting as a relay,

in fact, when you arrived. But do you know who for? For a boat with a desperately sick man on board. A merciful deed, a humanitarian act. I had succeeded in connecting it up with a wireless amateur who has gone to fetch a doctor at the Pasteur Institute.'

'We'll put your name forward for a life-saving medal,' jeered the policeman.

00.17 (GMT): In Paris

On the way to her flat, Laurette told her sad story to Guy Mercier. She had married Paul Corbier in 1943. At that time, he had been a sort of *matinée* idol; all the women were crazy about him; young, handsome, wealthy, brave, with a splendid reputation already behind him as an aviator, big game hunter and tennis champion. In 1944, Corbier, who had distinguished himself in the Resistance movement, volunteered for the Second Armoured Division. Within two months he had already been promoted twice, earned one medal and been mentioned three times. Then there had been a terrible accident; a grenade had exploded in his hands, as he was about to enter a German town. The surgeons had operated hastily and inefficiently. This had been followed by alternating periods of hope and despair. Finally, after a last operation, some of the world's most famous ophthalmologists had been summoned to a consultation, which had resulted in the tragic conclusion that Paul Corbier would always remain completely blind. Laurette had known just one year of happiness. The radiant bride, admired and envied, of one of the most attractive men in Paris, had become nurse to a shattered and humiliated man. Sport, which had been Paul Corbier's great passion, was henceforth out of the question; he had few if any intellectual resources, and he was now helpless,

incapable of coping with pain, solitude and nothing but his own company.

When the doctor came into the drawing-room, Corbier started calling Italy: 'IRP 45 ... IRP 45 . . .'

Why was there no answer from that infernal station?

Corbier was seething with irritation. Mercier was sitting beside him. He was waiting, Laurette had disappeared into her bedroom and had left them alone together.

'Doctor, would you mind looking up that number in the Call Book? IRP 45, under "Italy." '

Mercier found the heavy volume on the shelf beside the set. The Call Book looked very much like a telephone directory. It contained the names of all amateurs registered all over the world.

'I can find no trace of any IRP 45.'

Corbier moved irritably on his chair: 'Have you searched carefully?'

To convince him, the doctor read out the whole list of Italian code numbers; there was a gap between IRP 40 and IRP 62.

'It's not possible.'

The blind man's hands tensed on the switches as he continued to broadcast the call.

'Perhaps it is a new station,' suggested Mercier.

Corbier called: 'Laurette!'

The young woman appeared in the doorway of her bedroom. She had done her hair in a different way, fluffed it out and made herself look younger. She had put on fresh make-up. This attempt, for Guy's sake, to look as she had looked at Cannes in the summer of 1943, was touching, puerile and singularly unsuccessful. Her expression had lost its pristine vivacity, her complexion its bloom. A lily which has started to fade, Mercier repeated to himself. But he noticed again that she had kept her slender figure and

that her long legs were as lovely as ever. She brought in a tray.

‘A brandy, Guy?’

She had pronounced his name softly and caressingly. He raised his head, looked her straight in the eye and smiled: ‘With pleasure.’

And this in spite of the fact that he normally never drank any form of liquor.

She put the tray down on a low table, uncorked the bottle and filled a glass. Guy watched her every movement. She said nothing more, but all her gestures revealed an animation and gaiety which were not lost on the blind man.

Laurette held the glass out to the doctor and said: ‘Have you had any news of Jacques and Colette recently?’

The words were unimportant, but the tone was significant. Corbier interrupted brusquely: ‘Can’t you understand that I am calling a station which will not answer? If you insist on talking, I shall not be able to hear them.’

Laurette apologised humbly: ‘I am very sorry, my dear.’

She was in the wrong and knew it; Guy was also at fault. He turned his eyes away from Laurette, who was sitting, as usual, on the old, low armchair. She had crossed her legs and was showing the lace hem of her slip, but it was not the frayed lace she had been wearing before.

00.20 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

Ippolito came out of the building pushing Domenico in front of him. Attracted by the noise, some neighbours in nightclothes had grouped themselves in the courtyard and on the stairs.

When they caught sight of the doctor, who had buttoned up his long overcoat and was wearing a broad-brimmed hat, both relics of a more prosperous period of his life, there was a murmur of compassion on all sides.

‘Inspector,’ protested Domenico in a solemn voice, ‘I have told you the truth. I was acting as a relay between a boat and the Pasteur Institute. I even gave them a false code number, IRP 45 . . . A number which does not exist. You can easily verify that fact.’

‘That’s quite right,’ interrupted Carmela, who had slipped on a light dressing-gown and had followed her father and the policemen down into the courtyard. ‘IRP 45 is a code number which my father invented, I swear it.’

The little crowd around the police van could not make head or tail of this conversation. But, in any case, it sympathised with the ‘doctor.’ Such a nice man. Always polite. Always affable. And an educated man. What were we coming to? What barbarism, how dare they put a gentleman in prison who was an honour to the village?

Realising that the neighbours were on her side, Carmela Planted herself in front of the van which was going to take her father away.

‘You are not going to take him away,’ she cried. ‘I will not let you.’

A murmur of approval arose from the women in the crowd. The little one is right. What will happen to her if she is left all alone without don Domenico? Those policemen must have stones in place of hearts, to be ready to take a father away from such a young and defenceless girl! Have they no moral sense? Carmela was shouting and stamping her feet and became so heated that she ended up by convincing herself that it was all true.

Soon, everybody in the courtyard, forgetting the stories they had heard about the girl's flirtations and d'Angelantonio's shady transactions, was seething with indignation and preparing to interfere, violently if necessary.

Ippolito had grasped Carmela's arm and was trying to pull her away from the van; she fought, scratched, bit, wept and called for help.

'You're lucky to be under-age,' grunted the inspector, who did not dare to be rough with her. 'But your father will answer for you, I can promise you.'

Domenico watched the scene impassively. Every now and then he nodded his head and raised his eyes to heaven with the air of a martyr.

As he approached the detector van, Ippolito heard something and cried out in a voice of thunder: 'Be quiet, all of you!'

His tone was so imperative that even Carmela stopped struggling.

'Silence!'

Dead silence followed. From the set in the van, Paul Corbier's voice could be heard, calling: 'IRP 45 . . . IRP 45 ... IRP 45 ... Can you hear me?'

Ippolito nodded to the technician, bidding him answer. In a second or two, communication was established: 'Why did you go off the air?' asked Paris.

The inspector answered, good-humouredly: 'Tell us who you are, before you start getting angry with us.'

'I am the amateur you asked to fetch a doctor from the Pasteur Institute. The doctor is sitting beside me now. Can you connect us with the ship?'

'We will try. Keep standing by.'

The inspector gave an order to the policemen who were surrounding Domenico: 'Take him back to his room. Make him reassemble his set.'

The neighbours could not understand the reason for the policemen's sudden change of front, but when they saw 'Doctor' d'Angelantonio taken back upstairs in triumph, they heaved a sigh of relief.

00.25 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

Larsen and Olaf exchanged uneasy glances. Through the open window they could hear the cabin-boy crying. He had been beaten. Fishermen are not exactly angels. On a night like this they become demons.

'Bah,' said the father, 'it won't do him any harm.'

'It will make a man of him,' echoed Olaf.

He had shed floods of tears himself when he had been the cabin-boy. Being the captain's son had not saved him from being knocked about.

Olaf poured himself a generous tot of rum.

'You drink too much,' said Larsen.

The young man did not bother to answer and downed the rum at a single gulp. He took several deep breaths, then propped his elbows on the table, with his two hands clasped under his chin.

The father filled his pipe. He had put his pouch beside him, and was shredding his shag and packing it in, fragment by fragment, with a dirty thumb.

From the radio set, which had been left switched on, came screeching, gurgling and whistling noises, interspersed with sudden bursts of crackling interference.

All of a sudden a voice came through, Lalande's voice. It announced that contact had been established and that a doctor, Doctor Mercier, had been called by an amateur wireless fan in Paris and was ready to give his opinion.

It proved to be a slow and difficult business to link up and carry on a conversation. The boat was in communication with Africa. The Africans transmitted to Naples; from

there the police technician, using d'Angelantonio's set, passed the messages to Corbier. Both questions and answers had to follow this indirect and circuitous route.

'Describe the symptoms of the disease,' ordered Mercier.

'High temperature,' began Larsen.

These words were passed from relay to relay.

'Dribbling at the mouth . . . spots all over his body . . . a swelling on the thigh . . .'

From Paris, Mercier was asking: 'What colour are the spots?'

'Red.'

'Red,' announced Lalande.

'Red,' repeated the police technician.

'Are they painful to the touch?'

'No ... No . . .,' was repeated by the correspondents from one end of the chain to the other.

'Was the onset of the disease sudden?'

'Very sudden; the man fell down on deck.'

'Have you any animal on board?'

'Yes. A cat.'

'Fill a syringe with saliva from the sick man and inoculate it into the cat.'

Larsen and his son understood without any further need for speech. The captain took a syringe out of the medicine chest.

'Boil it,' said the voice coming from the set.

There was a methylated spirit burner in the corner of the cabin. Olaf filled a small saucepan with water and ignited the wick with his lighter. The father dropped the syringe into the water, which soon came to the boil.

To give himself something to do, Olaf went back to the set and announced: 'The water is boiling. In a few moments I will inoculate the saliva into the cat.'

The news was passed from set to set.

In d'Angelantonio's room, Inspector Ippolito had straddled a chair. He could not help casting sheep's eyes from time to time at Carmela. She was at her father's side, near the set. She had crossed her knees and the dressing-gown was gaping and showed her short cotton slip and her tanned and muscular legs; they attracted his attention as if his eyes had been magnetised.

Lalande got up to fetch some water from the refrigerator. The doctor had advised him not to drink iced water, but Lalande's desire for a cold drink filled him with impatience. The short distance to the kitchen seemed to him, in his state of exhaustion, like an interminable journey. The American refrigerator, enormous, white and shining, creaked as he opened the door. He could not wait to fill a glass, but drank from the bottle, greedily.

Doctor Mercier lit a cigarette, mechanically. He had forgotten to offer one to Laurette, in spite of the fact that she filled his thoughts. His memory of her as a young woman at Cannes was coming back to him and was becoming so vivid that he could not understand how he had been able to forget her. In the old days, Laurette's beauty had intimidated him. And now, here she was, sitting opposite him and practically begging for a smile. He lowered his head and saw that the young woman was nervously rubbing one foot against the other; for some unknown reason, he interpreted this as a gesture of appeal. So much so that he was embarrassed and turned towards the husband. He felt that he ought to say something to him, but Corbier's expression was so forbidding that his courage failed him. The blind man's eyes were staring unwinkingly at him and seemed to be watching him.

Olaf's water was boiling. The syringe was ready. He took

it out of the saucepan and held it between two fingers as he left the cabin.

He found the cabin-boy on deck and ordered: 'Bring the cat to the captain's cabin.'

Then he walked down the steps to the men's sleeping quarters. The cat was in Michel's arms. The cook had not been able to go to sleep and had gone up on deck with the cat. The cabin-boy was looking at Michel timorously. The cook had overheard Olaf's order. He had seen the syringe and knew what they proposed to do with it. He remained motionless as the cabin-boy approached him. The boy wanted to express his sympathy but could not find the words. Everybody on board knew how passionately devoted to the animal Michel was. When the cabin-boy had almost reached him, Michel let the cat fall on to the deck and shouted: 'Run, Mustapha, run. . . .'

As if it had understood, the animal scampered away at full speed.

The boy tried to chase it, but fell over. Michel had tripped him up and then proceeded to give him a vicious kick which made him wince with pain. He followed this up with a rain of blows. Edmund simply protected his face with his hands and made no attempt to remonstrate with the cook. Michel was well aware of the fact that it was not the boy's fault, but he had to vent his rage on somebody.

00.30 (GMT): In Paris

Mercier had taken his watch out of his pocket and laid it on the table. His fountain-pen was in his hand: 'Can you give me a sheet of paper?'

Laurette brought him a pad: 'I could help you,' she proposed. 'I know shorthand and often take dictation from my husband.'

‘No, thank you. I had better make my own notes.’

With a great effort, he had managed to answer in a cold and formal tone of voice, but the effect was the reverse of what he had intended. Laurette, far from being discouraged, was delighted at his change of front. It proved to her that Guy was not indifferent. Her unbridled imagination at once set to work building castles in Spain; the doctor had been in love with her ever since their first meeting in Cannes, all those years ago; now, he was going to take advantage of this unexpected opportunity and declare his passion for her, which he had repressed for so long. At this point, she put a stop to her day-dreaming, but her expression, when she looked at Mercier, betrayed her most secret thoughts. The set came alive again.

‘The animal has been injected,’ announced the radio technician.

Mercier answered in a dry, professional voice, assumed more for the benefit of the couple in the room with him than for his distant audience. Laurette realised this and smiled. Her husband groped for a cigarette, which he lit with the table-lighter.

The doctor issued instructions: ‘Tell the captain to watch the cat’s reactions with extreme care and report them to me as they occur. No detail, however slight, should be omitted.’

00.30 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Olaf put the cat down on the floor. Larsen cleaned the syringe.

The animal took a few steps, mewed plaintively and proceeded to hide under the couch.

Some of the fishermen had been watching the scene from the deck and had been peering through the window

curiously. Among them, Olaf recognised old Peter and the cabin-boy. But Michel was not there.

The cat stretched.

Olaf spoke into the microphone: 'It seems to want to go to sleep.'

The message was passed from the boat to Africa and from Africa to Naples. The police radio-operator transmitted it to Paris.

00.35 (GMT): In Paris

The doctor murmured: 'He'll sleep for a long time.'

'Is it serious?' asked Laurette.

There was no reply from the doctor. This time, he made no pretence at indifference. He was obviously worried. He bent forward towards the microphone: 'Will you please see that Captain Larsen has orders to isolate the sick man immediately? The cat's slightest reactions are to be reported to me, as before. I shall be standing by.'

He hesitated, then added, firmly: 'I am relying upon you men who are relaying my messages. I appeal to your sense of duty. Under no circumstances must you take off your earphones. I repeat: under no circumstances. The chain which links me to the boat must not be broken, unless or until regular communications are re-established.'

00.36 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

Inspector Ippolito made a wry face. Here he was, stuck for an indefinite period. He had had his amusing little game. The hunt was over. D'Angelantonio had fallen into his net. Not exactly big game but, if through the 'doctor' he could put his hands on the privateers and capture all the smugglers, he would not, have been wasting his time. He sat back in his chair and yawned. He was bored. How had

he been induced to embark on this life-saving game? Carmela was dozing in her chair. She had thrown a blanket over her knees and covered her legs. Her dressing-gown had slipped down a little in front, but one soon got tired of seeing the same sights. The inspector thought of his bed with nostalgia.

‘Sometimes,’ remarked the operator, optimistically, ‘a magnetic storm suddenly stops after it has passed through the most acute phase.’

‘But more often,’ said d’Angelantonio, ‘it lasts for many hours.’

Ippolito flashed a suspicious glance at the doctor. Could he be pulling his leg? But Carmela’s father’s expression was guileless.

00.37 (GMT): At Tituia

The technician had transmitted the doctor’s orders and Etienne heaved a heart-breaking sigh.

‘I am going to walk back,’ he announced.

But Dorzit, who was lashing himself into a rage in order to keep awake, shouted: ‘You are not going to move from here until we all go! Didn’t you hear the doctor’s orders?’

‘But my wife. . .’

‘She doesn’t need you to push her baby into the world.’

The negro seemed determined to rebel: ‘You have no right to stop me from going. . .’

‘Orders are orders, and you are going to obey them, whether you like it or not. You need not have played with your damned wireless set.’

Van Rielst put in his oar and declared, sententiously: ‘Dirty ape.’

Dorzit, still in the irritable stage of drunkenness, seized Etienne by the shoulders and shook him violently:

‘You black devil! You come and fetch us, you rout us out of our comfortable chairs, you play at being civilised, you have the nerve to pretend to take an interest in ships in distress, and now you want to leave us in the lurch. You’ve got another think coming!’

Tears sprang to Etienne’s eyes. Maria all alone. Maria in pain. Maria moaning, and his child, his little black piccaninny would come into the world without his father being present. What would the heathens say? That Christianity suppresses the most elementary human sentiments. But it was not the fault of Christianity. It was his fault. Pride, pride his besetting sin. He was attempting to do too much, aiming too high. But, what about charity? He had wanted to help his fellow men in distress and he was being punished. . . . All he knew was that he would give anything to have Father Gross, the missionary who brought him up, by his side to guide him.

As if his mute appeal to the late Father had been heard, Lalande promptly interfered on Loiseau’s behalf.

‘Will you stop shouting?’ he admonished Dorzit. ‘I cannot transmit the message.’

And turning to the negro: ‘We will ’phone to the police station at Zobra and ask them to give us the latest news about your wife.’

Etienne smiled. One machine had caused him trouble, another would help him.

He stared at the ’phone on the engineer’s table with an expression of almost worshipful gratitude.

00.40 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Four fishermen carried Erik, the sick man, into a cabin astern, which was more like a closet and which was normally used as a storage room. Erik groaned on his

mattress. As they passed slowly along the deck with their burden, a violent gust of wind lashed them and blew a blanket off the sick man. One of the men picked it up. They lowered the mattress to the floor in the storage cabin and went out.

‘Why are they isolating him?’ asked Frank, the oiler.

‘Captain’s orders,’ answered Olaf laconically.

Frank shrugged his shoulders. That was not what he wanted to know.

‘As for me,’ said old; Peter, always fond of the sound of his own voice, ‘when I was in Alaska, I saw a man who was suffering from a very strange disease. First, he lost an ear.’

The men laughed. The old man was annoyed: ‘Lost it, I tell you; it dropped on the floor. He picked it up. Then, he lost a part of his nose.’

He looked around him, but this time nobody laughed. Peter added: ‘In the end, he literally fell to pieces.’

‘This one is contagious,’ remarked Frank. ‘Conrad, who is his bunk mate, started vomiting just now. That was how Erik started.’

‘They didn’t need to inject Mustapha to find that out,’ said Michel belligerently.

‘If you want to know what I think,’ said a fourth man, ‘all these precautions don’t sound too good to me.’

Peter put in his word: ‘Nobody could fish in this weather. What are we doing here?’

‘Grandpa is right.’

Frank brandished a gnarled fist in the air: ‘It sure is a puzzle; why are we staying here?’

The others chimed in: ‘We’d far better go home.’

‘We’re fed up to the back teeth!’

Frank was more emphatic and determined than any of the

others: 'I shall go and tell Larsen that the crew wants to go back to port. Are you with me?'

That was quite another story. When such a question was put to them crudely, they hesitated to commit themselves. Seamen have a strong sense of discipline.

The only one to answer was Michel, who first spat on the floor: 'I'm with you. As to the fishing, I couldn't care less.'

But the silence of the others was hardly encouraging.

Olaf had gone back to the cabin. He sat down in front of the wireless. His father puffed at his pipe, without speaking. The two men looked at the cat which was asleep, rolled up in a ball at the foot of the couch.

00.45 (GMT): In Paris

Mercier had put a call through to his nurse at the Pasteur Institute: 'Martine, will you please go to the cupboard on the left and take out the serum which is right at the back? ... Please hurry, it is an emergency. No. I said right at the back. That's right. Pack up five or six bottles. Use cardboard and strong paper, as they will be sent a long way. I will call you back later. Thanks. Yes.'

The last 'yes' was in answer to Martine's impertinent question: 'Do you love me?'

He answered coldly, thoroughly annoyed by the irritating futility of the question. Besides, it was not true, he did not love Martine. There had never been any question of love between them, just fun and good comradeship. Why had she asked him tonight, in the middle of a serious message? Jealousy, no doubt. Mercier remembered that he had left the hospital with Laurette without saying good-bye to the nurse, who had certainly expected him to come back.

He hung up, returned to the set and asked Corbier: ‘No message?’

‘Nothing at all.’

The doctor sat down. Laurette looked at him with an expression of encouragement and invitation on her face. Another one who thought of nothing else. All women were the same, even when a whole boat’s crew was in danger of dying, when their lives could only be saved by remote control and he had embarked on one of those extraordinary adventures which brought back his adolescent dreams.

‘What do you think of my Millet, doctor?’ This unexpected question from the blind man took Mercier unawares. He had to make an effort to realise that he was being asked his opinion of a painting on the wall. He answered without thinking: ‘Very fine.’

‘It came from my family. When it came to sharing what my parents had left us, my brothers, my sisters and I all coveted that picture. It reminded us of our childhood, my mother’s drawing-room and a thousand pleasant memories. As we could not agree, we put our names in a hat and drew lots. I won.’

A short silence. Then Corbier continued: ‘I have bought a good many pictures since then. Some of them have considerable value, according to the experts. But I still prefer the Millet to any of the others.’

Mercier’s eyes travelled around the naked walls. He was disconcerted. There were no other paintings apart from the Millet. There were only a number of lighter patches which showed where the canvases must have hung.

Laurette was signalling to him frantically, obviously begging him not to say anything. Then he understood. He remembered hearing a similar story. The case of a blind

man who thought that he owned a number of works of art which his family had been forced to sell.

To break the intolerable silence, he asked Corbier: ‘Would you call the ship to find out if there is any news?’

00.47 (GMT): At Zobra

The sergeant of police had been aroused from sound sleep by the ringing of the telephone. It was some time before he could understand what the engineer at the Tituia mine was talking about. Finally, he looked relieved. It was no emergency, but simply a request for information.

‘No, sir. Loiseau’s wife has not had her baby yet. How do I know? Because I can hear her shrieking from here. No, sir, I don’t think that it will be very soon ... How do I know? Because she is not shrieking loud enough yet. I have had three children of my own. Very well, sir. I will let you know at once.’

00.48 (GMT): At Tituia

Lalande put the receiver back on its hook and smiled. Loiseau too gave a broad smile and showed all his white teeth. Dorzit smiled in his turn. Even Val Rielst smiled and showed his teeth, which were stained yellow by tobacco.

A voice came through on the set. It was the Italian police operator: ‘Re-establish contact with the *Maria Sorensen*.’

00.50 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

The cat was awake. It stretched itself slowly. Then it rubbed itself against the bottom of the couch.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ cried Larsen.

The man who appeared in the doorway was tall and pale, with light and somewhat protuberant eyes. As soon as they saw him, the captain and Olaf knew at once what to expect. Conrad had caught the disease. There were still traces of recent vomiting on his clothes.

‘Undo your trousers.’

The sick man displayed a swollen belly covered with spots. There was also the characteristic swelling on his thigh.

‘Sit down.’

The man obeyed. He seemed to be even paler than when he had first come in. His eyes were expressionless. The dirty towel which he had tied round his head came undone and dropped. He did not seem to notice.

‘Are the spots painful?’

The captain touched them. He pressed hard with his finger, and the man showed no reaction.

‘Obviously not.’

‘I’m thirsty,’ said Conrad.

Olaf picked up a jug and went to fill it from a tap on deck. The fishermen watched him in silence.

Olaf ordered: ‘Bring a second mattress into the little cabin.’

Back in the captain’s cabin, he went up to Conrad and, carefully avoiding coming into contact with him, poured some water down his parched throat. Conrad gave a deep sigh and got up.

