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River of Death

Alistair MacLean

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Аннотация

The classic tale of adventure and the dark secrets of a lost city in the Brazilian jungle, from the acclaimed master of action and suspense.THE LOST CITYHamilton knows the way to the ruins deep in the Brazilian jungle - and the secret they hold.The millionaire who calls himself Smith seeks the lost city to avenge a wrong from his hidden past.Their journey down the River of Death is an epic of violence and danger. But the secret that awaits them in the lost city is more dangerous still - as a legacy of theft, treachery and murder stretching back to war-torn Europe comes to a deadly climax beneath the ancient walls.

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PROLOGUE

Darkness was falling over the ancient Grecian monastery and the first of the evening stars were beginning to twinkle in the cloudless Aegean sky. The sea was calm, the air was still and did indeed, as is so often claimed for it, smell of wine and roses. A yellow moon, almost full, had just cleared the horizon and bathed in its soft and benign light the softly rolling landscape and lent a magical quality to the otherwise rather harsh and forbidding outlines of the dark and brooding monastery which, any evidence to the contrary, slumbered on peacefully as it had done for countless centuries gone by.

At that moment, unfortunately, conditions inside the monastery could hardly be said to reflect the dream-like outer world. Magic had taken wings, no-one slumbered, peace was markedly absent, darkness had given way to a score of smoking oil torches and there was little enough around in the way of wine and roses. Eight uniformed members of the Nazi S.S. were carrying oaken chests across the flagged hallway. The brass-bound boxes were small but so heavy that it required four men to carry one of them: a sergeant supervised their operations.

Watching them were four men. Two of those were high-ranking S.S. officers: of those, one, Wolfgang Von Manteuffel, a tall, thin man with cold blue eyes, was a major-general, no more than thirty-five years old: the second, Heinrich Spaatz, a thick-

set, swarthy man who had apparently elected to choose a scowl as his permanent expression in life, was a colonel of about the same age. The other two watchers were monks in cowled brown habits, old proud men but now with mingled fear and pride in their eyes, eyes that never left the oaken chests. Von Manteuffel touched the sergeant with the tip of his gold-handled malacca cane which could hardly have been regulation issue to S.S. officers.

'A spot check, I think, Sergeant.'

The sergeant gave orders to the nearest group who, not without difficulty, lowered their chest to the floor. The sergeant knelt, knocked away the retaining pins in the iron hasps and lifted the hinged lid, the screeching of the ancient metal being testimony enough to the fact that many years must have passed since this had last been done. Even in the wavering light of the malodorous oil torches the revealed contents glittered as if they were alive. The chest contained literally thousands of golden coins, so fresh and gleaming they could have been minted that same day. Von Manteuffel contemplatively stirred the coins with the tip of his cane, looked with satisfaction at the resulting iridescence, then turned to Spaatz.

'Genuine, you would say, Heinrich?'

'I am shocked,' Spaatz said. He didn't look it. 'Shocked beyond words. The holy fathers traffic in dross?'

Von Manteuffel shook his head sadly. 'You can't trust anyone these days.'

With what appeared to be as much a physical effort as an

exercise of will, one of the monks averted his fascinated gaze from the glittering chest and looked at Von Manteuffel. He was a very thin man, very stooped, very old - he must have been nearer ninety than eighty. His face was carefully expressionless, but there wasn't much he could do about his stricken eyes.

'These treasures are God's,' he said, 'and we have guarded them for generations. Now we have broken our trust.'

'You can't take all the credit for that,' Von Manteuffel said. 'We helped. Don't worry, we'll look after them for you.'

'Yes, indeed,' Spaatz said. 'Be of good cheer, father. We shall prove worthy of our stewardship.'

They stood in silence until the last of the treasure chests was removed, then Von Manteuffel gestured towards a heavy oaken door.

'Join your comrades. I'm sure you will be released as soon as our planes are heard to leave.'

The two old men, clearly as broken in spirit as they were in body, did as ordered, Von Manteuffel closing the door behind them and sliding home the two heavy bolts. Two troopers entered, carrying a fifty-litre drum of petrol which they laid on its side close to and facing the oaken door. It was clear that they had been well briefed in advance. One trooper unscrewed the cap of the petrol drum while the other laid a trail of gunpowder to the outside doorway. More than half of the petrol gushed out on to the flags, some of it seeping under the oaken door: the trooper seemed content that the rest of the petrol should

remain inside the drum. Following the departing troopers, Von Manteuffel and Spaatz walked away and halted at the outside doorway. Von Manteuffel struck a match and dropped it on the gunpowder fuse: for all the expression that his face registered he could have been sitting in a church.

The airfield was only two minutes' walk away and by the time the S.S. officers arrived there the troopers had finished loading and securing the chests aboard the two Junkers 88s, engines already running, parked side by side on the tarmac. At a word from Von Manteuffel, the troopers ran forward and scrambled aboard the farther plane: Von Manteuffel and Spaatz, doubtless to emphasise the superiority of the officer class, sauntered leisurely to the nearer one. Three minutes later both planes were airborne. In robbery, looting and plundering, as in all else, Teutonic efficiency shone through.

At the rear of the lead plane, beyond rows of boxes secured to painstakingly prepared racks on the floor, Von Manteuffel and Spaatz sat with glasses in their hands. They appeared calm and unworried and had about them the air of men secure in the knowledge that behind them lay a job well done. Spaatz glanced casually out of a window. He had no trouble at all in locating what he knew he was bound to locate. A thousand, maybe fifteen hundred feet below the gently banking wing, a large building burnt ferociously, illuminating the landscape, shore and sea for almost half a mile around. Spaatz touched Von Manteuffel on the arm and pointed. Von Manteuffel glanced through the window

and almost immediately looked indifferently away.

'War is hell,' he said. He sipped his cognac, looted, of course, from France and touched the nearest chest with his cane. 'Nothing but the best for our fat friend. What value would you put on our latest contribution to his coffers?'

'I'm no expert, Wolfgang.' Spaatz considered. 'A hundred million deutschmarks?'

'A conservative estimate, my dear Heinrich, very conservative. And to think he already has a thousand million overseas.'

'I've heard it was more. In any event, we will not dispute the fact that the Field Marshal is a man of gargantuan appetites. You only have to look at him. Do you think *he* will some day look at *this?'* Von Manteuffel smiled and took another sip of his cognac. 'How long will it take to fix things, Wolfgang?'

'How long will the Third Reich last? Weeks?'

'Not if our beloved Fuehrer remains as commander-in-chief.'

Spaatz looked gloomy. 'And I, alas, am about to join him in Berlin where I shall remain to the bitter end.'

'The *very* end, Heinrich?'

