

L I Z A R D M E N O F L O S A N G E L E S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

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

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

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

“Stop!” cried a man’s voice from the back of the theater. “Don’t touch that box!”

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

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

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

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

“Miss Lockhart,” the man said with a short bow.

“Mrs.,” she replied coolly.

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

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

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

Mrs. Lockhart interrupted. “Certain very specific circumstances.”

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

Rosenberg shook his head. “I fear you’ve lost me, sir.”

“Some believe life to be full of mysteries. My studies in the East—and elsewhere—have convinced me there is but One, a single web of relationships that binds everything in the universe together. It’s the principle by which magic works.”

“I am not a magician, sir. And my concern is with what seems to be a single mystery, the disappearance of my daughter, Vera. The police are stymied and I’m afraid something drastic may have befallen her.”

“I’m sympathetic, of course, Mr. Rosenberg,” Cairo offered, “but surely this is a matter for a conventional private investigator, not someone of my particular talents.”

“There are...other factors involved. Factors that I believe you might...Good Lord!” The color drained from Rosenberg’s face as he pointed a shaking finger toward the hallway outside the dressing room. “There’s one of them now!”

Cairo spun around to look. A sinister figure, heavily muffled in a wide-brimmed hat, raincoat, and baggy trousers, had just turned from the doorway and scuttled toward the stage door exit.

CAIRO LEAPED to his feet, his previous semblance of weariness gone. He bolted down the corridor in feverish pursuit of the mysterious onlooker. The heavily muffled man—if man it was—slammed open the bright red stage door and banged down the metal steps outside. As Cairo emerged into the warm darkness of the Los Angeles night he saw the figure moving rapidly down the sidewalk, its body strangely contorted. It was bent at the waist, its short arms jerking convulsively, as if fighting the impulse to drop to all fours.

Only a dozen yards separated Cairo from the creature as it turned the corner onto a side street. When Cairo rounded the same corner seconds later, it had disappeared.

Mrs. Lockhart found Cairo there, staring at a scarf, hat, coat, and pants lying in the gutter. A damp, fetid smell rose from the clothing. “Methane,” Cairo said. “Swamp gas.”

“I suppose,” Mrs. Lockhart said, “this means we’ll be taking the case.”

“HAVE YOU EVER,” Rosenberg asked, “heard the name Aleister Crowley?”

They sat the parlor of Rosenberg’s house in the community of Silver Lake, located to the north and west of Los Angeles proper. Rosenberg was fortifying himself with brandy while Cairo drank strong tea. Mrs. Lockhart, who had changed into a low-cut black evening dress, had declined refreshment.

“The Great Beast?” Cairo asked, startled. “He’s involved in this?”

"I'm afraid he may have corrupted my daughter. And I believe the creatures that have been following me—you saw one of them tonight—may be his minions. So you do know of him?"

"We have had ... encounters," Mrs. Lockhart said. "He's here in Los Angeles?"

"He's staying in Pasadena, in the home of a businessman rumored to have Satanic allegiances. From there Crowley is able to make acquaintances in the film industry. Or rather, to speak frankly, to prey upon members of that profession. Spending their money on drugs and liquor, using their homes for unspeakable acts—I hope my candor doesn't offend you, sir."

"No," Cairo said. "I rely on it. And this man Crowley is worse than you imagine. How did your daughter come in contact with him?"

"She's a film actress. She uses a stage name, Veronica Fleming. Perhaps you've heard of her?" The last was said with unmistakable pride. He offered Cairo a framed color photograph from the mantle that showed a beautiful woman with luminous eyes and lustrous dark red hair falling past her shoulders.

"She was a child actress," Cairo said. "Now playing ingénue roles."

Rosenberg nodded. "She first met Crowley through her producer. I believe it's been less than a month. She began to attend parties at the mansion where Crowley's staying. Then, three days ago, she disappeared. I fear that even if she hasn't been physically harmed, her reputation may have been so damaged by her association with this ... Great Beast, as you call him, that her ingénue days may be finished."

"You were right to come to us," Cairo said. "Crowley is reputed to be past his prime, but he is still one of the most dangerous men alive. As he becomes more debauched and decadent, in fact, it becomes ever more dangerous to trifle with him." He got to his feet and adjusted the cuffs of his jacket. "If you have an address for him, in fact, we'll be on our way."

"My chauffeur will drive you," Rosenberg said. "Make whatever use of him you require." He looked at his pocket watch. "However, it's nearly midnight. Surely..."

"Crowley will be awake," Cairo assured him. "Hesitation at this point could be fatal."

"Besides," Mrs. Lockhart added, "our vaudeville troupe has an engagement in San Diego in less than 24 hours."

THE HOUSE HAD been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, its long, shingled walls blending almost invisibly with the heavily landscaped grounds, its roof beams extending beyond the structure like a draftsman's energetic pencil lines. Every light in the mansion burned brightly and the driveway was filled with cars.

"Such physical beauty," Cairo remarked, "so full of corruption."

"I trust you're not waxing metaphorical," Mrs. Lockhart said. "You know how I feel about that."

They walked up the curving driveway together and Cairo tried the massive teak door. It was securely locked and bolted. Cairo paused momentarily to

pick the locks, then led them through a long entry hall into a scene of utter debauchery.

Perhaps two dozen men, women, and children sprawled in various postures throughout the large, oak-paneled room. None of them was Victoria Fleming. Few were fully dressed; some were bound with scarves or leather. They were grouped, for the most part, in twos and threes, with most of the possible combinations of gender represented. A blazing fire kept the room uncomfortably warm. On low tables throughout lay syringes, liquor bottles, and untidy heaps of white powders.

A low divan in the center of the room held a tall, sturdily-built man in his fifties, his head shaved, his thick jowls sagging with mindless pleasure. He was completely naked.

“Crowley!” Cairo shouted.

The bald man’s eyes slowly opened and focused upon Cairo. “You!” he cried. His stare exuded malevolence. “How dare you confront me here?”

Mrs. Lockhart turned to Cairo. “If everything is under control here, I’ll just have a look at the rest of the house.”