‘Can you walk as far as the storage cabin?’ Conrad turned towards the captain. For the first time, his expression became animated. It reflected abject terror, like a panic-stricken animal. Larsen turned his head away: ‘I am afraid that I shall have to isolate you. I have strict orders.’

The fact that he had found it necessary to give the man an explanation showed that he was deeply disturbed in mind.

And what a poor excuse! Larsen invoking orders and regulations! It was quite unprecedented.

But the captain had already pulled himself together:

‘Get along, be off with you . .

The man staggered as he walked away. On deck, the fishermen edged away from him and watched him as far as the door of the little cabin.

In the meanwhile, Olaf was at the microphone, asking anxiously: ‘What do you call the disease they are suffering from?’

The doctor’s answer was transmitted from relay to relay: ‘I cannot make an exact diagnosis until I know the final results of your experiment on the cat.’

The animal started to prowls around the cabin.

00.55 (GMT): In Naples

They were so bored that, to pass the time, the inspector, d’Angelantonio and two policemen were playing a game of cards.

‘I wonder what the disease is,’ said Domenico pensively.

‘In any case,’ said the radio-operator, ‘I’d rather be in our skins than theirs.’

‘Are we playing or are we chattering?’ asked the inspector venomously.

For some time there was no sound except that of the cards being slapped down on the table and the players’ brief bids.

Carmela came in from the kitchen with a tray. She was well aware of her duties as a hostess and had made coffee for everybody.

‘Will you have a cup, Inspector?’

Ippolito stared at her. Her expression was candour and innocence itself. He would have liked to dash the coffee in her face. But he knew that he would be merely making a

fool of himself. He accepted the cup with a grunt which might have been taken for a thank you. But he swore to himself that he would take the first opportunity of paying her back in her own coin. He was quite sure of himself. He had known too many girls of her type. They all finished up the same way.

For the moment Carmela did not seem to be worrying about her future. She stepped over to her father and, as she leaned over him, displayed enough curves to make the policeman squint.

Suddenly, Lalande's voice could be heard: 'The boat announces that the cat is showing signs of nervous excitement.'

The operator switched over to transmission and spoke: 'We have heard your message.'

Then he called out: 'Hallo, Paris ... Hallo, Paris . . . Can you hear me? I am switching over to reception.'

Corbier answered: 'Message received. I am switching over to reception.'

'The boat reports that the cat is showing signs of nervous excitement.'

01.00 (GMT): In Paris

Dr. Mercier was scribbling a note.

Laurette was reading it over his shoulder. He turned around suddenly, and Laurette blushed, as if she had been surprised in an immodest or indecent position and had betrayed herself; she felt that the doctor had understood that, in leaning over him, she had given way to an irresistible impulse to be near him physically and to touch him.

'Is it serious?' she asked to cover her embarrassment.

No reply. She had deluded herself. She alone had been conscious of her own acts. Guy had not even glanced at

her, or heard what she had been saying; he was completely immersed in the difficult task of attempting to make the right diagnosis. For an instant Laurette cursed these unknown people who were taking Guy's attention away from her and, in spite of everything, she could not help admiring him when he took up the microphone and ordered the relays to transmit the detailed questions which he had been jotting down on the pad.

01.05 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

On deck, the fishermen, their noses glued to the window of the captain's cabin, were fascinated by the cat's evolutions. The animal was turning around on itself, like a top. Slowly at first and then more and more rapidly. Its hairs, shining with sweat, stood up straight and its eyes were phosphorescent. Larsen became increasingly worried. He was convinced that he was living through the worst moments of his life as a sailor. It was all incredibly difficult; he was far away from his home port, isolated by the magnetic storm, and he felt completely powerless to cope with this strange disease.

He knew his men and realised that they were seething with discontent, which might well break out into open rebellion. They were frightened, and it was no use trying to reason with a panic-stricken mob. For the moment they were restrained by discipline. But it would take very little to break down that last barrier. What could he do?

The cat was gyrating madly. It was undoubtedly delirious. Olaf caught Michel's eye. He glared at Olaf with such venomous hatred that a cold shiver ran down his back. The man was capable of murder. What an old fool Michel was! ... He had married late in life. His wife was very ugly but very young and soon made him the laughing-stock of his village. Michel, who had been working in a canning

factory, had gone back to sea, to escape from her. But he sent his pay to her regularly. On board, he was respected. He knew his job as a fisherman. He had never been known to pick a quarrel. The cat had been his inseparable companion. Who could have suspected that he was so deeply attached to it? Animals were animals, and men, men. But Michel was fonder of the cat than of his wife; very natural, after all. He was fonder of the cat than anyone in the world. And Olaf realised that he was the target for the cook's rage and grief. It was not fair. But there again, he could not blame Michel. It was Olaf who had given the order to take the cat away from him. The animal was now frenziedly jumping on and off the furniture and hurling itself from one end of the cabin to the other.

The brief details reported by Olaf passed along the wireless chain, from mouth to mouth, until they reached the doctor.

The cat, in the end, collapsed at the foot of the couch. 'It looks exhausted,' reported Larsen.

01.10 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

They had finished their game. The cards were like many-coloured stains on the table. The empty coffee cups were scattered all over the room. One of them was smeared with Carmela's lipstick. The young woman was still in her dressing-gown, but she had touched up her face. She paid little attention to what came over the wireless. Very soon, Gennaro would be there. What would happen? Carmela was not afraid of her father, but she had a healthy respect for Gennaro's temper. He would probably feel that he had been decoyed into a trap when he found himself surrounded by policemen. She realised that she had no real hold on the

young man; he was too handsome, too sure of himself. She knew that he could have his pick of any of the local girls. Giving herself to him had been an attempt to bind him to her permanently. Instead of which, she found that he had acquired fresh authority over her and she was more closely bound up with him than ever. However, Gennaro was a man of honour and he would keep his word. Gennaro was now sure that she would not give him up, whatever he did, and took every advantage of that fact. He would marry her, some day, when it suited his purpose, but all her life she would be his slave. He would have complete freedom, but she would have to remain completely faithful. Carmela was resigned to her fate. Women expected men to be unfaithful to them. Nevertheless ... there were five men in the room and everyone of them without exception, sometime during the evening, had shown that he actively desired her. Carmela was no innocent virgin, she understood only too well what thoughts simmered in the inspector's mind behind that sulky expression and that surly manner. She was used to being admired and courted and it often amused her to make men run after her. What did it matter? She belonged to Gennaro.

The police technician was transmitting another report: 'The cat is becoming more and more frantic.'

Domenico gave a shiver of distaste: 'I can't bear the idea of torturing animals.'

Ippolito grinned ironically. But Domenico was impervious to sarcasm or humour. He had always taken everything too seriously, all his life, hence his inability to face facts; reality eluded him while he chased figments of his imagination.

01.12 (GMT): In Paris

Mercier had covered the top sheet of the pad in front of him with notes. He was tense, over-conscious of the importance of not making a mistaken diagnosis, but in spite of that fact, he could not help being disturbed by Laurette's agitation, her obvious infatuation. She no longer made any attempt to conceal her feelings. She was waiting for some gesture from the doctor with such impatience that a wave of heat rose to Guy's face. At the same moment, Laurette's cheeks became flushed, as if, already, their bodies were acting in harmony.

Corbier was moving about restlessly on his chair. A sigh escaped from his lips. It was a sound so soft as to be barely perceptible, but it served as a brutal reminder to Mercier of the realities of the situation. He shivered, and his annoyance was transformed into rage. He felt that he loathed this woman, who, ever since they had met again at the hospital, had done nothing but try to arouse his passions, and that in the presence of her husband. He was even more incensed when he remembered that he had been within an ace of allowing himself to be carried away. He now told himself that Laurette had completely lost her former beauty, that she was faded and rapidly ageing. He even went so far as to imagine what she looked like undressed, that her thin body had become haggard, the skin wrinkled, the muscles relaxed and the flesh soft, without resilience. But he could not quite convince himself that such a discouraging picture was a true likeness, and tried to persuade himself that she threw herself at any man's head

who showed the slightest interest in her and that her behaviour proved that she was promiscuous.

The silence became oppressive. Mercier felt that he must say something unpleasant to her, to make it quite clear that he had no intention of becoming her accomplice.

‘A glass of water, please.’

The request was barely polite. He had used the tone he was in the habit of assuming when speaking to the nurses at the hospital, even to Martine.

Laurette promptly rose to her feet. He was already regretting that he had given the young woman an opportunity of doing something for him. She had responded with suspicious alacrity and was full of zeal on his behalf: ‘Are you sure you would not prefer wine or brandy?’

Delighted at being given a pretext for being rude to her, he answered brutally: ‘I asked for water.’

This time he managed to be as dry and cutting as he could wish. She could not possibly have misunderstood. He was now behaving towards Laurette as if she were an enemy. She could not misinterpret his present attitude. He looked her straight in the face with a grim and hostile expression, to make doubly sure. But she still seemed unable to grasp the fact that his attitude had changed. Or perhaps she did not want to understand. She gave him a shy, almost tender smile and then went out of the room. In a sudden illuminating flash, Mercier realised that, in his outburst of rage, he had been unjust to Laurette; she was simply inexperienced. She had never been unfaithful to her husband. She was, of course, ripe for experience, the doctor had been right on that point, but she was not conscious of her own impulses. For the moment, all she felt was that she liked being near Guy, he soothed her and made her feel

affectionate. She admired him and enjoyed obeying his orders. She knew that Corbier was fully aware of what was going on, but felt no remorse, as she had done nothing to be ashamed of.

Fortunately the wireless interrupted their speculations.

01.13 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

The cat, after lying stretched out and motionless for some time, was now padding round the room, rubbing against the walls. It was no longer running. It seemed to have difficulty in propelling itself forward. Its movements became slower and slower. From time to time, it stopped and shook with a convulsive tremor. Then it set off again.

‘It is obviously getting weaker,’ announced Olaf into the microphone.

The news was transmitted from relay to relay. When it reached Dr. Mercier, the fishermen on the boat were watching the unfortunate animal zigzagging across the room, colliding with the furniture, as if it were drunk. Michel had torn a splinter of wood from the window frame with his dirt-encrusted nail. He was chewing it nervously. Edmund was sitting on the deck. He had averted his head, he could not bear to watch the animal’s agonised contortions. The cabin-boy knew that the men would jeer at him for his hypersensitiveness and that their mockery would be followed by blows, because these simple folk had no other way of expressing their sense of humour. But he preferred being beaten to the horrible spectacle of the wretched little animal’s death-struggles.

Behind the window panes the fishermen’s faces were expressionless. They were standing quite still, as if petrified; a leaden silence had fallen on the cabin.

The cat staggered, fell and managed to get up again. It took a few steps and then collapsed on the floor. It kicked out desperately, waving its four legs wildly in the air. After a last violent convulsion, its body went limp. Larsen walked up to it and touched it. The cat was dead.

The news was relayed from set to set. After a long silence, Lalande called: ‘Captain Larsen, Dr. Mercier requests you to clear everybody out of your cabin. He wants to give you a private message.’

The fishermen walked away. Olaf shut the portholes.

‘I am ready,’ said the captain. ‘I am alone with my son. I am switching over to reception.’

The answers still lagged far behind the questions. This time, the delay seemed intolerable to the two men. Finally, Lalande’s voice came through again: ‘The doctor wants to tell you that you have a case of a dangerous infectious disease on board. That you must take immediate, drastic steps to avoid contagion; not only you and your crew are in great danger but you will also endanger the lives of others who may come in contact with your ship later . . .’

01.16 (GMT): In Naples

‘Why won’t he give a name to the disease?’ asked Domenico, speaking for all of them.

‘To avoid frightening them,’ suggested the technician.

‘It’s obviously very serious,’ remarked Ippolito.

‘He was clear about that.’

They were all talking at once.

‘Perhaps the doctor is not sure of the diagnosis,’ hazarded Carmela.

‘It’s much more likely to be the plague.’

D'Angelantonio was responsible for this idea. And they all rallied to it at once.

‘An infectious disease.. .’

‘Which might endanger the whole crew and also those who might come in contact with the boat later.’

‘The plague or cholera.’

Camela crossed herself. One after another, all the men followed her example.

01.18 (GMT): At Tituia

The men who, out there in the Congo, formed another link in the chain were equally horrified by the news.

Dorzit, Van Rielst and Etienne, who even stopped thinking about his wife for an instant, were listening attentively to Lalande, who continued transmitting the terrible message: ‘You must not give way to panic. We are sending you, as quickly as is humanly possible, a serum which will allow you to check the progress of the disease. In the meanwhile, you must carry out scrupulously the following instructions ... Take a piece of paper and write them down. Do you hear, Captain Larsen? I am switching over to reception.’

Lalande turned the knob and Larsen’s voice came over: ‘Message received. But I would like the doctor to tell me the name of the disease which my men are suffering from. I am switching over to reception.’

Lalande answered: ‘The doctor says that the name of the disease has no importance. Please take a pencil and write.’

01.20 (GMT): In Paris

Mercier rose to his feet.

‘Please go on listening, Mr. Corbier. I am going to see to the serum.’

‘What is your plan, doctor?’

The blind man had not opened his mouth for some considerable time. Mercier was glad that he had asked this question. It gave him the feeling that they could agree, as men, on a plan, for a common purpose, quite apart from any misunderstanding about Laurette. He was delighted to make common cause with Corbier and hastened to answer: ‘I propose to establish contact with the hospital at Oslo, which is the port nearest to the boat. They must have ambulance planes for emergency cases; if not, they can appeal to the army. I will send them the serum.’

‘Are you sure that they have no serum themselves?’

‘Certain. I will make sure, but I should be very surprised to find that they have a substance which even the Pasteur Institute only makes in very small quantities, and which is used solely for the treatment of a tropical disease practically unknown in Europe, especially in the countries of the North.’

‘How, then, can you explain the disease breaking out on the ship?’

The question had been asked by Laurette. Mercier could not help showing that he was a little annoyed by it. In fact, he turned towards Corbier as he answered:

‘The first man to be affected, who carried the germs, came on board at Antwerp. He had just come from the Dutch East Indies.’

‘How long is the period of incubation?’

‘Rather short. Which makes me think that the man was infected just before his departure, probably in the port of Antwerp, by somebody on board the boat which had brought him to Antwerp.’

‘And he must have infected the others?’

‘As soon as he boarded the *Maria Sorensen*.’

‘All the others?’

‘It’s extremely probable.’

‘In your opinion, then, the whole crew will eventually show symptoms of the disease?’

‘Sooner or later, yes. The duration of the incubation period will vary according to the powers of resistance of the individual. That is why we must not lose a moment.’

The doctor, who was already sorry that he had listened so patiently, hurried towards the door, but Corbier called him back: ‘When does the next plane for Oslo leave?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘Laurette.’

Laurette had already understood and unhooked the receiver. In a few moments she was speaking to Orly airport. The information was disconcerting. The first Plane from Paris to Copenhagen and Stockholm would leave the next day at 9.50 and reach Oslo the same evening.

‘What do you propose to do?’

Mercier shrugged his shoulders. What right had Corbier to interfere? A few minutes ago he had felt in complete sympathy with the blind man; now he was beginning to find him a nuisance. The doctor in him was gaining the upper hand, the doctor who was not used to having a layman dictating his conduct.

‘What do you expect me to do? I shall put the serum on the morning plane, as there is no other.’

‘Wait a minute.’

Mercier mechanically looked at his watch. It was not a sign of impatience . . . There was no need to hurry, as the plane did not leave before the next morning. The blind man had asked Laurette to put another call through to Orly. She handed him the phone.

‘Would you kindly tell me what planes are leaving Orly

from now onwards and where they are going to?’

He listened for a while and then interrupted the employee: ‘Two-twenty? Thank you.’

He put the receiver back on its hook: ‘There is a plane which leaves for Berlin at two-twenty.’

Mercier was surprised and did not seem to understand, so Corbier elaborated: ‘Don’t you understand? Berlin is half-way to Oslo, perhaps a little more. In particularly urgent emergency cases, radio amateurs are in the habit of sending medicines by the first available plane which can transport them part of the way, the first stage of the journey. While the packet is on its way, contact is established with a correspondent at the town to which the packet is travelling. The correspondent takes charge of it when it arrives and sees to it that it is sent off as quickly as possible on the next stage of its journey. On arrival, another amateur, in his turn, takes delivery of the packet and sends it on. In this way, from stage to stage, from radio amateur to radio amateur, it is often possible to save several hours as compared with the official time-tables.’

The doctor was enthralled by this account of a procedure which he knew nothing about: ‘Do you think that we can use this procedure?’

It was an absurd question and justified the bluntness of the reply: ‘What have we been doing up to now?’

‘You are quite right; I apologise.’

It was now the blind man who took charge of the operations: ‘You must get a taxi. Go to the Pasteur Institute and fetch the serum, then drive to Orly and put it on the plane for Berlin.’

‘Will they take it?’

‘Ask any passenger who seems likely to be co-operative to smuggle it through for you. That is the best method. Failing that, give it to a member of the air crew. Ask him to

do it as a personal favour.’

Mercier was perplexed by these irregular and devious methods: ‘Don’t you think that if I introduced myself as a doctor attached to the Pasteur Institute and explained the circumstances, I would be able to send the serum by the official route?’

‘If you are anxious to nullify all our efforts so far, that would be the best way. Besides, I doubt whether you would have any success at all. It’s not your job. You had better hand over the serum to us, we will see that it gets there.’

Mercier forgot all about the previous cordiality of their relationship and their common aims. He was not going to take instructions from Corbier. So he replied firmly: ‘I do not propose to hand the serum over to any third person. I shall send it the only way I consider practical and certain. The morning plane.’

Corbier went livid with fury: ‘You refuse to entrust the serum to the radio amateurs?’

‘I refuse to risk a good many lives by handing it over to private people whose good will I do not question, but of whose efficiency I am not convinced.’

‘Do as you wish. Send your official packet by the official channels. But you cannot refuse to sell us some serum which we can send by whatever channels we please.’

The doctor had not foreseen this suggestion. He remarked: ‘You would have to have a medical certificate...’

‘Don’t worry. We will find a doctor to sign one for us. Laurette, call up Castel at the Hôtel-Dieu. . .

Laurette, for the first time, hesitated.

Mercier surrendered: ‘No need to phone, madame. I will give you the serum myself.’

Neither man could possibly have foreseen that their

quarrel would be instrumental in fulfilling Laurette's dearest wish: to be alone with Mercier for a long time.

'I am coming with you, doctor.'

Laurette went to fetch her coat, and the doctor and Corbier were left alone together. They had nothing further to say to each other. The blind man had not recovered his equanimity. Certainly, he had been the victor and had imposed his will on the other man. But when he thought of his wife going off with this Guy Mercier to whom she had been making advances the whole evening, he felt panic-stricken. What if Laurette left him! This was the first time, since his misfortune, that the idea had come into his mind. It had never occurred to him that his wife might leave him one day and that he would be left alone. Whilst Mercier and Laurette had been swapping memories about Cannes, he had had to exercise every ounce of self-control he possessed not to interrupt them and throw the doctor out.

That was why, later on, he had been so aggressive. But now, anger and impatience were replaced by a sensation of almost despairing confusion. He felt lost and bewildered. This man, who had shown so much courage throughout his life, now felt the icy breath of fear. Unreasoning, absurd, abject fear, like a wind of panic sweeping through him, which paralysed him and made him feel incapable of facing the situation with his usual energy and fortitude. At any other time, he would not have hesitated to exert his authority and to forbid his wife to accompany the doctor. But his courage failed him. He said nothing.

Laurette, wrapped up in her fur coat, gloved, wearing a little hat which she had not put on for ages, appeared in the doorway and announced gaily: 'Here I am.'

Mercier hesitated.

‘Hurry up, be off with you,’ said Corbier impatiently, ‘or you will be too late.’

No further words were exchanged. The blind man had not even acknowledged Mercier’s words of leave-taking.

They walked down the stairs side by side.

‘Are you surprised by my fur coat?’ asked Laurette with a smile. ‘It is about the only remaining relic of our old life of luxury. I do my best to prevent Paul from realising that there is no more money. He has enough to bear as it is. It would serve no good purpose for him to be told that, since the war, I have had to sell, piece by piece, everything of any value in the flat.’

Mercier was dumbfounded. When was she sincere? She seemed to have a genuine affection for her husband. Nevertheless, as they went out of the room, she had flashed him a triumphant glance which could only have one meaning. He had weighed every possibility and found it wanting, except the obvious one: Laurette was, in fact, perfectly innocent. What would happen now? He felt that the situation was completely beyond him. Almost against his will, he found himself feeling annoyed with her. Why had she introduced him to her husband? What an idea, to bring a probable lover into her home, face to face with her husband – a blind husband at that! Men have far more innate modesty, which women are incapable of understanding. Mercier, of course, quite unwillingly, was being very unfair to Laurette. He was blind to the facts: that there had been no premeditation on her part, that she had been the victim of circumstances. If Guy himself had been acting in good faith, he might have been able to recognise these simple truths, but that was not the case.

01.30 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Larsen was striding up and down the cabin: ‘I would have turned the ship about a long time ago if I had thought that it would help. But we are too far from the nearest port. We shall have to wait. That is all we can do.’

Olaf was sitting in front of the wireless and gazed at his father open-mouthed. He had never known him talk so much. The old man evidently felt the need to unburden himself.

Olaf was impressed by the cruel lucidity of his own powers of observation and asked: ‘Wait for what?’

‘Wait for their damned serum.’

‘But will it get here in time?’

‘If it doesn’t, we shall all die.’

Olaf absent-mindedly twiddled the knobs of his set. His father went on pacing the cabin. Suddenly, Larsen stood still, both hands in his pockets: ‘What are the men saying?’

‘They suspect that it is very serious.’

The captain shrugged his shoulders: ‘That’s of no importance. What I am anxious to avoid is that a certain word should get around the ship.’

‘A name ... of a disease?’

‘Yes.’

‘Because you think that...?’

‘I don’t know any more than you do.’

The young man relapsed into silence. His light eyes were staring straight ahead, without seeing anything. For an instant, he looked at the wall but seemed to be searching for something else. He rocked his head from side to side.

This rhythmical movement exasperated Larsen. The square head with its wiry hair went from right to left, left to right, just like the pendulum of a clock. He would have liked to take hold of his hair and pull with all his might, to force Olaf to protest, to cry out with pain, anything to prove to him that his son was near him and not miles away.

‘What’s the matter, are you dreaming?’

This time, he had touched Olaf on the raw. He lowered his head, as if about to charge. He felt quite capable of holding his own and no longer feared his father’s angry reaction: ‘I want to marry Christine.’

Larsen’s face showed surprise rather than anger. A stranger had come from a very far place, a young woman with hair like tow, done up in a tight little bun, a pale girl dressed in black, and suddenly seemed to be standing between them. The captain could not yet understand how or why.

‘Is that what you were thinking about just now?’

‘Not only just now, but all the time. I know that you are against it. But I have made up my mind. When we get back, I shall get married. And if that means that I shall have to give up sailing on this ship, you’ve only to say so; I’ll find a job somewhere.’

