

Division of Crime

MORNING, nearly eight o'clock. The pear Phoebus Black was eating tasted of wild blueberries. He took one more bite, threw the core into the trash, gulped down his German filter coffee and took the elevator down to the garage of the apartment building where he lived in the Athens suburb of Maroussi. He would not be going to his office in the Athens Tower today, just like he hadn't been yesterday or the day before or in the last twenty days for that matter. His secretary had been informed and had transferred all his appointments to the following month.

The freezing February air rushed into his car through the window. He rolled it up again. It would take him at least three-quarters of an hour to reach Piraeus. That was just the amount of time he needed to think through the latest details of this complicated narcotics case.

Stepping on the gas, he thought, "Some like to deal drugs and others like to deal criminals." From the evidence he had gathered it appeared that the whole job had been pulled off between the Omonia Sq. and Piraeus stops on the electric train route. What an incredible idea. When the story of the heroin racket hit the papers in a few days, the headlines would be: "White Death Runs along the Train Tracks".

Here's how it all began: One month ago the desperate parents of two seventeen-year-old junkies came to his office. From the clues they had given him and from the close surveillance of the two young men Phoebus Black was put on the trail of Flowers, a person of indistinguishable gender, who sold withered hyacinths at the Neon Phaliron train station exit. He was the dealer.

Black didn't lose any time. He presented himself to Flowers as a relative of one of the two boys. He threatened Flowers that he would turn him in to the police. Flowers got scared. He told Black about someone called 'The Director'. He himself had never met him face to face. He was the one who ran the show. Every time anyone ratted on the others, the Director had him 'taken care of', like Lucky who sold lottery tickets at the Monasteraki station. He was run over ten days ago.

That's what Flowers told him and he ended up by saying, "It's a no-go situation. It's either him or us. Everybody wants out of this racket, but the Director won't let us out. Can you nab him? He'll kill us all."

THREE DAYS later, Flowers was arrested by the police, who apparently had also caught whiff of the case. But the same day he was found hanged in his cell. Murder or suicide?

PHOEBUS BLACK picked up the thread of the case starting from the corpse. There were twenty some people at Flowers' funeral. Half of them had some kind of handicap. One was blind, the other was one-armed, another was on crutches and someone else was in a wheelchair. Black's assistant, Stevis, took a picture of them while he was pretending to be leaving a bouquet on a grave five tombstones away. Now Phoebus Black had them in the palm of his hand.

He started the surveillance. Some of the suspects spent day and night hanging round the trains and train stations. They all had their nicknames. But which of them were involved in the heroin racket?

Three quickly stood out from the crowd: Scarecrow, a towering, pock-faced blind man; Maestro, a sinewy, animated deaf mute; and The Kid, a skinny cripple in glasses and a cloth cap.

Scarecrow, Maestro and The Kid lived together in an old, rundown house that consisted of three separate rooms looking onto an enclosed paved yard. It was located in the seedy district of Rendis next to the wholesale Vegetable Market warehouse. The three had been as inseparable as brothers for years and years. Their life, as Black had pieced together, was the following: at nearly daybreak Scarecrow and The Kid set out for the Moschaton train station. The Kid in his wheelchair, holding the blind man's stick in his hands, gave directions to the Scarecrow, who pushed him along. At the station they greeted the morning ticket inspector, who gave them a hand getting The Kid in his wheelchair up the few steps.

They then took the train to Omonia Sq. and started plying their trade. They begged as one all day long. A huge short-wave radio in The Kid's arms played church hymns at full blast.

*A trinity am I, simple, undivided,
separated only into three faces
and in nature I exist united*

THE MAESTRO would wake at about nine. He always had his coffee at the same coffee shop, in Moschaton. Then he went back down the hill towards the Vegetable Market, greeted the greengrocers with broad, lively gestures, wove in and out of the loading docks, ran errands for the vegetable wholesalers and intently observed the ongoing conversations as if he had perfect hearing. He would spend all his time there, until late into the night.

The Scarecrow and the Kid took the train from Omonia to Piraeus, up and down, never one stop further. They stopped at the stations to change carriages or trains and once or twice a day they bought something at the underground stalls in Omonia Sq.. Every so often The Kid would carefully look around and whisper something to the Scarecrow who would answer by mumbling something back into The Kid's ear.

A little past midday there was a two-hour break in the routine. They had lunch and took a little nap, The Kid all covered up with a blanket in his wheelchair and Scarecrow next to him on a bench at the Theseion station. At three they got back to work and continued until late. As the sky darkened, one by one the beggars disappeared. At night business thinned out a bit.

SCARECROW AND The Kid would take the last train to Omonia at precisely 12:30. They chose an empty carriage, usually the last one, and there they counted the day's earnings. They got off at the Moschaton station. The night ticket inspector never asked them for their ticket. Maestro would be waiting for them at the steps. He helped Scarecrow get The Kid down the steps in his wheelchair. Then they headed home. Maestro in front, The Kid in his chair and Scarecrow pushing him from behind.

The Kid always liked tuning in to foreign radio stations on his short-wave radio at this time. When they arrived opposite the entrance to the Vegetable Market, the night watchmen and the owner of the all-night kiosk would see Maestro wave to them and they would wave back. If The Kid hadn't fallen asleep, he, too, would raise his hand and wave. They'd turn left, following the stone wall of the Vegetable Market until Kifissos Avenue, cross the small bridge over the river and enter a sparsely populated area. If anyone near there happened to be awake and heard an American song slowly getting louder and then fading into the night, they knew it was Scarecrow, The Kid and Maestro going wearily, but ever united, to their poor little yard with the three rooms.

ALL THIS was going through Phoebus Black's mind as he turned into Poseidonos Avenue heading for Piraeus. The surveillance had tired him, but his efforts had finally been rewarded...

It was exactly one week ago Friday. Scarecrow and The Kid had again taken the last train from Omonia Sq.. At the Monasteraki station on the platform stood a slim, well-dressed man in his forties, briefcase in hand. As soon as the train stopped, he cast a fleeting glance up and down the platform and then got into the last carriage where the two beggars were sitting alone. 'The Director'. The realization flashed into Black's mind. He could hear Flowers' voice ringing in his head, "Can you nab him? He'll kill us all." And what wouldn't Black give to know exactly what was going on in the last carriage with the three passengers as the train pulled out of the station.

The two beggars got off at Moschaton station as usual and the man with the briefcase got off at the last stop in Piraeus. In the last carriage, however, in the last compartment, the plastic binds were drawn. "The Director knows how to do business," Black thought. He followed him. Thus the clues again led, slowly but surely, to the freshly dug grave of Flowers.

The Director kept a small insurance office on Kolokotroni Street near the Piraeus Port. Scarcely two or three people a day went in there. Some carried briefcases. If you opened any of these cases, all you would find would be documents and insurance policies. "He does his dealing some other way," Black thought with certainty and parked his car about fifty yards from the entrance to the Director's office. "Some other way and not every day."

TODAY IT WAS Friday again. His assistant, Stevis, had staked out Scarecrow and The Kid. Black himself had the slim man under surveillance for the seventh day in a row. He was certain that he was the Director. The morning slipped away uneventfully and no one went into the small insurance office. But in the afternoon a sweaty, fat man in a velvet coat – a shady character if there ever was one – carrying a briefcase about as bulging as his fat belly arrived at the office. He wasn't in there for more than ten minutes and he reappeared in the building entrance. "Short and sweet," Black commented to himself. The briefcase was now noticeably thinner.

Until 11:00 at night nothing else happened. It was as if the Director had barricaded himself in his office. He was surely examining the merchandise.

There he was, coming out. A little bit of a delay on the way – a little window-shopping, a stop at a snack-bar – and just before twelve midnight he was at the train station on his way back to Athens. And Black on his tail. Where was he going? Where else but the Monasteraki train station? That's where they both got off.

The Director bought another ticket for Piraeus and went across to the platform on the other side of the tracks. Black was in no hurry. He bought a ticket too and hung around the entrance to the train station. When at a little past 12:30 he heard the train approaching, he raced down the steps two by two and barely made it in time into the next to last carriage. There, behind an open newspaper, Stevis' sleepy face awaited him.

The noise of the train made it impossible for them to hear any other sounds and they could see nothing of what was going on behind the locked door and the drawn blinds of the last carriage. Black was worried. But why? The blind beggar and his crippled friend were disciplined enough not to provoke the vengeful rage of the Director.

As the train was about to pull out of the Moschaton station, Black glanced through the window. He saw the Scarecrow pushing the wheelchair through the open door of the last carriage onto the platform. He saw Maestro next to the ticket inspectors' booth waving to his friends. "Everything's OK," he thought with relief. In any case, there was no time to gamble. He had to act. Next Friday the King of the Heroin Racket and his subjects would be sporting handcuffs.

Phaliron and then Piraeus. Last stop. The blinds in the last carriage were still drawn. But although they waited and waited, no one came out. The last carriage was empty...

AT THE SAME MOMENT at the exit of Kallithea station, on the side of the Sivitanidion Technical School, next to the overpass, a horrid cripple, a stranger to all, was lying in the dark holding an empty syringe in his right hand. Now that all had gone according to plan, he didn't mind waiting another hour, despite the cold and damp.

A few minutes ago he had felt wonderful as his blind friend had deposited him on the floor of the train carriage. More so because in his place, in the wheelchair, there was a corpse. And what a corpse!

When the Director had got on the train at Monasteraki station, he sat as always next to Scarecrow after having first drawn the blinds. “Good evening,” he said almost in a monotone, ready for the contingency of an undesirable passenger coming in and ruining the deal. “Good evening,” was the response. In a minute the train was at Theseion station pulling out again. Then, with the crippled fingers of his right hand The Kid removed the syringe he had been holding for hours under his nice, warm, folded blanket and said, “Now!” The blind man grabbed the Director from behind with his huge arms. The Director was speechless. The briefcase fell to the floor. In a few seconds the veins on the inside of the Director’s wrist had popped out from his efforts to escape. His right arm stopped provocatively close to the syringe The Kid was holding in his atrophied hands. He jabbed the needle into the largest, most central vein.

“Put me down,” said The Kid. The blind man allowed the Director to enjoy in peace a dose of heroin that was large enough to kill an elephant. He then lifted The Kid and carefully deposited him next to the door. With his legs spread wide to hold his balance and with great effort he lifted the corpse of the Director and dumped it into the wheelchair. He crossed the Director’s hands. He picked up the case and placed it against the Director’s chest. He covered the dead body with the folded blanket.