Without looking away from Crowley, Cairo nodded. “Excellent suggestion.”

“What are you doing here, Cairo?” Crowley bellowed, slowly rising to a sitting position, but making no attempt to cover himself. “You and that bloodless imitation of a woman? What do you want from me?”

“Information, merely,” Cairo said. “I’m looking for a woman named Veronica Fleming. She might also call herself Vera Rosenberg. We have reason to believe you might know her.”

“Or have knowledge of her?” Crowley smiled. “In the so-called Biblical sense, perhaps? Do not waste my time, Cairo. There are so many women. Sometimes they are masked or blindfolded, and I never even see their faces, let alone learn their names. They are all one to me. Merely vessels for the transmission of magickal power.”

“It’s not your childish blasphemy that I object to,” Cairo observed evenly. “Nor your physical depravity, nor even your wretched verse. It is your lack of compassion. It renders you less than human, and beneath contempt.”

Crowley colored at the mention of his poetry, but quickly regained control. “You are so sanctimonious, Cairo.” He waved one massive, long-fingered hand dismissively. “Yet you and I are two sides of the same coin. I debauch young women to feed my self-esteem, you rescue them to the same end. You focus your will through your ‘craft’ and your petty conjurings, I focus mine through ritual and tantric practice, but both of us know that will is the key. ‘Do what thou wilt—’”

“—shall be the whole of the Law,” Cairo intoned. “So you have told us, again and again.”

“You weary me, Cairo. Begone.”

Mrs. Lockhart had not yet returned. Cairo glanced at his watch. “I dispute your comparisons,” he said. “We are separate coins, and yours is made of base metal, counterfeit.”

Crowley, in a show of indifference, put a pinch of white powder on the web of his left thumb and inhaled it briskly. From one of the darkened corners of the room came a sharp cry, though whether of pain or pleasure was not immediately obvious.

“And whatever else may be true of me,” Cairo persisted, “I can at least console myself that I am not the author of poetry so wretched that it is universally reviled in my lifetime and will be forgotten promptly thereafter.”

This, at last, reduced Crowley to rage. “Hassan!” he screamed in a high-pitched voice. A young Arab in an embroidered galabeya and turban appeared, carrying a scimitar.

Crowley pointed to Cairo. “Kill him!”

CAIRO, WITH AN EXPRESSION of distaste, let his gaze wander around the room. He took three strides to the fireplace where he hefted the brass poker. “Mmmm,” he said with some dissatisfaction, and extended the implement from a practiced fencer’s stance.

Suddenly wary, Hassan, who had raised his scimitar and seemed to be on the point of charging, glanced nervously at Crowley. “Kill him!” Crowley shrieked again, and the young Arab inched forward, twirling the blade with a circular motion of his wrist. Cairo gave way before it, passing behind a sofa from which two scantily-clad women regarded him with mild interest.

Hassan lunged and swung the curved blade in a murderous arc. Cairo somehow stepped out of its path, letting it carry on unimpeded into a priceless white Chinese vase, which shattered into a hundred fragments. Glancing behind him, Cairo’s eyes fell upon a heavily-laden coffee table, and he reached back with his left foot to kick it aside. Powders, liquids, and candles flew across the room in a graceful arc and a teenage boy, who’d been reaching for one of the bowls, let out a sigh of regret.

Another furious scimitar slash failed to connect, reducing Hassan to blind fury. He became a windmill of flashing steel and yet Cairo remained untouched as the young Arab hurtled past him, colliding with a love seat and sending himself and its occupants sprawling across the deep red Oriental carpet of the adjacent dining room.

Stumbling to his feet, Hassan hurled a massive chair at Cairo, who ducked it easily. “Damn you,” Crowley shouted at the boy. “Can you not finish him?”

Hassan moved in with the sword again, backing Cairo toward a corner. The boy’s confidence was gone and he fought with the desperate intensity of the hopeless. His blade clashed with Cairo’s poker once, twice, a third time, and then Cairo said, “Ah. There you are.”

With a fluid motion he sent the scimitar spinning out of Hassan’s grip, leaving the boy with a purpling bruise across the back of his hand.

Mrs. Lockhart, who had reappeared from the back of the house, stood in the center of the room, staring at the upturned furniture and the shattered vase and bowls. “Shall we?” she asked Cairo.

“Indeed,” Cairo replied, and he saluted Crowley with the poker before tossing it into the fireplace. “If you’ll forgive us, we’ll take our leave.”

“I will curse you, Cairo,” Crowley muttered. “Carefully, elaborately, and inescapably. You will regret this. Briefly, in the time that remains to you.”

“Do what thou wilt,” Cairo said, and extended his arm to Mrs. Lockhart.

AS THEY WALKED down the driveway Mrs. Lockhart said, “No sign of Veronica Fleming, but I did find an acquaintance of hers. She claims that her name is Blanche. I assisted her escape through a window, and she’s now waiting for us in the car.”

Mrs. Lockhart walked around to the front passenger seat while Cairo got in back next to a thin, pale woman with limp ash-blond hair. She wore a low-cut evening dress of white satin. “Blanche, indeed,” Cairo smiled. “What’s your real name?”

After a long pause the woman lifted her pale eyes and said, “Mildred. Mildred Davis. Of Hillsboro, Missouri.”

“Drive,” Mrs. Lockhart said to the chauffeur. “Back toward Los Angeles.”

“You know Veronica Fleming?” Cairo asked the girl.

“I should think I know her. She stole my boyfriend.” In contrast to her fashionable appearance, her voice was uneducated and somewhat shrill.

Cairo raised one eyebrow and the girl continued. “The first time she come to the house, I couldn’t even believe it, her being in pictures and all. I used to watch her back in Hillsboro when she was just a little girl. She’s one of the reasons I come out here to Hollywood. Brother Perdurabo was going to make me a star just like her.” Cairo frowned at the name Perdurabo, one of Crowley’s many aliases. “Then,” the girl went on, “she went and moved in on my Bruno.”

“Bruno?” Cairo asked.