Spaatz grimaced. 'A hasty amendment. Almost the bitter end.'

'And I shall be in Wilhelmshaven.'

'Naturally. A code word?'

Von Manteuffel pondered briefly, then said: 'We fight to the death.'

Spaatz sipped his cognac and smiled sadly. 'Cynicism, Wolfgang, never did become you.'

At the best of times the docks at Wilhelmshaven would have no difficulty in turning away the tourist trade. And that present moment was not the best of times. It was cold and raining and very dark. The darkness was quite understandable for the port was bracing itself for the by now inevitable attack by the R.A.F.'s Lancasters on the North Sea submarine base or what, by this time, was left of it. There was one small area of illumination, and subdued illumination at that, for it came from low-powered lamps in hooded shades. Faint though this area of light was, it still contrasted sufficiently with the total blackness around to offer marauding bombers a pinpoint identification marker for the bombardiers crouched in the noses of the planes of the surely approaching squadrons. No-one in Wilhelmshaven was feeling terribly happy about those lights, but then no-one was anxious to question the orders of the S.S. general responsible for their being switched on, especially when that general was carrying with him the personal seal of Field Marshal Goering.

General Von Manteuffel stood on the bridge of one of the latest of the German Navy's longest-range U-boats. Beside him stood a very apprehensive U-boat captain who clearly didn't relish the prospect of being caught moored alongside a quay when the R.A.F. appeared, as he was certain they would. He had about him the air of a man who would have loved nothing better than to pace up and down in an agony of frustration, only there isn't much room for pacing on the conning-tower of a submarine. He cleared his throat in the loud and unmistakable fashion of one

who is not about to speak lightly.

'General Von Manteuffel, I must insist that we leave now. Immediately. We are in mortal danger.'

'My dear Captain Reinhardt, I don't fancy mortal danger any more than you do.' Von Manteuffel didn't give the impression of caring about any danger, mortal or otherwise. 'But the Reichsmarshal has a very short way of dealing with subordinates who disobey his orders.'

'I'll take a chance on that.' Captain Reinhardt didn't just sound desperate, he was desperate. 'I'm sure Admiral Doenitz - '

'I wasn't thinking about you and Admiral Doenitz. I was thinking about the Reichsmarshal and myself.'

'Those Lancasters carry ten-ton bombs,' Captain Reinhardt said unhappily. 'Ten tons! It took only two to finish off the *Tirpitz*. The *Tirpitz*, the most powerful battleship in the world. Can you imagine - '

'I can imagine all too well. I can also imagine the wrath of the Reichsmarshal. The second truck, God knows why, has been delayed. We stay.'

He turned and looked along the quay where groups of men were hurriedly unloading boxes from a military truck and staggering with them across the quay and up the gangway to an opened hatchway for'ard of the bridge. Small boxes but inordinately heavy: they were, unmistakably, the oaken chests that had been looted from the Greek monastery. No-one had to exhort those men to greater effort: they, too, knew all about the

Lancasters and were as conscious as any of the imminent danger, the threat to their lives.

A bell rang on the bridge. Captain Reinhardt lifted a phone, listened then turned to Von Manteuffel.

'A top priority call from Berlin, General. You can take it from here or privately below.'

'Here will do,' Von Manteuffel said. He took the phone from Reinhardt. 'Ah! Colonel Spaatz.'

'We fight to the death,' Spaatz said. 'The Russians are at the gates of Berlin.'

'My God! So soon?' Von Manteuffel appeared to be genuinely upset at the news as, indeed, in the circumstances, he had every right to be. 'My blessings on you, Colonel Spaatz. I know you will do your duty by the Fatherland.'

'As will every true German.' Spaatz's tone, as clearly overheard by Captain Reinhardt, was a splendid amalgam of resolution and resignation. 'We fall where we stand. The last plane out leaves in five minutes.'

'My hopes and prayers are with you, my dear Heinrich. Heil Hitler!'

Von Manteuffel handed back the phone, looked out towards the quay, stiffened then turned urgently towards the captain.

'Look there! The second truck has just arrived. Every man you can spare for the job!'

'Every man I can spare for the job is already on the job.' Captain Reinhardt seemed oddly resigned. 'They all want to live

just as much as you and I do.'

High above the North Sea the air thundered and reverberated to the throbbing roar of scores of aero engines. On the flight deck of the point plane of the Lancaster squadrons, the captain turned to his navigator.

'Our E.T.A. over target area?'

'Twenty-two minutes,' the navigator said. 'Heaven help those poor sods in Wilhelmshaven tonight.'

'Never mind about the poor sods in Wilhelmshaven,' the captain said. 'Spare a thought for us poor sods up here. We must be on their screens by now.'

At that precise instant another aircraft, a Junkers 88, was approaching Wilhelmshaven from the east. There were only two people aboard, which seemed a poor turn-out for what was supposed to be the last plane out of Berlin. Colonel Spaatz, seated beside the pilot, looked uncommonly nervous and unhappy, a state of mind that was not induced by the fact that their Junkers was being almost continuously bracketed by exploding anti-aircraft shells - practically the entire length of their flight lay over what was now Allied-occupied territory. Colonel Spaatz had other things on his mind. He glanced anxiously at his watch and turned impatiently to the pilot.

'Faster, man! Faster!'

'Impossible, Colonel.'

Both troopers and seamen were working in a frenzy of activity to transfer the remaining treasure chests from the second military

truck to the submarine. Suddenly, the air raid warning sirens began their ululating banshee wailing. As if by command, and in spite of the fact that they had known this was inevitable, the workers stopped and looked up fearfully into the night sky. Then, once more, again as if by command, they resumed their frantic efforts. It would have appeared impossible that they could have improved upon their previous work-rate but this they unquestionably did. It is one thing to be almost certain that the enemy may appear at any time: it is quite another to have the last lingering vestiges of hope vanish and know that the Lancasters are upon you.

Five minutes later the first bomb fell.

Fifteen minutes later the Wilhelmshaven naval base appeared to be on fire. Clearly, this was no run-of-the-mill raid. By this time Von Manteuffel could have ordered the most powerful arc-lamps, searchlights if necessary, to be switched on and it wouldn't have made the slightest difference. The entire dock area was an inferno of dense and evil-smelling smoke shot through with great columns of flame, through which shadowy Dante-esque figures moved as in some nameless nightmare, seemingly as oblivious of their surroundings as they were of the screaming aero engines, the ear-numbing explosion of bombs, the sharp whip-like cracks of heavy anti-aircraft fire, the ceaseless stuttering of machine-guns, although what the machine-guns hoped to achieve was difficult to imagine. Through all this the S.S. men and the seamen, reduced now,

despite all their will to the contrary, to almost zombie slow motion by the increasingly heavy burden of the chests, continued their by now fatalistic loading of the submarine.