“THE GLASSES and the cloth cap,” said The Kid. The blind man felt his way over to his friend, took his dark glasses and the cloth cap from his outstretched hands, felt his way back to the Director and placed the glasses and the cap on the slumped head of the Director.

The train slowed down. It was pulling into Petralona station. No one entered the carriage. In the three minutes to the next stop in Kallithea they could well have committed yet another murder.

AT THE KALLITHEA train station, a cripple crawled out of the last carriage. And if anyone happened to look out the window from another carriage, he wouldn’t have noticed the cripple lying there, waiting for the train to pull out of the station on its way to the next stop at Moschaton station. Pulling himself along with his hands the cripple slowly dragged himself past the ticket booth, right under the nose of the ticket

inspector, and rolled down the few steps to the street exit. For a radius of 100 yards there was not a soul to be seen in or near the station.

In Moschaton Scarecrow pushed the wheelchair with the dead body out of the train onto the platform. He greeted the inspector in the ticket booth. As always, Maestro helped him get the wheelchair down the steps. Then they took the usual route home. On top of the blanket in the dead man's arms were the blind man's stick and the radio. While they paused to cross Piraeus Ave, the Scarecrow turned the dial of the radio to an American station, the kind The Kid liked. He turned up the volume.

Opposite the entrance to the Vegetable Market the night watchman and the kiosk owner waved to them. Tonight The Kid was 'sleeping', as was so often the case. "Crazy love... crazy love," crooned Paul Anka. Tonight the trio again moved along the sidewalk of Vassileos Pavlou Avenue, along the wall of the Vegetable Market. "Sleep, Kid," whispered the Scarecrow. He caressed the head of the corpse and went on talking. Maestro went through his usual gesticulations and face-making, as if there was someone alive sitting in the wheelchair that was waking up at that very moment. No one heard Scarecrow, no one saw Maestro. *Crazy love! Crazy love!* wailed the singer into the night.

When they reached the river, they did not cross the bridge as usual. They turned right, up towards Kifissos Ave. Every so often a car zoomed by. They turned right again where Kifissos Ave. intersected with Constantinoupoleos Ave. on their right hand was the wholesale Vegetable Market and on their left were the train tracks. A freight train rolled by. Scarecrow heard it; Maestro saw it. About 600 yards down the road they bore to the right leaving the huge Vegetable Market warehouse behind them.

Scarecrow turned off the radio. He didn't make a sound. This was new territory now; he pushed the wheelchair slowly and cautiously. The wheels of the chair made a slow rhythmic sound as they turned round and round. Maestro continued with his jerky gesticulations. He had taken the white stick and every time they came up against some obstacle, he looked back and touched his blind friend's chest with it, as if he were fencing,

They crossed Piraeus Avenue again. They passed the district of Tavros on their left. The roads were completely deserted now. Small cottage industries and fields. "Poor Kid," said the Scarecrow again. But he knew that The Kid was not there

to hear him, but at the pre-arranged meeting point, under a nearby bridge: without his glasses, without his cloth cap, without his blanket, skinny and shivering in the cold. All this for the sake of the Director who was taking the longest, most comfortable ride of his life; the Director, who, after Flowers' funeral, had had those two nosy men follow them day and night – as if they didn't have the eyes and the ears and the strength to protect themselves!

THE THREE UNITED were invincible. They were a step ahead of his dirty deals. In a little while they would be leaving the Director under the Kallithea bridge with a well-wiped, untraceable syringe on one side of him and a briefcase full of merchandise on the other. They had decided to get out of this line of work anyway.

Scarecrow quickened his pace. It felt like the corpse had shifted in the wheelchair. (Maestro, we're almost there!) In a few moments they would be putting the Kid back in his rightful place, in his wheelchair – The Kid, who could both see and hear and think for the three of them. And then they would head on back home.

Tomorrow at the stations and in the trains the hymns would be heard again:

*Behold how good and how pleasant it is
for brethren to dwell in unity!*

The Death of Love

THE PARADE of carnival floats and masqueraders had just started off from Omonia Square in the city of Patras. The multi-colored crowd gathered on the sidewalks overflowed into the part of the street through which the carnival parade would pass, the final destination being the City Fire Department. Each of the groups of masqueraders that accompanied the floats – most of them had taken part in the Treasure Hunt that same morning – was dressed according to a different theme: Columbines and Pierots, Majorettes, Butterflies, Ants and Locusts, Bees and Daisies, Skeletons, Beggars, Pirates and Mexicans, Swiss Guards and everything else under the sun. The parade was making its way down Gounari Street, following the city's natural descent to the port. It was heading towards King George I Square, where the Mayor and special guests crowned with funny hats were waiting to applaud the procession. In addition to the various tunes that could be heard over the loudspeakers, one could also hear the marching band that played at the center of the parade, as well as the tunes from the smaller amateur bands that accompanied the parade at other points.

In the midst of this peculiar break from Greek tradition – the Patras Mardi Gras Carnival – a mixture of collective provincial boredom, of traditions borrowed from other countries and of a mass, though covert, scramble for sex, three people were living a drama of their own – a drama unbeknownst to everyone around them. These three people were the 45-year-old Athenian industrialist M. C.; a middle-aged English writer named James D., whose luxury yacht *Aquarius* had been anchored for the last few days in the Patras port; and a local young gypsy named Manolis, who lived in the gypsy slums of Patras. The silent spectators of the comings and goings of this bizarre trio were Athenian detective Phoebus Black and his assistant Stevis, who concealed their presence in the pandemonium of the last weekend of the Mardi Gras season. Their intervention was the result of a plea made by industrialist M. C's wife who promised Black 'a king's ransom' if he could help extract her husband from the clutches of the dangerous and unknown to many sex racket based in Patras.

THE GYPSY SLUMS were a colorful little community, not far from the downtown area, with narrow streets and refugee homes. The numerous gypsy families lived in the shacks on the edge of a small square with two-three stores and a community

water fountain. Some of the gypsies still wove baskets, while most worked on the wharf or took on seasonal jobs.

From the moment that night fell until the break of dawn the long dark road that started from the square filled with a diverse crowd of men: gypsies, soldiers serving in Patras, local young men and wealthy homosexuals of Greek and other nationalities. This was the meeting place of the topmost and lowest layers of society. A Mercedes or a Buick parked in one of the alleyways was not a strange sight.

But a detective in the gypsy slums was definitely a strange sight even if no one knew he was a detective. Fifteen days were enough for Black to find out what he needed to know. Along with Stevis he had become a regular item in the three hangouts in the area: 'Kota', 'Pipitsa' and 'Little Paris'.

In these ouzo bars where you could just order a drink and sit back and admire the virile young man or the *bon vivant* dancing the macho Greek *zeimbekiko*, the flirting began with just a look, but the deals were made outside in the first available dark corner. This was where small groups of men stirred and whispered, incessantly coming together and parting.

Equally common was the sight of a gypsy woman, baby on her hip and other members of the family tagging along, trying to peek through the screen of the bar to see if her husband was among the groups of men.

IN THIS singular, erotic microcosm, Phoebus Black pieced together the bits of a story that started from James D. For years people could remember him coming to Patras at least two or three times annually and spending his much of his time in the clubs of the city. Most of it, however, he spent in these three bars. About two and a half years ago he met Manolis. Since then he started living in Patras permanently and once or twice when he had to go to England, he took the young gypsy with him.

In one of the Englishman's recent absences, however, Manolis took up with the industrialist M. C., who had managed up to then, it seemed, to keep his double life a secret. As soon as James D. returned, the situation became impossible. Manolis continued to see his new friend and the writer began making scenes that literally ripped the gypsy slums apart.

Everyone assured Black that James D. was the vengeful type and some believed that he was involved in the recent disappearances that had taken place the last few years. Some even tied him in with the murder of a 10-year-old boy from the local orphanage. The crime had rocked Patras society, but finally was filed away as an unsolved case.

TWO EVENTS that took place on the last Saturday of the carnival season forced Black to act fast. That night Manolis had left the gypsy slums with three friends and went straight to the Municipal Theater, where the dance of the masked women – the *Bourboulia* as they were called – was to take place. Stevis, who was under orders to tail the young gypsy, took cover in the crowd and followed the four men inside the theater, which had been converted into a dance hall, and then went up the circling corridors and the three tiers of box seats.

After some time one of the dozens of masked women in black approached the gypsy and asked him to dance, as was the custom at this particular event. While they spoke, Manolis' expression became grave and worried. When at some point Stevis managed to get close enough, he clearly overheard the gypsy say to his unknown escort, "Tomorrow night then at 10:00 behind the Tourist Booth."

When they parted after a bit, Stevis left Manolis and his friends and followed the masked woman. This was just the right move because the woman in the black cape plunged into the crowd as soon as she left the theater and when she thought no one was looking, she headed for the yacht *Aquarius*. It was James D.

A LITTLE LATER Black and Stevis, who had already given him the rundown, entered 'Little Paris' and nonchalantly sat down next to industrialist M. C., who was anxiously watching the door. Manolis arrived a few minutes later. M. C. made a scene about his being late. He asked him where he had been all afternoon, but the gypsy managed to evade the question and pledged his undying love to the industrialist. At some point he told him that he was afraid for his life; that the writer might try to kill him in a fit of envy; that it might be wise if the two of them left Patras for a long time – wherever M. C. wanted to go. The industrialist agreed. "First thing tomorrow," he said. The gypsy preferred to wait till Monday because tomorrow he would be putting in his last appearance in Patras – and what an appearance! On a spectacular carnival float that he had been preparing with his friends for months.

After that Manolis got up to dance. Everyone watched him. He didn't dance the way he usually did, touting for custom to the passers-by in a bar that was open to all, but had the reputation of being a dark and secret hangout. He danced as if no one were there, as if he were a member of a sect, of a disease and a religion that knew its power and yet also knew its unrelenting fate. He danced like a man and a woman at the same time. With love and cynicism. Like a young boy in love and like a gigolo.

Then Black took the initiative. He scribbled a note and handed it to the industrialist before he could react. It read: “Your friend is hiding something from you. But his life may be in real danger. To find out more make sure you are at the City Tourist Booth at 10:00 tomorrow night.”