“Bruno Galt. He’s a geologist. Works for one of those big mining companies. He’s got piles of money. Brother Perdurabo was going to teach Bruno the Art, so he give me to Bruno for his, you know, those tantrum rituals?”

“Tantric,” Cairo said.

“That’s the ones. Then three days ago Veronica, she puts the moves on Bruno and he leaves the mansion with her. That was the last time I seen either one of them.”

“Do you know where Galt lives?”

“I should think I do. He’s got a place downtown.” She gave the driver an address on Grand Avenue.

“As quickly as you can,” Cairo told him. The driver nodded, made a right turn, and accelerated into the eastbound traffic on Huntington Drive. Cairo turned back to the girl. “What makes a geologist so interested in the occult?”

“It’s this guy he works with. Warren Shufelt. He’s a mining engineer.”

“Another of Crowley’s benefactors?”

“As far as I know, Mr. Shufelt don’t got nothing to do with Brother Perdurabo. He’s only interested in his tunnels.”

“Tunnels?”

“Yeah, the tunnels that—”

She broke off as a police siren suddenly split the night. Red lights flashed through the rear windscreen. The chauffeur slowed the car and steered toward the side of the road. Cairo leaned forward. "I'll handle this."

A policeman ran up to the car as Cairo wound down the rear window. "Your name Cairo?" the patrolman asked.

Cairo nodded.

"Follow us," the man called, already running back to his own vehicle. "There's trouble at Mr. Rosenberg's."

WHEN THEY ARRIVED at Rosenberg's house three police cars already sat in the driveway, red lights flashing. Cairo sprang out of the limousine and one of the policemen led him toward the house, with Mildred and Mrs. Lockhart following closely behind.

"There was a break-in," the policeman said. "Mr. Rosenberg asked us to put out an all-points for you. He said he needed to talk to you right away, and when Mr. Rosenberg needs something, well, we try to oblige him."

"I'm sure," Cairo said.

Rosenberg awaited them in his sun room, wearing a heavy terrycloth robe and drinking coffee. He was pacing back and forth in front of the sliding glass doors that led to his swimming pool. His hair was damp and he seemed feverish.

Cairo sat in a wicker chair. As soon as Mildred and Mrs. Lockhart had settled themselves on the divan he said, "Tell us what happened."

"I was fast asleep," Rosenberg explained. "I awoke when I felt the covers pulled away from me, and I sat up in bed. I caught just a glimpse of one of those creatures standing over me, and then it doused me in some kind of liquid."

"Can you describe the liquid?" Mrs. Lockhart asked, leaning forward.

"It was greenish and slightly oily to the touch. Thicker than water, somehow. And it had a faint, fetid smell, like a marsh."

Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart exchanged a significant look.

"I sprang out of bed," Rosenberg continued, "and caught only a glimpse of my attacker. He was small, heavily swathed—in short, almost identical to the intruder at the theater this evening. The way he moved, I tell you, sir, I'm not entirely sure he..." Rosenberg shook his head, then dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. "Is it unnaturally hot in here?"

"Quite the contrary," Cairo said. "Tell me what it is you were unsure of."

Rosenberg's voice dropped to a whisper. "I am not entirely sure he was...human."

Cairo nodded. "I see. What happened next?"

"The creature disappeared into the night. I called the police immediately, of course, and then I took a hot bath and scrubbed my skin nearly raw. It had begun to itch most fearsomely. In fact," he confided, mopping his brow again, "it still does."

Suddenly Rosenberg stood stock still. "My God—" he said.

Cairo got to his feet. "Rosenberg? Is something wrong?"

Rosenberg's only reply was a high-pitched moan that seemed to escape involuntarily from his lips.

Cairo looked at Mrs. Lockhart. "What's wrong with him? Do you see anything?"

Mrs. Lockhart shook her head but Mildred suddenly gasped and put her hand to her mouth. "L-look!"

Cairo turned back. Faint wisps of smoke had begun to rise from Rosenberg's robe.

"What's going on?" Mildred cried.

"Open those glass doors, Mrs. Lockhart, if you please," Cairo said with icy calm.

"Helllllllp ... meeeeeeee..." Rosenberg howled, as the first tiny flames began to flicker at the back of his head, like an infernal halo. The very air around him had begun to warp from the intense heat that poured off his body.

Cairo reached one hand toward Rosenberg, then snatched it back. There now seemed to be a fire deep inside Rosenberg's chest, like the glow inside a piece of charcoal whose surface has turned to ash. In fact, Rosenberg's skin had begun to flutter away in small, gray sheets.

Mrs. Lockhart wrestled open one of the massive glass doors and stood aside as Cairo snatched a Navajo rug from the tile floor and, using it as a shield, attempted to wrap it around Rosenberg's body. At that instant Rosenberg burst into flames as hot as those in a crematorium. The blanket was consumed instantly and Cairo fell back with his hands before his face.

When he got to his feet, nothing remained of Emil Rosenberg but a pile of ashes and one charred gray foot.

A POLICEMAN BURST through the door with a revolver in his hand. "What's going on here?" He glanced nervously around the room. "Where's Mr. Rosenberg? And what's that smell?"

Cairo faced him, his eyes intent. He held up his right hand, middle finger bent and held by the thumb, the remaining fingers extended. "Listen to my voice," Cairo intoned. "There is nothing wrong here. You will give us the keys to your patrol car. You will walk us to the car and explain to the others that I am a high-ranking member of the Los Angeles police department."

The policeman's eyes clouded over and his brow furrowed as if he were studying a complex mathematical formula. "Nothing's wrong here. You can put your badge away, sir. My car is right outside."

Mildred looked at Mrs. Lockhart in amazement. "How did he do that?"

"A very great deal of self-confidence," Mrs. Lockhart replied. "Don't dawdle."

The officer escorted them to his car and waved to them from the driveway as Mrs. Lockhart expertly backed the long, black automobile, lights still flashing, into the street. Cairo turned to Mildred, who sat wide-eyed in the back. "First we need directions to Galt's apartment," he said. "Then I want you to finish telling me about the tunnels."