On the conning-tower of the submarine both Von Manteuffel and Captain Reinhardt were coughing harshly as the dense and evil-smelling smoke from the burning oil tanks enveloped them. Tears streamed down the cheeks of both men.

Captain Reinhardt said: 'God's sake, that last one was a ten-tonner. And straight on top of the U-boat pens. Concrete ten feet thick, twenty, what does it matter? There can't be a man left alive there now, the concussion would have killed them all. In heaven's name, General, let's go. We've had the devil's own luck till now. We can come back when it's all over.'

'Look, my dear Captain, the air raid is at its height now. Try moving out of the harbour now, a slow business as you know, and you have as good a chance of being blown out of the water as you have alongside the quay here.'

'Maybe so, Herr General, maybe so. But at least we'd be *doing* something.' Reinhardt paused, then went on: 'If I may say so without offence, sir, surely you must know that a captain is in command of his own vessel.'

'Even as a soldier I know that, Captain. I also know that you're not in command until you have cast off and are under way. We complete loading.'

'I could be court-martialled for saying this, but you are inhuman, General. The devil rides your back.'

Von Manteuffel nodded. 'He does, he does.'

At the Wilhelmshaven airfield a dimly seen plane, later identifiable as a Junkers 88, made so violently bumpy a touch-down that its undercarriage could well have collapsed under the impact. The bumpiness was understandable, the drifting smoke being so intense that the pilot could make only a blind guess as to his height above the runway. Under normal conditions he would never have dreamed of attempting so hazardous a landing but the conditions were far from normal. Colonel Spaatz was a man of a highly persuasive cast of mind. Even before the plane had rolled to rest he had the door open, peering anxiously for his waiting transport. When finally he saw it - an open Mercedes staff car - he was aboard it within twenty seconds, urging the driver to make all possible haste.

The smoke surrounding the submarine was, if anything, even denser and more acrid than it had been minutes before although a sudden gusting wind, no doubt the result of the firestorm, gave promise of an early amelioration of the conditions. But choking and half-blinding though the smoke still was it didn't prevent Von Manteuffel from seeing what, despite his coolly relaxed calm, he had so desperately wanted to see.

'That's it, then, Captain Reinhardt, that's it. The last chest aboard. And now your men aboard, Captain, and let the devil ride on *your* back.'

Captain Reinhardt was hardly in the frame of mind to require any second bidding. Shouting hoarsely to make himself heard

above the still thunderous din, he ordered his men aboard, ropes to be cast off and engines slow ahead. The last of his men were still frantically climbing up the sliding gangway as the submarine inched away from the quayside. It hadn't moved more than a few feet when the sound of a motor car screeching and skidding to a halt made Von Manteuffel turn sharply and look at the quay.

Spaatz had leapt from the Mercedes while it was still moving. He stumbled, recovered himself, and stared at the still very slowly moving submarine, his face contorted in desperate anxiety.

'Wolfgang!' Spaatz's voice wasn't a shout, it was a scream. 'Wolfgang! God's sake, wait!' Then the anxiety on his face yielded abruptly to an expression of utter incredulity: Von Manteuffel had a pistol lined up on him. For some seconds Spaatz remained quite still, shocked into a frozen and uncomprehending immobility, then comprehension came with the crack of Von Manteuffel's pistol and he hurled himself to the ground as a bullet struck only a foot away. Spaatz dragged his Luger from its holster and emptied it after the slowly moving submarine which, apart from giving vent to his feelings, was an otherwise futile gesture as the conning-tower was apparently empty, Von Manteuffel and Captain Reinhardt having obviously and prudently ducked beneath the shelter of the steel walls off which Spaatz's bullets ricocheted harmlessly. And then, abruptly, the submarine was lost in the swirling banks of smoke.

Spaatz pushed himself to his hands and knees and then stood

upright and stared in bitter fury in the direction of the vanished submarine.

'May your soul rot in hell, Major-General Von Manteuffel,' Spaatz said softly. 'The Nazi Party's funds. The S.S. funds. Part of Hitler's and Goering's private fortunes. And now the treasures from Greece. My dear and trusted friend.'

He smiled almost reminiscently.

'But it's a small world, Wolfie, my friend, a small world, and I'll find you. Besides, the Third Reich is gone. A man must have something to live for.'

Unhurriedly, he reloaded his Luger, brushed the mud and moisture from his clothes and walked steadily towards the Mercedes staff car.

The pilot was in his seat, poring over a chart, when Spaatz clambered aboard the Junkers 88 and took his seat beside him. The pilot looked at him in mild astonishment.

Spaatz said: 'Your tanks?'

'Full. I - I didn't expect you, Colonel. I was about to leave for Berlin.'

'Madrid.'

'Madrid?' This time the astonishment was more than mild. 'But my orders - '

'Here are your new orders,' Spaatz said. He produced his Luger.

CHAPTER ONE

The cabin of the thirty-seater aircraft was battered, scruffy, unclean and more than a little noisome, which pretty accurately reflected the general appearance of the passengers, who would never have made it to the ranks of the international jet-set. Two of them could have been classified as exceptions or at least as being different from the others although neither of them would have made the jet-set division either, lacking, as they did, the pseudo-aristocratic veneer of your true wealthy and idle layabout. One, who called himself Edward Hiller—in this remote area of southern Brazil it was considered poor form to go by your own given name—was around thirty-five, thickset, fair-haired, hard-faced, obviously European or American and dressed in tan bush-drills. He seemed to spend most of his time in moodily examining the scenery, which, in truth, was hardly worth the examining, inasmuch as it duplicated tens of thousands of square miles in that virtually unknown part of the world: all that was to be seen was an Amazonian tributary meandering its way through the endless green of the rain forest of the Planalto de Mato Grosso. The second exception—again because he seemed not unacquainted with the basic principles of hygiene-claimed to be called Serrano, was dressed in a reasonably off-white suit, was about the same age as Hiller, slender, black-haired, black-moustached, swarthy and could have been Mexican. He wasn't

examining the scenery: he was examining Hiller, and closely at that.

'We are about to land at Romono.' The loudspeaker was scratchy, tinny and the words almost indistinguishable.

'Please fasten seat-belts.'

The plane banked, lost altitude rapidly and made its approach directly above and along the line of the river. Several hundred feet below the flight-path a small, open outboard motorboat was making its slow way upstream.