BLACK WAS TURNING all these thoughts over and over in his mind the next afternoon as he stood on the corner of Gounari and Korinthou streets and watched the floats turning toward Vassileos Georgiou Square. He still couldn't get rid of the image of the funny-looking Carnival effigy leading the parade that had passed him by quite a while ago. With a jerk it had turned towards him and seemed to look straight at him, or so Black thought, its rigid smile painted on its face giving him an extra smirk of sarcasm.

Since last night no important leads had been added to the case. The float that Manolis and his friends had made had taken part in the Treasure Hunt that morning and the young gypsy then lunched with M. C. in Marouda Square at a little taverna called Spyridoula's, located at the point where the Carnival Parade would start at 4:00 that afternoon. The industrialist seemed calm and only when he caught a glimpse of Black and Stevis did his eyes cloud with worry. Would he come to their appointment that night? As for the Englishman, he hadn't put in an appearance all day. What could that mean?

THE TIME WAS five o'clock. The detective stood on the left side of the road, ready, if necessary, to run to the port to alert Stevis, who was staking out the *Aquarius* from his hotel room at the Astir just in case.

And there, suddenly, from round a corner in the background, was the Gypsy float. It was a large open truck, painted pitch black, but covered in all kinds of flowers and greenery, so that the black hardly showed through. In front of the float strutted five young gypsy men in white pants and a red carnation in their hair. The next group was five more men wearing striped shirts and navy fatigues, their arms covered in tattoos: the Sailors. Following them were the Soldiers, their khaki uniforms tight on their lean, toned thighs, the rest of the trouser leg disappearing into their shiny black army boots. The sleeves of their shirts were rolled up and their berets folded and tucked through the shoulder strap. Bringing up the rear were five Transvestites, who

stirred up whistles, guffaws of laughter, and cruel, playful catcalls from the on-lookers – especially the men.

From the loudspeakers buried in the crust of flowers on the Gypsy float blared the instrumental music of the Greek *hasapiko* dance. The Gypsies and the Soldiers strutted along at a singular, gallant pace while the Sailors and the Transvestites followed the float blowing kisses and flashing smiles at the spectators. Then played the instrumental music of the *zeimbeikikos* dance. The Sailors and the Transvestites danced to the front of the float, trading places with the Gypsies and the Soldiers. On the float itself there were five other young men in yellow cat-suits, their faces and hands painted white, their hair dyed platinum blond: the Narcissi.

When the others finished dancing, the Narcissi broke into a wild dance, a cross between an ancient Dionysian frenzy and the Greek *tsifteteli* dance. Behind them on the float, propped almost upright in amongst the flowers was a white casket. It was crowned with an arch bedecked in flowers spelling out in red carnations: *THE DEATH OF LOVE*. At the highest point of the casket hung a black smiling skull mask and underneath it, placed at a slant, was the black sickle of Death.

The main character, however, was missing.

AS SOON AS Black caught wind of Manolis' inexplicable absence, he struggled to find the solution to the mystery. On the gypsy float Manolis was to play the role of the lead Narcissus. Black had seen him that morning during the Treasure Hunt standing on the float with the face of Narcissus and the body of Death – a black catsuit with a skeleton painted on it. He had held the sickle and every so often covered his face with the skull, which now lay on the casket. But where was he now? Where had he disappeared to? What had happened since 2:00 that afternoon when Black had left him dining at the taverna with M. C.? And where was M. C.? Why hadn't he informed him of his friend's disappearance?

At that moment the float passed right in front of him. The Narcissi were dancing wildly; the crowd was cheering them on. The black skull mask stared at Black with empty eyes and the sickle sought to find its owner. In a daze the detective followed the macabre float, elbowing his way from sidewalk to sidewalk through the swarms of people. For the moment there was nothing else he could do. As night fell, perhaps more light would fall on this riddle.

AND SO it did. The parade followed its regular route and ended up at the City Fire Department. The Soldiers, Sailors, Gypsies, Transvestites and Narcissi all had a drink together and then dispersed. Well, not exactly all. Five Sailors got on *THE DEATH OF LOVE* and along with the driver of the float followed the Carnival effigy and a few other floats to Agiou Georgiou Square. From there, a little later, they started off again for the harbor. The crowds had spilled into the streets and the procession nudged through them slowly down Agiou Nikolaou street surrounded by whistles and head bonking from plastic Carnival hammers.

At precisely eight o'clock, while the Carnival effigy had been transformed into a blazing bonfire and the fireworks display had begun, *THE DEATH OF LOVE* was slowly leaving the crowd behind and making its way to the docks where the *Aquarius* was anchored. Smiling, yet vaguely worried, James D. appeared on the deck of the yacht. Two-three crewman also came out on the deck and helped the others load the casket onto the yacht.

That was the first time Phoebus Black realized that the casket was particularly heavy and that perhaps it contained a real corpse. It didn't take a genius to guess whose corpse it was. But how could he intervene? And what if he were wrong and he made a fool of himself? In any case, whether the casket was empty or full, Black knew where to find it. So he left Stevis with the instructions not to take his eyes off the yacht and not to take any initiatives. Then Black set off for the 10:00 appointment. Only with the help of the industrialist could Black intervene and solve the mystery. Maybe it was better that things turned out this way. Perhaps the only way M.C. could extract himself from this dirty racket was through the death of the young gypsy.

The sky was filling with the booming sounds and the phantasmagoric colors of the fireworks.

AT PRECISELY TEN o' clock Phoebus Black was pulling up in his car at the small wooded park behind the City Tourist Booth on a hill. M.C.'s car was parked in a dark spot, but its driver was not in it. As soon as Black got out of his car, he felt danger creep up behind him. He turned and saw Manolis emerging from a clump of trees and walking towards him. Without the mask of Death and with a smirk on his lips. Without the sickle. With a pistol. His eyes were full of contempt.

"You fool! You fell right into the trap! I was sure you would! I was onto you from the beginning. No one can hide from me. Nor from the death of love. When

there are three, one must die. You can go tell your client that her husband drew the short straw. As for the funeral, you attended it! It was fit for a king. The yacht is now miles away, too far for you to catch it. But even if someone does go after it, they won't find anything on it. No one will be able to explain the disappearance, just like they couldn't explain the other ones. Now beat it before you get yours. Beat it!"

The Pistol

THE CRUISE SHIP *Nina P* – an old remodeled ocean liner – was sailing on the Ionian Sea. Destination: Venice. Corfu and the coasts of Albania belonged to yesterday; it was now past midnight. The location was latitude 42°35' North and longitude 17°53' East. The ship sailed between the coastline of central Italy and the Dalmatian coast with 613 passengers and a crew of 120.

Everything was far away: both land and the problems this microcosm had deposited there. Here was a haphazardly thrown together community floating under the name *Nina P*. The closest thing was the sea, smooth and deep blue if of course it was the same color it had been four or five hours ago.

Snuggled in a deck chair on the top deck, protected from the brisk air by a yellow windbreaker and legs stretched out on the guardrail, a passenger looked out into the darkness. But this summer night did not move him; it merely gave rise to theorizing. “The darkness does not prevent one from seeing,” he thought. “To know the color of the sea and one’s approximate location, one needs but elementary knowledge of geography and a good memory.” And then, “What does ‘color’ mean anyway? One uses the senses, knowledge and imagination according to one’s occupation. The sea is different for a detective, fisherman or a writer. And what is the significance of ‘location’?”

A shadow approached him. It belonged to Stevis.

“How was the ball?” Faint strains of the orchestra filtered up to the deck from the interior ballroom. And then, “Did you make any progress?”

“No, but something’s cooking. A redhead. Very nice. In ten days’ time I’ll have her in the bag,” Stevis responded.

“You have indeed started your vacation, although I have a feeling something will disturb our peace again.”

Stevis could see a drawn-out debate coming on like an unavoidable storm. He had already regretted coming up onto the deck. “In any case, he said, “we didn’t start out for a vacation; we’re on a case. As for the peace you mentioned, only he who seeks it finds it.”

“Not always. Even if you are indifferent to everything and everyone, sometimes events come and grab you by the neck. A vacation does not only mean relaxation and amusement. Look at these people. Most of them have

pinched pennies to go on this cruise. Why do you think? To leave behind a routine of annoying petty things to experience a short-lived routine of other petty things they merely do without the rest of the time?”

“I guess that’s it. What else is a vacation?”

“It could be very much more. Especially when it is taken in a remote place, cut off from the rest of the world. On this ship certain things cannot happen the way they do on the outside. Then again, other things can only happen here. It’s a matter of disposition. It also depends on the people – the people you meet in such a restricted place, in such a restricted timeframe. Choices become less random, and if you think about it, they are not even choices any more.”

All the lights had been extinguished. Stevis drew on his last ounce of strength. “In any case,” he said, “even the important things that might occur in a place like this are events these people, the passengers I mean, have not experienced.”

“Only that these are not always pleasant experiences,” Phoebus Black replied.

The ship continued to slice through the water, a dark mass in the greater darkness.

HOW WAS IT that the well-known Athenian detective and his assistant were aboard the *Nina P*? A much-publicized travel agent had hired Black to carry out an investigation into the security measures that had to be taken so that on these short cruises in the Mediterranean all sorts of petty crimes could be avoided: brawling, pick-pocketing and minor drug dealing. For Black, the job was a piece of cake. Tomorrow would be the second day of the cruise and he had essentially dealt with the first part of the problem based on the blueprints of the ship his client had given him. He had paced every inch of the *Nina P*: the cabins, the lounges, the bars, the discos and the restaurants; the duty-free shops and the boutiques, the beauty salons, the gyms and the open decks. He had also inspected the crew’s quarters, the bridge, the radio room, the fuel tanks, the ballast room, the hold and the galleys.

Now he had the main part of the problem to work through: to study the passengers, their movements, and their frame of mind. This demanded more time and Black had plenty of that. The cruise was to last ten days and since he had accepted the job as an opportunity to take a short rest, he’d take

tomorrow night in Venice off. He'd disembark and enjoy his favorite Venetian white wine in a quaint trattoria. He'd take Stevis with him, unless, of course, he preferred to go out on the town with his redhead.

THE NEXT DAY Phoebus Black also made an interesting acquaintance – only that his was a brunette – and a very good-looking one at that. She was sitting at the ship's bar with a middle-aged woman with bleached hair. The brunette was absorbed in a book. Black managed to get a glimpse of the title: "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pimm" by Edgar Allan Poe. Black, too, was reading a book. Their eyes met. At first by chance, then not. She smiled at him. When the middle-aged woman left, saying that she was going to her cabin to rest, they had no trouble striking up a conversation.