This explosion of feelings which had been long repressed, seemed to Larsen, under the present circumstances, incredibly absurd. Of course, there could be no question of allowing the boy to ruin his life by marrying this insignificant creature. He remembered that his wife had, on several occasions, spoken to him about Christine. But he thought that he had answered in such a way as to discourage the very idea. What was the use of discussing it now? Everything in good time. The only urgent problem, which had to be tackled first, was to find out whether they

would be able to get back to port at all. For the moment, that was all that mattered.

Olaf misunderstood his father's silence. He knew how quickly, as a rule, Larsen lost his temper, and he was astonished at this unusual silence. Was his father less hostile to Olaf's plans than he had thought?

'For the moment, the question is not a practical one,' said Larsen in the end.

'Yes it is. Christine is pregnant.'

'Idiot!'

The captain glared at his son. He did not get on with Olaf very well, but he was his son, after all. He had planned a very different future for him. Must a man work hard all his life, make sacrifices and plans for his family and have them all destroyed in a day by the stupid whim of a callow youth? Was his own child going to wreck his life, and must he stand by and do nothing to stop it? Christine was pregnant. The irony of fate! Larsen had always been glad not to have a daughter, precisely because he had always feared such predicaments. And now, it was Olaf who was obliging him to face a situation to which he had considered himself immune. Christine was pregnant; so much the worse for her, that was her affair. This thought passed out of his mind in a second, as quickly as his rage. He knew that such an attitude would be unworthy of him, and that, furthermore, he would never tolerate it in his son. He felt all the more incensed with his future daughter-in-law, that gawky hop-pole, insipid and badly washed, who had laid such an astute trap for his son. But that was to be expected from a woman; they were all born like that. They had no need of lessons. What on earth could Olaf see in her? His taste had always been bad, and none but insignificant girls ever attracted him. He had been so busy playing the young

cockerel, feeling so proud of his conquest, the little fool, that he had not even realised that it was Christine who had been leading him by the nose. Larsen also remembered that his wife had told him that Olaf was very jealous. Could anyone be more blind? What was he afraid of? Would anyone want to steal his precious treasure? Christine would never have found another man. All that was beside the point; the fact was there, irreparable. Christine was pregnant. Olaf would have to marry her. Olaf got up, went over to the porthole, opened it and leaned out.

‘What are you doing?’

There was no reply from Olaf, and his father, suddenly uneasy about him, came and looked over his shoulder. Olaf was vomiting.

Larsen clenched his teeth to prevent himself from giving vent to his feelings by a howl of anguish.

01.35 (GMT): In Paris

The taxi stopped in the Rue Vaugirard in front of the door of the Pasteur Institute. Mercier jumped out.

‘Wait for me,’ he said to Laurette.

Inside, in the darkness, she smiled at him.

As Mercier climbed the stairs and hurried through the corridors, he reflected that Laurette’s attitude since they had been alone together was much more reserved than he had expected. He had to admit, making a valiant attempt to be honest with himself, that he was rather disappointed. What did you expect, half-wit? That she would throw her arms around your neck? No, he was not vain or stupid enough for that, but, in view of her attitude throughout his visit to the flat and the smile of triumph she had given him at the last moment, he had been confident that she

would encourage him to take the first step as soon as they were in the taxi. But nothing of the sort. Laurette had withdrawn into her corner and was obviously on the defensive. Mercier had still not grasped the fact that her apparent encouragement had been due to innocence; it was only when she found herself alone with him in the taxi that she became conscious of the suggestive element in the situation; it flustered her a trifle, but even then she was not so much apprehensive as unsure of herself.

Martine recognised her lover's footsteps and opened the laboratory door.

She was short and somewhat heavy as compared with Laurette, who was exceptionally slender and willowy. Mercier had already forgotten that only a short while ago he had been thinking of Corbier's wife as faded and ageing. As he went in, Martine gave him a beaming smile which showed her slightly irregular teeth. The hospital was well heated; she was almost naked under her white overall; the doctor knew it. Almost absentmindedly he put his hand down the front of her overall and caressed her swelling breasts. Martine responded by moving nearer to him, but almost immediately stepped away from him.

She frowned anxiously: 'Is this what you wanted?'

She pointed to a packet on the table. Mercier carefully examined the packing and gave a nod of approval: 'How many ampoules of serum did you put in?'

'Six, as you told me to over the phone.'

'Good.'

The doctor picked up the packet and was about to leave.

'You might at least tell me who it is for. Or is that asking too much?'

'It's for a ship.'

He spoke in a clipped and professional tone of voice, as

he had to Laurette two hours before. Once again, it was a defensive reflex, as Martine was well aware.

‘When will you be back?’

‘I have no idea. You can go home.’

‘I prefer to wait here.’

‘I doubt if I shall come back tonight. I have to sit in front of a wireless set and listen in.’

‘With your little holiday pal?’

Mercier, who had a guilty conscience, answered irritably: ‘With my holiday pal, as you call her, and her husband. It really is extraordinary how you women can think about nothing else!’

Martine shrugged her shoulders. She knew the doctor too well to be taken in by his display of indignation.

‘You are quite free to sleep with her if you want to. You ought to know by now that jealousy is not one of my faults.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, Please.’

As he walked down the corridor, she called after him: ‘I advise you not to take her scarf off, the one she wears around her neck. Not unless you are particularly fond of wrinkles.’

Mercier hurried down the stairs in dignified silence. The taxi was still outside the door and he jumped in.

‘Are you coming to Orly with me?’ Laurette seemed genuinely surprised.

‘When I start something, I am in the habit of finishing it.’

As he spoke, it occurred to him that this statement might be interpreted in one of two ways. He had not meant it, but he now hoped that she would take it for granted that he was being the bold lover. This proved, in fact, to be how she did take it. She did not answer, but gave a satisfied smile. She was still frightened, but her sentiments were changing with disconcerting rapidity. Fear had become transformed

into a sensation of pleasurable anticipation, an almost morbid submissiveness. She deluded herself that she was preparing to repulse an attack, whereas, in reality, she was longing to be attacked. She hoped that he would make violent love to her, she felt her whole body calling to the man sitting at her side. Nevertheless, on the surface, she appeared to be anxious to continue the conversation about trivialities. Mercier had no suspicion of the storm which was raging in her heart and in her senses. He was perplexed; she pulled down her skirt to cover her legs, mechanically, and he remembered that, at her flat, she had seemed to flaunt the lace hem of her slip. He made no further attempt to understand what was happening. It was beyond all reason. His intelligence had failed him, but his intuition stepped into the breach. His senses responded to hers. He felt his blood rushing to his head. But even then, he was too timid to risk the gesture which might have made Laurette throw herself into his arms. He controlled himself, with a great effort, and made a great show of indifference. The same difficult, thrilling and dangerous game that Laurette was playing.

They arrived at Orly a few minutes before the Berlin plane was due to take off.

The passengers were all in the waiting-room. It was impossible to communicate with them. They had already been through the Customs. Mercier and Laurette went in search of the office used by the pilots and other flying staff. An employee stopped them. A special permit was needed to get into that part of the airport.

‘Please ask one of the members of the aircrew to come,’ insisted Mercier

‘Do you know them?’

The employee gave him a glance of suspicion.

‘Tell them that I am a doctor on the staff of the Pasteur Institute and that I want to talk to them.’ The man turned this suggestion over in his mind for several seconds – so many precious seconds wasted. Then he shook his head.

‘I am not allowed to leave my post.’

‘Well, then, let me in,’ cried the doctor impatiently.

‘Impossible. You will have to go upstairs and get a permit from the Director.’

‘But that is out of the question! The plane will have left by the time I come down again.’

The employee raised his arms in a gesture which disclaimed any responsibility: ‘What do you expect me to do about it? You should have left yourself more time.’

Mercier clenched his fists. Was he going to allow his precious packet to be left behind because this idiot was a stickler for the regulations?

He made no attempt to argue with the man. Perhaps the Director would be more co-operative. In any case, that was the only hope.

He gave the ampoules to Laurette: ‘Hold the packet and wait for me.’

And he ran towards the stairs.

Through the gate, Laurette saw the crew of the plane walking towards the flying-ground. In a few seconds it would be too late. She became frantic at the idea that the serum might be left behind. She called out to the men. The assistant pilot heard her. He turned round. She beckoned to him. He walked back to the gate. He listened, half in amusement, half in astonishment, to her hasty explanation. She was so agitated that it was almost unintelligible. The pilot had carried medicines on various

occasions in the past, but they had reached him through the usual channels.

‘Who will come and fetch the serum at the Berlin airport?’

‘A radio amateur.’

‘His name?’

‘I don’t know yet, but you can be sure that somebody will be there.’

‘How will I know him?’

‘He will introduce himself.’

‘Tell him to ask for Gilbert Sirnet.’

The pilot ran off to join his colleagues.

‘You even have blondes chasing you at the airport,’ said Carmont, the first pilot, with a laugh.

Sirnet showed his friend the packet and explained the circumstances.

‘Do you think there is any chance of my having trouble with the Customs?’

‘In theory, we are not allowed to carry goods.’

‘But it is a question of urgent medicine.’

‘Are you sure? Have you opened the packet?’

Sirnet hesitated, then he shrugged his shoulders: ‘I trusted her.’

Carmont smiled. He was twenty-nine, three years older than Sirnet, which gave him the right to talk like an elder brother: ‘Because it was a woman and a pretty woman at that? Did she give you her name and address?’

‘There was no time.’

He felt conscience-stricken. How could he have been such a fool? He examined the packet carefully in the hope of discovering the name and address of the sender. In the end, he found it: The Pasteur Institute, Paris.

‘Do you see? They are ampoules of serum.’

‘Perhaps. But that won’t help you to find the blonde again.’

Mercier joined Laurette, who had waited for him near the gate. The doctor was furious. He had just seen the plane take off.

‘Quite incredible! The Director was in conference with the heads of the K.L.M. and could not see me. His assistant was not in his office. The secretary was afraid to take any responsibility. We simply must do something to expose the disgraceful way in which they run these services in France, and put a stop to such a scandal. They must have plenty of human lives on their conscience with all that red tape.’

He broke off and noticed that Laurette was smiling.

‘Where is the packet?’

When she had told him how she had managed to get the serum on board the plane, he felt like putting his arms around her and kissing her. He put his arm through her’s and they made for the exit. They felt very close together and very affectionate. He tightened his hold on her arm. It was as if fate had ordained that they should run through the whole gamut of sensations which men and women can feel for each other, in that one night.

On the way back, in the taxi, she leaned her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair, very gently.

‘I should never have believed that you would have the nerve to ask the pilot to take the packet,’ he said.

‘Oh, that shows that you know very little about me!’ she answered with a smile. ‘When I was a girl, I was more daring than any of my friends. Did you realise it? No, you didn’t even recognise me. I’m an old woman already. It’s very sad.’

Her eyes were full of tears. The doctor would have liked to say something to console her, but he could not think of

the right words. Laurette continued: 'My husband has been blind for eight years now. It seems three times as long. I'm not complaining, I'm merely stating a fact. Paul was a marvellous man when we were first married.'

'He still is.'

'You have no idea how intelligent he was, how tactful and sensitive towards me. As a rule, people who are spoilt by destiny are selfish people. He never was with me. And who was I? Just a pretty girl, with nothing to distinguish me from thousands of others. I had no money to bring to the marriage. Paul was intelligent, rich, handsome, everybody loved him, men and women alike. Wherever he went, he was the magnet, the first and most important person in any gathering. I used to say to myself: "It is impossible that a man like that should stick to me. Somebody is sure to take him away from me." But his love for me never seemed to vary. He was always affectionate, charming, agreeable and good-tempered. Until the day when . . .'

Laurette burst out sobbing. She pulled a handkerchief out of her handbag, blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes. Then she continued: 'I have no wish to complain, nor can I reproach him with anything. When the blow fell, he took it stoically. I lost my head. I wept and wrung my hands, and it was he who comforted and consoled me as though I and not he had lost his sight. He was certain that he would be cured and, in the end, he infected me with his optimism. We spent most of our time making plans for the future; when he had recovered his sight, he wanted to go to India . . .'

'I can understand that demoralisation set in, little by little.'

'Not little by little. All at once. The very day of the consultation. When the doctors told him that there was no

hope, that he would be blind for the rest of his life, it made me understand just how convinced he had been that he was going to be cured. Within a few hours, he collapsed completely. The strength which had kept him going seemed to abandon him. Up to that time, it was he who always protected me; now I was left with a lost soul; he was helpless and rudderless and clung to me with pathetic single-heartedness. I myself so badly needed help that I was not much help to him. At first, I thought that I would go off my head. I wanted to commit suicide. The only thing that held me back was the thought that Paul would not know what to do without me. However, I survived the worst part of the ordeal, at what cost to myself you have been able to observe.'

Mercier made an attempt to cut her confession short. He was afraid that she would upset herself and start sobbing again. But Laurette persisted.

'Let me talk. It is a relief to tell someone about what I have been through. If you knew how long it has been since I had any kind of a friend. We live a completely isolated existence, shut up in that flat which is gradually going to pieces, because on top of everything else we have no more money.'

Mercier had started by judging Laurette somewhat harshly when he had noticed that she was attracted by him and thought she was making advances to him. He had almost hated her because of what he took to be a cynical absence of conventional modesty and because she had put him in a false and embarrassing position towards her husband. When they had left to go to Orly, he had decided to teach her a lesson and put her in her place. In spite of his bitter quarrel with Corbier, he had considered the husband more worthy of pity than the wife. But, after his first setback in the taxi and Martine's exasperating insight, his almost

disdainful reserve had been transformed into an increasing physical desire for her.

And now he was filled with unbounded admiration for her; he felt flooded with the most exquisite tenderness towards this young woman who was leaning against his shoulder, who had come back into his life only three hours ago.

He would have given anything to find some way of consoling her, making her forget her tragic situation. He knew that she was happy to be near him, just as he was to be near her, for no apparent reason; but in fact, he had the best reason in the world; for there is no greater bliss than that which heralds the birth of love.

02.10 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Nobody could sleep on board.

The fishermen were huddled together on deck. Most of them were sitting on the floor. They were gazing at the black and choppy sea, the heavy sky. It was cold, but they preferred staying on deck to going to the sleeping quarters in which the sick men had lain.

The ship rolled heavily, the deck tilted and the door of the storage cabin – the isolation ward for the two sick men – flew open with a harsh creaking sound. They all raised their heads and stared at it. It was swinging to and fro with the movement of the boat. In the end, one of the men got up and slammed it shut.

Frank, Michel and two other men were playing cards. They were playing for high stakes and there were stacks of money on the deck beside them. It was strictly against the rules to gamble for money on board, but who was likely to enforce the rule at this juncture?

Old Peter, whose state of nervous agitation and ceaseless chatter had antagonised everybody, was reduced to telling

his stories to the cabin-boy. Edmund was leaning against some netting and listening to him.

‘During the great war, not the last one, the war of 1914, I came up on deck and what did I see? The water was covered with wreckage-cases, furniture and everything you could think of. And floating alongside the bodies of drowned men in English uniforms. The Germans had sunk a steamer coming from India.’

‘Yes,’ said the boy, for the sake of saying something, ‘it must have been very impressive.’

‘Why impressive?’ protested the old man, furious at being interrupted. ‘Every time you open your mouth you say something stupid. There was nothing impressive about it. I told you that it was in wartime. And you expect to see sights like that in wartime. I can see that you don’t know anything about war. During the last war, the whole sea, so to speak, was covered with wreckage.’

In his cabin, the captain had made Olaf lie down on the couch.

‘Do you feel better?’

There was no answer from the invalid. He put a fevered hand up to his forehead.

‘It must be tiredness and nervous excitement,’ said the father.

Had Captain Larsen turned into a silly old woman? Who was he trying to kid? His son or himself? It was obvious that Olaf in his turn had caught the disease. If it had been one of the fishermen, he would have been isolated in the little cabin with the others long since. Besides, why hesitate? He would have to be carried there in any case.

The young man’s lips were moving, but the sounds he made were so faint that Larsen could not hear him.

He bent over: ‘What? What are you saying?’

The sick boy mumbled something. The captain became irritable and impatient: ‘Try and talk louder. I can’t hear you.’

The boy made a great effort and mumbled some more words which were barely comprehensible: ‘Three months . . . Christine has been pregnant for three months.’

Larsen straightened up. He said nothing more. He walked heavily over to the wireless, turned the knob and called: ‘KTX ... KTX here ... calling all stations. Can you hear me?’

02.15 (GMT): At Tituia

‘I am listening,’ answered Lalande. ‘Go ahead KTX...’

The set suddenly went dead.

‘What has happened?’ asked Etienne.

The engineer examined the set rapidly. He soon found the cause of the breakdown. The battery, which had not been used for a long time, was flat.

‘Have you no spare battery?’

‘No. I practically never used the set.’

Dorzit scratched his nose: ‘Something must be done.’

Lalande felt like smacking his face and saying: ‘Certainly, you swollen bladder of lard, certainly, fat hog; something must be done. What are you waiting for? Do it yourself. Must I be the one to get on my feet again? I am a sick man. I am shivering with fever. I had not been out of bed for three days. You come and drag me out of it in the middle of the night. You soak yourself in my whisky, and you loll in my armchair and I have to keep awake because I have to act as the relay between Naples and the ship – a fat lot I care about the damned ship – and when you could really

be of use you don't raise a finger! ‘

As Lalande had not answered him and seemed determined not to get off his chair, the planter got heavily to his feet. He shook Van Rielst brutally.

‘Come on. We'll go and fetch the battery from my car.’

The cotton buyer hoisted himself to his feet with considerable difficulty. He was breathing hard. Dorzit gave him a push.

‘This way.’

And to Etienne: ‘Here you, take the torch and go ahead of us.’

02.20 (GMT): In Paris

The taxi had taken Mercier and Laurette back to the Champs-de-Mars. They found Corbier in a great state of nerves. Ever since they had gone, he had been trying to establish communications with some radio amateur's set in Berlin. Nobody would answer. Was it possible that nobody had heard him? What a strange night!

The doctor proposed getting in touch with an official station. A glance from Laurette made it clear that he had been tactless. The very idea of using an official organisation exasperated the blind man. What good had officials been, up to now? Had a single one of the innumerable control stations scattered over the world picked up the S.O.S. from the ship? Who had transmitted the message as far as Paris? Who had contacted the Pasteur Institute, and how had the serum been sent off? Wasn't his experience with the airport management at Orly sufficiently conclusive to make the doctor understand that one had to rely upon the goodwill of a few devoted individuals and not on organisations tied up and throttled by their own red tape? He shouted and threw himself about.

It made Mercier think, with affectionate pity, what Laurette's life must be, constantly exposed to his brutality and his sudden changes of mood. He turned towards the young woman. They exchanged glances of sympathy behind Corbier's back. The blind man was now trying to establish contact with a correspondent in Brunswick.

02.16 (GMT): In Brunswick

Corbier knew that Eugene Hollendorf was listening in. The German radio amateur was an old soldier. The fevers he had contracted in Russia had left him with such severe headaches that he could not sleep. For years past, Eugene had spent almost all his nights sitting behind his transmitter.

'Can you hear me?'

'I hear you, Corbier.'

A vast expanse of serried roof-tops. Narrow streets, dating back to the Middle Ages. Ruins. And among the ruins a few partially destroyed houses. In the rooms which were still intact, life continued. Rooms and even whole flats were lived in. In spite of the lateness of the hour, one window was illuminated. It was Hollendorf's room. He was forty-eight. There were a few tufts of fair hair on his bald pate. His ravaged face, deeply lined, made him look vaguely romantic.

He had recognised Corbier's voice at once.

'I am listening.'

They had made each other's acquaintance over the air some time ago. When they learnt that they were both war victims, they immediately became fast friends. Almost every night, they had a long chat while everybody else was asleep. These two men who had never seen each other had more than once exchanged secrets which they hid from their intimate friends.

The German nodded his head as he listened to Corbier:
'Bravo, Paul. An excellent job of work for the radio amateurs.'

'Are you in touch with a correspondent in Berlin?'

'Several. I'll get on with the job at once.'

'The name of the airman who is bringing the serum is Sirnet.'

'I have made a note of it. Somebody will be at the airport to meet him. I promise you. Good-bye.'

'Keep in touch with me and report progress.'

As soon as Corbier had gone off the air, after several unsuccessful attempts, Hollendorf unhooked his telephone receiver: 'Operator, I want long-distance. I want to put an urgent call through to Berlin.'

02.20 (GMT): At Tituia

Lalande's set was still out of action. Dorzit and Van Rielst had brought the car battery but the set still refused to work. There was obviously something else wrong. Lalande pottered around the instrument. But he was so weak that the slightest gesture involved a great effort. Etienne did his best to help him. Screwdriver in hand, he was unscrewing part after part, faithfully following the engineer's instructions. The set, which had not been serviced for ages, was in a sad state; several parts were already badly rusted.

'Well?' asked Dorzit.

The question infuriated Lalande: 'Well, what?'

'Have you found the cause of the breakdown?'

'It could be one of at least half a dozen causes.'

'It would be very serious if you could not manage to get it going again.'

'Why do you consider it necessary to tell me that? Do you

imagine, perhaps, that I am incapable of realising it myself?’

The aggressive tone of his answer offended the planter, who grunted: ‘A polite question deserves a polite answer.’

Lalande’s nerves were stretched to the breaking point. He shrieked in a strident voice: ‘I shall speak to you as I please. And if you don’t like it you can take yourself off. I never invited you to come here and still less to make yourself at home. I don’t need you to repair my set. Your being here can serve no useful purpose.’

Dorzit brandished a fat, red fist. Van Rielst put his arms around his waist and pulled him back before he could hit the engineer. Lalande had been watching Dorzit without making any attempt to defend himself.

‘Leave him alone. Can’t you see that he’s in a high fever and doesn’t know what he is saying?’

Etienne was standing up and moved in front of Lalande to protect him: ‘You are acting like children. Brawling will not help us to mend the set.’

Only too happy to find another victim on whom he could vent his rage, Dorzit turned on the negro: ‘Shut your trap, ape. Nobody asked you to interfere. The quarrel is between white men, do you understand? Between men of the same race. If we want to fight, we shall fight. And monkeys have nothing to say! It’s none of their business.’

The engineer had recovered his presence of mind. He was not proud of himself and regretted losing his temper; he had, up to now, been so successful in concealing his real feelings. The hostile glance he shot at Dorzit was not unmingled with fear at having made a powerful enemy. The planter had lived in the jungle for twenty-five years. In that time he must have become friendly with a number of the

directors of the Company. An unfavourable report could be disastrous. These gentlemen who lived in Brussels, in their comfortable air-conditioned offices, surrounded by antique furniture and well-dressed secretaries, were only too ready to believe the worst of those they had sent out to croak under the tropical sun. An insidious word slipped in at the right moment could make you forfeit the benefit of thirty months of the dog-days, fever and mosquitoes. Lalande held his hand out to Dorzit: 'I apologise. I did not mean to be offensive.'

Dorzit shook his hand in silence.

'We are all in a state of nerves,' concluded Van Rielst, 'the important thing is to re-establish contact with the ship as soon as possible.'

02.25 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

Larsen, tired of calling and getting no answer, turned the knob and left the table. Once again, the *Maria Sorensen* was cut off from the rest of the world.

Olaf was stretched out on the couch, sleeping. Sweat was dripping from his forehead and his face.