This craft—on closer inspection a very dilapidated craft indeed—had three occupants. The largest of the three, one John Hamilton, was tall, broad-shouldered, powerfully built and about forty years of age. He had keen brown eyes, but that was about the only identifiable feature of his face as he was uncommonly dirty, dishevelled and unshaven, giving the impression that he had recently endured some harrowing ordeal, an impression heightened by the fact that his filthy clothes were torn and his face, neck and shoulders were liberally blood-stained. Comparatively, his two companions were presentable. They were lean, wiry and at least ten years younger than Hamilton. Clearly of Latin stock, their olive-tinged faces were lively, humorous and intelligent and they looked so much alike that they could have been identical twins, which they were. For reasons best known to themselves they liked to be known as Ramon and Navarro. They considered Hamilton—whose given name was, oddly enough, Hamilton—with critical and

speculative eyes.

Ramon said: 'You look bad.'

Navarro nodded his agreement. 'Anyone can see he's been through a lot. But do you think he looks bad enough?'

'Perhaps not,' Ramon said judicially. 'A soupçon, perhaps. A little touch here, a little touch there.' He leaned forward and proceeded to widen some of the already existing rents in Hamilton's clothing. Navarro stooped, touched some small animal lying on the floorboards, brought up a bloodied hand and added a few more artistically decorative crimson touches to Hamilton's face, neck and chest then leaned back to examine his handiwork critically. He appeared more than satisfied with the result of his creative workmanship.

'My God!' He shook his head in sorrowful admiration. 'You really have had it rough, Mr Hamilton.'

* * *

The faded, peeling sign on the airport building-hardly more than a shack—read: 'Welcome to Romono International Airport' which was, in its own way, a tribute to the blind optimism of the person who had authorised it or the courage of the man who had painted it as no 'international' plane had ever landed or ever would land there, not only because no-one in his right senses would ever voluntarily come from abroad to visit Romono in the first place but primarily because the single grass runway was so short that no aircraft designed later than the forty-year-old DC3

could possibly hope to land there.

The aircraft that had been making the downriver approach landed and managed, not without some difficulty, to stop just short of the ramshackle terminal. The passengers disembarked and made for the waiting airport bus that was to take them into town.

Serrano kept a prudent ten passengers behind Hiller but was less fortunate when they boarded the bus. He found himself four seats ahead of Hiller and therefore was in no position to observe him any more. Hiller was now observing Serrano, very thoughtfully.

Hamilton's boat was now closing in on the river bank. Hamilton said: 'However humble, there's no place like home.'

Using the word 'humble' Hamilton was guilty of a grave understatement. Romono was, quite simply, a jungle slum and an outstandingly malodorous example of the genre. On the left bank of the aptly named Rio da Morte, it stood partly on a filled-in, miasmic swamp, partly in a clearing that had been painfully hacked out from a forest and jungle that pressed in menacingly on every side, anxious to reclaim its own. The town looked as if it might contain perhaps three thousand inhabitants: probably there were double that number as three or four persons to a room represented the accommodation norm of Romono. A typically sleazy end-of-the-line—only there was no line-frontier town, it was squalid, decaying and singularly unprepossessing, a maze of narrow, haphazardly criss-crossing alleys—by no stretch of

the imagination could they have been called streets-with the buildings ranging from dilapidated wooden shacks through wine-shops, gambling dens and bordellos to a large and largely false-fronted hotel rejoicing, according to a garish blue neon sign, in the name of the OTEL DE ARIS, some misfortune having clearly overtaken the missing capitals H and P.

The waterfront was splendidly in keeping with the town. It was difficult to say where the river bank began for almost all of it was lined with houseboats—there had to be some name for those floating monstrosities—relying for their construction almost entirely on tar paper. Between the houseboats were piles of driftwood, oil cans, bottles, garbage, sewage and great swarms of flies. The stench was overwhelming. Hygiene, had it ever come to Romono, had gratefully abandoned it a long time ago.

The three men reached the bank, disembarked and tied up the boat. Hamilton said: 'When you're ready, take off for Brasilia. I'll join you in the Imperial.'

Navarro said: 'Draw your marble bath, my lord? Lay out your best tuxedo?'

'Something like that. Three suites, the best. After all, we're not paying for it.'

'Who is?'

'Mr Smith. He doesn't know it yet, of course, but he'll pay.'

Ramon said curiously: 'You know this Mr Smith? Met him, I mean?'

'No.'

'Then might it not be wise to wait for the invitation first?'

'No reason to wait. Invitation's guaranteed. Our friend must be nearly out of his mind by now.'

'You're being downright cruel to that poor Mr Hiller,' Navarro said reproachfully. 'He must have gone out of his mind during the three days we stayed with your Muscia Indian friends.'

'Not him. He's sure he *knows* he knows. When you get to the Imperial keep close to a phone and away from your usual dives.'

Ramon looked hurt. 'There *are* no dives in our fair capital, Mr Hamilton.'

'You'll soon put that right.' Hamilton left them and made his way in the gathering dusk through winding, ill-lit alleyways until he had passed clear through the town and emerged on its western perimeter. Here, on the outskirts of the town and on the very edge of the forest and jungle, stood what had once passed for a log cabin but was now no more than a hut and even at that, one would have thought, a hut scarcely fit for animal far less human habitation: the grass-and weed-covered walls leaned in at crazy angles, the door was badly warped and the single window had hardly an unbroken pane of glass left in it. Hamilton, not without some difficulty, managed to wrench open the creaking door and passed inside.

He located and lit a guttering oil lamp which gave off light and smoke in about equal proportions. From what little could be seen from the fitful yellow illumination, the interior of the hut was a faithful complement of the exterior. The hut was very sparsely

furnished with the bare essentials for existence—a dilapidated bed, a couple of bent-wood chairs in no better condition than the bed, a warped deal table with two drawers, some shelving and a cooker with some traces of the original black enamel showing under the almost total covering of brown rust. On the face of it, Hamilton didn't care too much for the sybaritic life.

He sat wearily on the bed which, predictably, sagged and creaked in an alarmingly disconcerting fashion. He reached under the bed, came up with a bottle of some undetermined liquid, drank deeply from the neck and set the bottle down somewhat unsteadily on the table.

Hamilton was not unobserved. A figure had appeared just outside the window and was peering inside from a prudent distance, a probably unnecessary precaution. It is more difficult to see from a lighted area to a darkened one than the other way round and the windows were so filthy that it was difficult to see through them anyway. The watcher's face was indistinct, but the identity of the man not hard to guess: Serrano was probably the only man in Romono who wore a suit, far less an off-white one. Serrano was smiling, a smile composed of an odd mixture of amusement, satisfaction and contempt.