She was travelling in a group of three: her mother, her brother and his wife. She was from the island of Lemnos, but her family was from Egypt. She had studied literature and was now working for a company. She spoke four languages and read a lot of literature. Had she been to Venice before? No. But she might not even disembark to see the channels and gondolas for herself. She knew all this so well from her books, from what others had told her and from films. Narrative is one thing, and reality is another. She agreed. Yet there was some other reason she hesitated to leave the ship.

Her name was Makrides, Lena Makrides. She seemed interested when she found out that Black was a private detective. She glanced at the cover of the book he was reading. Oh! Jorge Luis Borges. *Labyrinths*. Yes, she knew it, she had read it. She asked Black if he had read any other book by Borges. No, it was his first.

"I am keen on all good detective literature. Due to my profession, you see. I'm trying to prove a theory of mine. I've read Chesterton, Conan Doyle, Vian, Hammet and Highsmith. Borges is interesting but he is metaphysical. I believe that impasses are of a social nature, nothing more. In other words, they are not impasses. So be it. Even Poe, you know, has written detective stories. But I don't know that story." He pointed to the book on her lap.

"Oh, this is something completely different. It's a travel adventure, something like that. You know, I have a weakness of my own: sea stories. I often travel by ship. I'm the one that persuaded my family to come on this cruise. The sea has always moved me so."

They were approaching Venice.

“So, have you decided? Are you going to get off the boat and see Venice? It might be the only chance you ever get. I think you should take advantage of it.”

“Yes. Perhaps it’s the wisest thing to do. I have no desire to be left all alone on this huge ship.” She smiled at him again. “Let’s arrange to meet again, Mr. Black. It was truly a pleasure meeting you.” She left with a melancholy, anxious air about her.

VENICE WAS yet again exactly how each visitor had imagined it. Flawless, priceless and full of legend and dampness. The food, however, at the La Toretta trattoria was something that Black and Stevis had never tasted before even in their wildest dreams: *risotto ala marinara* and *scampi ala grilla*, bon fillet and *fazzolli in salsa*, and *zuppa inglese*. Taste ala italiano. So delicious that Black forgot all about the brunette’s sadness, while Stevis thought of his redhead two or three times.

THE NEXT MORNING Black found Lena Makrides at another one of the ship’s bars. Alone.

“So! How did you find your way out of the mazes of Venice?”

“They were exactly as I had expected them! What a charming city Venice is! Only that, I find that there are much darker mazes in this ship,” she said. “Would you like to join me for a drink?”

They proceeded to a quiet corner. Phoebus Black lit his pipe. A cloud of honeyed smoke wafted through the air.

“It’s true,” Black said, “that this ship is more than just a maze with all its decks and narrow corridors, the doors that block passage from one part of the ship to the other, the spiraling staircases, row and after row of cabins and the endless halls one after another. But I know you were speaking in the figurative sense. You meant people.”

“Both. In any case, even in here everyone one has a starting point or a finish line. Here’s mine.” With trembling hands she opened her small handbag. In it was a pistol. An old beretta in good condition.

She closed the handbag gain and glanced around.

“Where did you come across that?” he asked her.

“What difference does that make?”

“Look. A pistol is no laughing matter. You weren’t born with it in your hands. Did someone give it to you or did you take it? Did you buy it? If yes, why? Or did you steal it? If yes, then it doesn’t belong to you. Or did someone you don’t know leave it for you? Let’s examine all the alternatives.”

“It belongs to me. That is for sure.”

The bow of the ship cutting through the water gave birth to a rich foam, which immediately died. They had emerged onto the deck.

“Does it have to do with some fear of yours? You hinted at something yesterday.”

“Of course. You said it yourself. A pistol is no laughing matter.”

Black laughed.

“Yes, but a pistol can dispel fear. With a beretta in your bag you have no reason to feel fear whatever it is threatening you.” She looked him straight in the eye with the despair of someone trying to explain something to an imbecile. “Mr. Black, my fear starts precisely from this pistol.”

“Why?”

“Because a pistol must be used. That’s the reason for its existence. It’s not an heirloom. It’s a gun, the kind people fire. Otherwise there would be no gun industry.”

Was she saying something incredibly wise or was she crazy?

“Is that how it is?”

“Yes, that is precisely how it is.” The woman stared at him in despair.

“There is also the matter of personal security. That’s probably the reason you have the pistol. To avert something, to frighten someone who is threatening you.”

“But I gained possession of this pistol by chance, without wanting to. Let’s say I inherited it. It was my father’s, who was a banker. I found it in his personal belongings when he died. That’s when the fear started setting in. I don’t know if you understand. In any case, no one person is threatening me personally. Just everyone...”

BLACK’S SURPRISE was apparent. “Everyone?”

“Yes, everyone. All of my friends and family and a lot of strangers too.” The words streamed out of her mouth like the water gushing about the ship’s bow. First, her mother. That pale sickly woman who had never acquired any interest in life outside her game of pinochle. She was insanely jealous of her

daughter. She often had fits. She had been hospitalized twice. Then there was that cold man with the dark glasses and the rude manners. He was Lena Makrides' half-brother: same mother, different father. His name was Marios Notis. He had a shop with tropical fish and plants in the southern Athenian suburb of Kalamaki. He and his wife both hated Lena and had specific reasons to want her out of the picture: a piece of property in central Athens, most of which would become theirs if the main inheritor – that is Lena – were out of the way. Then there also was her husband, whom she had left two years ago. His name was Yiannis Makrides. There he was; the tall thin man in his mid 30s sitting near the swimming pool reading a best seller novel. He still hadn't given up on their marriage and wouldn't give her the divorce. When they met on the ship, on the first day of the cruise, he claimed it was by pure coincidence that they were there at the same time. But wasn't it a little strange that he was travelling alone? There was also a cabin boy, a short greasy man with effeminate manners who loitered in the corridor outside her cabin door almost every night. She was afraid he was going to rape her.

"Everyone's threatening everyone," she went on. "With or without a pistol we do each other in. That's why I've concluded: either I sit here and let them kill me or – since I have the pistol – I kill someone. In other words, it's them or me."

SHE WAS CRAZY. That's for sure. It just took Black a while to realize it, to make sure. And yet there was such warmth in her eyes and she had such beautifully defined lips. What a shame.

He'd try one more time.

"I don't think one of the two necessarily has to happen, Ms. Makrides. In the final analysis, if the pistol is the problem, get rid of it so you don't have to keep thinking about it." He spoke to her tenderly and protectively. "We can toss it into the sea. Even this very minute if you like."

The *Nina P.* continued on its itinerary: Dubrovnik, Corfu, Kusadasi, Mykonos and Piraeus. They looked at each other in mutual disappointment. The other passengers were sunning themselves on the deck, shopping at the duty-free shops, flirting in the lounges and at the bars. "So intelligent, so pretty, so young! What a pity!" Black pondered. Yet she was thinking the same: "What a shame!" Black was the only one who could help her. But how

could she make him see exactly what she was trying to tell him. She would try again too.

“Every pistol, Mr. Black, has a story to tell. The problem can’t be solved just by throwing it into the sea. One doesn’t kill just because he happens to find a gun. On the other hand, guns are manufactured for the purpose of killing. Do you know the poem by the Greek poet Kavvadias?”

*My blade I always have thrust in my belt
a small steel African knife*

Her voice was warm and moist.

Corfu, Kusadasi, Mykonos, Piraeus...

“Today’s my birthday. And I am afraid that tonight all that I’ve confided in you will come true. I’m not just afraid – I’m sure.”

Her voice became louder but she herself was pulling away.

*... the kind that the Arabians usually handle
I bought it from an old black man in Algiers.*

It would be a good idea if he and Stevis kept a discreet eye on this young brunette who thought everyone and everything was a threat to her. Who knows? Maybe some of her fears were justified. After all, it would be terrible if something untoward were to happen now that Phoebus Black was on board.

Kusadasi, Mykonos, Piraeus. A shadow slithered down the dimly lit corridor and stopped outside Lena Makrides’ cabin door. Holed up in a service cabin, Phoebus Black surveyed the long corridor through a slit in the door. The short stubby man, who five seconds ago had passed in front of him, stood with his back to him as if he were trying to decide whether to turn and show his face. A loud noise from Lena’s cabin reached Black’s ears. Someone was securing the door by putting something heavy behind it. Sounds of laughter came from the other end of the corridor. The short stubby man immediately turned and disappeared. He had the complexion of a mulatto, a shiny face with spots, black hair and two rows of sharp teeth in a mouth that seemed to be smiling. The steward.

Black also spotted the tropical fish salesman and his wife. They passed Lena Makrides' cabin casting a hostile glance at her door. They unlocked the door to the cabin next to hers and went in. They locked the door.

The steward passed Black's hideout again. A door suddenly flew open. A woman in a gaudy nightgown burst into the corridor. Lena Makrides' mother approached the mulatto steward and vulgarly pushed herself up against him while he started lifting her nightgown up over her knees. Panting they started making their way towards the service cabin where Black was hiding. "Not here, darling!" They were three feet away from Black's nose. They turned and dragged themselves in the other direction.

ANOTHER HALF HOUR'S wait. Stevis was on the verge of falling asleep, as he had to supposedly nonchalantly stroll up and down near the entrance to the hall. "For a crazy brunette I've lost a perfectly sensible redhead," he thought with his eyes half-closed. He only just caught sight of the tall, thin man who slid past him and noiselessly went down the stairs. Black spotted Yiannis Makrides slowing padding down the carpeted corridor. He strained to hear him whisper.

"Lena."

The louder the bent man's voice became the more the appeal started sounding like a threat. The door remained closed and mute. No one appeared to have heard him from the adjacent cabins. And yet... Black was sure that this was all indeed happening in the blurred greenish light of the corridor, which was just inches outside the door he was peeking from.

"Lenaaaa!"

Mykonos, Piraeus...