The night was dark and cool and the stars burned fiercely overhead as Mrs. Lockhart drove toward the city. Mildred's face, in the starlight, showed a

mixture of fear and excitement, innocence and cupidity. “Mr. Shufelt, see, he had this idea about a lost city under Los Angeles. He thought there was gold down there, big tablets of it—I guess like Moses had, only gold. He said he had maps that he made with what he called his Radio X-Ray. It just looked like a fancy dowsing rod to me, but what do I know? He drilled a big hole on Fort Moore Hill this spring trying to find it.”

“I assume he was unsuccessful,” Cairo said. “Otherwise it would have been in every newspaper in the civilized world.”

“Bruno says he *did* find it.”

“Then perhaps we should be talking to this Shufelt instead of Galt.”

“I don’t think even Brother Perdurabo could talk to Mr. Shufelt now.”

“Are you saying he’s dead?”

“The city gave up drilling, see, on account of being scared the hole was going to cave in, even though Mr. Shufelt said they were almost through. So Bruno and Mr. Shufelt went out there one night and Bruno lowered him into the hole with his Radio X-Ray machine and a pickax. Bruno stayed up top to watch for cops and all, and after three or four hours Mr. Shufelt said he found something. Then Bruno heard Mr. Shufelt say something like, ‘Oh my God, they’re alive!’ Then there was this awful noise that Bruno said was like bones going through a grinder and the bottom part of the tunnel fell in. By the time Bruno could get down there, there was a hundred tons of rock where Mr. Shufelt had been.”

“Did Bruno go to the police?”

The girl nodded. “He says they didn’t believe him. They thought it was just a trick so they’d let Bruno and Mr. Shufelt start drilling again.”

“Do you have any idea what Mr. Shufelt might have meant when he said, ‘They’re alive?’”

“Bruno thought he knew. He thought—”

“Yes?”

She looked out the window, then back into Cairo’s eyes. “He thought it was the lizard men.”

“SEE,” MILDRED EXPLAINED, the words rushing out now in a torrent, “the tunnels are all supposed to connect together in the shape of this giant lizard. The head is up by Chinatown and the tail is down by the Central Library. There’s some kind of Indian legend about it. It was supposed to be built by lizard people five thousand years ago.”

“The lizard people are real,” Cairo said. “We saw one of them at the theater this evening, and it was one of them that attacked Rosenberg at his house. But what was Veronica’s part in all of this?”

“She was real interested in those gold tablets. See, Bruno, he was sure there was another way into the tunnels. He was telling me about it at the mansion, about how he had all of Mr. Shufelt’s maps and everything, and about how he thought Brother Perdurabo could help him find the entrance. That’s when Veronica made her move. I bet she convinced Bruno she’d be better at that tantric stuff than me.”

“The maps are at Galt’s apartment?”

“He used to show them to me. I tell you, I don’t understand half the things he’d say to me, and those maps ain’t like any maps I ever saw.” She leaned forward and said to Mrs. Lockhart, “Turn right on Grand Avenue, and go slow. We’re almost there.”

Mrs. Lockhart parked the police cruiser on the nearly deserted street and killed the lights. Downtown Los Angeles was a gray place, nothing like the outlying cities with their palm trees and ocean views. Cairo hunched his shoulders slightly as Mildred led them into a Spanish-style apartment building that had seen more prosperous days. No one answered the buzzer labeled “B. Galt,” so they climbed the stairs to the third floor, where Cairo opened the door as easily as if it hadn’t been locked.

The apartment consisted of a living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen: red tile floors, arched doorways, white plaster walls, and ceiling fans. The Spartan furnishings included no paintings, plants, or knickknacks. Two glasses sat in the kitchen sink, one of them showing lipstick traces, and a handbag lay on the rug beside the couch. Mrs. Lockhart made a quick inspection of its contents. “It’s Veronica’s,” she said.

A drafting table stood against the far wall of the bedroom. Cairo shuffled through the neat stacks of paper and said, “Come look at this.”

A map of downtown Los Angeles was taped to the surface of the table, onto which three vellum overlays had been added. Several hundred short lines crisscrossed the top layer. The second layer showed several longer, more complex lines, one of them winding through El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historic Park downtown.

The third overlay contained the outlines of a lizard, resembling the Gila monster of Arizona. Its head stretched north of Chinatown and its straight, stubby tail terminated at the Los Angeles Central Library, only a few blocks from where they stood.

“That’s the map,” Mildred said. “Crazy, ain’t it?”

“The lizard I understand—more or less,” Mrs. Lockhart said. “The other two diagrams baffle me.”

Cairo shook his head. “Mildred, did Bruno ever say anything that might make sense of all this?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think he understood it so much himself. That’s why he was going to Brother Perdurabo.”

“We’ll search all the rooms,” Cairo said. “There must be something else here to—”

At that moment the front door of the apartment flew open with a crash. A dark figure stood in the hallway, silhouetted by the hall light.

“Bruno?” Mildred said.

The figure groaned and toppled face-first onto the floor.

CAIRO ROLLED THE MAN onto his back. He had an athletic build, short blond hair, and wire-rimmed glasses. One lens had shattered and his khaki work clothes were bloodied and torn. “Is this Bruno?” Cairo asked Mildred.

Mildred nodded, wide-eyed. “Is he...?”

“Alive at the moment,” Cairo said. “But not at all well.”

“Lizard men...” Bruno whispered.

“Easy,” Cairo warned. “We have to get you to a hospital.”

“No time,” Bruno whispered. “I’m...a walking dead man...have to warn...lizard men...on the move...kill us all...take back their city...” His eyes suddenly opened wide. “Lizard queen! Must stop...the lizard queen!”

“Where are they?” Cairo asked intently. “These lizard men, how do we find them?”

“To...the tunnels...from...the tunnels...”

Cairo looked to Mrs. Lockhart. “He’s making no sense. If you’d be so kind as to get his feet, perhaps we—” He broke off as waves of heat began to pour off of Bruno’s body.

“Lizard!” Bruno screamed. “Queeeeeeeeeeeen!”