Hamilton extracted two leather pouches from the torn remains of his buttoned pockets and poured the contents of one of them into the palm of his hand, staring in rapt admiration at the handful of rough-cut diamonds which he let trickle onto the table. With an unsteady hand he fortified himself with another drink

then opened the other pouch and emptied the contents onto the table. They were coins, glittering golden coins; all told there must have been at least fifty of them.

Gold, it is said, has attracted men from the beginning of recorded time. It unquestionably attracted Serrano. Seemingly oblivious of the possibility of discovery, he had moved closer to the window, so close, indeed, that a keen-eyed and observant person inside the hut might well have seen the pale blur of his face. But Hamilton was being neither keen-eyed nor observant: he just stared in apparent fascination at the treasure before him. So did Serrano. The amusement and contempt had disappeared from his expression, the unblinking eyes seemed huge in his face and his tongue licked his lips almost continuously.

Hamilton took a camera from his rucksack, removed a cassette of exposed film, examined it closely for a moment and, in doing so, dislodged two diamonds which fell and rolled under the table, apparently unobserved. He put the cassette on a shelf beside some other cassettes and cheap camera equipment then turned his attention to the coins again. He picked one up and examined it carefully, almost as if seeing it for the first time.

The coin, indisputably gold, did not appear to be of any South American origin—the likeness of the engraved head was unmistakably of classical Greek or Latin origin. He looked at the obverse side: the characters, clear and unblemished, were unmistakably Greek. Hamilton sighed, lowered some more of the rapidly diminishing contents of the bottle, returned the coins

to the pouch, paused as if in thought, shook some coins into his hand, put them in a trouser pocket, put the pouch into one of his buttoned shirt pockets, returned the diamonds to their pouch and his other buttoned pocket, had a last drink, turned out the oil lamp and left. He made no attempt to lock the door for the sufficient reason that, even with the door as fully closed as it would go, there was still a two-inch gap between the key bolt and door jamb. Although it was by now almost dark he did not appear to require any light to see where he was going: within a minute he vanished into the shanty-town maze of corrugated iron and tar-paper shacks which formed the salubrious suburbs of Romono.

Serrano waited a prudent five minutes, then entered, a small flashlight in his hand. He lit the oil lamp, placing it on a shelf where it could not be seen directly from the outside then, using his flashlight, located the fallen diamonds under the table and placed them on the tabletop. He crossed to the shelves, took the cassette which Hamilton had placed there, replaced it with another from the pile of cassettes and had just put the cassette on the table beside the diamonds when he became suddenly and uncomfortably conscious of the fact that he was not alone. He whirled around and found himself staring into the muzzle of a gun expertly and unwaveringly held in Hiller's hand.

'Well, well,' Hiller said genially. 'A collector, I see. Your name?'

'Serrano.' Serrano didn't look any too happy. 'Why are you pointing that gun at me?'

'Calling cards you can't get in Romono, so I use this instead. Are you carrying a gun, Serrano?'

'No.'

'If you are and I find it I'm going to kill you.' Hiller was still geniality itself. 'Are you carrying a gun, Serrano?'

Serrano reached slowly for an inside pocket. Hiller said: 'The classic way, of course, my friend. Finger and thumb on the gun barrel then gently on the table.'

Serrano carefully, as directed, produced a small snubnosed automatic and laid it on the table. Hiller advanced and pocketed it, along with the diamonds and the cassette.

'You've been following me all day,' Hiller said consideringly. 'For hours before we boarded that plane. And I saw you the previous day and the day before that. In fact, I've seen you quite a few times in the past weeks. You really should get yourself another suit, Serrano, a shadower in a white suit is no shadower at all.' His tone changed in a fashion that Serrano clearly didn't care much for. *'Why* are you following me, Serrano?'

'It's not you I'm after,' Serrano said. 'We're both interested in the same man.'

Hiller lifted his gun a perceptible inch. If he'd lifted it only one millimetre it would have carried sufficient significance for Serrano who was in an increasingly apprehensive state of mind. 'I'm not sure,' Hiller said, 'that I like being followed around.'

'Jesus!' Serrano's apprehension had become very marked indeed. 'You'd kill a man for a thing like that?'

'What are vermin to me?' Hiller said carelessly. 'But you can stop knocking your knees together. I've no intention of killing you—at least, not yet. I wouldn't kill a man just for following me around. But I wouldn't draw the line at shattering a kneecap so that you couldn't totter around after me for a few months to come.'

'I won't talk to anyone,' Serrano said fervently. 'I swear to God I won't.'

'Aha! That's interesting. If you were going to talk who would you talk to, Serrano?'

'Nobody. Nobody. Who would I talk to? That was just a manner of speaking.'

'Was it now? But if you *were* to talk, what would you tell them?'

'What could I tell them? All I know—well, I don't know, but I'm pretty sure—is that Hamilton is into something big. Gold, diamonds, something like that—he's found a cache somewhere. I know that you're on his track, Mr Hiller. That's why I am following you.'

'You know my name. How come?'

'You're a pretty important man around these parts, Mr Hiller.' Serrano was trying to be ingratiating but he wasn't very good at it. A sudden thought appeared to occur to him for he brightened and said: 'Seeing we're both after the same man, Mr Hiller, we could be partners.'

'Partners!'

'I can help you, Mr Hiller.' Serrano was eagerness itself but whether from the prospect of partnership or the understandable desire not to be crippled by Hiller it was difficult to say. 'I *can* help you. I swear I can.'

'A terrified rat will swear to anything.'

'I can prove what I say.' Serrano seemed to have regained a measure of confidence. 'I can take you to within five miles of the Lost City.'

Hiller's initial reaction was one of astonishment and suspicion.

'What do you know about it?' He paused and recovered himself, 'Well, I suppose everybody's heard about the Lost City. Hamilton's always shooting off his mouth about it.'

'Mebbe so. Mebbe so.' Serrano, sensing the change in the atmosphere, was almost relaxed now. 'But how many have followed him four times to within a few miles of it?' If Serrano had been at the gambling table he'd have leaned back in his chair, his trump card played.

Hiller had become very interested indeed, even to the extent of lowering, then pocketing, his own gun.

'You have a rough idea where it is?'

'Rough?' Immediate danger past, Serrano invested himself with an air very close to benign superiority. 'Close is more like it. Very close.'

'Then if you've come all that close why don't you go looking for it yourself?'

'Look for it myself!' Serrano looked almost shocked. 'Mr

Hiller, you must be out of your mind. You don't understand what you're talking about. Have you *any* idea what the Indian tribes in the area are like?'

'Pacified, according to the Indian Protection Service.'