Yiannis Makrides took two steps back as the door opened. A pistol appeared. A hand. Terrified, he started stepping back while Lena Makrides slowly advanced towards him. Black could hardly breathe. It felt like the two sides of his larynx had collapsed. As soon as the man went through the iron fire door in the corridor, the woman with the pistol, pale as a sheet, shoved it with her other hand, till it closed tight. Then the man, who had his hands in the air, in a sudden move, flicked his left wrist a few inches to his side. On a white panel a red button: PRESS IN CASE OF FIRE. And that's precisely what he did. The door wouldn't open on the other side now. He disappeared round the corner.

As if in a trance, Lena Makrides turned towards the open door of her cabin. She had barely reached the door when another man appeared in front of her, not three yards away. She shrieked in horror but the sound was muffled by the fireproof

door. The man stood there frozen with indecision. He saw Black springing from the door of the service cabin directly opposite him, pounding his fists on the window of the intervening door. The woman didn't dare turn around. She only just managed to get into her cabin. Stevis gestured to Black that there was nothing he could do and then disappeared again towards the staircase. There was a bang.

BLACK DIDN'T unlock the fireproof door. He had his reasons. He made a big detour, racing down steep stairs and mute corridors. Panting, he arrived at the entrance to the corridor where he had left Stevis to keep watch. He wasn't there. It made sense. He scrambled down the stairs and was doubly startled and exhausted when he happened upon the dead body of Lena Makrides.

“Suicide.”

“No.”

It wasn't really suicide. This young woman with the antique beretta had fired the gun and was shot because of someone else. Exactly the way she had predicted. Only that both things happened at the same time. With one bullet.

In the corridor, the suspects were pressing their faces to the pane of glass in the fire door. The mother, the ex-husband, the greasy steward. Behind the door of the adjacent cabin, another pair of suspects: the half-brother and the sister-in-law. They glanced at each other in fear. The shot had interrupted their calculated indifference to the goings-on in the corridor.

In the eyes of the deceased there was no disappointment. Black knew now. When he had told her, “One of the two didn't necessarily have to happen,” he couldn't have known both would happen simultaneously.

PIRAEUS... Now he had to accept her theory. It had to happen to someone. She would shoot someone and someone would shoot her. In fact, it was someone else that had made her pull the trigger.

He carefully wiped the fingerprints off the pistol, changed the position and posture of the body, messed up some of the young woman's things, and emptied the contents of her handbag on the bunk. Let the ones who would be arriving soon, the coroner and the police, find the rest. He would say he knew nothing. He *did* know nothing. There was only one thing he was sure of.

He kicked the gun. He wouldn't be solving the problem by tossing it in the sea. There, under the bed, someone would come across it.

Three Victims in Search of a Murderer

“THIS IS the strangest case I’ve ever handled,” Phoebus Black cried out as he looked at his assistant, Stevis, with knitted brows nervously pacing up and down in the office he had kept for years now in the Athens Tower. “Sherlock Holmes himself would have thrown up his hands at this one,” he continued. “This case with the three Economou heirs, who are all scared stiff of each other and of their own shadows, seems to be straight out of Victorian England and not modern-day Athens.”

Black rarely handled petty cases or crimes that had already been committed. Those who had hard evidence that a significant crime was about to be committed usually went to him, asking him to pinpoint the suspects and overturn their plans.

LIKE THIS ONE. The two Economou cousins’ first appointment had taken place a week ago, arranged by Black’s secretary. At precisely 11:00 am there had been a knock at the door and Basil Economou entered. He was a plump man, about 40 years of age, in a gray casual suit and thick-lens eyeglasses. Ten minutes later, Christos Economou arrived. “Safety in numbers,” he said. He was tall and thin and approximately the same age as his cousin. He wore a handsome platinum gold ID bracelet on his left wrist. Phoebus Black, who up to that moment had heard nothing of these two rather likeable gentlemen, lit one of the pipes that had been carefully arranged on his desk and asked, “How may I be of assistance?”

“You see, Mr. Black,” began Christos Economou. “Basil here and I are the only children of two brothers. Our fathers have passed away. They had two other brothers, Uncle Stephanos, who has also passed away, leaving only one heir, our cousin Andreas Economou, and Uncle Teddy, who has been living for the past 50 years in Australia.”

Christos Economou paused to take a deep breath, so the other Economou grabbed the opportunity to say his bit.

“As we discovered about a month ago,” he said, “Uncle Teddy is on his deathbed and has made us two and our cousin Andreas the sole heirs to the huge estate he has amassed over the years. Of course, we were happy about this when we first found out. But then something happened which truly has us very worried.”

The two cousins glanced at each other for a moment and then Christos Economou went on. “Mr. Black, ten days ago I received a very strange telephone call. There was an odd, husky voice on the other end of the line that said, ‘Buddy, your days are numbered.’ I got the same kind of call two more times in the next few days.”

“I got the same kind of call twice as well,” said Basil as he myopically peered through his thick glasses. “But because there’s not a shred of suspicion between the two of us – we grew up together – we immediately wanted to tell each other about the calls. And we realised we were the victims of the same prankster, or, as we fear, of the same well-planned scheme. Someone wants to frighten us, make us fear everyone and everything, make us nervous, and when the time is right, to get rid of us according to his well-conceived plan.”

“And who do you think this could be?” asked Phoebus Black, finally breaking his silence.

“We both immediately thought of Andreas Economou. We’ve never been on very good terms with him. As for him, he has always envied the close friendship Christos and I shared. You also need to know that he is a fanatic gambler. He’s lost whole fortunes in the past and he’s probably deep in debt right now. There’s no one else who could be interested in this state of affairs and who would want to frighten us. But of course these are just speculations. We haven’t laid eyes on Andreas Economou for years now.”

“You haven’t given me a whole lot to go on,” said Black and he got up from his desk chair. He paced up and down a couple of times and went on. “I’ll do what I can and I’ll be in touch very soon. For now all I can say is not to be too frightened and don’t contact the police yet. That wouldn’t help matters. On the contrary, it might makes matters worse.”

THAT VERY AFTERNOON Phoebus Black was ringing the doorbell of a large penthouse with a view of the sea in the Athens area of Kalamaki, where the lawyer Andreas Economou lived alone. When the private detective was admitted, he introduced himself, excused himself for the disturbance and got right down to business. After informing his host about what his cousins had told him during their appointment earlier that day at his office – mentioning of course their suspicions of him – he looked him straight in the eye and asked him, “Have you, Mr. Economou, also received any such phone call?”

“No, I admit that I haven’t,” he said with a sincere yet vaguely enigmatic smile. “I don’t know if that makes me suspect, but unfortunately or perhaps fortunately for me, I haven’t received any such call.”

“That, in itself, does not mean much,” said Phoebus Black. “You may not have been threatened, but you may have threatened others. Of course, you could very well have said that you too have been threatened. However, you may be admitting to part of the truth in order to hide another part. You may want to seem innocent by virtue of your honesty, when you are not. Personally, I don’t think you are so silly to think that you can fool a private detective so easily. If you had dreamed up this scheme with the telephone calls, you would have no other choice: you would have already reported having received such a call to the police or told a friend that you too are being threatened so that you have an alibi.”

Black gazed out at the Saronic Gulf as if he could find the answers he was looking for out there. When he spoke again, his tone was even more familiar. “Allow me to call you A and your two cousins, B and C: the initials of your first names. I will start by examining the following possibilities. One: B may have made the threatening call to C and C to B. Two: Only one of your two cousins may have called the other and then claimed that he too had received a threatening call. Three: It may be only B or C making the calls but as a joke. Four: Someone else, for reasons that we may not be aware of, for example, this person may be fond of you, let’s say – and he or she took this initiative to make the calls. Five: It may be some unknown prankster. Six: Perhaps your cousins made up this whole story to get you out of the way and then claim they, too, had been threatened. In any case, something tells me that you are not in any way involved.”

“Thank you very much for your vote of confidence, Mr. Black,” said A. Economou as he accompanied his visitor to the door. “Personally, I believe that my cousins and I are safe and that most probably this is a distasteful joke at their expense, and why not, at mine too.”

“That may be so, but it would be a good idea for you to be careful too until we find out what exactly is going on,” said Phoebus Black as he entered the elevator. “Again, I apologize for disturbing you.”

THEY WAITED for another three days. On the morning of the fourth day there was an article in the papers reporting that the lawyer A. Economou had disappeared from

his residence in Kalamaki. The cleaning woman, who had used her key to enter the flat, saw it had been vandalized and notified the police. In the living room there were signs of a struggle and drops of blood. The only thing that remained to be done was to investigate to see whether it was murder or a staged disappearance.

After this development, Phoebus Black became even more suspicious of the other two Economou cousins. Just as these thoughts were going through his head, B. and C. Economou appeared at his office, frightened out of their wits by what they had read in the newspapers. They both believed that this disappearance was just another part of the well-thought out plot against them. Their fears had now multiplied. However, as Phoebus Black tried to detect how sincere his two clients were, he gradually became aware of another kind of fear in their behavior. One was frightened of the other. But why? Might it be that each one was afraid that the other would reveal the truth – that they had murdered A. Economou together – or that they were fearful that now one would turn against his accomplice?

PHOEBUS BLACK was pensive. And what if they were both innocent? Or what if only one of the two was guilty? But which one?

Another two days went by. And the fear grew. The two Economou cousins were being interrogated by the police as suspects and they told Black – each one separately – that they believed their cousin had been murdered and that now they suspected each other.

“Which is what I believe,” said Black to his assistant. “Now at least we are more certain. Whoever the murderer is, he will have to stop killing because if there are two victims, all suspicion will fall on the remaining one.”

THREE MORE DAYS went by. And suddenly, when everything seemed to be taking on a more routine pace, C. Economou disappeared on his way home from the police inspector. They found the body the next morning, thrown into a ditch at the foot of Mt. Parnitha with five bullets in the head and chest. The body was hastily covered with some leaves. His car – a red one – was found at a bend in the road, a couple hundred yards away.

B. Economou was arrested as the only suspect. But he was released only half an hour later because there was no evidence against him.

Now it was too late for Phoebus Black to act. He had had all the evidence for some time and yet he had left the victim defenseless in the hands of the murderer.

But perhaps B. Economou had killed C. Economou out of fear. Perhaps this dead man with the five gaping wounds was preparing to do the exact same thing to the murderer who, after making sure he had an airtight alibi, made the first move.

PHOEBUS BLACK tossed and turned in his bed for yet another night. In the morning he rushed to his office and cancelled all his appointments. He was thinking. Just thinking. Then all of a sudden his assistant Stevis burst into the office and threw the afternoon papers, which had just come out, onto his desk. Black picked up the one on the top and read the headline: "Last Economou Heir Found Dead: Suffocated by a Pillow".