“Oh no,” Cairo sighed. “Not again.”

Flames leaped out of Bruno’s clothing and the glass of his spectacles melted and ran like tears. The skull inside Bruno’s head seemed to glow as if made of molten lava.

“Your hands,” Mrs. Lockhart said sharply. “Where you touched him.”

Cairo looked down. Smoke was already rising from his skin.

“I’ll get ice,” Mrs. Lockhart said, moving swiftly to the icebox in the kitchen. Cairo ignored her. He backed away from Bruno’s furiously burning body and lowered himself into a cross-legged posture on the floor. He closed his eyes. Flames flickered between his fingers and then, just as suddenly, died out. A moment later Cairo opened his eyes and inspected the hands he held out in front of him, unharmed.

“There’s no ice,” Mrs. Lockhart said, returning. “Are you all right?”

“Perfectly,” Cairo assured her.

“How ... how...” Mildred stammered.

“It was no worse than the hot coals I used to walk upon in India. Any *fakir* could have done the same.”

“You ... you were faking it?” She burst into sudden tears. “I don’t understand any of this! This is all so horrible! Poor Bruno, and poor Mr. Rosenberg! And that monster, Crowley, who wanted to have relations with anything that moved! I wish I never came to California! I wish none of this had ever happened!”

“Listen to my voice,” Cairo said. He held up his hand, palm first, with the middle finger bent again. “I will not command you to forget, because if you forget you will only make the same mistakes again. And I cannot undo the things that happened tonight. I can, however, make you able to remember them without much pain, or fear, or curiosity, so that you can go back to Missouri and be Mildred Davis once again. Do you understand?”

Mildred nodded and Cairo lowered his hand. “Do you have any money?” he asked her. She shook her head. Cairo reached into the limp blonde hair behind her ear and produced a small, tightly folded piece of paper. He carefully unfolded it to reveal a twenty-dollar bill. “That should get you home,” he said.

Mildred wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “How can I ever thank you?”

“Help me search for another map,” Cairo said, “before we take you to the train station.”

DAWN WAS A PALE gray promise in the eastern sky when they pulled up in front of Union Station on Alameda Street. Even at this hour the sidewalks teemed with well-dressed travelers, while children sold newspapers and fresh fruit. The smell of oranges blended with the scent of orange blossoms in the air.

They had searched Bruno’s apartment top to bottom and found no other maps than the ones on the drafting table. Cairo had appropriated those, along with a massive battery-powered miner’s lamp they’d found in Bruno’s closet.

They got out of the police car. “Thank you so much Mr. Cairo, Mrs. Lockhart,” Mildred said. “I don’t know how I could ever pay you back.”

“Just take care of yourself,” Cairo said. He reached into thin air and pulled back a business card. “This is the address of our manager. Write us a letter when you’re safely back in Missouri.”

“I will.”

“A moment,” Mrs. Lockhart said suddenly. “Mildred, what’s that?”

She was pointing to a ramp, paved with cobblestones, that led down into the ground. “That?” Mildred said. “Why, that’s just a walkway, for people and horses to cross the street.”

“Are there many of them in the city?”

“Maybe a couple of hundred.”

“As many,” Mrs. Lockhart pressed on, “as there were little marks on the top sheet of Bruno’s map? Cairo, would you be so kind?” He nodded, reached back into the police car for the map, and unrolled it on the sidewalk.

“You’re right,” Cairo said. “It’s a map of the pedestrian tunnels. Very astute, Mrs. Lockhart.”

“There’s more,” Mrs. Lockhart said. “Note how these pedestrian tunnels connect with a longer tunnel that goes under the park? That park right behind us?”

“By heaven,” Cairo said. “I think you’re on to it.” He rolled up the maps and exchanged them for the miner’s lamp. “What did Bruno say when I asked him how to find the lizard men? Could it have been that he meant us to get ‘to the tunnels’—meaning the tunnels of the lizard men—’from the tunnels’—meaning from the pedestrian tunnels?”

“Let us find out,” Mrs. Lockhart said. “Mildred, can you make your way to your train on your own?”

“Compared to a lot of things I done since I came out here,” Mildred said, “it’ll be a piece of cake.”

She blew a kiss, and Cairo managed a short bow, then he and Mrs. Lockhart turned and hurried down the ramp that led to the tunnels under Los Angeles.

THE SHORT TUNNEL crossed beneath Alameda and emerged again at the end of Olvera Street in the park. Cairo walked the length of it then returned, searching the walls and floor. “I don’t see any way this can join the other tunnel.”

“That’s because,” Mrs. Lockhart said, “you’re using your eyes.”

Cairo stopped. “You’re right, of course.” He produced a long, red handkerchief from his sleeve and tied it over his eyes. Once again he slowly walked the length of the tunnel, arms raised slightly from his sides, turning his head every few seconds to listen or to sniff the air. An elderly Mexican woman, muffled in a black dress and shawl, passed him with a frightened look, crossing herself and muttering under her breath.

Once she had climbed the ramp to the park Cairo asked, “Are we alone?”
“Quite,” Mrs. Lockhart replied.

Cairo nodded, walked to the middle of the south wall of the tunnel, and ran his fingers carefully over the massive stone blocks. “Ah,” he said, and a section of the wall pivoted backward into darkness. He removed the blindfold and switched on Bruno’s mining lamp. Sniffing the air of the passage he commented, “Methane. Volatile stuff. Don’t light up one of your cigars in here, Mrs. Lockhart.”

“Very droll, Cairo. If you don’t wish to lead, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Cairo handed her the lamp and followed her into the passage. The tunnel was ten feet high and nearly that wide, paved with large, uniform stones. The scars of pickaxes were visible in the rock of the ceiling. Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart had advanced no more than a few paces when the section of wall that had pivoted to admit them rumbled slowly back into place.

Mrs. Lockhart looked at Cairo. “I trust you’ll be able to get us out again.”
“I hope so too,” Cairo smiled. “Lead on.”