'Pacified?' Serrano gave a contemptuous laugh. 'Pacified? There isn't enough money in the country to make those desk-bound pansies leave those lovely air-conditioned offices in Brasilia and go see for themselves. They're terrified, just plain terrified. Even their field-agents—and there are some pretty tough cookies among them—are terrified and won't go near the area. Well, four of them did go there once some years back, but none of them ever returned. And if they're terrified, Mr Hiller, I'm terrified too.'

'That creates quite a problem.' Not surprisingly, Hiller had become quite thoughtful. 'An approach problem. What's so special about those bloodthirsty people? There are many tribes who don't care all that much for people from the outside, what you and I would regard as other civilised people.' Apparently Hiller saw nothing incongruous in categorising himself and Serrano as 'civilised'.

'Special? I'll tell you what's special about them. They're the most savage tribes in the Mato Grosso. Correction. They're the most savage tribes in the whole of South America. Not one of them has moved out of the Stone Age so far. In fact, they must be a damned sight worse than the Stone Age people. If the Stone Age people had been like them they'd have wiped each other

out—when those tribes up there have nothing better to do, they just go around massacring each other—to keep their hand in, I suppose—and there would have been no human left on this planet today.

'There are three tribes up there, Mr Hiller. First, there are the Chapates. God knows they're bad enough, but all they do is use their blowpipes, pump a few curare-tipped poison darts into you and leave you lying there. Almost civilised, you might say. The Horenas are a bit different. They use darts that only knock you unconscious; then you're dragged back to their village and tortured to death—this, I understand, can take a day or two-then they cut off your head and shrink it. But when it comes to sheer savagery, the Muscias are the pick of the bunch—I don't think any white man has ever seen them. But one or two of the outside Indians who have met them and survived say that they're cannibals and if they see what they regard as being a particularly appetising meal they dump him alive into boiling water. Something like lobsters, you know. Go looking for a lost city surrounded by all those monsters? Why don't *you* go looking? I can point you in the right direction. Me, I only like cooking pots from the outside.'

'Well, maybe I'll have to do a little more thinking on that one.' Absently, almost, he handed Serrano back his gun. Hiller was no mean psychologist when it came to gauging the extent of a man's cupidity. Hiller said: 'Where do you live?'

'A room in the Hotel de Paris.'

'If you saw me in the bar there?'

'I've never seen you before in my life.'

An unbiased guidebook to the better taverns of South America would have had some difficulty in finding the space to list the bar of the Hotel de Paris, Romono, in its pages. The bar was not a thing of beauty. The indeterminately coloured paint, what little there was of it, was peeling and blistered, the splintered wooden floor was blackened and filthy and the rough-cut softwood bar bore the imprint of the passage of time. A thousand spilt drinks, a thousand stubbed-out cigars. It was not a place for the fastidious.

The clientele, fortunately, were not of an overly fastidious nature. Exclusively male and dressed for the most part in scarecrow's clothing, they were rough, uncouth, ill-favoured and hard-drinking. Especially hard-drinking. As many customers as possible—and there were many—pushed up to the bar and consumed huge quantities of what could only be described as rot-gut whisky. There was a scattering of bentwood chairs and rickety tables, largely unoccupied. The citizens of Romono were mostly vertical drinkers. Among the currently vertical were both Hiller and Serrano, separated from each other by a prudent distance.

In such surroundings, then, the entrance of Hamilton did not provoke the horror-stricken reaction that it would have in the plusher caravanserais of Brasilia or Rio. Even so, his appearance was sufficient to cause a marked drop in the conversational level. With his tangled hair, a week's growth of matted and bloodied

beard, and ripped and blood-stained shirt he looked as if he had just returned from the scene of a successfully if messily executed triple murder. His expression-as was indeed customary with him —lacked anything in the way of encouragement towards social chitchat. He ignored the stares and although the crowd before the bar was at least four deep a path opened magically before him. In Romono, such a path always opened for John Hamilton, a man very obviously held, and for a variety of good reasons, in considerable respect by his fellow citizens.

A large, very fat barman, the boss of the four men serving nonstop behind the bar, hurried forward towards Hamilton. His egg-bald pate gleamed in the light: inevitably, he was known as Curly.

'Mr Hamilton!'

'Whisky.'

'God's name, Mr Hamilton. What happened?'

'You deaf?'

'Right away, Mr Hamilton.'

Curly reached under the bar, produced a special bottle and poured a generous measure. That Hamilton should be thus privileged apparently aroused no resentment among the onlookers, not so much because of their innate courtesy, of which they had none, but because Hamilton had demonstrated in the past his reaction to those who interfered in what he regarded as his own private business: he'd only had to do it once, but once had been enough.

Curly's plump, genial face was alive with curiosity as were those of the bystanders. But Hamilton was not a man to share confidences as everyone was well aware. He tossed two Greek coins on to the bar. Hiller, who was standing close by, observed this and his face grew very still indeed. His face was not the only one to assume sudden immobility.

'Bank's shut,' Hamilton said. 'Those do?'

Curly picked up the two shining coins and examined them with an air of unfeigned reverence.

'Will those do? *Will those do!* Yes, Mr Hamilton, I think those will do. Gold! Pure gold! This is going to buy you an awful lot of Scotch, Mr Hamilton, an awful lot. One of those I'm going to keep for myself. Yes, sir. The other I'll take and have valued in the bank tomorrow.'

'Up to you,' Hamilton said indifferently.

Curly examined the coins more closely and said: 'Greek, aren't they?'

'Looks like,' Hamilton said with the same indifference. He drank some of his Scotch and looked at Curly with a speculative eye. 'You wouldn't, of course, be dreaming of asking me if I went all the way to Greece to get those?'

'Certainly not,' Curly said hastily. 'Certainly not. Will I will I get the doctor, Mr Hamilton?'

'Thanks. But it's not my blood.'

'How many of them? Who did this to you—I mean, who did you do it to?'

'Just two. Horenas. Same again.'

Although most people at the bar were still looking at Hamilton or the coins, the hubbub of conversation was slowly resuming. Hiller, glass in hand, elbowed his purposeful way towards Hamilton who regarded Hiller's approach with his customary lack of enthusiasm.

Hiller said: 'I hope you'll excuse me. I don't want to intrude, Hamilton. I understand that after tangling with head-hunters a man would like some peace and quiet. But what I'd like to say to you is important. Believe me. Could I have a word?'

'About what?' Hamilton's tone was less than encouraging. 'And I don't like discussing business—I assume it is business—with a dozen pairs of ears hanging on to every word I say.'

Hiller looked around. Inevitably, their conversation was attracting attention. Hamilton paused for a moment, as if in thought, then picked up his bottle, jerked his head and led the way to the corner table most remote from the bar. Hamilton, as always, looked aggressive and forbidding and his tone matched his expression.