Now what? Who was it that had killed the three Economou cousins? And what was the motive? It all seemed like a huge crossword and the little black squares were the three bodies. Or rather, two bodies and three drops of blood from the third one.

Black didn't go to his office that afternoon. He wandered aimlessly around his flat in Maroussi trying to solve the mystery. On the 6:00 news a blond newscaster announced that the body of A. Economou had been found in the garden of his summer cottage in the suburb of Vari "Finally! At least this is a lead," Black muttered. "We have all the bodies. Now all we need is a murderer."

The newscaster went on to say that according to the coroner's report, the victim, A. Economou, was not killed on the day he disappeared, but only seven-eight hours prior to the discovery of the body.

"Now what?" muttered Phoebus Black to himself again. "You think that bastard fooled us all? Maybe he was hiding all this time so that he could get rid of the other two. But now? Who killed him? Or was it suicide? If it was, then we know who did it of course. But if it was murder, then we'll never find the murderer."

Another three-hour wait. On the evening news it was announced that A. Economou had committed suicide. This yes. This put things into perspective. Unless... Unless the murderer was indeed someone else and A. Economou had committed suicide in order to avoid being murdered like his cousins.

In any case, there were no more potential victims.

ABOUT TEN DAYS LATER Phoebus Black was talking with his assistant Stevis when there was a knock at the door and his secretary brought in an express registered letter that had just arrived. In the corner of the envelope the sender was marked as A. Economou, Kalamaki.

Upon noticing Black staring at the envelope in a peculiar manner, Stevis took the initiative of opening the envelope and reading the contents to him:

Dear Mr. Phoebus Black,

You were right in the end. I didn't make threatening calls to both my cousins. I only made one; to B. Economou. Then who called C. Economou? That is the question you unknowingly asked me when you came to my flat. The only answer is that B called C. But what if he wasn't just playing a prank – like I was? What if he was serious about the threat? After your visit, I also became terrified and decided to disappear for a while, staging my own murder so that anyone wanting to do me in would be discouraged. In the end, B killed C perhaps because he was afraid that C had killed me or perhaps because he wanted to kill him anyway. In the latter case, B would have killed me too. But there was yet another reason I couldn't reappear. I would have been considered the main suspect for C's murder since B had an alibi. So I decided to kill B. Which I did. Immediately following that, however, I realized I couldn't live my life forever in hiding. So I decided to resurface. But it would have to be as a dead body. I could have someone kill me! But then you would have been plagued with questions. So I guess I will kill myself. I hope that the usual delay of the postal services will not add to your distress and I also hope that when you receive this letter I will truly be dead this time.

The Ill-Fated Woman

ON THAT SIZZLING summer afternoon three cars were speeding on the Patras – Pyrgos Provincial Road, holding exactly the same distance between them as if they had been tied together with an invisible rope. In one car was the Christou couple from Thessaloniki – Dr. Achilleas Christou and his wife – in another was television technician Yiorgos Panou and in yet another private detective Phoebus Black and his assistant Stevis. But the cars weren't in that order. Who was in the first car, who in the second and who in the third? Who was following whom?

Could it be Black and Stevis in the first car – a white Fiat 127, slithering like a snake through thick grass? Or might they be – as would be expected – in the last car, a red Datsun or at least in the black Volkswagen Golf? Was the driver of the Datsun spying on both cars or only the Volkswagen? In other words: Did the person/persons in the Datsun know about the existence of the Fiat?

In the town of Kyllini, there was a long line of cars waiting to board the ferryboat to Zakynthos. It was the last Saturday of July and the tourist season was at its peak. So when the 6:00 boat left for Zakynthos, all three cars, which understandably had kept some distance between them, were not on the ferry. The Datsun had to wait for the 8:30 ferry. Who got left behind?

Zakynthos is an island. The links of the chain would soon be joined together again. And maybe the last link would be joined to the first.

FROM ROOM 305 of the Xenia Hotel, Phoebus Black could gaze out on the calm sea they had just traveled on. Just that and nothing else. He drew the curtains closed. It was damp and humid and he decided to take a bath while listening to his conversation with Rania Christou, tape-recorded in Athens about three weeks ago.

Rania Christou was not just the wife of Dr. Achilleas Christou from Thessaloniki. She was a drama school graduate, she had acted for a year or two in the theater using her maiden name – Rania Myrtides. Apart from that she had also worked as director of documentary films for television. According to her words on the tape, Rania Myrtides had good reason to believe her husband was intending to kill her. “Another Lena Makrides case,” thought Phoebus Black and he remembered the death

of the pretty language teacher during his trip on the *Nina P.* last year.* This time he had to do everything in his power to prevent Rania Myrtides also falling prey to her own phobias.

Was this Black's own deduction? Not yet. His observation of the couple for the last fortnight in Thessaloniki had not led him to the conclusion that his client was about to be murdered. The only lead he had was her own statement.

But everything's possible (Black's own personal philosophy) more or less. And up to now, he had almost always been right.

THE TAPE went on playing. "And why do you think your husband wants to kill you?"

"Because for a year now we've come to the point of truly hating each other. He more than me. He is jealous of me because I'm more intelligent than him, more sociable. When we're with friends, I'm always the centre of attention, while no one has anything to say to him. They think he's a boring little man. Which is what he is. Just a plain anesthesiologist. No other interests – totally lacking in cultivation."

"Why do you want a divorce?"

"He won't even hear of it! A couple of times when we tried separating, he asked me to try to work things out. Now he's told me in no uncertain terms that if I even mention a divorce again, he'll kill me. But he'll kill me anyway. He'll be sneaky; he'll do it without so much as leaving a trace. That's why I warned him I'd go to the police. I also told him if he wants to make one last try to make things work, from now on he has to accept that I'm going to continue my career in television without any complaints from him. He promised he would change his attitude. He was probably scared by what I said. Lately he's been unbelievably nice to me."

"But if he loves you, why would he want to kill you?" Black asked.

"Because he's jealous."

"Do you have any children?"

"No."

Black got out of the bathtub and put on a pair of briefs. He pressed the stop button on the Sony tape recorder and left the bathroom. He went over to the window and drew back the curtain. Maybe it was a bit cooler outside. He could see the lights

* See the story "The Pistol" by the same author.

of a boat. He hesitated for a moment. He turned out the light, but didn't immediately close his eyes to go to sleep.

SUNDAY MORNING. A television crew from one of the Greek State channels was setting up equipment and lights in the entrance of the Solomos Museum in the small square of Agios Markos. The filming would last three days and the topic of the film was the artistic tradition of the island. The film was being produced on the occasion of the five-day Zakynthos Festival that would take place this summer, as it did every summer. Rania Myrtides was the screenwriter and director of the film. There she was, cigarette in hand, vivacious and full of confidence, giving directions to the crew. Executive producer of the film was Yiorgos Panou – standing next to her.

At the same time, on the beach, a few hundred yards from the Xenia Hotel and a few hundred more from Agios Markos square was Achilleas Christou, blithely baking in the sun. Also sunbathing just ten yards from the doctor was Stevis, while Black was sitting at a table in the Kokkinos Vrachos (Red Rock) pastry shop, attentively listening to the second tape of his conversation with Rania Myrtides. He was sitting in an armchair, under the arch of the long, narrow two-story building that looked out onto the vast Solomou Square. Two tiny earphones were tucked into his ears.

“You never know!” He could hear the husky and harsh female voice right in his brain as if it was his. From time to time he nonchalantly glanced over at the crew in Agios Markos Square (“Anything was possible”).

This problem was anything but new to Phoebus Black. Rania Myrtides' situation was one of many women: oppressed – even in this day and age – by their husbands. These were women with degrees, with capabilities, who were ultimately limited to housekeeping or condemned to inactivity because the husband did not want to sacrifice just a small part of his career. But this was usually the case when there were children involved. But Rania Myrtides didn't have any, which made the case more unusual.

He glanced over at Rania again. “A bird that wants to spread its wings.” He pressed the stop button again on the red Sony. He got up. The crew was getting into a white van and preparing to leave. He fished a few coins out of his pocket and left them on the table in the pastry shop.

He started out for the Xenia Hotel.

ON SUNDAY NIGHT at the Bodega, a quaint little taverna at the end of the quay, about thirty people were dining around four tables pushed together. It was the television crew, a few local intellectuals and some of the artists taking part in the Zakynthos Festival. It was a quiet night. Two tables away, Black and Stevis were also enjoying the local wine and the seafood dishes.

Dr. Christou seemed rather pleased. Rania Myrtides, on the other hand, was upset. The owner of the taverna, a colorful fellow with a beard and tousled hair, picked up his guitar and sat next to the Doctor.

Why is all so full of strife?

Why can't a garden be our life?

“Achilleas Christou must be extremely jealous of his wife. Otherwise, why wouldn't he let her develop her interests and pursue her talents? What has he gained up to now by basically locking her up in the house, confining her to the boredom of unemployment and housebound luxury? Why would he be creating scenes on a daily basis which get – as she claims – totally out of hand when he monitors her phone calls, her messages and her comings and goings. Rania had every right to object.” Phoebus Black tried to theorize: “These are the remnants of a male-dominated past which put the two sexes at odds with each other and broke up marriages.”

MONDAY AFTERNOON, at a location called Tsilivi. At a little taverna, at the end of a long beach the television crew had stopped for lunch after a long shoot in the island's plains: Agios Dimitrios, Angeriko and Alykes. Phoebus Black was in his black Volkswagen, which he had parked behind a thatch of reeds and was observing Rania Myrtides, who was sitting next to Yiorgos Panou. “Now there's a person she'd be compatible with!”

His mind wandered to Stevis again. Right now he'd be eating his *bon fillet* in the Xenia dining room, keeping an eye on the doctor, who would have also just returned from the beach. The Xenia was where the Christou couple was also staying. And so was the television crew, which was just getting ready to leave the taverna and head back to the main town.

Phoebus Black started his car. If his client realised that he was also following her and not just her husband, she would certainly have a thing or two to say about that. “For reasons of security,” he’d explain. How different she seemed in comparison to last night. She was giggling like a little girl.