The passage ran straight and unencumbered for several hundred yards, angling slightly downward. Suddenly Cairo halted. “Mrs. Lockhart. Shut the lamp off, if you would.”

She did so, and for a moment they were plunged into what seemed to be absolute, stygian darkness. Then, after a few agonizing seconds, a faint, yellowish-green outline emerged from the general gloom of the floor. Cairo knelt and lifted away a stone trap-door, revealing a drop of ten feet or so, with hand-holds in the rock, and a stone staircase below it that led deep into the bowels of the earth. The green glow rose from the stairs.

Mrs. Lockhart handed the lamp to Cairo and began to descend. “Be careful,” she said. “It’s a bit slippery.”

Cairo passed down the lamp and joined her on the first platform. “Are you prepared to go on?” Cairo asked. “I have no idea where this may lead.”

A narrow smile barely registered on Mrs. Lockhart’s agelessly beautiful features. “That lack has never stopped me before.”

The stairs seemed to have been carved from living rock, untold generations before. The risers were over a foot in height and the uncomfortably narrow treads were well worn. The passage curved gently to the right as it descended. After the initial turning, Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart continued straight downward in a northwesterly direction for hundreds of feet before abruptly emerging into a chamber the size of a banquet hall with a smooth, level floor. The mysterious green glow came from a single sphere, somewhat larger than a man’s head, in the center of the ceiling. It provided enough light to easily read

the carvings in the walls of the cave. Interspersed with vaguely humanoid figures were rows of hieroglyphs. Cairo took the lamp and studied them.

“Remind you of anything?” Mrs. Lockhart asked.

“The Temple of Ramses the Second at Abu Simbel,” Cairo returned, awe in his voice.

Mrs. Lockhart nodded. “And...?”

“And Chichen Itza in the Yucatan.”

“Exactly.”

“But if there is a single civilization that bridges those two cultures, it must mean—”

“Correct,” Mrs. Lockhart said. “These tunnels can only have been built by the survivors of Atlantis.”

CAIRO STOOD for a moment, as if trying to fathom all the implications of the idea. “Are you saying that the Atlanteans were not human? That they were some sort of ... lizard race?” Cairo turned slowly, taking in the carvings, the alien technology of the light sphere. “It could explain so much...”

He froze. “Did you hear something?”

Mrs. Lockhart shook her head once, a curt gesture that barely disturbed her jet-black hair.

Another tunnel led from the far end of the chamber. Cairo glided silently toward the opening and looked into the darkness. “I don’t think—”

This time the noise was clearly audible, a sort of wet thump. It was quickly followed by another. Cairo backed into the center of the room and held the lamp high. Mrs. Lockhart moved behind him, crouching slightly, her arms raised in the posture of an oriental science of self-defense.

A panel of hieroglyphs suddenly slid open to reveal a small passageway, followed almost instantly by a second panel and then a third. A fourth opened in the opposite wall, then two more. For a moment silence fell on the underground chamber, an absence more terrifying than the sounds that had preceded it.

And then the openings poured forth lizard men.

There were at least a hundred of them, all about four feet in height, their skins gray-green in the eerie luminescence. Their loins were wrapped in some sort of bindings that left room for the massive tails that dragged the ground behind them. They had almost no necks, and their lipless mouths extended more than an inch beyond where their noses should have been. Their bulbous eyes stared unblinkingly as they shambled forward on massive lower legs that bent nearly double. Had they straightened those legs they would have been the height of a man.

They formed a great circle around Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart. The odor of methane in the air was almost unbearable. Cairo shifted the lamp to his left hand and gestured with his right. “We are looking for a human woman, Veronica Fleming. We have no desire to harm you.”

“Speak for yourself, Cairo,” Mrs. Lockhart said. “In any case, I don’t believe they’re listening.”

The lizard men had begun to move forward. "I will protect myself," Cairo warned them, waving the lamp in an arc in front of him. "Have a care."

The lizard men charged.

Cairo swung the lamp once, grazing one of them and tracing a line of dark green across its chest. He had no further opportunity. In the next moment the weight of the creatures bore him and Mrs. Lockhart to the floor of the cave and consciousness fled from them both.

CAIRO RECOVERED to find himself leaning back against one face of a steep, ten-foot tall pyramid, his wrists and ankles secured by golden chains. He winced in pain as soon as he opened his eyes and it took him a moment to try again.

"Are you all right, Cairo?" Mrs. Lockhart asked. She was chained to a second pyramid a few yards away.

"Somewhat the worse for beating," he said, "but I hope to survive." He blinked, raised his head, and gasped in astonishment as he looked around.

They'd been brought to a huge underground chamber, larger than any cathedral in Europe. A massive green globe seemed to hang well below the vaulted ceiling, where it blazed with a light to rival the noonday sun. Pyramids, altars, and figurines rose from the smooth stone floor at irregular intervals. Surrounding them swarmed hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the lizard creatures. Many of them carried spears that appeared to be tipped with gold. And on a dais in front of Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart stood a woman in long, flowing white robes and a golden mask.

Cairo smiled. "Veronica Fleming, I presume?"

The woman moved to the edge of the dais. She was but a few paces away from Cairo, had he been able to move, her waist on a level with his eyes. "No," she said, and removed the mask. "I was never Veronica Fleming."

Rosenberg's daughter stood revealed before them, her haunted eyes and shining red hair appearing almost black in the mysterious light. "Veronica Fleming was a creation of my father's, the invention of a status-seeking, fame-obsessed immigrant ashamed of his own heritage. It was Veronica Fleming who was sold into the child slavery of the studio system, Veronica Fleming who was given drugs and liquor before she even became physically a woman, Veronica Fleming who was used by producers and directors and has-been actors. Not me. Never me."

She spread her arms wide above her head, fingers extended. "I am Vera Rosenberg, and I have found my true destiny...as a Queen." Her subjects answered her with percussive sounds from their throats, horrid gulping barks that resounded the length and breadth of the chamber and built to a deafening crescendo.

"What do you mean to do with us?" Cairo demanded, his voice raised to be heard above the hideous cacophony.

"You will be sacrificed, of course," Vera said. "In due time."