'Out with it,' he said, 'and no shilly-shallying.'

Hiller took no offence. 'Suits me. That's the way I like it, the only way to do business. I'll lay it on the line. It's my belief you've found this Lost City of yours. I know a man who'd pay you a six-figure fee to take him there. That straight enough for you?'

'If you throw away that rot-gut rubbish you have there I'll give you some decent Scotch.' Hiller did as requested and Hamilton

topped up both glasses. Hiller was clearly aware that Hamilton was less interested in dispensing hospitality than in having time to think and from the just perceptibly slurred note in Hamilton's voice it could well have been that he could be taking just slightly longer than normal to think quickly and clearly.

'Well, I'll say this,' Hamilton said, 'you don't beat about the bush. Who says I've found the Lost City?'

'Nobody. How could they? No-one knows where you go when you leave Romono—except maybe those two young sidekicks of yours.' Hiller smiled thinly. 'They don't look like the type that would talk too much.'

'Sidekicks?'

'Oh, come off it, Hamilton. The twins. Everybody in Romono knows them. But it would be my guess that *you* would be the only person to know the exact location. So, okay, I'm only going on a hunch—and a couple of brand new golden coins that may be a thousand years old, two thousand. Just supposing.'

'Supposing what?'

'Supposing you'd found it, of course.'

'Cruzeiros?'

Hiller kept his face impassive, a rather remarkable feat in view of the wave of elation that had just swept through him. When a man talks money it means that he is prepared to dicker, to make a deal, and Hamilton had the means to bargain. Hamilton had his *quid pro quo* and that could mean only one thing—he knew where the Lost City was. He had his fish hooked, Hiller thought

exultantly: now all he had to do was gaff and land him. That might well take time, Hiller knew, but he had every confidence in himself: he rather fancied his prowess as a fisherman.

'U.S. dollars,' Hiller said.

Hamilton thought this over for a few moments then said: 'An attractive proposition. Very attractive. But I don't accept propositions from strangers. You see, Hiller, I don't know you, what you are, what you do, and how come you are empowered to make this proposition.'

'A con man, possibly?'

'Possibly.'

'Oh, come. We've had a drink a dozen times in the past months. Strangers? Hardly. We all know why you've been searching those damned forests for the past four months and other huge stretches of the Amazon and Paraná basins for the past four years. For the fabled Lost City of the Mato Grosso-if that is indeed where it is—for the golden people who lived there—who may still live there—most of all for the fabled man who found it. Huston. Dr Hannibal Huston. The famous explorer who vanished into the forests all those many years ago and was never seen again.'

'You talk in clichés,' Hamilton said.

Hiller smiled. 'What newspaperman doesn't?'

'Newspaperman?'

'Yes.'

'Odd. I'd have put you down for something else.'

Hiller laughed. 'A con? A convict on the lam? Nothing so romantic, I'm afraid.' He leaned forward, suddenly serious. 'Listen. As I said, we all know why you're out here—no offence, Hamilton, but goodness knows you've told everyone often enough—although why I don't know-I'd have thought you'd have kept it secret from everybody.'

'Three good reasons, my friend. In the first place, there has to be some reason to account for my presence here. Secondly, anybody will tell you that I know the Mato Grosso better than any other white man and no one would dream of following me where I go. Finally, the more people who know what I'm after the greater the likelihood that some person, some time and in some place, will drop a hint or a clue that could be invaluable to me.'

'I was under the impression that you didn't require hints or clues any longer.'

'That's as maybe. Just you go ahead and form any impressions you like.'

'Well, all right. So. Ninety-nine per cent of the people laugh at your wild notions, as they call them—though God knows there's not a man in Romono would dare say it to your face. But I belong to the one per cent. I believe you. I further believe that your search is over and that the dream has come true. I'd like to share in a dream, I'd like to help a man, my employer, make his dream come true.'

'I'm deeply moved,' Hamilton said sardonically. 'I'm sorry—well, no, I'm not really—but something gives here that I just can't

figure. And besides, Hiller, you are an unknown quantity.'

'Is the McCormick-Mackenzie International?'

'Is it what?'

'Unknown.'

'Of course not. One of the biggest multinational companies in the Americas. Probably the usual bunch of crooks using the usual screen of a battery of similarly crooked international lawyers to bend the laws any which way that suits them.'

Hiller took a deep breath, manfully restraining himself. 'Because I'm in the position of asking a favour of you, Hamilton, I won't take exception to that. In point of fact the record of McCormick-Mackenzie is impeccable. They have never been investigated, far less impeached on any count.'

'Smart lawyers. Like I said.'

'You can be glad that Joshua Smith is not here to hear you say that.'

Hamilton was unimpressed. 'He the owner?'

'Yes. And the Chairman and Managing Director.'

'The multi-millionaire industrialist? If we're talking about the same man?'

'We are.'

'And the owner of the largest newspaper and magazine chain in the Americas. Well, well, well.' He broke off and stared at Hiller. 'So that's why you—'

'Exactly.'

'So. He's your boss, a newspaper magnate. And you're one of

his newspapermen, and a pretty senior one at that, I would guess —I mean, he wouldn't send out a cub reporter on a story like this. Very well. Your connections, your credentials established. But I still don't see—'

'What don't you see?'

'This man. Joshua Smith. A multi-millionaire. A multi-billionaire. Anyway, as rich as Croesus. What's left on earth for him that he doesn't already have? What more can a man like that want?' Hamilton took a long pull at his whisky. 'In short, what's in it for him?'

'You are a suspicious bastard, aren't you, Hamilton? Money? Of course not. Are you in it for the money? Of course not. A man like you could make money anywhere. No, and again no. Like you—and, if I may say, a little bit like myself-he's a man with a dream, a dream that's become an obsession. I don't know which fascinates him the more, the Huston case or the Lost City, although I don't suppose you can really separate the two. I mean, you can't have the one without the other.' He paused and smiled, almost dreamily. 'And what a story for his publishing empire.'

'And that, I take it, is your part of the dream?'

'What else?'

Hamilton considered, using some more Scotch to help him with his consideration. 'Mustn't rush things, mustn't rush things. A man needs time to think about these things.'

'Of course. How much time?'

'Two hours?'

'Sure. My place. The Negresco.' Hiller looked around him and gave a mock shudder which could almost have been real. 'It's almost as good as it is here.'

Hamilton drained his glass, rose, picked up his bottle, nodded and left. No-one could have accused him of being under the weather but his gait didn't appear to be quite as steady as it might have been. Hiller looked around until he located Serrano, who had been looking straight at him. Hiller glanced after the departing Hamilton, looked back at Serrano and nodded almost imperceptibly. Serrano did the same in return and disappeared after Hamilton.