He allowed them to start off first. He put on a tape and the music made him feel more assured. He caught up with them a few turns down the road. Maybe she was feeling a little more pensive now. It’s difficult to figure out how someone is feeling by staring at their back. He turned down the music. “This is a clear-cut case of a war of nerves. This marriage will probably not end in murder. But it most certainly will end in divorce.”

MONDAY NIGHT. The fourth evening of the Zakynthos Festival was a success. At about 11:00 the same group of people from the previous night ended up at the *Quarteto di Zante*, a large popular taverna where a small ensemble played old-fashioned local songs. Tonight Rania Myrtides was happy. The doctor was not. Black was confused. Stevis was indifferent.

A little after midnight the group went off for ice cream and then to the Akrotiri club. Rania Myrtides danced with Yiorgos Panou all night. A couple of times when Rania glanced at her husband, his eyes were full of understanding and affection.

Black finished off his third whiskey. The dance-floor was crammed with people dancing and most of the seats were vacant. Stevis had his eyes fixed on two-three very pretty women with whom he was aching to dance.

TUESDAY AFTERNOON. The television technicians and Rania Myrtides went swimming in Gerakas, 12 miles outside the main town. Numerous Greeks and foreign nudists flocked to the two ends of this very long beach, flanked by baking gray clay rock. The crew picked the left end.

Phoebus Black had read that both in this location and at Lagana beach the rare species of Mediterranean turtles called *Caretta caretta* come to lay their eggs. They bury them in the sand and then leave them. But this happens only when there are no people around. When there are, the turtles leave without laying their eggs.

Phoebus Black sat under a solitary, sickly looking pine tree and observed Rania Myrtides and Yiorgos Panou through his binoculars. They were stark naked. Of course, he couldn’t see with his binoculars where Achilleas Christou was at that

moment. (Where was he? At the beach near the hotel? Had he realised he was being followed?)

“Someone is burying eggs in the sand,” Black mumbled to himself, “but when the baby turtles come out, I’ll be there to catch them, before they slip into the sea.”

ON TUESDAY EVENING, the last day of the Festival, thousands of people gathered in the school gym were applauding the artists who had played the local folk songs and staged the theatrical plays. Many officials were also present: the senator, the local congressman and the mayor.

Stavis was there too in one of the first rows watching not only the ensembles and troupes but also the television crew in front of the stage shooting the last scenes of the documentary. Black was sitting in the 20th row. Tonight Rania Myrtides was sitting next to her husband. She got up at the intermission. She returned to her seat holding two soft drinks.

At exactly 10pm the island’s folk dance troupe got on the stage. Men and women in the traditional costumes – white blouses and waistcoats, colorful scarves and *tsarouchia*, the Greek traditional shoe with upturned toe and pompon – danced to the tune of a local folk song. All holding onto the end of a colorful ribbon streaming from the central maypole, they danced around it, weaving and unweaving the ribbons.

Next on the program was “The Dance of Theseus”, a rare dance brought to Zakynthos by the Turks after the Fall of Crete in 1669. In the beginning only the leader dances: He is Theseus fighting with the Minotaur. Then the other dancers join in. The circle then breaks and the lead dancer along with the others following him passes under the joined hands of two fellow dancers: it is Theseus’ exit from the labyrinth.

ACHILLEAS Christou stood up pale as a sheet. He said something to his wife, who pointed forward and to the right. He passed the rows of seats and headed behind the stage. Stavis followed and he wove through the standing members of the audience and hurriedly proceeded towards the locker rooms.

The dance troupe finished the program with another rare dance from Zakynthos called “The Ill-fated Woman”

*I wedded a young, handsome lad, woe is me
Every morn he loaded me, with a sack of barley*

In the dim light the doctor was searching for something. Stevis couldn't make out his expression nor could he see what was happening on stage. But he could hear the song loud and clear.

To the mill I bear it, at the mill I grind it...

Two old men were playing traditional instruments: one was thumping a hand drum called a *tambourlo* and the other was blowing the *aniakara*, a type of bagpipe that sounded like an oboe. The ill-fated woman was represented by a huge man who repeated each stanza on his own, crying out the song in despair, falling on the wooden stage and beating his head with his hands. Then he would immediately get up again and lead the dance with all the other dancers who would go on to the next stanza.

I hap upon the broken mill and all the sails are torn

Achilleas Christou had disappeared behind the locker rooms.

*And I hap upon – oh woe is me!
I hap upon the miller who is bad and in a fury*

The ancient dance, with origins reaching back to times of Dionysian worship, did not only tell the story of a young girl who married the wrong man, but it also portrayed the oppression of women by men by virtue of the fact that the ill-fated woman was played by a man. This was because, up until only a few years ago, it was forbidden for women to dance in public. Black glanced over at Rania Myrtides and remembered her words: "He'll kill me anyway. Only he'll be sneaky, without leaving so much as a trace."

The insistent beating of the drum and harrowing wail bagpipe grew louder:

*And there is my husband – o woe is me!
there is my husband coming with a blade for me...*

The lead dancer had once more fallen on the stage. Some members of the audience were watching intently, caught up by the dramatic effect of the dance. Most others were laughing at the comic elements of the dance.

To sink it in my – o woe is me!

To sink it in my heart, black blood to draw from me

A scream! Not coming from the stage.

THIRTY SECONDS. Stevis wasn't in position. Neither was Black. He had already reached the place where Stevis was a moment ago. Rania Myrtides was sitting in her seat.

That is my ill fate – o woe is me!

That is my fate and of my husband I take leave...

The lights went on. Behind the locker rooms it was pitch black. Black took out a small flashlight. Two-three cars, parked in the schoolyard, turned their headlights in that direction. Hundreds of people gathered. Some were even stepping on the blood that had dripped onto the gravel. Many people, especially those who had children, were starting to leave. The green railing around the schoolyard was stained with blood at one point. Black leaned over and saw. A dozen yards down, on a second level, in the schoolyard of the middle school, Dr. Achilleas Christou, lay in a red puddle of blood, his eyes fixed on the sky and a peculiar expression on his face. The point of a spear from a spear gun was protruding from his belly.

The police officers elbowed their way through the crowd. Two patrol cars arrived. The blue lights of the siren whirled round. Everyone was looking down towards the body as if they were staring into the depths of the sea. Black was looking at something else. A low fence, directly behind the locker rooms, connected to the numerous back streets of the old town. Getting over the fence was a piece of cake. Someone pushed the play button on the cassette player on the stage. "The Dance of Theseus" rang in his ears (or was it just his imagination?). On the other side of the low fence started labyrinthine streets of the town.

Rania Myrtilides looked at Black with a stunned expression. But in her head she was thinking other things; it was her last refuge, man's only freedom: thought.

“At last the brute was done in. And he got exactly what was coming to him. That man wasn't for me. But he wasn't for any other woman either. He never paid me any attention, he never did anything I wanted. The only thing I felt for him was disgust. And he called himself a man! If he hadn't been loaded, I would have got rid of him a long time ago.” Rania felt her head nod with the fatigue and stress of the past few days. Not to mention the unpleasant nature of the sight before her eyes.

THE INTERROGATIONS would begin. The television crew would get it over with soon enough. So would that nice television technician who had flirted with her, never imagining how well he had played the role she had prepared for him.

As for Black, he would withdraw like a gentleman. Poor guy. How could he have known that last Saturday, on the Patras – Pyrgos Provincial Road there was a fourth car? A dark gray Volvo. But what do the color and make of a car matter? What matters is who is driving it. That car would be leaving tomorrow morning for Thessaloniki along with many other cars leaving the pretty island of Zakynthos.

It crossed her mind that she should let out a heart-rending cry. She looked over the railing and screamed, beating her hands against her head. (Over the last few days Black was sure to have started doubting her testimony to him). But it would never cross his mind that she had used him as an alibi. And who could imagine that in those hundreds of empty orangeade bottles there would still be some traces of an innocent laxative in them?)

She looked at the detective again with an expression of despair drawn on her face. Inwardly she pitied him. “All men are fools,” she thought. “Even the Volvo driver.” She fixed her eyes on Black's face. “What can I do?” she thought. “Just keep on thinking that you're the last link in the chain that controls all the others, but remember that you might consider looking over your shoulder once in a while...” She had graduated from her drama school with flying colors. She let out another scream and fainted.

If a Murder Is To Be

“MY NAME is Nikos Katrinis. I’m a 36-year-old lawyer and single. My partner, Lambros Kelefas, and I have our practice in a small office on Harilaou Trikoupi street in the centre of Athens. A few years ago we decided to start a new venture. We came into a large sum of money from a case we won. We invested in a plot of land near the Grammatikos area, between Kapandritis and Marathon, in Attica. It was 12 acres and a great bargain. That was back in 1977. We divided it in half. We drilled for water and were successful and decided to grow pistachio trees – a profitable yield. Be patient, Mr. Black, you’ll soon see what this is all leading up to.

Six months ago my partner changed his mind. He asked me to cut up the farm and sell it in pieces to a number of buyers. The value of the land had of course gone up quite a bit in the meantime. But I wanted nothing to do with this scheme. I had dreamed of seeing these 12 acres filled with trees and other crops and saw myself taking up the farmer’s life. In an attempt to find the happy medium I suggested Kelefas sold me his share at a reasonable price. He proposed the same thing to me: to sell him my share. But Mr. Black, as I’ve told you, I’m in love with this farm. I feel like it’s a part of me.

We argued and argued until we arrived at an impasse. A fifteen-year friendship – ever since the army – cracked like teacup. Three months ago we got the approval for a loan we had applied for at the Agricultural bank. So that we wouldn’t be set back another year, I went ahead and ploughed the whole field. I intend to plant a thousand pistachio trees, a few hundred olive trees, various citrus fruit trees and a couple hundred poplars.

My partner and I hadn’t seen each other for a long while as I wasn’t going to the office any more. All of a sudden, a week ago, he called me up and asked to meet me. When I saw him, he was a changed man. He told me he had changed his mind again: that he agrees to cultivate the land the way we had initially agreed. But I have every reason to have my doubts.

He’s got something else in mind. But what? From one minute to the next he’s turned back into my good old friend. He comes to the farm, he supervises the chores, and he’s friendly to everyone. From morning to night he’s my shadow. What I’m

afraid of is that he will try to carry out his threat. He had told me once, ‘I’ll cut up the land even if it means cutting you up too in the process.’