The captain was hovering over the couch. To see his son lying sick and helpless caused him agonising mental torture. Since childhood, he had not felt so unhappy. Larsen knew that Olaf's life was in danger and could think of nothing else. He could not understand how he could have questioned his love for the boy, so recently. The idea that Olaf might die caused him as much physical pain as the stab of a dagger through his heart. What did Christine matter to him now? If Olaf loved her, he could marry her. Could a father wish for anything but happiness for his son?

Larsen remembered an argument he had had with the village clergyman a long time ago; his wife had complained

to the reverend gentleman, who had called on him with the laudable object of reconciling husband and wife. After the clergyman's first few words, the captain had protested indignantly: 'Everything I do is for her own good.' And the clergyman had corrected him: 'Her good as you understand it.' Larsen had not been able to take this seriously; naturally, his wife's good as he understood it. How else could he have provided for her welfare? The clergyman had looked him straight in the eye and had asked: 'Has it never occurred to you that your wife might have a different conception of her own good?' Larsen had understood then, but he was still of the same opinion; a wife never knew what was good for her. It was up to the father to do the deciding for the family. That was the way it had been since the beginning of the world and nobody had complained. Even his wife had not complained. After a few feeble protests, at the beginning, she had accepted the life he had offered her. Did that prove that she was happy? the captain wondered.

He shrugged. Who can be happy in this world? Was he happy himself? How could he be with his heavy burden of responsibility, supporting his family, commanding the ship and being answerable to his employers for the fishing? Had he been helped by anybody, or even understood? He had always had to stand on his own feet, unaided and alone. Every man was alone in life. His wife was alone with her worries and her aspirations, repressed over so many years. And so were Olaf and he himself, alone and solitary. Though Olaf now had that lanky fair girl on his side. Those two must have had a bad time during the last few months, worrying how they could overcome the obstacles between them and happiness. He himself, Olaf's father, was the main obstacle. Why had he objected to the young

man's marriage? Because he had been hoping that he would make a better one. That was how he had become his son's enemy. For the first time the captain thought that Olaf might be entitled to his own conception of what was good for him and that he might even be right. He would probably marry Christine; women always ended up by getting their own way. His daughter-in-law would hate him too; she already hated him and would turn Olaf against his parents.

All these thoughts made Larsen's head feel heavy. They could all go to the devil! He banged his fist on the table and swore in a loud voice. But Olaf did not hear him. He was dead to the world, lying on the couch. His father looked at him and felt his heart twisted with tenderness. My God, if only he would survive the dread disease! Save him, O Lord, and I will let him do anything he wants to do, I promise you.... Even marry his Christine. . . .

02.30 (GMT): In Brunswick

Hollendorf picked up a pair of pincers. With it, he lifted a stamp and examined it with a magnifying glass. One of the little triangular teeth around the edges was folded over. He straightened it out carefully; fortunately it was intact. He turned the pages of the catalogue; the specimen was illustrated. He looked up the price. This particular variety, alas, was the least valuable.

The phone rang.

'Hallo,' said the operator, 'I am connecting you with Berlin.'

An empty room. An enormous desk nearly filled it. Black, heavily carved, it told a long story of a prosperous and comfortable existence which two wars had not disturbed in any essential respect. The bookcase, too, with its

naked-breasted caryatids, dated from the same happy period, as did the books in their sumptuous bindings; and the green curtains with their heavy folds, the Persian carpet, the old-fashioned leather armchairs, the Chinese statuettes in the glass-fronted cabinet and the paintings of the German school hanging on the walls.

The phone bell rang and rang for a long time. Finally, it succeeded in waking an old servant. She came into the room, eyes still puffy with sleep, pulling her dressing-gown across her shrivelled breasts, dragging her slippers. She unhooked the receiver.

‘Doctor Muller is not here,’ she said with a strong peasant accent. ‘He’s gone away, to the mountains. Yes, on holiday. For a few days. Is there any message?’

02.35 (GMT): In Paris

The Frenchmen had just been told by Hollendorf of his lack of success so far.

‘I will ring up another number...’

‘Keep trying. You must contact somebody in Berlin without fail,’ insisted Corbier.

‘Don’t worry. I shan’t give up trying.’

A heavy silence fell on the room. All three of them were immersed in their thoughts. What does Corbier know? the doctor wondered. He was suspicious of me from the start, from the moment I arrived. And, ever since our return from Orly he has looked as if he might break out at any moment and make a frightful scene. He envied Laurette’s serenity. It was true that she spent her time in a living hell and his very presence would be balm to her tortured spirit. It seemed that she was quite ready to stand up to her husband’s fulminations. He had no such desire. Decidedly, she was extremely seductive. Her smile was enchanting.

How could he have been disappointed when he first saw her again. He now found that she was even more beautiful than before. She had matured. As a girl, she might have been prettier, but she was infinitely more interesting at present. He was sure that she would become his mistress when next they met; it was obvious that she wanted him. As to Corbier, he would take good care never to see him again. One distressing evening was enough. What an extraordinary thing that it should be those wretched victims on board the ship who had brought them together! Destiny sometimes has curious whims. Should he keep up his affair with Martine? He could not make up his mind. She was convenient and made few demands upon him. This one might be more exacting. Would she be justified in manifesting jealousy? After all, she was married. It was essential that she should not leave her husband. Besides, he was certain that she had not contemplated such a step, not for a second. Her duty kept her by his side. So much the better. It meant that there was no need for him to commit himself. A man needed his liberty.

Laurette smiled. There were strange thoughts behind that smile. She was trying to imagine what Mercier looked like in the nude. She succeeded without difficulty. Not because of her memories of Cannes, but using Paul, her husband, as a model. The doctor was shorter, his chest was less broad. Judging from his hands, he was more hairy. His muscles were undoubtedly flabby. Corbier had been an athlete. Laurette mentally ran her hands over Mercier's body. Touching these masculine limbs, which it pleased her to imagine as soft and somewhat childish, gave her an agreeable sensation. It was a curious fact, however, that if Laurette had been asked whether she was ready to become the doctor's mistress, she would have answered in good

faith that she was not sure but that the answer was probably in the negative. This was Laurette all over; she had always been like that, always lost in dreamland. The long periods of solitude, shut up alone with her husband after his accident, had merely accentuated this lifelong tendency. She was by no means ashamed of it. In fact, she encouraged her imagination to roam, wide and free. Though this woman of thirty-five had only known one man in her life, this did not prevent her from indulging in the wildest flights of fancy.

What was Corbier thinking? In his thoughts, he was practising with a punching-ball. He was squaring up to it and hitting it harder and harder, faster and faster, and suddenly the ball had acquired a face. It was Mercier's head. The head bounced against the board, it shook as his fist sank into the features; a terrific blow on the chin, then it rebounded and presented itself to his fist with docility. Blood. At last, the blood was spurting from the nose, the eyes, the mouth. Now, it was pouring out and covered the whole face. Corbier's hands were smeared with it; these bright red stains gave him infinite pleasure. He had surprised them; Laurette and Mercier. He had begun by punishing the man. When he had thrown him out, he would have his revenge on the woman. He would take his time over it, prolong it and use the subtlest forms of cruelty. To begin with,, Laurette, who was expecting an explosion which never came, would think that he was going to spare her. She would soon be disillusioned. Corbier wondered how he would begin his campaign; sly allusions, pin-pricks; or a brutal attack. Perhaps it would be better to prolong the agony and hold a tacit threat over her. He would make her live in constant terror, for months. She would not know when and how the blow would fall. She would tremble at his slightest gesture.

This would bring a little excitement into their lives which were becoming too monotonous.... Corbier suddenly realised to his horror that he regretted that he had no evidence of his wife's infidelity. Was he going mad? Only an hour ago, he had been crushed and abysmally depressed at the thought that his wife might leave him, and now he was playing with the idea of torturing her. But the contradiction was only an apparent one. He was going through hell, and therefore it was only natural that he should want to make others pay for it. Who would be a better target for his spleen than the woman he loved?

The set suddenly came alive, startling them.

The Italians were announcing that communications with Africa had been cut off. The thin thread which had connected them to the ship had been broken. What had happened?

'Go on calling Zobra, we are standing by.'

Silence once more. But the outside world had also broken the thread of their private thoughts.

'Why were you unwilling to tell them the name of the disease?' Laurette asked the doctor.

Actually, she was not at all interested. The question was merely a pretext for speaking to Mercier and smiling at him. It was a declaration of love.

'It would have frightened them unnecessarily.'

The doctor's voice, too, was full of caressing undertones.

Corbier interrupted. His voice was harsh, his tone cutting as usual: 'One should never lie to one's patient's. One's duty is to tell them the truth.'

This was tantamount to a rebuke to the doctor and herself for their duplicity. Laurette bit her lips.

Then, abruptly, Corbier asked: 'Have you been crying?'

She stammered, frightened by his perspicacity: ‘No. What should I be crying for? Why?’

At first, he did not answer. Then, as she insisted, he said in a tone of contempt: ‘That was my impression, when you came back.’

Mercier pulled a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. He avoided Laurette’s eyes.

02.40 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Olaf had opened his eyes. He felt better for his sleep. He looked better. Larsen stared at him in astonishment; had he already survived the crisis, or was it simply some ordinary malady? He hardly dared hope. Several times he had tried to kid himself that it was nothing serious, but, inwardly, he was convinced that his son was suffering from the same disease as the others. He was still convinced of it.

Olaf managed to get up. He looked at his father, but quickly turned his head away. He pretended not to notice the anxiety in his father’s expression as he watched his every movement and walked towards the door.

‘Are you going out?’

‘I am going to tell them.’

‘What?’

‘What they have. The disease we have on board.’

‘You know nothing about it.’

‘What are you frightened of, then? I was listening to the wireless, when you were. The doctor’s silence was very significant. They have a right to know what we know.’

The captain hammered the table with his fist: ‘The only rights they have are those which I am willing to grant them.’

He had the impression that Olaf had staggered and was leaning against the cupboard to stop himself from falling. He changed his tone: 'How would it help them?'

'To defend themselves, if there is still time.'

'Think it out. How can they defend themselves? If there is anything that can be done for them, we will do it.'

'Well then, they can prepare for death. They can express their last wishes. They can pray or do as they please. But at least we shan't be letting them die like cattle, without understanding what is happening to them.'

'We have been promised the serum. If it was sent off on time, they will be saved without knowing the danger they have been running.'

'But what if they prefer to know? What if I go and tell them?'

The captain moved his bulk in front of the door: 'I forbid you to go out of this room.'

Olaf looked at him and flushed to the roots of his hair: 'And you forbid me to kick the bucket too? What I have is the plague or cholera or yellow fever, I don't know which, so whether you forbid me or not I'm a gonner! I shall never get back to port. I shall never see Christine again, I shan't know my own child. Do you kid yourself you can stop me by appealing to discipline and the lies you have been telling me for all these years?'

He stepped forward. Larsen stood in front of him:

'As long as I am here, you are going to obey me.'

'We'll see.'

Olaf tried to push his father on one side. Larsen pushed back and struck the first blow. Olaf hit back.

His fist smashed into Larsen's face. The captain bent down and tried to put his arms around Olaf's waist. Olaf stepped back and hit out once more. Larsen lowered his head and charged. Olaf lost his balance. The two men rolled on the floor. They wrestled for a long time, savagely, colliding with the furniture, clinging on to doors and chairs. In the end, Olaf got the upper hand. He banged his father's head on the floor until Larsen sank back unconscious. Then he got up and staggered to the door. On the way he wrenched the cupboard door open, took out a bottle of rum, uncorked it with his teeth and drank the greater part of it.

03.00 (GMT): In Brunswick and Berlin

'I have your number for you,' announced the nasal voice of the long-distance operator.

The receiver to his ear, Hollendorf was amusing himself by arranging his stamps in order of size. He had a complete series in front of him. It was a vignette of many colours, a fascinating sight. So few people had eyes to see. They could see nothing special in stamps. They just stuck them on envelopes in a great hurry, as Hollendorf himself had done before the war. They did not even notice that they were looking at varied and beautiful scenery, celebrated paintings, portraits of great men. They had other things to look at. But a man who was the prisoner of ill-health, condemned not to leave his room, cloistered inside four walls, had to content himself with small objects. Nothing around him escaped his attention. Since his illness Hollendorf had learnt the shape, colour and every other characteristic of the objects which surrounded him. He was as attached to inanimate objects as he was to the few people who still came to visit him. Before the war he had been an engineer and had been in charge of a factory. Now

he was a weaver; his first trade, to which he was greatly attached because, in early youth, it had enabled him to escape from poverty. During the day, he worked alone in his room, surrounded by threads of hemp which, little by little, were transformed into cloth.

Finally, he could hear a voice at the other end of the wire. A disagreeable grumbling noise which showed how angry Willy Grundel was at being aroused from a sound sleep; swollen, enormous, his neck bare, his unbuttoned pyjama-top showing his hairy chest, Willy Grundel shouted: 'Are you crazy? Do you think that I am going to get up at this ungodly hour to go to Tempelhof?'

He turned around to look at the alarm-clock with its luminous numbers. The green eiderdown slipped and fell on the carpet. Herta moaned in her sleep and turned around heavily. Hollendorf's account of the special circumstances did nothing to calm Willy's rage.

'This is a matter for the authorities. Private people have no business meddling in an affair of this kind. Get in touch with the police!'

His loud voice had awakened Herta. She was a placid woman. Her husband's vehemence made her smile. His indignation amused her. She stroked his arm gently, but this affectionate gesture was not sufficient to calm him.

'The fact that I have an amateur radio transmitter does not entitle you to disturb me when I am asleep. When I am not listening in, I have every right to be left alone. I have my work in the day-time and I sleep at night.'

He hung up, before Hollendorf could make any further attempt to persuade him. As he bent down to pick up the eiderdown, he grumbled: 'There ought to be a law against

phoning people in the middle of the night.’

Herta burst out laughing. Her complexion and hair were very fair. She had a round, dimpled face, with very small eyes drowned in fat, like currants in a plum-pudding.

03.20 (GMT): In Tituia

Lalande had at last succeeded in repairing his set. The others had watched him working in silence without daring to interfere. But when the first buzzing and crackling sounds came from the set, they breathed a sigh of relief.

Contact was re-established with Italy. The police technician, who was beginning to believe that they would never contact him again, hastened to tell the good news to Paris. But it was more difficult to link up with the ship again. There was no answer from the *Maria Sorensen*. Had atmospheric conditions changed? Lalande wondered whether an aerial might make it easier for them to hear him. Dorzit grasped his intention and got up. Etienne followed him.

‘Can we ask your boys to help us?’

‘Of course.’

The planter was never quiet for long. Especially when he had work to do. From the veranda, Lalande heard him swearing, shouting, blustering, insulting the blacks. Ever since they had quarrelled openly, he no longer disliked Dorzit. Now his hatred was concentrated on Van Rielst who was gazing at him owlshly from his armchair. The engineer felt better. He was less feverish. It was inexplicable in view of the accumulated strains of that night, getting up, dragging himself around. Perhaps the attack, which was following its usual course, was in a phase of regression. Or perhaps nervous tension was a good

remedy for the disease. He was very thirsty. But he did not dare leave the set. He switched over alternately from transmission to reception. He was afraid that he might miss a call.

As he felt himself growing stronger, he became more passionately interested than ever in what he was trying to accomplish. It was no small feat to save men at sea, thousands of miles away, by organising a consultation with a Parisian specialist. He had always enjoyed the Boy Scout type of adventure. To a considerable extent, his taste for such enterprises had been responsible for his accepting this job in Africa. He had hoped that he would find vast horizons, that he would lead an active life and that he would go back home enriched by experience and also richer in the literal sense. Instead of which, he had at once slipped into the routine of a provincial official, the difficulties he had to cope with were commonplace ones, the problems he had had to face were problems which an accountant would have been more fitted to solve. Perhaps it had been his fault, after all. Perhaps he was lacking in initiative, seeing that he had allowed himself to be bogged down in this evil smelling swamp.

For some time Lalande had realised that he was no superman. But he had never admitted it to himself as openly as he had tonight. It was a fact which had to be faced sooner or later. The important thing was not to let anybody else suspect it. Many mediocre individuals had important jobs which they did not deserve. He would be one of them. With one difference; his eyes were wide open and he knew all about himself. He could not understand why this new knowledge actually gave him pleasure. It was as if he had got rid of a heavy burden.

03.25 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

In the captain’s cabin, the chair in front of the wireless set was empty. The set had been left switched on, but there was no one to hear Lalande.

The plague! The news spread throughout the ship with the speed of lightning. To the fishermen, Olaf’s report could only have one meaning – a simple and tragic one.

Their reaction had been a delayed one. At first, they had kept silent for some time. Their simple minds had not grasped the implications. Bit by bit the idea dawned on them. With understanding, fear grew. It gradually assumed gigantic proportions, an abject animal terror. A wind of real panic swept through the whole ship. It was an ancestral terror which arose from the depths of their being; distracted, faces blanched, the hair standing up on their scalps, their eyes wild, they let loose a babel of sound. They all shouted at once, cursing, wailing and blaspheming.

Frank tore off his shirt and his trousers. He stripped himself in the sleeping quarters to see if there were any traces of the disease. Reassured, he put on his clothes again. The others followed his example; soon, the room was full of naked men inspecting themselves and each other. For fear of contagion, they were careful not to touch each other. Nobody ventured near the sick men’s bunks. They glared at each other with hatred and suspicion. Each man was his neighbour’s enemy. Each man was on his own and ready to use any weapon to defend himself against the danger. Edmund has discovered a spot on his chest. At once everybody gave him a wide berth. The terrified boy

was left alone in the middle of a circle of men and stared at this little swelling which seemed to him enormous.

His eyes filled with tears. He murmured: 'I can't believe it. . .'

Edmund could see no gleam of pity or even interest in any of the faces around him. They reflected only horror, disgust or execration.

Peter could not take his eyes off him. He also stared at Olaf who had collapsed on the ground, exhausted by the struggle with his father and by wildly chasing up and down the ship to spread the tragic news. An absurd idea suddenly came into Peter's stupid head. The others would be safe if they did not allow themselves to be contaminated by those who had already contracted the disease.

It was senseless, to be sure. But how could one expect these wretched terror-stricken brains to think with any degree of lucidity?

'Those who are going to catch it have caught it. The others are safe. . .'

They went on repeating this statement, because they had to believe it. Otherwise there was no hope. They had to convince themselves that the terrible disease would not attack them.

'But contagion must be avoided at all costs.'

A ring of grim faces and raised fists surrounded Edmund and Olaf. They were pushed towards the door, after they had been forced to pick up their mattresses which the healthy men refused to touch. They climbed the steps, walked across the deck towards the cabin in which the other sick men were lying.

But the fishermen were still on the rampage. They had to do something, anything, to avoid thinking and being left

alone with the fear of death which. obsessed them. They felt that they had to prove that they were actively fighting the danger and not remaining passive. The presence of those unfortunate men, who were groaning behind that thin wall a few yards away, drove them frantic.

‘Burn their things.’

Someone had had this brilliant idea. They clattered down to the sleeping quarters again. They protected their faces with handkerchiefs, bits of rag, anything, and collected the sick men’s boxes and bags, all their personal belongings, the sheets and blankets which had touched them, and carted them up on deck. They piled them up and Frank poured paraffin over them. Peter lit the bonfire with his lighter. There was a roar, and the flames had destroyed everything in a few minutes. Faces and shadows were monstrously distorted against the background of the sinister fire. Normally, these men who were poor observers at best, would never have noticed these strange shapes against the dancing flames, but the terror which had gripped them made the simplest phenomena seem ominous. They quickly kicked the smouldering fire out and threw the few remaining fragments, which were still burning, into the sea. And darkness settled on the ship once more.

Darkness frightened the fishermen. Everything frightened them. Another voice arose, an idiot’s voice: ‘Throw them in the sea...’

Whose voice? What matter! The men were out of their senses, they were ripe for any form of violence, however insane.

‘Chuck them in the sea! Chuck them in the sea!’

Put the sick men in a small boat and let them drift. That was their first idea. Not a single voice was raised on behalf of these unfortunates who had been their comrades a short time ago.

They were blinded and exasperated by the instinct of self-preservation. The crew had been transformed into a horde of brutes ready for anything.

‘They must not be allowed out of the cabin,’ cried someone.

‘Throw the boat into the sea.’

Hatchets had appeared from nowhere.

Michel, the cook, had been down to the cook’s galley and had opened the provision cupboard. He came back, laden with bottles. Mugs were filled to the brim. The neat rum enflamed them still further.

The door of the captain’s cabin opened. Larsen appeared on deck. The men stared at him, stupefied, as if they had forgotten that he existed. The sight of their captain had silenced them; a sense of discipline is deeply rooted in those who live at sea. Larsen was as white as a sheet. His clothes were in disorder. There was a large bruise on his forehead. Blood trickled down from a cut in his lip on to his shirt and jacket.

Larsen went and stood in front of the door of the isolation cabin. He spread his legs wide apart and Planted himself firmly on them. Then, he slowly pulled a revolver out of his pocket and announced calmly: ‘The first man who takes a step forward will have his brains blown out.’

He was within his rights. He could justify his action before any court in the world, which would sentence the mutineers, not one of whom would ever be able to secure another berth. The fishermen knew this. Nobody moved.

03.30 (GMT): In Paris

Hollendorf had just announced that his efforts to contact a radio amateur in Berlin by phone had been unsuccessful.

He proposed to continue sending out appeals over the air.

Mercier glanced uneasily at Corbier; the blind man's sightless eyes were fixed on him, and the young man thought that they were charged with some obscure threat. They hated each other. Nevertheless, they did not dare to break the link which obliged them to go on struggling side by side in the hope of saving these men who were unknown to them. They went on playing the comedy of human solidarity against which their personal feud faded into insignificance. But it was an embarrassing contradiction. They were Frenchmen, revolted by any lack of logic.

Though both men were tormented, Laurette was quite unperturbed. She looked lovingly at Mercier. She was not being hypocritical. If her husband had been able to see her, and in his own way he could see her, this would not have affected her attitude. She felt attracted towards the doctor; she made no attempt to control her feelings; even if she had been able to, she would not have made the attempt.

'Do you think that Hollendorf will manage to contact someone?' asked the doctor.

'Why should he succeed, if he has failed up to now?' Corbier realised that he had answered somewhat irritably. He added in a less aggressive tone of voice:

'It is true that atmospheric conditions can change from one minute to another.'

In the meanwhile, they felt that they must do something. They could not just tamely reconcile themselves to failure and see all their efforts wasted.

They put through a call by telephone to the Tempelhof airport in Berlin. At the same time, by wireless, they tried to re-establish contact with Italy.

03.35 (GMT): In the Bay of Naples

The hot wind from Africa, the sirocco, was blowing among the orange trees. Gennaro was strolling up the narrow lane, whistling, with his hands in his pockets. He was a bit late for his appointment. He was in no hurry, as he knew that Carmela was waiting for him. She was obviously sitting up for him, watching the clock. Most probably, she had been waiting for her father to go to sleep, then she had crept to the door and pulled back the bolt. Gennaro would only have to give the door a slight push. He was familiar with the room, the dining-room, and would tiptoe across it without any danger of colliding with any of the furniture. Carmela would fall into his arms as soon as he had crossed the threshold of her room. She would leap out of bed and run to meet him, feet bare and scantily clad in a chemise which only reached half-way down her thighs. Gennaro liked the way she cuddled up to him. It was unusual for a girl to give an impression of complete abandon. It was extremely pleasant for the man. Gennaro wondered whether she would remain equally submissive. Carmela was his woman. But he would prefer her to stay in her father's flat and go on seeing him in secret as at present. Would she agree? Up to now, Carmela had always done what he wanted her to do. But the father? Old d'Angelantonio would make a terrific row if he ever found out. Hence, it was essential that he should avoid being caught, at all costs.