"Three days ago," Mrs. Lockhart said, "you stood in the same relation to Aleister Crowley, the Great Beast 666, that Veronica Fleming stood to her

Hollywood masters. How did your situation change so utterly in so short a time?"

"The span of time is not three days," Vera said, "but rather five thousand years. I am the fulfillment of ancient prophecy." She beckoned to four of the nearest lizard creatures. "Leave them chained, but release them to walk about."

"So your subjects speak English?" Cairo asked, as his manacles were unfastened from the pyramid, the loose ends of the chains held by shambling lizard guards.

"English, Latin, Hebrew—all of your warm-blood languages are descended from those of my people."

"Your people, then," Mrs. Lockhart commented, "would be the cold-bloods?"

"Your reputation has preceded you, Mrs. Lockhart," Vera said. "You are hardly one to cast aspersions on cold-bloodedness." She smiled without humor. "But I will give you some few answers before your deaths. The rituals are more effective if the victims have some understanding of their purpose."

She walked gracefully down the steps of the dais and swept her arm toward a monumental sculpture which had the same Gila-monster form as the underground complex itself on Shufelt's map. It stretched a hundred yards in length, some thirty feet in height, and its surface was formed of beaten gold. At Vera Rosenberg's gesture, an opening appeared in the side of the giant reptile.

"Clearly," Cairo murmured to Mrs. Lockhart, "she may have shed her former identity, but she hasn't lost her flair for the dramatic." One of the lizard men responded by jabbing him in the kidneys with the blunt end of a spear.

"In this chamber," Vera said, "are thirty-seven golden tablets." She snapped her fingers and two of the lizard men scuttled into the chamber then reappeared, awkwardly carrying one of the tablets between them. The tablet had the rudimentary form of a lizard, with abbreviated head, tail, and legs breaking the otherwise oblong form. It appeared to be a slab of solid gold four feet in length, a little more than a foot wide, and perhaps half an inch thick. The upper surface was covered in hieroglyphs similar to those in the outer chamber.

"If the information inscribed on these tablets became public knowledge," Vera said, "it would destroy your civilization. Together they contain the entire history of the world since its creation, and believe me, its creation is nothing at all like you imagine it to be. They tell of the origin of warm-blooded life as an experiment gone awry. They even predict the coming of a warm-blooded, red-haired woman in the fifth millennium of exile to lead them back to domination of the surface world."

"You've read them all in three days?" Mrs. Lockhart remarked. "You've been busy."

"Your sarcasm is wasted," Vera replied imperiously. "Fragments of this knowledge have escaped over the centuries. Hopi legends tell of the great lost cities of the Lizard Clan. Bruno Galt heard of the Lizard Queen from a Hopi medicine man that they'd hired to help with their research. When Bruno and I met, we were two ambitious people who quickly saw how we could benefit from one another."

“Bruno’s dead,” Cairo said.

“Yes. He could never see past the gold. He didn’t realize that gold was meaningless once you had the power to rule an entire city—perhaps an entire continent. The power to repay anyone who had ever hurt you.”

“Then you must know your father is dead as well.”

“I ordered it.”

“We watched both of them die,” Cairo told her, “terrifying and painful deaths. Both were incinerated before our eyes.”

Vera nodded again. “It is our preferred means of execution: the Blood of the Green Lion.”

Cairo’s eyes widened at the name. “The universal solvent,” he murmured, “that the alchemists have always spoken of. It dissolves the seven metals and gold. How can you transport it?”

“Your warm-blood alchemists were wrong. Gold contains it, if the gold is pure enough. Our scientists developed it in the days when we ruled the surface world. Simply douse any object and gradually, in the space of half an hour or so, the energy within the molecules of that object releases itself as heat. We used the Blood of the Green Lion to melt these tunnels. Because gold can resist this chemical process, it became sacred to our people. As you can see, we’ve accumulated a good deal of it.”

She seemed to drift into a kind of reverie. “The race has fallen off greatly since then. Rapid evolution is both a blessing and a curse. But in a few generations—mere decades in human terms—I know we can rise again.”

She turned to back to Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart. Her smile at last appeared more genuine. “I realize you’ve only scratched the surface of the knowledge we have to offer you, but I fear we must break off. It’s time for you to die.”

LIZARD SOLDIERS STRETCHED Cairo and Mrs. Lockhart on two adjacent altars, securing their chains to the stone. On a third altar lay the heavy mining lamp. Two further lizard disciples staggered into view carrying a massive golden urn between them. They set it at the foot of the altars and stepped away.

“That would be the Blood of the Green Lion?” Cairo asked. “You mean, then, to burn us to death?”

“That is correct, Mr. Cairo. But your deaths will inspire my people to their conquest of the surface world, so you will not die completely in vain.”

“I take it,” Mrs. Lockhart ventured, “that no one has actually used this chemical here, underground, in quite some time?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because,” Cairo explained, “these tunnels are full of methane. The ground under Los Angeles is notoriously unstable, and clearly a fissure has opened some deposit of the gas. There may be other natural gases present as well which are not so easily recognizable, and even more flammable. In any event, an open flame in this chamber will result in an explosion of epic proportions.”

Vera’s face registered her concern. One of the lizard men tugged at her robe and she bent over to listen to his hoarse, croaking voice.

Cairo raised his right hand as far as the chains would allow and pinned his middle finger with his thumb. "You must believe me," he said intently. "We are all in danger. You must release us now and let us return to the surface."

Vera dismissed him with a shake of her magnificent red hair. "Before poor Bruno showed me my destiny, I had planned to achieve my independence by means of Brother Perdurabo's techniques. I learned enough from him to resist such feeble parlor tricks as yours, Cairo." She clapped her hands. "Cover them with the Blood! When you have finished, we will begin the rite of war. As they burn, they will light our charge to the surface world and the restoration of our empire!"

Two lizard men carefully raised the urn onto a pedestal. A third held a golden bowl to a tap at the bottom of the urn and filled it with a viscous liquid. Vera mounted a second pedestal near the urn from which she could look down upon the sacrificial altars. The creature carrying the golden bowl held it high overhead and the chamber resounded again to the yelping cries of the lizard men, as bone-chilling a sound as ever heard by human ears.