Romono had not yet got around to, and was unlikely ever to get around to, street-lighting, with the result that the alleyways, in the occasional absence of saloons and bordellos fronting on them, tended to be very poorly lit. Hamilton, all trace of his unsteady gait vanished, strode briskly along, clearly unbothered by the fitful or nonexistent lighting. He rounded a corner, carried on a few yards, stopped suddenly and turned into a narrow and almost totally dark alleyway. He didn't go far into the alley—not more than two feet. He poked his head cautiously out from his narrow niche and peered back along the way he had just come.

He saw no more than he had expected to see. Serrano had just come into view. Serrano, it was clear, wasn't out for any leisurely evening stroll. He was walking so quickly that he was almost running. Hamilton shrank back into the shadows. He no longer had to depend on his hearing. Serrano was wearing steel-tipped

shoes which no doubt he found indispensable for the subtler intricacies of unarmed combat. On a still night Serrano could have been heard a hundred yards away.

Hamilton, no more than another shadow in his shadowy place of concealment, listened to the rapidly approaching footsteps. Serrano, almost running now, looked neither to right nor to left but just peered anxiously ahead in quest of his suddenly and mysteriously vanished quarry. He was still peering anxiously ahead when he passed the alleyway entrance. Hamilton, a shadow detaching itself from the deeper shadow behind, stepped out swiftly and in silence brought his locked hands down on the base of Serrano's neck. He caught the already unconscious man before he could strike the ground and dragged him into the dark concealment. From Serrano's breast pocket he removed a well-filled wallet, extracted a gratifying wad of cruzeiro notes, pocketed them, dropped the empty wallet on top of Serrano's prone form and continued on his way, this time without a backward glance. He had no doubt that Serrano had been on his own.

Back in his tumbledown hut, the guttering oil lamp lit, Hamilton sat on his cot and pondered the reason for his being shadowed. That Serrano had acted under Hiller's instructions he did not for a moment doubt. He did not think that Serrano had intended to waylay or attack him for he could not doubt that Hiller was almost desperately anxious to have his services and an injured Hamilton would be the last thing he would want

on his hands. Nor could robbery have been a motive—although they may well have seen the bulges of the two pouches in his shirt pockets—and Hamilton had been well aware that Serrano had been watching him through the hut window—comparatively petty theft would not have interested Hiller; what he was after was the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow and only he, Hamilton, knew where that rainbow ended.

That Hiller and his boss Smith had dreams Hamilton did not for a moment doubt: what he did doubt, and profoundly, was Hiller's version of those dreams.

Hiller had wanted to find out if he had been going to contact his two young assistants or other unknown parties. Perhaps he thought that Hamilton might lead him to a larger and worthwhile cache of gold and diamonds. Perhaps he thought Hamilton had gone to make some mysterious phone call. Perhaps anything. On balance, Hamilton thought, it was just because Hiller was of a highly suspicious nature and just wanted to know what, if anything, Hamilton was up to. There could be no other explanation and it seemed pointless to waste further time and thought on it.

Hamilton poured himself a small drink—the nondescript bottle did in fact contain an excellent Highland malt which his friend Curly had obtained for him—and topped it up with some mineral water: the Romono water supply was an excellent specific for those who wished to be laid low with dysentery, cholera, and a variety of other unpleasant tropical diseases.

Hamilton smiled to himself. When Serrano came to and reported his woes to his master, neither he nor Hiller would be in any doubt as to the identity of the assailant responsible for the sore and stiff neck from which Serrano would assuredly be suffering. If nothing else, Hamilton mused, it would teach them to be rather more circumspect and respectful in their future dealings with him. Hamilton had no doubt whatsoever that he would be meeting Serrano—officially—in the very near future and would thereafter be seeing quite a deal of him.

Hamilton took a sip of his drink, dropped to his knees, ran his hand over the floor under the table, found nothing and smiled in satisfaction. He crossed to the shelving, picked up a solitary cassette, examined it carefully and smiled in even wider satisfaction. He drained his glass, turned out the light and headed back into town.

In his room in the Hotel Negresco—the famous hotel in Nice would have cringed at the thought that such a hovel should bear the same name-Hiller was making—or trying to make—a telephone call, his face bearing the unmistakable expression of long-suffering impatience that characterised any person so foolhardy as to try to phone out of Romono. But at long last his patience was rewarded and his face lit up.

'Aha!' he said. His voice, understandably, had a note almost of triumph in it. 'At last, at last! Mr Smith, if you please.'

CHAPTER TWO

The drawing-room of Joshua Smith's villa—the Villa Haydn in Brasilia—demonstrated beyond all question the vast gulf that lay between a multi-billionaire and the merely rich. The furnishings, mainly Louis XIV and not the shadow of an imitation in sight, the drapes, from Belgium and Malta, the carpets, ancient Persian to the last one, and the pictures, ranging all the way from Dutch Old Masters to the Impressionists, all spoke not only of immense wealth but also a hedonistic determination to use it to its maximum. But for all that vast opulence there was nonetheless displayed an exquisite good taste in that everything matched and blended in something very, very close to perfection. Clearly, no modern interior decorator had been allowed within a mile of the place.

The owner matched up magnificently to all this magnificence. He was a large, well-built and dinner-suited man of late middle age who looked absolutely at home in one of the huge armchairs that he occupied close to a sparkling pine log fire.

Joshua Smith, still dark in both hair and moustache, the one brushed straight back, the other neatly trimmed, was a smooth and urbane man, but not too smooth, not too urbane, much given to smiling and invariably kind and courteous to his inferiors which, in his case, meant just about everybody in sight. With the passage of time, the carefully and painstakingly

acquired geniality and urbanity had become second nature to him (although some of the original ruthlessness had had to remain to account for his untold millions). Only a specialist could have detected the extensive plastic surgery that had transformed Smith's face from what it once had been.

There was another man in his drawing-room, and a young woman. Jack Tracy was a young-middle-aged man, blond, with a pock-marked face and a general air of capable toughness about him. The toughness and capability were undoubtedly there—they had to be for any man to be the general manager of Smith's vast chain of newspapers and magazines.

Maria Schneider, with her slightly dusky skin and brown eyes, could have been South American, Southern Mediterranean or Middle Eastern. Her hair was the colour of a raven. Whatever her nationality she was indisputably beautiful with a rather inscrutable face but invariably watchful penetrating eyes. She didn't look kind or sensitive but was both. She looked intelligent and had to be: when not doubling—as rumour had it—as Smith's mistress she was his private and confidential secretary and it was no rumour that she was remarkably skilled in her official capacity.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.