Gennaro pushed open the gate, walked up the stairs, careful not to make them creak. He pushed open the front door of the flat. When he saw the inspector and his men,

he quickly turned on his heel. He started down the stairs, but the policemen were equally quick off the mark. They caught him up in no time and brought him back to face Ippolito.

‘Was this the smuggler you were expecting.’

D’Angelantonio was too dumbfounded to answer.

‘Own up. Is this the man who was to bring you a message from the privateer?’

‘You’re mad,’ protested Gennaro, indignantly. ‘I have never had anything to do with smuggling in my life.’

‘Well then, what are you doing here?’

Gennaro held his tongue. Ippolito turned to d’Angelantonio: ‘What is this young man doing here at this unearthly hour?’

‘I have no idea,’ stammered the old man.

The inspector had not had twenty years of experience for nothing. He knew when a man was telling the truth. D’Angelantonio was undoubtedly sincere.

He eyed Gennaro mockingly and asked in a sarcastic voice: ‘What is your story?’

But the young man hesitated and seemed at a loss for an answer. He merely shrugged his shoulders insolently.

‘Very good,’ concluded the inspector, ‘I shall arrest you and keep you in prison as long as you refuse to tell me what you are doing here.’

It was Carmela who answered for him: ‘Gennaro came here because he had an appointment with me.’ All eyes were turned on Carmela. The girl faced them bravely. Ippolito tried not to smile. Gennaro protested: ‘Why did you tell them? I’m not afraid of going to prison.’

‘And I’m not afraid of the truth. I want everybody to know that I love you.’

The police sergeant came forward and spoke to the

inspector, to provide confirmatory evidence; Gennaro Sarda was well known throughout the countryside as a skirt chaser. Only the day before yesterday, it appeared that Mauro the innkeeper had surprised him with Concetta his wife.

‘Is that true?’ Carmela asked her lover.

Gennaro said nothing and lowered his head. In view of her bold avowal, the blow was a hard one. A tear, which she had not been able to hold back, slipped down her cheek and dropped on the table.

‘Have you no shame!’ thundered her father.

He had thrown himself on Carmela and was raining blows on her before anybody had time to restrain him. She allowed him to hit her without making any attempt to protect herself. Gennaro went up to them. D’Angelantonio, wild with rage, was about to turn on him, but the inspector held him back.

‘Control yourself. Your personal affairs can be settled between yourselves, when we have gone.’

Gennaro put in a word, in a gentle but firm tone of voice: ‘Don Domenico, I ask for nothing better than to be allowed to marry Carmela.’

‘Thief,’ shrieked the old man, ‘you steal other people’s honour. In my house! ... In my own house! Whilst I am peacefully sleeping, you come and take my daughter, but you will not take her with you to Paradise, that I swear.’

‘I repeat, don Domenico, I am ready to make amends.’

‘Make amends, miserable wretch! That is the least you can do. But first I shall make an official complaint to the police. No one is allowed to violate good faith with impunity. I who treated you as a friend when I met you in the street, I who knew your family. If I had only known that you were a criminal.’

‘I was wrong and I apologise.’

‘You apologise! Only too easy after having caused irreparable harm.’

‘It was all my fault,’ cried Carmela. ‘I love him. I know what I am doing. It was I who asked him to come here.’

‘Shut your mouth! Nobody has asked your opinion.’

‘And what if I insist on speaking? After all, it is very much my business.’

‘I order you to hold your tongue!’

‘I shall not allow myself to be muzzled!’

But Gennaro agreed with the father: ‘Keep out of this, Carmela. It is for us men to discuss.’

Carmela fell silent.

D’Angelantonio continued, threateningly:

‘I shall denounce you to the police.’

This time, the inspector lost patience: ‘The police! We are the police. We have too much to do to be bothered with your daughter’s amorous adventures.’

It was not so easy to silence the doctor. Once he was sure of being in the right, he was not going to allow himself to be intimidated: ‘Every citizen has a right to protection. This individual stole into my house tonight. . . .’

He pointed to Gennaro, who broke out into humble apologies.

‘You are quite right, don Domenico. I have the greatest respect for you, I have always respected you and your family. If you wish to beat me, do so. It would be a righteous manifestation of your anger.’

‘Naturally, it would be justified. I don’t need you to tell me that. I don’t need your consent.’

‘I should never have presumed.’

‘I said that, because I did not like your tone of voice.’

The discussion might well have lasted for an interminable

time, but it was interrupted by the radio technician, who cried: 'Will you be quiet, confound you? I can't hear. Paris wants to be connected to the ship.'

03.40 (GMT): At Tituia

'The accursed ship does not answer,' repeated Lalande.

And the Italian wireless-operator: 'Paris asks you to go on trying.'

'I have been trying all this time.'

'Don't give up hope.'

'You need have no fear.'

Another one who had started ordering him about. Anyone would think that his was the sole responsibility for saving the *Maria Sorensen*. He would have liked to send him packing. But Lalande controlled himself. Henceforth, he would have to be very careful and watch every move. He was determined to become calm and balanced in all circumstances. It should be easy. Now that he had learnt to appreciate himself at his true value, he would have less justification for considering himself misunderstood. This was characteristic of Lalande; sudden and violent fluctuations in mood. He thought of himself in quite different ways, according to his mood, discovering in himself unsuspected qualities and defects. He then began to plan his life to correspond with the new picture he had painted of himself. This plan was conscientiously adhered to for a few days, until he started doubting the accuracy of his last diagnosis.

At the moment, Lalande was blissfully contented. He was calling the ship; it did not answer. He persisted untiringly. The ship had to answer. For his own sake. For the sake of the glory which would be his. He did not waste a thought

on the crew. He was thinking about himself; a short time ago he would have thought of himself as the fishermen's sole saviour. Now, he saw himself cunningly exploiting this life-saving operation, which was a co-operative enterprise, solely for his own benefit. He visualised himself as the one who had maintained contact with the boat for hours on end, dreadfully hampered by his fever and lack of sleep. There would be articles in the papers. His head office would hear about his exploit. It would probably mean promotion to a much more important post.

03.50 (GMT): In Paris

Nothing new from Africa. Contact had not yet been re-established. Nothing new from Brunswick. Hollendorf had not been able to link up with Berlin.

The cigarette stubs were accumulating in the ashtrays.

Corbier was drumming nervously with his fingers on the wireless. The noise exasperated the doctor, who had to restrain his almost ungovernable impulse to shout at Corbier and tell him to stop. Laurette noticed and smiled at him. This reassured him and he smiled back.

Corbier spoke: 'What about that long-distance phone call.... Will it be much longer?'

'Wait, don't be so impatient.'

'Remind them.'

Docile as always, she got up and dialled the number.

'Berlin, one hour's delay.'

'Could it be made an urgent call?'

'That would not make much difference. The line is very busy.'

Laurette put her hand over the instrument: 'What shall I do?'

‘Tell them to make it an urgent call, all the same.’

She complied. But she could not help thinking that she would find several thousand francs on next month’s phone bill which would never be repaid. To be a radio amateur was an expensive business, especially if one played at rescue work. Her thoughts began to wander. The night might well cost her husband more than he had bargained for. As far as she was concerned, she had reason to be grateful to the radio amateurs. She had them to thank for her meeting with Mercier. What the consequences were going to be, she still did not know. But she had already had several hours of stimulation. Extremely precious hours. She would have to think, about them at length, recapitulate everything to be quite sure of not forgetting anything. It would be food for weeks of solitary reflection. Perhaps it might not even stop at that; Laurette was not in the habit of pursuing a thought to its logical conclusion. She could not imagine Mercier taking his place in her old life, still less what life would be like with him. She allowed herself to drift, to be guided by events without the slightest attempt at modifying them. If she had been in the habit of using her reason, she would have claimed that it was useless to try and interfere with one’s destiny; it does with you what it wills. This unconscious fatalism had been her guiding principle throughout her life; she accepted Mercier when he came along, she would accept him if he stayed; if he went, she would submit with her usual resignation, just as she had allowed Corbier to enter her life and had put up with the accident which ruined his own. These events made her glad and sad, just as her peasant ancestors had welcomed hail or sunshine, moonlight or floods, with joy or grief, invariably and completely passive.

‘One hour,’ said Corbier. ‘It will be too late. The plane will have arrived.’

Laurette and Mercier were startled. Their thoughts had been far away.

‘One hour for what?’

‘For the call to Berlin, of course. Didn’t the operator tell you that there was an hour’s delay?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Well, then, why are you surprised?’

‘But ... I don’t know.’

‘Your thoughts must have been wandering.’

‘What an idea!’

‘I am sure that the doctor agrees with me. What do you say, doctor?’

‘I do not know Madame sufficiently well to be able to judge.’

‘You are a hypocrite.’

Guy shrugged his shoulders: ‘What did you say?’

‘Everybody who has been well brought up is a hypocrite. What did you think I meant?’

‘Oh . . . nothing. You have a strange way of expressing yourself.’

‘Do you find it unpleasant? But surely you ought to be used to sick people’s whims by now.’

‘You are right. I apologise for having forgotten it.’

‘I am the one who should apologise.’

Laurette cudgelled her brains to think of a way of interrupting the conversation: ‘Would you like some coffee?’

She could think of nothing else to say. Mercier smiled.

‘Yes, very much. It will do me good.’

‘No coffee for me,’ said the blind man dryly.

04.00 (GMT): In Brunswick

Fritz Hollendorf rose to his feet heavily. He walked into the next room. Why had he not thought of it before? Here, right at hand, was the solution to the problem which had been worrying him.

A boy of about ten was sleeping in his bed. Hanzi was the only one who had escaped the bombardment which had destroyed Hollendorf's house and which had killed his wife and daughter. The man stood for a moment gazing tenderly down at his son, then, after overcoming his scruples, he shook him.

Hanzi awoke with a start: 'What's the matter?'

'Get dressed.'

Hanzi rubbed his eyes and protested: 'But it's still dark. It must be very early.'

'I am not sending you to school. Listen carefully. I want to send you on an important, confidential mission.'

The boy's eyes closed. The father went into the kitchen, turned on the cold-water tap, and brought back a soaking bath-glove.

'Here, bathe your face. It will wake you up.'

Hollendorf's plan was quite clear in his mind; the only people who were in a position to transmit a message to Berlin were the Americans. They must be appealed to. But at four o'clock in the morning it would be difficult to find a soldier who would be prepared to use his initiative about something which was outside his usual sphere of activity. There was only one hope: the officers' club. Sometimes they stayed up very late. It was worth trying. Hollendorf dared not leave his set. There was still a chance that some

radio amateur might be contacted who would agree to go to Tempelhof. And besides, Hanzi was far more likely than he was to succeed in gaining entry into the club. He was as cunning as a little monkey. The hardships of post-war life had made the children self-reliant.

‘If you manage to persuade an officer to help us, ask him to come back here with you. Be sure to make it clear that it is a real emergency. That it is a question of a ship with men on board who are desperately ill and that we are trying to get serum to them.’

To make certain that his son was wide awake, Hollendorf took him into the kitchen and put his head under the cold-water tap.

While Hanzi was dressing, he rapidly scribbled the note which the boy was to take with him.

04.10 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Lalande had kept his promise to the Italian radio operator. At regular intervals, about every five minutes, he had been repeating the call.

A man was dragging himself along the deck of the ship. His legs would not support him. He was giddy. He was watching the progress of the disease, as it gradually mastered him, with terror. He prayed that the others would not notice him. He was even more afraid of his mates than he was of the disease. He dragged himself a little farther away, to avoid being detected. When he approached the captain’s cabin, he heard the wireless calling. A distant and insistent voice was repeating: ‘Can you hear me?’ This voice galvanised the man. He felt infinitely hopeful. He felt stronger and bolder, almost happy, and he cried:

‘The wireless! Quickly. Contact has been re-established.’

Larsen heard him. He looked at the men who surrounded him. He felt that he had them well in hand; they would not move. He could safely leave them. He walked to his cabin. He was about to shut the door, but Frank had followed him, prevented him from closing the door and followed him inside. The captain hesitated, but decided not to protest. He went over to the set and the cabin gradually filled up. The men all wanted to hear the latest news. They had the right, now that they were conscious of the danger which hovered over them.

Thanks to Lalande and the Italian technician, Larsen and the doctor could talk to each other again.

The latter asked: 'Please give me a complete list of the drugs in your medicine chest.'

At a sign from the captain, one of the fishermen unhooked the chest from the wall and emptied its contents on the table. Larsen called out the names of the drugs. He frequently made a mistake in the name, but the doctor always corrected him.

Finally, the doctor interrupted him: 'How many ampoules?'

The captain opened the last box and counted: 'Twenty ampoules.'

'Up to what date does it say they can be used? You will find it written on the box somewhere. Look carefully.'

Larsen found the date.

'Excellent. Give an injection to all your men.'

The captain asked one more question: 'What has happened to the serum that you were going to send us?'

'It has been sent.'

In fact, the serum had left, it was on the way. But would it arrive in time? It was travelling at the moment on a

French plane flying towards Berlin. The box was on the floor at the feet of an airman called Sirnet. That was all that Laurette knew about the man to whom she had entrusted the precious packet. It would be enough if somebody was going to Tempelhof to take charge of the packet on arrival. But would Hollendorf and Corbier manage to contact a radio amateur in time? Would he be willing to send the packet off again on the second stage of its journey? If they failed, the chain of good-will which stretched from Africa, via Naples and Paris, to Brunswick would be broken and everything that had been done up to the present would have been done in vain.

04.30 (GMT): In Brunswick

The house which the Americans had rebuilt to accommodate the officers' club was quite new, in ultra-modern architectural style. Its stark lines were reminiscent of the buildings which had sprung up here and there in Germany during the best years of the Weimar republic. It had been bitterly criticised in the city and even more in the military circles of the army of occupation. For a long time regional headquarters had been ashamed of allowing itself to be persuaded by an architect of an advanced school of thought, at a time when an anti-Nazi record was a sufficient recommendation to ensure an order.

And then, all of a sudden, the photographers of *Life* had discovered the building and the situation had been entirely changed. There had been articles in the papers extolling it as an example of the American Army's contribution to the embellishment of German towns. In the highest quarters, it became an accepted fact that the Brunswick Officers' Club was a remarkable building. All the American officials proclaimed it, with all the more conviction because most of

them would never have known it if it had not been pointed out to them.

To reach the club, Hanzi had taken a short cut which led straight up to it, across the hairpin bends of the road. The building was on an eminence which dominated the city. Hanzi was out of breath when he reached the top of the hill. He got into the park without difficulty. A soldier, on sentry duty, was walking up and down in front of the façade.

The soldier frowned when he saw the boy. The war had swept this ex-farm labourer through half a dozen countries without making him forget his village for an instant. Everything he had seen and known had run off him like water off a duck's back. In the same way he had not been able to memorise a single word of a foreign language. He was no more interested in what this brat might want, as he jabbered a few words of halting English, than he was interested in any of the manifestations of this god-damned country. His duty was to stand guard. He fulfilled it conscientiously and refused to be distracted. He waved away the importunate boy with a gesture which was definite and final.

Hanzi was as obstinate as his adversary and much more cunning. He did not waste time arguing, but went around to the other side of the building and looked in at a lighted window.

Five officers were sitting around a green baize cloth under an enormous chandelier of Bohernian crystal, ablaze with electric lights: four who could have wished for nothing better than to stop this game of poker which had started at ten o'clock; and a fifth for whose sake they did not venture to suggest stopping the game. From the very beginning, Charles Bellamy had been the loser. He had been losing all night. And he was still losing at this late hour. He already owed the other players several months of a lieutenant's

pay. He wondered how he was going to manage to pay them. The others were asking themselves the same question. Everybody knew that Charles, a commercial traveller in civilian life, had not a cent to his name.

A hundred times in the course of his twenty-seven years of life, Charles had sworn to give up playing cards. He just could not do it. A born gambler is a gambler for life. He had started playing when he was ten. But, in his long gambling life, he had never had such bad luck as tonight. It seemed so unfair to him that he was waiting for something to turn up to change his luck. Mentally, he was reckoning up the value of the possessions he could pledge, the money he might be able to borrow. The total was not half the sum he had lost. He knew that his friends were thinking the same thing.

Like all gamblers, he was determined to pay up. But how? He had often been on the edge of a catastrophe. Up to now he had always just managed to avoid it. But this time, he was for it.

He was left with the classical solution for ruined gamblers: the revolver shot in the temple, the death of a gentleman. But that seemed ridiculous and old-fashioned to Bellamy. What Charles craved for was something bold, violent, daring, more suited to his temperament. Unfortunately the war was over. Otherwise he would have known what to do; hurl himself at the enemy. He would either have got killed or brought back a medal. He felt like roaring with laughter. He wanted to laugh at himself, laugh at his obsession.

A second Charles seemed to be watching the misfortunes of his double and jeering at him.

Hanzi had jumped on to the window-sill. He bumped against the window panes. The officers raised their heads and saw the little boy who was appealing for help with his

hands. Bellamy got up and opened the window. He started lifting Hanzi by his armpits. The sentry ran up. He was furious at having allowed himself to be circumvented and tried to grab the boy. He was profuse in his apologies. Bellamy signed to him to desist. Nobody would accuse him of neglecting his duty. The boy could come in. Hanzi jumped into the room and blinked at the officers, blinded by the dazzling brightness of the chandelier.

Bellamy put a hand on his shoulder: 'Well, young man, what is the trouble? Why are you still up at this hour?'

The other officers were on their feet and were surrounding Hanzi, pleased by this diversion which gave them a respite from the game.

Hanzi was intimidated. He forgot his instructions. He opened his mouth and began to stammer. He held his father's note out to Bellamy.

The pilot scanned it rapidly: 'What ship is your father talking about?'

'I don't know.'

'Is your father a radio amateur?'

Hanzi wondered whether radio amateurs were authorised or not. So many things were forbidden these days, but they were done all the same. He was suspicious of the occupying forces and so uncertain that he thought it more prudent to be reserved.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean, you don't know? Your father must have a transmitting set, he says so in his note.'

'He has a set, but I don't know whether he uses it.'

Bellamy shrugged his shoulders. The boy was an idiot. He was particularly annoyed because, as soon as he had set eyes on Hanzi, he had realised that the boy had been sent

by Providence to solve his problem. Bellamy pulled on his coat: 'I am going with him.'

The note was passed from hand to hand. His comrades all wanted to advise him at once; the best solution would be to put a phone call through to an American station. The official stations knew best how to deal with this sort of rescue work. There would be no point in getting somebody to take charge of the serum when the plane grounded in Berlin: there would still be the problem of forwarding it on to Oslo. The military hospital would be the best unit to do the job. Or the police. In any case, nothing could be done without advising the authorities.

Bellamy did not agree: 'All that would take too long and there would be too many complications. The serum would arrive too late.'

'And by yourself, will you get it there any sooner?'

'Without a shadow of a doubt, because I won't have to ask anybody's permission.'

'Permission to do what?'

'I don't know. To do what I find necessary. I shall let myself be guided by inspiration.'

'You're talking nonsense.'

'We shall see.'

'You're just being funny at our expense.'

Could it be possible that they did not understand that Bellamy was irresistible tonight, capable of carrying out any mission successfully? That no obstacle would prevent him from making sure of this job of rescue work, which nobody had asked him to undertake? That it was essential for him to do something at once, to throw himself into any enterprise, so long as it was a difficult one?

He had a flash of gambler's inspiration: 'Will you take a bet on it? A bet that I get the serum sent to Oslo?'

‘All by yourself?’

‘All by myself.’

‘What is the bet?’

‘What I have lost, double or quits.’

‘It’s a bet.’

‘Work out the amount while I am away. I haven’t a minute to lose.’

He hurried towards the door, but after taking a few steps, he came back to the table. He took a heavy gold watch out of his pocket and laid it on the green table top.

‘I leave that as security.’ He took Hanzi by the hand: ‘Come along, let’s go.’

He felt himself in terrific form. There was no doubt about it; he was saved. Success depended on his courage and skill. He somehow knew that he could not fail.

From the door, he cried: ‘You might at least wish me good luck.’

They inundated him with jokes and swear words. They were relieved by being able to indulge in this spate of invective after all the hours of strain. Bellamy burst out laughing and hurried out, dragging the frightened child behind him.

04.40 (GMT): In Paris

Corbier could not keep awake. His head fell forward on his chest. He looked pathetically like a beaten man. Fatigue, in his case, had been stronger than rage.

Laurette and Mercier were not sleepy and felt like accomplices. They kept silent for fear of waking the husband. They were savouring these few moments of close and tender intimacy which would be of importance to them in the future, because the spark which had been ignited that night would almost certainly be fanned into flame.

She pointed to the bottle; he filled their two glasses. Laurette was not thirsty, but she drank and enjoyed it all the same. With her glass in one hand, she switched out the standard lamp which was between her and Corbier with the other, as if she wanted to make sure that her husband would not be disturbed. In fact, she had been thinking solely of herself. She was afraid that she was looking anything but her best, with her features drawn by fatigue, and preferred to have her face in shadow. However, as soon as she had switched the light off, it occurred to her that Mercier might interpret her gesture as an attempt to safeguard the privacy between them by not waking her husband.

She blushed. The doctor wondered why? He would have liked to reassure her, but as he did not know what was passing through her mind, he could do nothing.

The phone bell aroused them all. Corbier awoke with a start.

At the other end of the wire, the switchboard operator at the Tempelhof airport, Willi Stromer, was speaking. They tried to make him understand, in their rudimentary German, what they wanted him to do. The answer was barely polite. In a dry official voice Willi explained that he had no authority to give messages to Planes when they landed at the airport. If this Monsieur Sirnet were to come to him and give him the packet of serum, he would be willing to hold it, but that was all that he could or would do.

‘Would you be willing to put the packet on the first Plane leaving for Oslo?’

‘No, sir, I have no authority to do so.’

The generation just before Willi’s had been humble towards foreigners. These were the sons of defeat. But the new generation had reverted to nationalist pride.

Willi did not like Frenchmen in general and, in particular, those at the end of the line annoyed him; he would do nothing without orders. The people who were qualified to give him orders were not there. They were asleep. Heads of services do not work at four in the morning, either in Germany or in Paris. They would be in their offices at nine o'clock. Too late? Why? Why could they not be patient like everybody else? No? They could not? Very well, so much the worse for them. Let them do their own dirty work. Willi had rarely felt himself so important as he did now in adopting a cutting tone with these pseudo-conquerors who were fussing in Paris.

Mercier hung up, furious.

Corbier, at the wireless, had just received a message from Hollendorf. The German announced that he had succeeded in arousing the interest of an American flyer, a Lieutenant Charles Bellamy, in rescuing the men on the ship. Bellamy was proposing to go to Berlin himself to meet Sirnet and make the necessary arrangements for having the serum sent on to Oslo.