Cairo shrank from the creature as it mounted the steps of the altar, still carrying the bowl held high. Cairo's two hands were clasped together, his knees drawn up as far as his chains would permit. From the lizard's bulbous throat came a high-pitched warbling moan. A dozen more lizards took up the sound, then a hundred, then a thousand, until the very bedrock seemed to quiver and shake.

"Now!" Vera screamed. "Cover him now!"

Cairo seemed frozen. The lizard began to lower the bowl. The cries of the lizard army reached a feverish climax. And suddenly Cairo moved.

His hands flew free of the golden manacles as he caught the golden bowl from underneath and sent its contents arcing backward through the air. The thick liquid seemed to cohere and hang suspended as a single transparent mass in the bright green light for an eternity. Then it fell, covering Vera Rosenberg from head to foot.

"No!" Vera shrieked. "No! This cannot be! I have a destiny!"

Cairo froze momentarily, shocked by what he had inadvertently done. Then he shook himself and began to move again. In a second he released his feet, and in another he freed Mrs. Lockhart. In another he wrenched a spear from the hands of one of the stunned lizard soldiers and scrambled onto the altar that held the mining lamp.

"Kill them!" Vera demanded as Cairo drew back his arm. "Cairo, you're a fool. You're outnumbered thousands to one. My servants will tear you limb from limb for what you've done to me!"

"There is no antidote, then?" Cairo asked softly.

"None!"

"Then I am sorry," Cairo said. "It was not my intent that the fluid fall on you. As to your subjects ... they will have to find us before they can kill us."

With that he turned and hurled the spear upward with all his strength.

It sailed straight and true toward the small green sun overhead, and when it struck, the sphere imploded with a crack, a brief flash of green fog, and a rain of glass fragments.

The huge cavern was plunged into night. For a moment the beam of the miner's lamp revealed Mrs. Lockhart extending her hand toward Cairo and then the darkness closed again over the panic and chaos that reigned in the tunnels of the lizard men.

GASPING FOR BREATH, Mrs. Lockhart sank to the floor of the tunnel, then reached down and pulled Cairo up the last of the stairs they had descended only hours before. Cairo collapsed beside her, panting heavily.

"That," Mrs. Lockhart said between breaths, "was a horrific risk you took, exploding that lamp. It could have ignited the gasses and finished us then and there."

"We would have been no more dead," Cairo returned, equally exhausted, "than we would have been otherwise. I could only hope they couldn't track us by smell."

"A safe wager. If their senses were so acute, they would have known about the methane."

Cairo turned on the miner's lamp and examined his wrist-watch. "I fear that I may have underestimated the danger of that methane. It's been more than half an hour since Vera Rosenberg was doused in the Blood of the Green Lion and—"

As if in answer, a muffled explosion shook the floor underneath them. Instead of dying out, the noise seemed to grow. "Cairo," Mrs. Lockhart said, pointing down the stairs they had just climbed. The green glow was gone, replaced by the hellish orange of an inferno. "Run!"

They lunged to their feet and sprinted for the entrance to the tunnel. The walls were shaking now, and dirt and small rocks clattered around them and filled the air with dust.

"How much farther?" Mrs. Lockhart gasped. "I can feel the heat..."

"There!" Cairo exclaimed, as a wall materialized out of the fog of dirt and rubble. He flung himself at it, fumbling for a catch. "It must be here!"

"Patience," Mrs. Lockhart said with forced calm. Her voice was barely audible above the roar as one chamber after another ignited below them. "Let it find you..."

More quietly still she said, "And let it be soon..."

"I have it!" Cairo cried, and the wall opened to reveal the pedestrian tunnel beneath Alameda Street. He pulled Mrs. Lockhart through the opening, went to the mechanism on the outer side with sure fingers, and the wall slid closed as the very air behind it exploded into a blinding yellow fireball.

IN THE BRIGHT Los Angeles sunshine they sat on a park bench and watched the ordinary citizens of Los Angeles buying lunch from the vendors on Olvera Street. Cairo's shirt and trousers were in shreds, and the skin beneath was a mass of bruises and lacerations. Mrs. Lockhart had fared little better; her black hair was caked with dust and she wore the remains of Cairo's jacket to cover the damage to her gown.

"The thing that most frightens me," Cairo said, "is the knowledge that some of those lizard creatures doubtless escaped. If what Vera Rosenberg said

is true, their rapid evolution could allow them to become more humanoid in the space of a few generations. In our lifetimes there could be lizard men walking among us undetected.”

“What is it that you’re afraid of?” Mrs. Lockhart asked. “That cold-blooded, repugnant creatures might gain control of the film industry? How would we know the difference?”

“You make light of it, but the knowledge that was lost today—for good or ill—can never be recovered.”

“Knowledge is not always the highest good,” Mrs. Lockhart said, turning to follow the progress of an early summer breeze through the trees in the park.

“Really? If Rosenberg were alive, what would you have told him about his daughter?”

“I would merely have said that she died in an unfortunate accident, while exploring the tunnels under the city.”

“After the way he exploited her throughout her childhood?”

“His cruelty would not justify lack of compassion on my part.” Her eyes seemed to lose their focus. “It would be ... less than human, somehow.”

A small green lizard, no longer than Cairo’s hand, had crawled out onto the sidewalk to sun itself. As Cairo watched, it darted toward the busy street, hesitating a few inches from Cairo’s right shoe.

“I suppose you’re right, as always, Mrs. Lockhart.”

She blinked, brushed at the front of her borrowed jacket, and instantly recovered her composure. “Of course I am,” she said. “And as it’s already past one o’clock in the afternoon, may I suggest we be on our way? We have an engagement in San Diego this evening.”

“Indeed,” Cairo answered. As he rose, he nudged the lizard gently with his foot and sent it scampering back into the safety of the bushes. “Indeed, Mrs. Lockhart,” he laughed, “lead on.”