'Go on calling Berlin all the same, ' insisted the blind man.

'Of course, I shall take no chances.'

Both of them considered the silence of all the Berlin radio amateurs as a personal affront.

In half an hour, the French plane would reach Tempelhof.

04.50 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

The fishermen had been lined up in the sleeping quarters, naked to the waist, for their injections. The captain passed from one to the other, a swab of cotton wool and syringe in hand.

'This or nothing at all . . .' grumbled Frank.

Larsen shrugged his shoulders: 'You know as much about it as I do.'

The man who had been the first to hear the doctor's appeal and who felt that he was beginning to pass through the crisis, had gone of his own accord to join the sick men in the storage cabin.

When all the men had been injected, the captain was about to return to his cabin, but Frank stopped him. 'Something must be done.'

'What do you expect me to do?'

Frank shouted: 'Do you want us to stay here and wait until we kick the bucket without trying to defend ourselves?'

Once more the ship was seething with rebellion. Everywhere there were shouts and oaths. Larsen calmly stared at the men.

'Have you something to propose?'

Michel stepped forward.

'I have a proposal to make; lower a boat. The men who are still all right could abandon ship.'

'In this weather? You're mad.'

'We'd have a better chance than if we stayed with the sick men.'

There was a loud chorus of approval: 'If you won't let us get rid of them, we'd far better get away ourselves.'

'That would be the only way of saving our lives'

'I'd rather have to cope with a rough sea than with the sickness.'

'I'd a hundred times sooner risk drowning than rot.' The captain had no intention of arguing. They would accuse him of preventing them from helping themselves. He shrugged his shoulders.

'You can do as you please.'

The shouting subsided, as if by magic. Now that they had

been given permission, they felt much less sure of themselves. They would have preferred to see the captain taking the initiative in abandoning ship. Michel asked: 'Do you authorise us to leave the ship?'

Larsen drew himself up to his full height: 'No. I do not authorise you. I forbid you to abandon ship. Only it seems to me that I am no longer master on board my own ship. So, I say to you: do what you want to do. Go and commit suicide because you are cowards, afraid of dying.'

'You won't come with us?' 'Certainly not.'

'Because of. . . Olaf?'

'None of your business.'

Perhaps if Olaf had been well and had insisted on going, Larsen might have followed him, though he was well aware of the folly of such conduct. Up to now, he had not known how much he loved his son.

At the moment, he had only one wish: to get rid of these cowardly fools and go to the storage cabin. For his part, he had no fear of infection.

Frank asked in a low voice, almost as if he were talking to himself: 'Why have you had the engines stopped?'

'Because I have given our position to the doctor in Paris so that he can have the serum dropped by parachute.'

'When will it arrive?'

Larsen did not even bother to answer.

'Do you think that it will get here in time?'

'How should I know? If you've no patience to wait, be off with you.'

'It takes a long time to send off a medicine from Paris. How do we know that it has even been sent off.'

Michel cried: 'What the hell do they care? They're not in any danger of catching the infection. They'll take their time all right. And we, in the meantime, can croak for all they care!'

‘You can’t convince me by yelling at me,’ answered the captain. ‘I am sure that they are doing their best to help us. Will they manage it? That’s another story.’

05.00 (GMT): In Brunswick

When he arrived at the Brunswick airport, Bellamy found a comrade just back from a night flight. He tried to persuade him to accompany him to Berlin. The other man hesitated. Bellamy insisted. He explained that it was an extremely important mission. His colleague asked to see the order. As Bellamy could not produce it, the other categorically refused to go. He considered the risk too great. ‘Wake one of our commanding officers,’ he repeated, ‘and I’ll come with you with the greatest of pleasure. . . .’ But Bellamy had no intention of waking one of his superiors. It would be too difficult and take too long to give an adequate explanation. Besides, he was by no means sure that he would be able to succeed. In any case, he would be delayed and arrive too late. Every minute counted. He ran off, leaving his colleague dumbfounded, towards the hangar in which the plane had just been put away.

‘Roll out the plane,’ he instructed the mechanics. ‘I have to take off right away.’

They were somewhat surprised, but they obeyed.

His colleague stood staring at him from a distance. He was wondering whether he was justified in letting Bellamy take off in his plane. He was in two minds, but finally decided that if no one stopped him as he left the airport, he could deny any knowledge of Bellamy’s acts. Bellamy had seemed in a state of great excitement, and it did not seem wise to start a quarrel with him, which, in any case, could

serve no useful purpose. It was five o'clock in the morning. He was tired and wanted to get to bed as soon as possible. As he walked away, the mechanics were rolling the plane along the runway.

'Gasoline?' asked Bellamy.

She had to be filled up. He peered anxiously at his watch as the gasoline was being pumped in. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket, was about to light it, realised that it would be dangerous and put his lighter back in his pocket. He walked up and down, cigarette dangling from his lips. He had to win his bet. His destiny was no longer a question of luck, but in his own hands.

A mechanic informed him that the plane was ready, and Bellamy climbed in.

05.10 (GMT): In Berlin

On arrival at Tempelhof, Sirnet found no radio amateur waiting to take delivery of the serum. He went to the reception, the airport health office, the police and the customs. No one had heard of the packet. The Air France office was closed until ten o'clock in the morning. No planes were leaving before noon.

The aviator could not forget the anxious expression on the young woman's face at Orly. She had seemed genuinely worried. She had been so positive that the medicine would be called for in Berlin, by a correspondent who would send it on to Oslo. He did not want to break faith with the unknown woman. But what more could he do? To leave no stone unturned, he climbed to the telephone switchboard upstairs. By bad luck, the man who had spoken to Corbier had just gone off duty. His colleague protested, in all good faith, that he had not been told of any message about medical products. Sirnet was disappointed and went down

to the main hall of the airport. He passed in front of the bar, where the switchboard operator was playing crap and was winning; his colleagues were having their breakfast, while waiting for the bus which was to take them to town.

‘Well?’ asked Carmont, ‘did the person who was to call for the packet never turn up?’

Sirnet shrugged his shoulders. He hated having his leg pulled. He had never been able to stand being laughed at. But, having to live in common with his colleagues had taught him to hide his feelings, in order to avoid becoming their butt. The airmen were tired and a little malicious leg-pulling would help to keep them awake. The fair and agitated young woman who had accosted Sirnet was pretty enough to arouse their jealousy. They had envied his luck and now they were not sorry that he had been let down. It remained to be seen what was the real purpose of the fair deceiver and what the packet really contained. Smuggled jewellery? Opium or cocaine? Secret documents?

Sirnet hesitated to tear the wrapping paper.

‘Anyone can get hold of Pasteur Institute packing paper, and it makes an impression on the mugs,’ jeered Carmont.

‘You are not going to claim that you would not have taken the packet if she had given it to you?’

‘At least I would have looked to see what was inside.’

Why hesitate? As nobody had appeared to claim the packet, he had every right to open it. He overcame his reluctance by saying to himself that he might find, inside the packet, some sort of indication which would permit him to forward the packet to the recipient.

But when it was opened, the contents were found to be ampoules with the labels scratched off.

‘That leaves us exactly where we were,’ said someone.

‘We ought to have the stuff analysed,’ proposed another.

‘Why not simply hand it over to the police?’ suggested the steward.

‘Above all, not that,’ cried Carmont. ‘Sirnet would have to explain why he passed the packet through without declaring it. Customs officials do not appreciate the finer points of gallantry.’

But Sirnet was not listening. He was watching an employee who was coming up to their table with a visiting-card in his hand. When he had glanced at it he gave a cry of delighted surprise.

‘Dora!’

An extremely smart and attractive brunette was waving to him through the door which led to the enclosure reserved for the air crews. The others all turned and stared at her.

Sirnet got up, beaming, and said: ‘So long, all of you.’

Carmont stopped him and pointed to the packet: ‘You are forgetting your serum.’

Sirnet answered casually: ‘I leave it with you. Perhaps someone will come and claim it.’

But Carmont was not so easily shaken off: ‘If someone should turn up, they will ask for you. What can we do with the stuff, the rest of us? We can’t leave it on the table, after all. You volunteered to be responsible for it, you have no right to shirk it at this stage.’

The airmen exchanged amused smiles. They were not interested in the serum, but they were pleased that Cannont had thought of a way of delaying Sirnet. The pretty girl could wait. Sirnet, in a highly irritable state of mind, wrapped up the packet as best he could.

‘Wait, I’ll help you,’ suggested Carmont.

But Carmont was obviously fumbling on purpose, to keep Sirnet from leaving. Finally, Sirnet became so impatient that he snatched the cardboard box from Carmont and slipped in into his brief-case.

‘I will bring it back with me tomorrow morning,’ he announced as he hurried away.

‘Don’t be late,’ called out the captain.

‘Don’t worry. I’m never late.’

He disappeared through the door.

‘Who is Dora?’ asked the steward.

‘A little German tart,’ answered Carmont casually.

‘She’s infernally good-looking,’ sighed the captain.

05.15 (GMT): At Tituia

The men’s eyes ached with fatigue. But they could not sleep.

Half-dozing, Dorzit was thinking of his harvest; if he had adopted a bolder, more progressive policy, he could have grown a much larger quantity of cotton. He earned a good living. But he had never managed to accumulate any reserves. He had just managed to save a minimum for his old age. And the years were passing. Dorzit felt strong enough still, but one day he would be forced to retire and go back to Europe. For years his main preoccupation had been to ensure a peaceful old age and a good rest. But, as old age approached, he began to have doubts. First of all, where would he go? For a long time he had thought of the village where he had been born in Calvados. A flat country, with cold, wet winters but lots of trees and flowers. He claimed that he had had more than enough of the sun, the heat and the niggers. But, two years ago, he had gone back to France for his holidays and had spent a month in his village. He had discovered that he had lost any desire to live there. He said, like everybody else: I

don't want to finish in this filthy country. But he now knew that he would die there, and that it would be best so. Only, to go and live in Africa, to struggle for years with the object of having a peaceful life afterwards, and to find out that this 'afterwards' would never come and that a peaceful life meant nothing to you after all, it was all rather absurd.

Van Rielst hardly opened his mouth. He went on drinking in silence. He drank with a sort of desperate concentration, opening his mouth only to pour a drink down his throat. His problems were of no interest to the others. He had found that out a long time ago. Actually, his problems boiled down to one problem: Van Rielst was frightened of dying. When he had last seen his doctor, the fellow had shaken his head; his condition was deteriorating rapidly. Van Rielst knew it, he could feel it. The disease was growing and consuming him. Why do you go on drinking too much? the medical man had asked. Why? Didn't the doctor remember what he had told Van Rielst after his first examination? That he was a condemned man, that the most he could hope for would be another two or three years. Can a man who knows that avoid drinking?

Etienne, at that moment, loathed the wireless. He bore a grudge against Dorzit, Van Rielst, Lalande, all those unknown people bending over their sets, whose voices were talking to each other from one corner of the world to another. He disliked the fishermen, the doctor and himself. His child was about to come into the world and he would not be there. What wind of folly had swept him away? The white men's world was not his world. He did not feel at home in it. 'Rey treated him as an inferior. He accepted the situation. As if he were suffering from an original and unforgivable taint, his black skin. He was a Christian, but he did not really believe that all men were equal as the

gospel preached. It seemed to him a polite gesture on the part of the white man, a concession for which he was duly grateful but which should not be taken too literally. For their sakes he had renounced the traditions and faith of his ancestors. He was shunned by his own people and not welcomed by the others. Perhaps his generation was a generation of transition and it would be different for his child. But Etienne could not delude himself. His child would be black, too. He would not be allowed to play with European children. He would be turned away. This was the first time that doubt had crept into Etienne's mind. Up to now, he had been so convinced of the righteousness of the cause which Father Gross had preached.

The phone rang. Lalande unhooked the receiver. The police sergeant at Zobra announced:

'I have the honour to inform you that the woman Loiseau has successfully given birth to a daughter.'

Etienne burst out laughing. There was nothing nervous or hysterical about his laughter; it was simply the expression of joy unconfined, heartfelt, irresistible happiness which, little by little, infected the others.

Dorzit pounded him on the back:

'Bravo, another piccaninny in the world! There's always room.'

Van Rielst pulled a flask out of his pocket and said gravely:

'We must drink to that.'

Starting with Etienne, the flask passed from hand to hand. They all drank straight from the flask. Lalande, who drank next after the negro, carefully wiped the neck of the bottle.

'We must tell our friends,' proposed Dorzit.

'Do you think so?' asked Lalande.

In fact, he found it an excellent suggestion. Waiting up together for so long had ended by forging a bond of solidarity between the radio amateurs.

05.17 (GMT): In Naples

The news made them all smile.

‘A little negress, how sweet,’ exclaimed Carmela.

‘The blacks have softer skins than we have,’ observed the sergeant gravely, ‘especially the women.’

The others nodded their heads. Ippolito thought of the Abyssinian war. He had been a fascist at the time. In spite of that fact, he had never been able to hate the enemy. He was willing to fight the poor devils, kill them because it was an indispensable preliminary to building the Italian Colonial Empire, but hate them, why? These unfortunate natives were inoffensive; they attacked a modern army with lances, bows and arrows. They charged tanks on horseback and passively submitted to being bombed from the air. Ippolito would gladly have adopted a little blackamoor, like some of his pals, if the captain had not severely called them to order.

‘I shall inform Paris of the birth of the child,’ declared the police technician, delighted to have something to do.

05.20 (GMT): In Paris

In Paris, the news of the birth slightly relieved the atmosphere of surcharged tension in the drawing-room in the Champs-de-Mars. There were no comments, but smiles broke out on their three anxious faces. The thoughts which were obsessing them were fermenting in their heads. The slightest spark would be enough to cause an explosion. They were waiting for an explosion, even hoping for it. It

would be the only way to put an end to this abominable situation. Each one of them felt an urge to lay their cards on the table and talk openly and frankly.

They took in the news of the birth, but it did not mean enough to them to divert the course of their thoughts.

A child . . . If Corbier had been given a child by Laurette, would it have made him any happier? It was still a possibility, if he wanted it. The blind man weighed the pros and the cons; a child would provide him with an occupation, it would help him to pass the time and, above all, it would remove his fear of losing Laurette. She was already tied by her duty as a wife, she would never think of trying to break the double bond of a son and husband. So much for the pros. But the cons seemed to weigh even more heavily on the scales; to begin with, Corbier had always considered that bringing a child into the world was a crushing responsibility, even when he had been in full possession of all his faculties. There is always an element of cowardice in the bravest of men. Then there was the painful aspect of his relationship with a child who could only know his father in his present state, incapacitated, and the appalling prospect of never being able to set eyes on his offspring. But the most conclusive, and the most sordid reason of all, which he was reluctant to admit even to himself, was that Corbier could not face the prospect of Laurette's affections being showered upon anyone else, even on his own child. He was afraid of being deprived of part of Laurette's love, and he knew that he would not be able to tolerate it.

Laurette had also been thinking of a child, born of herself and Corbier. But she had rejected the idea, almost with a feeling of repulsion. She then thought of having a child by Mercier. She wanted a child which would be hers

exclusively. The man should only be an instrument. Why, then, did she not want a child by her husband? Laurette realised, much to her dismay, that what revolted her was the idea of sleeping with Corbier. How had she been able to put up with it until now? My God, my God, begged Laurette, have pity on me, do not prolong my agony! Everything must be as it was before she had met Mercier. Otherwise, she felt that she would go mad. This tumultuous upheaval inside her only lasted a few seconds and she suddenly felt quite calm inside again, almost happy. She saw herself as a stranger would see her. She felt lucid, almost cynical, and began examining her conscience. What was the best way of overcoming this crisis, which was incontestably due to Mercier? Never see him again, or sleep with him so as to get him out of her system? She felt slightly prejudiced in favour of the second solution. But was she really objective about it all or was she merely trying to find excuses for doing what she wanted? Laurette concluded that she was, in fact, objective. Besides, she did not really care. She knew only too well what was going to happen.

05.21 (GMT): In Brunswick

Corbier had informed Hollendorf of the birth of the child. 'It's better to have a girl than a boy,' said the German. 'At least girls do not have to fight wars.'

He went into the next room to have a look at his son. Hanzi was sleeping curled up like a hunting dog, a new habit of his. Hollendorf had also observed that he often smiled in his sleep. Poor little fellow! He was making up for lost time. Life had not always been easy for him and his opportunities for enjoying himself when he was awake were few and far between. His father had been luckier than

he was. Hollendorf wondered why, whenever he thought of his own childhood, the same pictures always flitted through his mind; he could see himself, with his father, his mother and his brothers in a large carriage loaned to them by an uncle for the holidays. They were in the habit of going to the Alps, in Bavaria. A wooden chalet in the midst of a pine wood, with a lake which was perfect for bathing and snow peaks all around them.

Hollendorf gave a sigh and went back to his set.

He started calling again: 'Hallo, Berlin . . . calling all stations. Brunswick calling . . . I am switching over to reception.'

A calm voice answered: 'Go ahead, Brunswick, I hear you.'

Hollendorf explained the circumstances; the ship in distress, the epidemic, the serum on its way. The Frenchman Sirnet who had almost certainly arrived in Berlin without finding anybody to meet him. The American Bellamy who had left too late and who proposed to take charge of the medicine and send it on to Oslo.

He paused and asked: 'Can you hear what I am saying.'

'Perfectly, go on.'

When Hollendorf had finished, he asked: 'Can you do something to help?'

'Perhaps.'

'Who are you?'

Hollendorf was convinced that whoever it was had heard him repeating this question several times, but did not want to answer. The mysterious correspondent had gone off the air and Hollendorf's calls once more fell into a well of silence.

05.23 (GMT): In Berlin

It had been a Red Army jamming station which had picked up the message. The office was furnished simply and without taste. Photographs were hanging on the walls: Stalin, Lenin, Bulganin and Krushev.

The Russian officer who was listening in at the wireless set rapidly scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper.

He called, a soldier came in. The officer handed him the paper.

‘Take this to the commanding officer at the base.

The soldier saluted and went out. The officer reflected for a moment; his fingers were playing with the pencil. Mechanically, the Russian started sketching. He was a poor draughtsman, he drew like a small child. He drew some undulating lines, which were supposed to represent waves, around the ship and, above it, the plane bringing the serum.

‘Comrade lieutenant.’

The officer started. The soldier had come back into the room.

‘Shall I give the note to the motor-cycle messenger or can it wait until tomorrow?’

‘It must be taken immediately.’

The Soviet officer’s hand crumpled the drawing paper into a ball. He dismissed the man and rapped out crossly: ‘Another time, kindly knock on the door before you come in.’

05.30 (GMT): In Berlin – Tempelhof

Bellamy's plane had landed on the military airstrip. The formalities wasted a little more of his precious time. He ran towards the great hall for the passengers. He looked first for the Air France office, which was closed. By this time, almost everybody at the airport had heard rumours of the serum. The Frenchman had knocked at all the doors, hoping to find the person who was to fetch the packet. He had not found anybody willing to take charge of it. Infernal idiots, all of them! Bellamy fumed with rage.

When he came across the switchboard operator who remembered the phone call from Paris, he exploded. Why, in heaven's name, had he not told his comrade before going down to the bar? How could he explain being given an important message and not even taking the trouble to pass it on to the airport authorities, to the port health office and to the crew of the plane when it arrived? The arrogant young man, who had felt so pleased with himself for answering the unknown callers from Paris in a supercilious tone of voice, was overwhelmed by this storm of words and did not dare open his mouth. Only the bright red colour which rose to his face and neck betrayed his discomfiture. He did not feel humiliated; he had made a mistake and muttered an apology. But at the bottom of his heart he felt nothing but hatred and dumb rancour. After all, all the occupying forces were hateful. He remembered the bombed houses, the streets in flames, women being raped, furniture being smashed.

An employee came up to the air force lieutenant. He was

holding a piece of paper in his hand; he had traced Sirnet's name and address. The Frenchman was staying at the Hotel Am Zoo.

Bellamy jumped into a taxi.

05.35 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

The men were sitting on deck in a circle. They were talking to each other in low voices, like conspirators. It was, in fact, a sort of plot which was being hatched at Frank and Michel's instigation. They were planning to abandon ship at dawn. They had made up their minds. The boat was ready. She was to be loaded with provisions, all the provisions there were on board, baggage and a supply of water; rum too.

'It will be my job to distribute the rations,' declared Frank.

Peter was the only one who was still hesitating: 'Abandoning a ship on the high seas, that's called desertion.'

'If you don't want to come with us,' replied Michel, 'it will be all the better for us. You're an old man, you would only be in our way.'

'Age has nothing to do with it,' protested Peter heatedly. 'I know the sea better than you do, because I have been a seaman for many more years. That is why I spoke of the law of the sea.'

'Your precious laws, do they allow for plague on board? For the wireless being out of action? For being immobilised in the middle of the night?'

'All I say is that we ought to think twice before disobeying all the rules of discipline and running the risk of being hauled up before a court.'

'I've done all my thinking, and done it for the others too.'

Peter wanted to argue the matter, but Frank moved towards him brandishing his enormous fist.

‘You’re going to stay here. We wouldn’t take you if you got down on your bended knees and begged us. That’s final. But I advise you not to interfere with the others. If you do, I’ll see that you pay for it. Do you understand?’

‘I’m not saying a word,’ groaned the terrified old man. ‘You know what you are doing, and so does Michel. You are right. I have nothing against it. I was thinking aloud, that’s all.’

Michel, exasperated by this interminable spate of words, shouted: ‘Shut your mouth!’

‘My mouth, my mouth . . .,’ repeated Peter, putting his hand in front of it. ‘That’s right, I always talk too much.’

And he shuffled off, dragging his feet.

When Michel had raised his voice, all eyes had turned towards the storage cabin. The fishermen hoped that the captain had not heard.

Larsen was standing in the dark and evil-smelling cabin. The sick men were lying on their mattresses. They clung to the captain who was their last hope. The cabin-boy was sobbing.

‘Come, my boy, be a man.’

The boy made an effort to hold back his tears. But he could not help trembling all over, and his teeth were chattering.

The only one who had not stirred was Olaf. He watched his father approaching, and continued staring fixedly in front of him. His expression evinced neither fear nor any other emotion. Larsen bent over his son’s mattress. He raised his hand to stroke the matted hairs which sweat had stuck to his temples. But he dared not stretch the hand out

farther. Olaf did not seem to have noticed the timid, incipient gesture.

‘Contact has been re-established. The serum is on its way.’

The captain had spoken solely to break the unbearable silence between them, to start a conversation. Olaf wanted to pretend that he had not heard, he wanted to go on playing at indifference. He should have kept his mouth shut. But it had been too strong for him; the need for reassurance had been stronger than any other sentiment, even his hostility towards his father.

His trembling voice betrayed his anxiety: ‘When will it arrive, this serum?’

This question obsessed everybody on board. Faced by this smooth-faced youngster, features drawn with pain and anguish, the father hesitated, unbearably moved. He would have liked to say something to restore his son’s self-confidence, he searched for reassuring words to allay his fears; he could not find them; alas, he had no experience in lying.

He muttered: ‘Very soon, I hope.’

A stupid answer; he felt like smacking his own face. Of course you hope, fool. Everybody is hoping that the serum will arrive soon. What Larsen really wanted to say was that he would do anything in the world to save Olaf, that if he could have the disease transferred to himself, he would gladly do so. Perhaps words were not needed to convey his meaning to his son.

Olaf spoke again in a pleading voice: ‘You will look after Christine, when I am.. .’

He could not finish the sentence: When I am dead – he could not pronounce the dread word. A wave of terror swept through him and paralysed him; a sob rose to his throat. He made a brave and unsuccessful attempt to stifle it. He felt ashamed and turned his face towards the wall.

Larsen felt penetrated with love for his son, as never before. He picked him up in his arms as he had done when he was a little boy. He had finally managed to break through the hard shell which isolated him from his fellows, to set his heart free; he became expansive:

‘Nothing will happen to you. You will get over this. We shall go back home together. And your mother will bake an apple tart, as she has always done when you get back. I used to dislike it, but, little by little, when I saw that you enjoyed it, I finished up by liking it too. I never told you. Your mother doesn’t know it. You see, I am telling you all my stupid secrets.’

‘And Christine?’

‘I’ll do as you wish. I will go and ask her parents, if you like.’

Larsen now felt certain that he could not wish for a better daughter-in-law than the one his son had chosen.

Olaf, too, felt that all hostility towards his father had melted away.

‘Be careful you don’t catch the infection.’

Larsen laughed merrily; this was the first time that the boy had shown any interest in his welfare.

‘What an idea! It’s nothing at all. You’ll soon be on your feet again. I promise you.’

He was sincere in his belief that he would prevent the disease from harming his son. To have been able to make contact with Olaf again gave him unlimited confidence in his own powers, a blind faith in the future.

05.50 (GMT): In Berlin

The Kurfürstendam; a taxi drove down the vast deserted avenue. The lights were on in a single bar and were reflected on the blind fronts of shops and houses.

Cigarette in mouth, two whores were strolling up and down the pavement; a passer-by was reading a letter under a lamp-post. A policeman glanced at him suspiciously. The first passengers were arriving at the underground station, sleepy-eyed and sluggish; a few women.

The taxi stopped in front of the hotel 'Am Zoo.'

'Wait here for me.'

Bellamy pushed the door. In the hall, the night porter who was dozing in an armchair, his feet on a chair, with a meal on a tray beside him, jumped to his feet.

'Mr. Sirnet's room?' asked the American.

The porter went to his desk and consulted the register. Bellamy looked at the clock on the wall; he was consumed with impatience. The hands were going round too quickly. And this dumb fool was taking an age to find a name on the list. . . .

The porter had found it at last: 'Mr. Sirnet has an apartment, rooms 87/89.'

'What floor?'

'Second.'

Bellamy hurried towards the elevator. The lift-boy was not there. The American turned towards the stairs. He bounded up them, taking several steps at each stride. The German called him back; he wanted to stop him from going upstairs until he had announced his visit to Sirnet. Bellamy shrugged his shoulders and went on climbing the stairs, without bothering to answer. The porter gave it up as a bad job and went back to his armchair with a sigh; so long as he was not reprimanded! But try and argue with an allied officer in uniform!

Bellamy banged hard on the door of apartment 87/89.

Very soon, a young man in pyjamas opened the door; it was Carmont, Sirnet's companion.

The American tried to explain for some time, but Carmont did not seem able to take in what he was saying. On his advice, Carmont went into the bathroom to bathe his face with cold water. When he came back, he was able to answer Bellamy's questions. Unfortunately, Sirnet had taken the ampoules of serum away with him. He had gone home with his mistress, who had called for him at the airport.

'Do you know the woman's name and address?' 'Her name is Dora Kern, and she lives at 126 Leipzigerstrasse.'

'Thank you.'

Bellamy clattered down the stairs, rushed through the hall and found his taxi still waiting in front of the door. He shouted the address at the driver. The man looked at him with astonishment.

'What are you waiting for? Get going.'

'Do you know where Leipzigerstrasse is? In the Soviet sector.'

Bellamy hesitated for a moment. Then he ordered: 'Take me there all the same.'

'Are you actually going there in uniform?' asked the dumbfounded driver.

Bellamy was taken aback. He had not thought of this complication. An American found at night in uniform in the Soviet sector would soon find himself at the police station. And this was not the moment to risk a delay of that kind. Mechanically, he looked at his wrist-watch; too much time lost already!

'Wait for me. I'll be only a few minutes.'

In the hall, the porter was finishing his meal. He raised his eyebrows when he saw the American run past him. Bellamy climbed the stairs again, arrived in front of

Carmont's door and knocked. The Frenchman opened the door at once; he had not gone back to bed. He had been reading.

'Lend me your civilian clothes. Quickly. The Leipzigerstrasse is in the Soviet sector.'

Carmont had been thinking. He now regretted that he had made fun of Sirnet at the airport. Anything he could do to facilitate the despatch of the serum he would do willingly. The American was getting impatient.

'Hurry! We must not lose a minute.'

Carmont's clothes did not fit Bellamy. Fortunately, Sirnet's clothes were there. Grey trousers, a sports jacket.

While the American was changing, Carmont announced: 'I am coming with you. I might be useful.'

'As you please, but hurry. I can't wait.'

His arrogant tone annoyed the Frenchman; he said nothing. In a few seconds he was ready. The two men went down together and packed themselves into the taxi.

Inside, they looked at each other for the first time. Carmont took a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and held it out to Bellamy.

'No, thank you.'

Carmont lit his cigarette: 'Do you think that you can get the serum off to Oslo quickly?'

'I don't know.'

'It was idiotic not to have let us know sooner. Sirnet was waiting for you at the airport.'

The taxi was driving through a wide street in which all the houses had been demolished by bombing, which had made great changes in the centre of the city. Suddenly, a little farther on, the advertising posters disappeared from the walls, the houses seemed darker, the streets less well

kept; everywhere there were slogans in German.

‘The Soviet sector,’ said Carmont with a smile.

Carmont was familiar with the Soviet sector. He often went there to dine with friends, or to buy presents for his Parisian lady friends. Everything was cheaper in East-marks. And, besides, an object from behind the iron curtain seemed to have a special charm for the recipient and endowed the donor with unquestionable prestige. It was out of the ordinary.

The taxi stopped in front of a squat, solidly-built house dating back to the period before the 1914 war. There was an electric press-button at the side of the front door which was supposed to open the door but which was not working.

‘Have you a match?’ asked Bellamy.

As he held them out, Carmont thought that Bellamy might have at least said ‘Please.’ But this was not the time to stand on ceremony. He felt angry with himself for being such a stickler for the conventions. The American lit a match. He found the list of tenants: Dora Kern . . . fifth floor.

A few moments later, the young woman who was sleeping by the side of her lover was startled into wakefulness by a loud knock on the door. She was young and her beauty was flawless, even on waking; her agitation even increased her charm. But Sirnet had not even looked at her. He was distinctly alarmed. His watch showed a quarter past six. It could not be the milkman, so it must be the police. The Frenchman jumped out of bed; his papers were not in order for the Soviet zone, and at this time in the morning a casual love affair was not an explanation which would find favour in the eyes of the Volks police; the members of the so-called people’s police had anything but romantic souls.

Half-dressed, he slipped into the back room. They had already discussed what to do in the event of a police raid and had sketched out a plan of escape.

‘Hurry up,’ whispered Dora. The knocking became louder and more peremptory.

‘The woman next door must have denounced me, I am sure of it.’

Sirnet stepped out on to the balcony outside the end room; he finished dressing in the cold, but he was oblivious to the temperature. He had carefully thought out his itinerary in case of danger; in one jump he could be on the roof of the next-door house, and it would be child’s play to slide down into the courtyard. For the moment he flattened himself against the wall, while Dora shut the glass door. Then she snatched up a dressing-gown in the bathroom, threw it over her shoulders and shuffled slowly towards the front door.

‘Who is there?’

‘Open up,’ called two voices imperiously.

‘What do you want?’

They started banging on the door again. Fearing that the noise would wake everybody in the building, Dora decided to open the door. Bellamy and Carmont burst into the flat.

‘M. Sirnet?’

Dora did her best to pretend surprise.

‘I know nobody of that name. You have come to the wrong address.’

‘You are Dora Kern all right?’ asked Carmont.

‘Yes. What about it?’

‘You have nothing to fear from us. It was Sirnet himself who told me that he was coming here.’

Dora was highly suspicious of police methods. She insisted:

‘I don’t understand what you are talking about. I have already told you that I am alone in the flat.’

Bellamy broke in, in his turn, using English interspersed with a few words of German to make it more comprehensible:

‘Please do not waste our time, mademoiselle. We know that Sirnet is here. It is most urgent that we should see and speak to him.’

He had taken her by the arm in the hope of convincing her. Dora tore her arm away, brusquely. The time had come to pretend to lose her temper, she thought, and she raised her voice.

‘Please leave me alone,’ she said haughtily. ‘What right have you to force yourselves into my flat? I don’t know any M. Sirnet.’

Carmont lost patience and interrupted her without ceremony: ‘You know him perfectly well. I saw you with him last night at the airport.’

He had raised his voice and Sirnet heard him. He recognised his colleague’s voice and drummed against the panes of the glass door with his fingers. Guided by the sound, the two men made their way to the back room. Dora followed them. Sirnet was signalling to let him in. She obeyed. As soon as he was inside the room, the airman started to sneeze. Every time he opened his mouth to speak he was interrupted by a violent bout of sneezing. Carmont burst out laughing, but Bellamy was too wrought up to appreciate the humour of the situation. Dora had at last understood that she was not dealing with the police and that she had been frightened without cause. She relaxed and started laughing as well. Finally, Sirnet was able to talk. Yes, he had the ampoules of serum which he had brought from Paris. He was only too happy to hand them over to the American if the latter had a means of shipping

them to their destination in a hurry. The two men left with the precious packet, and the couple went back to bed.

‘Lucky dog, that Sirnet,’ commented Carmont on the way downstairs.

There was no answer from Bellamy.

The taxi was still waiting in front of the door. The driver, seeing them come down with a parcel, wondered uneasily what an American officer could have been doing in the Soviet sector. He felt convinced that he had been transporting spies.

‘To Tempelhof.’

The chauffeur set the taxi in motion, but he was by no means reassured. What could he say to the East-police if they stopped him? How could he explain that he had no part in this business? A poor taxi-driver could not ask people a lot of questions before taking them into his cab. Suddenly, the idea occurred to him that they might ask him whether he knew that his passenger was an American officer. How could he deny it, seeing that at Tempelhof, where he had first picked up his fare, he had been in uniform?

The driver was on the point of stopping the taxi. He would explain to them politely; you gentlemen had better take another taxi, the driver will not know that you are American. But another thought struck him. He himself lived in the western sector. If he were to make the officer angry, he might take his number, and poor Michael Lorben would be for it, on the other side this time; Soviet spy, the Americans would say, fifth column. If, on top of it all, the American were to get himself arrested after leaving his taxi, who could prove to him that it was not Michael Lorben who had denounced him? Ah, it was no fun being a German nowadays and trying to live a quiet life!

And now, like a bad dream, the driver's worst fears were proved amply justified.

A shrill whistle. He had not even noticed that he had reached the boundary line.

He ground to a stop. Two Volks policemen came up and looked inside the vehicle. They had not stopped him when he had crossed over into the Soviet sector on the way out; it was just his luck that they should do so now that they had picked up that accursed packet.

'What is in that box?'

'A medicine for urgent delivery.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Tempelhof.'

'Your papers?'

The fat was in the fire. What were this French airman and this American officer doing in the Russian zone? They had great difficulty in making themselves understood. Bellamy's English mixed with German made a poor impression. Carmont knew no language except French.

The Vopos climbed into the taxi.

'Drive us to the command post.'

The driver felt like trying to explain and clear himself. But the policemen had paid no attention to him, and he had enough sense not to talk. He had far better hold his tongue. The taxi stopped in front of headquarters. The Vopos got out with its two occupants. Bellamy was still holding the packet in his hand.

'You can go,' said one of the Vopos to the driver.

Michael Lorben, who had not yet grasped what the man had said, made no move.

'Get the hell out of here,' shouted the policeman.

This time, the driver was only too glad to obey instructions and drove off at full speed.

Inside, the men who had brought in Bellamy and Carmont

were making a report to their chief, who proceeded to question them in person. He ordered them to open the packet. The Vopos were perplexed at the sight of the ampoules.

The American began to lose his temper: ‘You, call commander, your chief, boss. . . We explain. . . Bring interpreter . . . He understand . . . Very important . . . Very urgent. . .’

He threw a despairing glance at the clock on the wall which registered seven o’clock.

The policeman reassured them. The military authorities had been informed. A Russian officer was on his way. And, tired of listening to their protests, he sent them out to wait on a bench, in the entrance hall.

They sat down side by side in melancholy silence.

‘Coffee?’ proposed a Vopos.

‘Why not?’

Time passed. If Bellamy had not been fuming with rage, he would have been able to go to sleep. He would then have been able to forget the serum and the *Maria Sorensen*.

But an idea of sleep was quickly driven from his mind as he remembered his habitual and now desperate concern with the vital question of success or failure. He refused to consider the possibility of defeat, of losing even one hand in his perpetual gamble with life. Up to now, he had always managed to win, to extricate himself successfully, sometimes at the last moment, from situations which seemed hopeless. If he allowed himself to be beaten this time, he would feel that his luck had abandoned him, once and for all. If he lost faith in his luck, he would lose faith in himself, and without that ... He preferred not to think about it. He must win, there must be no faltering. He would take good care not to go to sleep.

Carmont, for his part, was wondering how he had got mixed up in this business. He had been nice and comfortable in his room at the hotel, nobody had asked him to go with Bellamy. Why had he followed him? A sense of duty, of human solidarity? But in the end Carmont was honest with himself; he had followed the American out of sheer curiosity. To be able to boast, afterwards, about an adventure which, you might be sure, would lose nothing in the telling. For once he would have a really exciting story to tell, if all went well: 'When I was arrested by the Reds ' There should always be an erotic note in these stories, to make them more interesting. On this occasion this element was certainly not lacking.

A heavy black car stopped in front of the door. A captain in Red Army uniform jumped out; fair, head shaven, square shoulders, spectacles, short legs in immaculately polished high boots.

Bellamy started to explain with the help of the interpreter. The Russian interrupted him:

'I know all about it. It's the serum for the trawler *Maria Sorensen*.'

Bellamy and Carmont stared at him, open-mouthed with astonishment. Gravely, the officer explained: 'We were informed by our central wireless listening-in station.'

Carmont said quickly: 'As you know all about it, we should be greatly obliged to you if you would give orders for the packet to be given back to us. We are going to send it to Oslo, where it will be taken by Red Cross plane and dropped on the ship by parachute.'

'No, sir.'

He spoke calmly but firmly. Bellamy and the Frenchman protested: 'You refuse to give us the serum?'

'I refuse.'

‘Why?’

‘It has been confiscated.’

‘But, confound it . . . There are men in danger of losing their lives who are depending on the stuff.’

‘I know.’

‘And you are trying to prevent us from sending it to them?’

‘That is not what I said.’

Bellamy exploded: ‘Is this your idea of a joke?’

No answer from the officer. He gave an order to a Volks policeman: ‘Have the packet taken to my car.’

The man obeyed.

Bellamy was beside himself with fury; what he had been told about the Reds was true, less than the truth! The Russians were bandits, enemies of civilisation, brutes. He felt like shouting and hitting out. The blood rushed to his head. He vociferated that he was an American citizen, such treatment was monstrous, he was not to be intimidated, and so on. But the Soviet officer merely smiled:

‘We have planes, too. Much faster than yours.’

Bellamy was taken aback. With a great effort, he repressed the insults which he had been about to hurl at the officer, but he could not think of anything to say. He looked at Carmont, who merely smiled. The fool looked as if the whole business amused him. The American clenched his fists. He would gladly have punched that smiling face.

When the car started, Bellamy had still not opened his mouth.

The Volks policeman tapped him on the shoulder:

‘You are free to go where you please.’

Another one who was pulling his leg. The American had never regretted as bitterly as that night that he was too slow-witted to retort quickly, much less make a witty

repartee. He would have given anything to nail the man to the spot with some crushing retort. Great men, in such circumstances, were always capable of some memorable witticism. Or so they said.

Once, out of the post, they walked down a wide avenue lined by trees. The city was beginning to wake up. The early risers were hurrying towards the underground stations and bus-stops. A grey crowd of men and women with pale faces, old wrinkled overcoats, cracked and down-at-heel boots, women without beauty or pride in their appearance, heads wrapped in dull-coloured scarves, legs covered in wool or coarse cotton.

Very rarely, a young face, fresh and arrogant, stood out from this mass of the vanquished. Young fellows swaggering along with a martial air, caps firmly planted on their heads, cigarettes dangling from their lips, whistling as they walked. Hard-faced young women faced the world with an insolent and defiant expression, in leather jackets cut in the masculine fashion – Carmont turned around and looked at them covetously. He thought that it was his duty to come back some day and see if he could contrive an affair with one of these bold female comrades. It would be an amusing experience. Besides, these women were probably not too particular whom they slept with; free love was the party line, was it not? And what a fascinating tale to tell his Parisian lady friends! ‘At that time I had as my mistress a little bolshevik, she was wild and savage and always carried a revolver; she thought of nothing but the Revolution, which did not prevent her from knowing as many refinements of vice as any woman in the bourgeois world . . .’

Bellamy kicked a can violently and startled the Frenchman, but succeeded in changing his train of thought. The can rolled across the asphalt, making a great din.

Bellamy gave it another kick. But it was far from sufficient to relieve his feelings.

‘They made monkeys out of us,’ he muttered. ‘A lot of swine . . . swine . . . swine . . .’

He went on repeating the same word, unable to find anything else to say. His rage made him look so comic that Carmont could hardly restrain himself from laughing out loud.

07.00 (GMT): On board the ‘Maria Sorensen’

Dawn. The sun was rising over the Arctic Ocean.

The men were busy with the boat. It was all settled. They were leaving. They had loaded the boat with provisions and lowered it overboard. The men had guilty consciences. They realised that they were deserting the ship and abandoning their shipmates. Time had somewhat attenuated their panic; they were less afraid of the disease. During the last few hours, only one more man had succumbed to the infection. He had gone to join the other sick men in the storage cabin. If the decision had to be reconsidered at this stage, many more of them would have hesitated. But it was too late to back out now. Frank and Michel were in charge of operations. The last bits and pieces of baggage were being lowered into the boat.

Old Peter was wandering over the deck like a lost soul. He was being torn in two. He had no desire to go with the others, but he was afraid to stay on board. Larsen, who seemed to have lost interest in what was happening on board, had shut himself up in his cabin and never came out.

As he looked at his shipmates, Peter’s expression was that of a beaten dog. They pretended not to notice him. In the end, the old man appealed to Michel; they had always been good friends. For one moment of weakness, a few ill-

chosen words, he did not deserve to be left behind. Michel turned a deaf ear to him and refused to answer. Peter realised that the moment would soon come when it would be too late. They would go without him. He became distracted; he groaned; he begged; he sobbed; he accosted all the fishermen in turn. Embarrassed, they were unwilling to ask any favours for him. Finally, Frank gave Peter a brutal push towards the boat.

‘Get in and keep your trap shut.’

‘Thank you. Oh I thank you. You’re a good scout.’

‘Get in, I said, instead of jabbering like a parrot.’

Peter would have liked to ask permission to fetch his duffel-bag, but he was frightened that Frank might change his mind and did not dare move away. He got into the boat, which pushed off and began to move over the grey water. The captain came out of his cabin, looked out towards the boat for a moment, then walked down the narrow steps towards the storage cabin and the sick men.

07.20 (GMT): In Paris

Bellamy had telephoned to Hollendorf. And Hollendorf had called Paris. A Soviet plane, carrying the serum, had just taken off from Berlin and was making for Oslo. It was now essential to warn the Norwegian authorities in time for them to prepare an ambulance plane to transport the medicine as far as the ship.

‘Will you phone from here?’ asked Corbier.

The doctor declined. The call had to be made from the Pasteur Institute, from hospital to hospital. The radio amateurs had played their part. It was up to the officials to take over.

Mercier took his leave. When he rose to his feet, all three of them had felt embarrassed. A sort of balance had been

established between them which no longer existed; but the atmosphere soon cleared. The blind man shook the doctor's hand. He was almost cordial. As if the morning, by cutting the adventure short, had permanently broken the threads which had united them during the night. Everything became strangely normal again.

Mercier shook hands with Laurette: 'Good-bye, madame.'

He himself listened, stupefied, to these formal words and his own indifferent tone.

Laurette answered in the same tone: 'Good-bye, doctor. It was very nice to see you again.'

Then he said: 'I will give you a ring.'

Had he imagined the gleam of triumph in her eye? She murmured: 'Certainly. Please me. I should like you to.'

He thought that he had detected an undercurrent of feeling in her voice and went on thinking about it all the way back to the Pasteur Institute. But he also felt depressed. It was, from his point of view, much to be regretted that what might have happened had not in fact occurred. They had been on the verge of something genuine, a strong and moving passion, which might have been unique in both their lives and which they would never have another chance of experiencing. They would meet again, he was sure of that. They might even sleep together. But their relationship would be established on an inferior plane of feeling, very different from what might have been. They would merely be chasing a mirage, trying to revive the almost perfect understanding, the extraordinary attraction which had drawn them together for a few moments. If they had allowed themselves to be swept away by it, they would have known such blissful happiness as is

rarely given to human beings to enjoy, and never twice in one lifetime. Both of them had been too timid, too cowardly. Mercier wondered whether he might not be wiser to forget her, not see her again, not spoil a memory which further meetings would only smirch. But he was being incurably romantic. He was well aware of it, just as he knew that in a few hours he would not be able to resist the urge to phone the Corbiers. The familiar surroundings of his office, neutral and commonplace, finally dissipated the fumes of the night and its heady adventures.

He put a call through to Oslo and, as he waited to speak to the hospital, he sent a lab. boy out to fetch him some coffee. The boy came back in a few minutes with a tray. Mercier was dunking his crescent-shaped roll in the coffee and reading a paper when the phone rang.

The Russians had left nothing to chance; they had already contacted the hospital at Oslo. An ambulance plane was all ready at the airport, waiting for the serum. Radio stations all over northern Europe, from Dunkirk to Copenhagen, from Glasgow to Oslo, were trying to establish contact with the *Maria Sorensen*.

07.36 (GMT): In Brunswick

The officers were awake.

No sooner landed at the airport, Lieutenant Bellamy had been sent for by his captain. Standing rigidly at attention, he listened to his superior officer's homily.

'Fifteen days' detention for not being present at roll call.'

What is the captain blathering about? and what is this story about a roll call? Bellamy was completely puzzled. He had committed a much more serious fault. He made an honest attempt to rectify the mistake.

‘I flew to Berlin, Captain.’

And he would have added that he had illegitimately taken possession of a military plane and that he had landed with false orders invented by himself, but Captain Higgins interrupted him angrily:

‘Have I asked you any questions? What do you mean by interrupting me when I am speaking?’

The captain went on talking for a long time and Bellamy kept his mouth shut. He looked at the officer’s red ears, his rounded cheeks, his stiff moustache, the hair which grew low on his forehead, his deeply sunken eyes and red nose, with almost maudlin affection. So Higgins, that fat bladder of lard, the old dug-out, the universal butt, jeered at even by the recruits, was showing, for the first time in his life, signs of real common sense. Rolling his eyes and blowing like a grampus, the captain roared in what he mistook for muffled tones: ‘A fine fellow you are. You let yourself be foxed by the Russians.’

Bellamy squirmed with self-loathing: ‘I shall never forgive myself, Captain.’

08.00 (GMT): In Oslo

An anonymous operator, employed at the Maritime Watch Station at Oslo, was the first to re-establish contact with the *Maria Sorensen*.

Every five minutes he repeated, according to instructions: ‘Hallo, KTX . . . KTX, . . . can you hear me?’

Suddenly a voice broke the silence: ‘KTX here . . . KTX. I am listening in.’

The operator had spoken in a dry, official tone of voice. But the voice he picked up was tremulous with anxiety.

‘I have a message for you,’ he said. ‘The serum is on its way.’

No reply. The operator continued: 'Stand by. Keep listening in. Keep in touch with me. I will tell you when the ambulance plane takes off to bring you the medicine.'

08.05 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

Through the window of his cabin, Larsen watched the boat receding into the distance. It was now only a black speck on the horizon. He picked up a megaphone and ran up to the deck.

With all his might, he shouted: 'Connections have been re-established! The serum is on its way! Come back! Come back!'

But they were too far away to hear him. Through his binoculars he saw that they were rowing frantically.

Larsen ran down to the stores, rummaged in an untidy cupboard, found two flags and clattered up on deck with them. He waved them frenziedly towards the fugitives; waste of time and trouble; they could not see him. Then, he had a sudden brain-wave; the siren.

The shrill shriek cut through the air.

The fishermen had heard. They stopped rowing. They looked through their binoculars, in their turn. The captain stood on the deck and started waving the flags again.

'It's his way of telling us off,' grumbled Frank.

But the men who had sailed with Larsen for a long time knew that he would not give himself trouble for nothing.

'Why is he sounding the siren?'

'Something has happened.'

'Something serious.'

Peter hazarded a suggestion: 'We might turn round.'

Michel gave him a look of withering scorn. The old man lowered his head. But the idea appealed to most of them:

‘What can we lose? We can at least hear what he has to say.’

‘He can’t force us to go aboard if we don’t want to.’

Michel snarled: ‘He’s worried about his ship, that’s all. He can’t manoeuvre his ship by himself, and the sick men can’t help him.’

They went on arguing for a few moments. But from the moment the idea had been put forward, it was obvious that the moderates who were in favour of rowing back would win the day. Quite unexpectedly, Frank himself ended up by agreeing with the majority and the boat turned round towards the ship.

The captain saw them. He walked across the deck and went into the storage cabin. When the sick men had heard the siren, they had realised that something had happened. Since their mates had abandoned ship, they had given way to despair and had even stopped being sorry for themselves. They were waiting for death. Larsen went up to his son.

‘Communications have been re-established. A plane is on its way. It is bringing the serum . . .’

Olaf managed a wan smile: ‘It will be too late.’ ‘Not a bit of it. It’s not too late. You are going to recover, all of you are going to recover. You are saved. In one hour you’ll be on your feet again.’

The sick men were sitting up in bed. It had taken them a few minutes to understand, to grasp at this new hope.

‘Why did the others leave the ship?’

‘Because they’re idiots. They’re coming back. They heard the siren.’

Olaf was too weak to keep his head raised. He fell back on the bed, his eyes vacant, his hands trembling. His father could not bear to look at him and went out. The crisis was over. Olaf was out of danger. And Larsen felt immensely

relieved. On deck, he realised that he did not know what to do with himself. Wait. He looked at the sky. It was too early yet for the plane. Meanwhile the boat was crawling back over the grey water. The mutineers were returning. Everything would soon be in order again. He was the captain once more, unquestioned master on board after God. During the night the normal relationship between master and men had been broken off. They had escaped. Larsen bore them no grudge. He had not been able to assert his authority. He had been worried about his son and had given way to the men.

It was now full daylight, which dissipated the uncertainties of the night. The captain walked all over his ship, as if to take it in hand again. He went down to the men's sleeping quarters which the fugitives had left in complete disorder, evidence of their mad scramble to escape. A single duffel-bag remained intact on a bunk; it belonged to Peter, who had not had time to come and fetch it. The bunks of the sick men stripped of their mattresses enhanced the impression of a catastrophic flight. Larsen kicked the papers, the odd personal objects, the clothes, lying on the floor, crossed the alley, visited the storerooms and the machinery. There, too, he found traces of the men's mad panic; reserves pillaged, provisions exhausted, cupboards sacked.

When the boat came alongside the ship, Larsen was still below deck, in the hold. Surprised at not seeing him, some of the fishermen climbed on board. The first of them arrived on deck as the captain appeared at the top of the steps. He looked at them without saying a word. He stared at one man after another in frigid silence. They were climbing the rope ladder in a slow procession. They knew they were guilty and made no attempt to defend

themselves. They had deserted; it was inexcusable. The captain advanced towards them. The group parted to let him through. He walked towards Michel and Frank, the leaders, whom the others abandoned and avoided as if they were suffering from the plague.

Larsen eyed the cook:

‘Was it because of the cat that you turned against me?’

The man nodded his head, very slightly.

The captain raised his arm. He smashed the flat of his hand hard against Michel’s cheek. The man took the blow without flinching. The arm was raised and came down again. It was Frank’s turn. The guilty men took their punishment with the passivity of inanimate objects. They were wrong, and they knew it; they had no intention of rebelling. They had deserved punishment. If they had been forced to express their feelings, they would have admitted that they did not know how they had dared to defy discipline in such a flagrant manner. The blows were almost reassuring; it proved to them that everything was back to normal again, the attack of madness was over. Besides, they had lived with Larsen for so long that they understood him and, in a confused way, felt that he would end up by forgiving them. Actually, if Larsen consented to rubbing the slate clean, it would not be because of any desire to be lenient with them, but because he felt a little guilty himself; a captain’s first duty is to be clear-headed under all circumstances and to be able to control his men.

‘Take them down to the hold.’

Ten hands pushed Michel and Frank towards the steps. They made no attempt at resistance. Order had been re-established on board.

08.20 (GMT): In Oslo

The airport at Oslo was the scene of one of the last episodes of the adventure which began with the wireless appeal from the *Maria Sorensen*, which had finally been picked up in Africa. The players were insignificant minor characters.

One was a Red Army pilot; he was called Ivan, hardly an original name. Besides, what did his name matter? He was an anonymous soldier, or rather airman, who was given an order and carried it out. He carried a packet to Norway; this packet contained a medical product. He was told to deliver it to an ambulance plane. His position had been wirelessly and he was expected. Throughout the flight, he had been singing a tune he had heard the day before in a Berlin café and which had stuck so firmly that he could not get it out of his mind. A hundred, two hundred, five hundred times he had repeated these few notes. He had not memorised the words of the song. So, he improvised others, in Russian. They had no meaning to speak of, but they seemed to fit the melody. And Ivan was not difficult to please. His was a sunny nature, he was a simple soul with only two passions in his life: music and anything mechanical. He was completely satisfied with his life as a pilot. The Berlin-Oslo flight was not a long one. Soon, underneath the Soviet plane, the vast rectangular landing-ground appeared.

Ivan handed the precious packet over to the Red Cross official, who was a little man with a moustache and a bad cold. He had been waiting in the open air and was coughing unhappily. He took the packet over to the

ambulance plane. The pilot put it away in a waterproof container and started up his engines. The Red Cross man scuttled into the bar and ordered a boiling-hot grog. He rubbed his hands together and stood with his back to the stove, trying to get some warmth into his frozen little body.

The pilot of the ambulance plane was about the same age as Ivan, twenty-seven. Their tastes were very similar: mechanics, music and dancing. But Sven, the Norwegian, was also enthusiastic about politics. He was an excellent social-democrat. At first, his instinct had been to glare at the Russian Mig. But he was a pacifist. Hence, his hostility was restricted to suspicion. He would have liked to have a long talk with Ivan, but there was no time. He had to take off at once and parachute the serum to the ship. A ticklish operation, which he had carried out successfully on several previous occasions.

08.30 (GMT): In Naples

The re-establishment of normal radio communication had made the relays superfluous.

Domenico's set was taken to pieces again. Inspector Ippolito was about to leave with his prisoner.

'Where are you taking him?' protested Carmela.

'The right place for him, prison.'

She ran across to the door, turned round and opened her arms wide. She was determined to block his passage:

'You can't. I won't let you!'

'I don't need your permission!' grumbled the inspector as he tried to push her aside.

'It was thanks to him that you were able to save those people on the ship.'

'He can call them as witnesses when he is brought up for trial.'

The father lent his imperturbable presence to this painful scene. It was characteristic of him that there was no middle way; either he submerged his adversary under floods of eloquence or draped himself in his dignity. He gave the policeman a look of contempt; they were struggling with Carmela at the door; she was clinging to the handle, scratching and shrieking insults. The men were not at all averse to getting their hands, at last ‘ on this pretty wench who had not stopped provoking them all night. They set about her with a will, squeezing, pulling and pawing, delighted when she fought back. In the end, they succeeded in tearing her away from the door. D’Angelantonio walked down the stairs behind the inspector. But Carmela had no intention of letting herself be brushed off so easily. Hair in the wildest disorder, out of breath, she panted and breathed fire and slaughter against her father’s persecutors; she used even less charitable epithets as she began to attract the neighbours, who were pouring out of their flats in increasing numbers, filling the landings and the courtyard.

‘They are taking my father away. He is innocent.. He responded to the appeal of a ship in distress. That was his only crime! Fishermen’s lives have been saved thanks to him, and now they arrest him for it.’

The policeman, only too familiar with such tactics, paid no attention to her. They pushed their prisoner towards the van. But the small crowd in dressing-gowns, slippers and hair-curlers was aroused and began to get vociferous.

‘What will become of me?’ groaned Carmela, wringing her hands like her favourite heroines at the cinema.

‘That is true, what will become of the poor little girl?’ echoed a compassionate matron.

More voices were raised in protest: ‘Don Domenico is an honest man.’

‘We all know and respect him.’

‘You can’t arrest the doctor.’

‘He’s done nothing wrong.’

‘Keep your trap shut,’ thundered the inspector. ‘Did I ask for your opinions?’

The brutality of this verbal onslaught was sufficient to impose silence. Carmela decided to change her tactics. She threw herself on her knees in front of Ippolito:

‘Pardon him, Inspector, he will never do it again, I promise you.’

A chorus of neighbours echoed her: ‘Pardon him.’ Ippolito tried to lift the girl up, without success. She crawled about on her knees; the policeman began to get flustered.

‘It’s quite impossible.’

‘If you want to, you can. You are the boss.’

The supporting chorus intoned: ‘If you want to, you can. Let him off.’

‘Mind your own business!’ shouted the inspector.

But the policemen who were about to push d’Angelantonio into the van, hesitated. And Domenico, who had carefully kept out of the controversy up till then, felt that this was his cue.

He turned on his lowest register, a grave and sincere tone of voice, like a good actor: ‘I give you my word, Inspector, that I will never use my set again.’

‘How could you use it?’ jeered the policeman. ‘Do you think that I am going to leave it here?’

More than that was needed to silence the ‘doctor.’ He continued, imperturbably: ‘It was my only pleasure, it mitigated my miserable lot. But if a wireless transmitter arouses your suspicion and makes you think that it might be used for illegal purposes . . .’

Ippolito cut him short: 'That's enough. Did you even have a licence?'

'No.'

'Very good. I shall confiscate the set and make you pay the fine.'

Don Domenico was bewildered. He felt that he had by no means exhausted the arguments in his favour, and was somewhat disconcerted by the inspector's expression, a mixture of anger and irony. Carmela had been quicker to grasp his point.

'Thank you, Mr. Ippolito!'

She kissed his hand. She now allowed herself to be raised from her knees. The police officer patted her cheek; it had been done with a fatherly air. But Carmela was not deceived and smiled impishly.

The neighbours also profusely complimented Ippolito on his generosity.

Ippolito, furious with himself because he had not been able to disguise his real feelings, turned his back on Carmela.

'You will not always find me so easy to deal with,' he grunted, as he got into the van. 'Try me again some day ... when there is no ship to be rescued.'

The other policemen climbed into the van and it drove off.

Domenico watched it going out of the courtyard, through the crowd and disappear down the street. Then he drew himself up to his full height and ordered his daughter in a ringing tone of voice: 'And now, go home ... be quick about it!'

She obeyed, after darting a quick glance of encouragement at Gennaro. The neighbours came up to the 'doctor' and shook his hand in silence. He thanked them with affectionate dignity.

Gennaro had been standing apart. Don Domenico waved

to him, inviting him to come nearer. He put his hand on the young man's shoulder: 'Come and see me tomorrow.'

And to the neighbours: 'Allow me to present my daughter's fiancé.'

08.35 (GMT): At Zobra

Dorzit's jeep stopped in front of Loiseau's hut. The vehicle had been escorted through the village by a dense crowd and could only move forward at a snail's pace; a policeman was walking in front of it and did his best to keep the crowd back. Etienne climbed down. He was immediately surrounded by relations, friends and acquaintances. He was embraced innumerable times. His hand was shaken, everyone congratulated him. His mother, his mother-in-law, at least half a dozen toothless old women were standing on the threshold of the hut and the baby was held out for his inspection, amidst cackles of joyful laughter. Inside, his wife smiled at him from her bed. The medicine-man was at the bedside and made hideous faces. There was a terrific din all round the house; laughter, shrill whistling, cries, cheers and whoops of joy. They had reverted happily to the old African traditions.

'It's a girl,' said the mother. 'What are you going to call her?'

'Maria Sorensen.'

The old women protested, all talking at the same time.

'Maria is a name all right. Sorensen means nothing.' But Etienne was adamant: 'She is going to have a double name, Maria Sorensen.'

Dorzit had gone back to his house, but came out again almost immediately. He pushed his way through the natives

and took Etienne by the arm: ‘Come here, ape...

He dragged him to his own house. Loiseau was bewildered.

In his bedroom, the planter pointed to his set: ‘They’re talking about us on the official radio, listen.’ An announcer was speaking: ‘Last night, a fishing vessel in the Arctic ocean, the *Maria Sorensen* . . . ‘

08.36 (GMT): In Brunswick

A comfortable room, with massive furniture. Armchairs covered with dark velvet, thick curtains, black woodwork, every possible kind of knickknack, all equally and uniformly hideous. Bellamy was in his pyjamas. What was the good of getting up if one was under arrest? The ashtrays were full of cigarette butts, illustrated newspapers were all over the room. On the bedside table, a detective novel was open at page 20. Bellamy was no great reader. On the desk, there was a tray with a copious breakfast. Fried eggs, bacon, bread, butter and coffee. Bellamy filled his cup; a few drops of boiling water fell on his finger. He made a face. There was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ shouted the officer at the top of his voice. An orderly appeared, with the mischievous expression of a New York newsboy. He saluted and held out an envelope. Bellamy took the letter and snapped:

‘You may go.,

Bellamy tore open the envelope. The letter contained one word in large capitals ‘PAID,’ and four signatures.

Bellamy shrugged his shoulders. Had he really won his bet? An idle question, as he knew that his companions would be willing to cancel the debt. Hence, the news gave him little if any pleasure. It did not even mean the removal

of a source of worry, as he had, for practical purposes, forgotten about the matter some time ago. Now that he was obliged to remain shut up inside the house for fifteen days, what could he do? He looked out of the window, down into the street. He was neither amused nor attracted by the faces he saw, but it was all he had to look at.

Bellamy went back to bed. Sleep; that was the only solution. Fifteen days and fifteen nights of sleep. And drink. He opened the cupboard; there were four bottles of whiskey left. Not enough. He would have to send out for more.

He turned the switch of the wireless, and the announcer continued the account to which Dorzit, at this very moment, was listening in the depths of the Congo:

‘. . . they were urgently in need of medical assistance. Unfortunately not one of the neighbouring receiving sets could hear them. Captain Larsen lived through some hours of agonising apprehension until . . .’

08.37 (GMT): In Brunswick

‘Are you being as quick as you can, Hanzi?’ cried the father.

Hollendorf talked to the boy in a particular voice, faintly pompous and full of implied reproach; a parent’s voice.

‘I’m ready,’ said the boy, who appeared in the doorway, half dressed.

‘Where is your satchel?’

‘Here it is.’

The father opened and examined it to see that the books and note-paper were in proper order. While Hanzi was lacing his boots, he asked: ‘Are you still sleepy?’

‘A little.’

‘I hope that they will not ask you any questions this morning. You can tell your master that you had to go on a very important errand during the night . . .’

‘Don’t worry. I know my lessons, I shall be all right.’

‘Well, be off, then. Don’t be late.’

Hanzi put on his coat and carried his satchel under his arm: ‘I shan’t have time for any breakfast.’

‘You had better take a piece of bread and butter with you.’

There was a piece, ready buttered on a plate. Hanzi picked it up, kissed his father and ran off.

‘Be careful how you cross the streets,’ his father called after him.

Hanzi pretended not to hear. His father was an old bore. He repeated the same things every morning.

Neither the father nor the son, preoccupied as they were by this little daily ceremony of going off to school, had heard the wireless, which was still switched on. The announcer was talking about their exploits.

‘. . . a few radio amateurs, relaying the messages to each other from Africa to France, from Germany to Norway in a remarkable chain of human solidarity . . .’

08.38 (GMT): In Paris

In Corbier’s flat the wireless set was switched on. The blind man and his wife had not yet gone to bed. They were sitting in armchairs and listening.

‘It was essential to contact the Pasteur Institute. A doctor, Dr. Mercier, came to the microphone . . .’

The husband turned his head. It seemed a great effort. After the doctor’s departure, they had not exchanged ten words. But they had reverted to their old habits. The old atmosphere enveloped them again; they were alone

together and the temporary disturbance, due to the presence of a third person, had been allayed. Was last night's episode going to leave deep scars, destroy the precarious equilibrium of their household? Was it not more likely that it would leave its mark, but that the mark would grow fainter and finally be rubbed out by time? To answer the question, one would have to know how the new situation would develop. Dr. Mercier, a ghostly figure standing between them, could serve the husband as a weapon for tormenting his wife, as a spice to their daily relationship. He could, in Laurette's imagination, become a lover who would, according to her fancy, be timid and scrupulous, subtle or bold, always the docile hero of her most cherished dreams.

At the moment, the fan of possible solutions was spread wide open. Would the husband, mad with jealousy, force his wife to break with Mercier, would he kill the doctor, or would he, on the contrary, become the obliging husband stimulated by this disturbing secret which broke the monotony of their existence? Laurette might, of course, give herself to Mercier and deplore her weakness immediately afterwards, imploring her husband's forgiveness, or she might be a Laurette desperately in love and running away with her lover, or a Laurette delighting in the sharing of her favours.

Neither of them could, as yet, face the situation with such brutal lucidity. They were thinking along these lines, but taboos stopped them from following their thoughts to their logical conclusion.

'Laurette,' asked the husband all of a sudden, 'when you were on holiday with Mercier, what happened exactly?'

‘Absolutely nothing.’

‘You must have flirted with him a bit.’

‘I think that he tried to make love to me, in a very indirect way. He was perhaps, or thought himself, a little in love with me.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Absolutely all. I swear it. At that time, I was not interested in any particular man.’

She was delighted that she was able to be completely honest with him. This would not have been the case if he had questioned her about her present sentiments. But he did not. Probably because he was frightened of what she might answer. Laurette, however, was agitated and in her confusion she made a clumsy gesture, colliding with the lead to the wireless. There was a crackling noise and Corbier snapped irritably: ‘Please don’t touch the set.’

There was a brief silence, followed by the announcer’s voice:

‘The authorities have now taken the affair in hand and help is being rushed to the threatened vessel.’

08.39 (GMT): In Paris

At the Pasteur Institute also the authorities had taken the affair in hand. Mercier’s part was played. He could now go home to bed after a sleepless night.

In the corridor, the accountant stopped him.

‘I want to talk to you, doctor.’ Mercier followed the accountant into his office. He had not had much to do with this young man with faded features and narrow shoulders, whose clothes were always too small or too big for him, and who was said to be a militant member of an extreme right-wing political party. He sometimes had visitors, and other members of the staff who held very different political

opinions were violently hostile to him.

The accountant seemed very embarrassed. 'I apologise, doctor. It is an administrative question; a pure formality. You despatched some serum last night. How am I going to enter it up in the books?'

Mercier was about to reply indignantly, but the accountant forestalled him: 'I know all about it, doctor. Everybody is talking about it. I can quite understand your reaction. But, believe me, it is not my fault; it is a question of the regulations. I am not responsible for them; but I must respect them, seeing that they are in force. And, above all, I must see that other people respect them.'

'Was there a regulation forbidding me to send serum to sick people?'

'That is not what I meant. All I meant was that the serum was not despatched through the ordinary channels. I quite understand that you had no choice, it would have arrived too late. Only, you were obliged to hand it over to a person who was, in a way, a private person, of no official standing. Do you see what I mean?'

'Had I no right to do so?'

'Oh yes, certainly, you had every right. But the person in question should have paid for the serum.' 'But as it was not for him . . .'

'Agreed, I don't deny it. But he could have been given a receipt and the money could have been refunded later. But in that case, I should have had two documents which could have been entered in the books. That would be the usual and regular procedure. Naturally, if you are not willing. . .'

'What makes you think that I am not willing?'

Mercier took his wallet out of his pocket.

A little later, on the way out, he felt in the pocket of his overcoat and found a note from Laurette. He read: 'Thank you.' He crumpled the paper into a ball and dropped it in the gutter. He felt, all at once, that the accountant's stupid chatter was the last straw which destroyed his romance with Laurette. He would certainly phone her tomorrow, perhaps even today, but he would begin again from the beginning, with a clean slate. The last fragments of his dream of that night had disappeared with the ball of paper.

08.45 (GMT): On board the 'Maria Sorensen'

The pilot of the Swedish ambulance plane had a packet of chewing-gum in his pocket. He had been chewing steadily throughout the monotonous journey over the sea, a vast expanse of grey broken only by a few shreds of mist. He was now flying over the *Maria Sorensen*, the trawler which, at the moment, was the most important item in the news bulletins of all the radio stations in the world.

On deck, an old man with an experienced eye was the first to spot the plane. He informed his shipmates, who collected in groups and waved.

The pilot spoke into his mouthpiece: 'Captain Larsen. I am going to drop the serum. Are you ready?'

'Ready.'

'Coming down.'

The plane swooped downwards and circled around, the circles becoming smaller and smaller. Now, it was nearly over the deck. The pilot checked the straps around the container.

From the deck, the men were anxiously following the evolutions of the plane with their eyes. They saw it come nearer and nearer. It was only three hundred yards overhead, then two hundred, a hundred, fifty yards. And

suddenly the parachute was released, opened and started floating above its burden; the ampoules of serum. The door of the storage cabin opened. The sick men had dragged themselves to the door to see the arrival of the packet which was to put an end to their prolonged sufferings.

‘Captain,’ said the pilot, ‘I am leaving you now. Have you any message for the base?’

‘Thank them, and thank all those who have helped us.’

THE END