Mr. Black, protect me. I don’t have enough evidence to go to the police. And I don’t want Kelefas to catch onto my fears either. That’s why I’ve chosen to contact you this way. Under no circumstances do I want us to be seen together. In the file I’ve given you you’ll find the plans to the farm and detailed directions about how to get there. Please, act quickly, but without giving yourself away unless it is absolutely necessary. And when my troubles are over, be certain I will find the way to show you my gratitude.”

PHOEBUS BLACK turned off the cassette player, removed the cassette and laid it on an open manila envelope full of various documents and said, “Here’s a man who wants us to save him and we haven’t even met him.”

“And he hasn’t met us,” said Stevis, looking at him, his dark face divided horizontally by a thin moustache.

“If, of course, we can assume that he isn’t imagining things,” completed Black as he drummed his fingers on the address noted on the envelope: *Mr. Phoebus Black, Private Detective, Athens Tower, Athens*. “A picture of the client wouldn’t hurt,” he continued, “even though it isn’t always necessary to see someone’s face; you can get to know him by his actions, by his relationships with others. But Katrinis had known his partner – what’s his name? Kelefas – for fifteen whole years. But did he *really* know him?”

“What do we do now?” asked Stevis as he pulled a large folded landscape plan out of the envelope. He spread it out on the table.

“We can do nothing but follow his instructions to the letter. We’ll stake out the farm for a few days and nobody will know we’re there, except perhaps our client.”

“And what if it’s all a practical joke?”

“That doesn’t seem to be the case here. But better a practical joke than for someone’s life to be in danger.”

“I don’t get this stuff,” Stevis said studying the plan. “I know that if a murder is to be, it will be. Then the police takes over to find the perpetrator.”

“But does the police always find the perpetrator? How many crimes are ultimately solved? Few, that’s for sure. And even fewer perpetrators are brought to justice. But I agree it’s extremely difficult to change the direction of certain events –

especially when you get involved in a story just before the end. And without any real authority either.” He paused. “A detective’s job is to examine whether there is anything suspicious going on, to gather evidence useful to his client, to trip up any potential criminals. And if he can do nothing to prevent the crime, at least he can prove who committed it.”

“We have to start out tomorrow at dawn to get to the farm before the owners,” Stevis said as he folded up the plan.

THEY TURNED OFF the National Road at the Tatoi exit. Village houses started appearing. It was 6:00 am. In the Kapandriti area the *cafeneia* were already open for business. Their patrons were the workers and employees of the Boyati and Athens area and the farmers who would be presently setting out for their fields.

They spotted a sign: Varnavas 4 miles – Grammatikos 8 miles. The road snaked up through the motionless, dew-studded landscape. Small rolling hills, bare or with a few scattered trees, slowly revealed one another. Numerous farmhouses, a few horse breeding ranches, a country cottage. To the right in the background glimmered a sliver of Marathon Lake.

Now they were going through a thick pine forest. The asphalt road followed the incline of the valley filled with sycamore trees. On the open turns of the road there were some parked cars. More hills. Groups of hunters were hiking over them. The restless dogs scampered alongside them. Day was breaking at no great rush.

After the village of Varnavas, which had an altitude of almost 2000 feet, the road started descending once more. In the gaps between the mountains to their left, they could make out the Euboean Gulf and the island of Euboea. Before them lay more hills and far in the distance Mt. Pendeli hid the city of Athens from view.

“We probably need to turn off here,” said Black, and Stevis, who was sitting in the passenger seat consulting the road map, nodded in agreement. The car made a right angle turn and started trundling over the dirt road that went up and down, full of potholes and half-dried mud-puddles and coarse sharp gravel. The fields on either side of the road were fenced off and many of them were filled with small trees, mostly almond and olive, a few vineyards and beehives. A few hunters here and there.

They continued, following the directions on the map. On one downward slope, about 500 yards opposite them, the entrance to the partners’ farm came into sight. On the other side of the chicken wire fence, near the gate rail, two bulldozers and a loader

were parked. No one was in sight. They had just enough time to pick a spot where they could stake out the farm. Maybe there, in the cluster of pine trees on the hill opposite.

AS SOON AS they had hidden the car behind the hill, numerous cars started appearing from the direction they had come – in the beginning one or two and then five, six, ten, a dozen. Leaning against the trunk of a pine tree, Black observed them through a pair of army issue binoculars. The drivers and passengers numbered about thirty people. From the way they were dressed and their activities on the farm one could tell what their respective roles were. The two that had arrived in a small jeep looked like intellectuals. They must be the two lawyers. But which one was Katrinis and which Kelefas? Three others resembled engineers or foremen. The rest were farm hands. They had already started unloading the saplings crammed on the two large trucks. Katrinis' voice echoed in Black's head: "a thousand pistachio trees, a few hundred olive trees, various citrus fruit trees and a couple hundred poplars..."

From where Black and Stevis stood they could see only a small portion of the farm. They needed a broader view. Black and Stevis split up after agreeing to meet in the same place in an hour's time. Making their way through the brush, the wild pear trees and large rocks, crawling on all fours for most of the time, the two of them went halfway round the 12 acre farm, always keeping a safe distance, taking close note of what went on there.

The farm was fenced in. Apart from the main gate, there was another smaller exit on the left side. In the middle of the slanting land was a large shed with a lean-to. The farmhands were removing the plastic bags holding the dirt to the roots of the saplings and were planting them after tossing some dirt mixed with manure into the holes they had dug for the trees. Other workers were watering the planted trees with a hose that came from a large cistern. Five men supervised.

HUNDREDS OF large lizards scampered around Black and Stevis' feet. A slithering sound. A snake. At the creek that divided the two hills a tortoise was making its way through the decaying sycamore leaves. Coming from the farm were the sounds of the farmhands joking and the rapid thuds of the hoe on the fresh soil, covering the roots of the newly planted saplings. A sparrow, not two yards far from Black, flitted slowly as if it were oblivious to him or as if it was showing him the way.

March was on its way out, but spring was still buried beneath the soil. Nothing was for sure.

“If we had thought to bring some hunter’s clothes along with us, it would have made life a little easier,” Stevis complained as he returned dripping with perspiration, his trousers torn in two places and his clothes covered in pine needles and thorns. “And why can’t we have some kind of mike to hear what they’re saying on the farm? Why do we have to do all the guesswork?”

Black was brushing his clothes off. “Those devices are overrated. The main links of the story can be discovered through simple observation and common sense. After all, the battle against the enemy must be on equal terms.”

“The simpler the means, the more evil the plan,” Stevis quipped.

Black didn’t hear him, but said, “The farm is under our control even if we can’t see it. If Kelefas truly wishes to hurt Katrinis, then he wouldn’t do it of course in front of thirty other people. All these men will leave in their cars just the way they came, through the same gate. That means we can take a rest under the pine tree over there and lunch on those tasty sandwiches you prepared for us. After 3:00, with our eyes glued to the iron gate, we will begin our observation. Nothing of any importance can happen till then. And even if something does, it will be under our control.”

INDEED, at precisely 3:00 p.m., the farmhands started to leave. In a matter of a few minutes there were only two cars parked near the gate: the little red jeep the lawyers had arrived in and a blue Datsun.

“Unless,” thought Black aloud as if he were continuing something he started saying six hours ago, “unless the two partners decide to stay back and settle things on their own. But how?”

A quarter of an hour later the foremen left. The little red jeep was now on its own.

“Murder can happen in such a way that we have no power to stop it,” Black said and then became quiet. Stevis was silent too. Perhaps he was thinking, “If we could only prove it!”

Five minutes’ silence. Then there was the clear sound of someone digging – or rather, not quite digging, but tossing dirt. Black jerked up. He wanted to know exactly what this sound meant. He wanted to get somewhere high, to fly if he could, to see where this monotonous thud was coming from. He approached the fence at the lower

part of the plot. He thought of cutting through the wire, but he hesitated once again. He imagined two men planting some tree or laughing about some joke. Nonsense. Only one man was making this sound. And Katrinis had asked him to intervene and save him – not write his eulogy.

Black was grasping the chicken wire as if he were the caged one and his rival had all the freedom to roam around. “Whatever you do, you can’t get away from me,” he grunted under his breath and started running along the length of the fence. The rhythmic thudding stopped every now and then. Now it sounded closer; then it seemed further away. “Perhaps he’s doing it on purpose to throw me off. But who is it? Katrinis is the only one who knows I’m nearby.” His mind was going a mile a minute, “This soil was ploughed some time ago. Wherever this digging thud is coming from, it’ll leave a mark in the soil.”

Then all was quiet again. Black started making his way back up to where Stevis was waiting for him. He grabbed the binoculars from his assistant’s hands and focused them on the gate to the farm.

ANOTHER FIVE MINUTES’ silence. A man appeared near the lean-to. He was all cleaned up and had just changed into fresh clothes. He went over to the car. Kelefas! Or was it Katrinis? And what about the other three men that had left earlier? Did they have a part in what had taken place? What *had* taken place anyway? Black lowered the binoculars. “When you can’t prove something has happened, it’s like it has never taken place.” And a few seconds later he added, “I’m starting to talk nonsense.” And yet he was right about something. Everything had happened right before their very eyes – even if they couldn’t prove it.

The unknown man started the car. The red jeep started disappearing down the road. Black could jump into his car, speed down the road and cut him off. But to say what?

One man was missing; and this man had vanished in no time. It would be better if he were dead, because the driver of the jeep was capable of burying him alive, having first knocked him on the head with a hard sharp tool. So, he must be buried. In fact, he must be buried standing up because if he were buried lying down the mark of the upturned soil would be too oblong and would raise suspicion. Someone simply had taken pains to dig a sapling hole two yards deeper last night or

the night before. So now there would a sapling conveniently planted over the head of the buried body.

Stavis pried the chicken wire open and entered the farm. The earth was terraced. The trees were planted in row upon endless row. It was a joy just to look at them. The sun was setting and the wind that had been blowing since morning had softened somewhat.

“Someone we never knew has now ceased to exist. Now we know him, hence, now, for us, he exists, while before... I wonder what kind of tree it is.” He gave his assistant a questioning look. “When the roots grow, they’ll spread over his skull. If it’s a pomegranate tree, it’ll blossom in the Spring. If it’s an almond tree, sooner. But it’ll probably be a pistachio tree. Or a poplar.”

He pictured a poplar tree, its leaves rustling in the wind, struggling against the wind. Then he imagined a pomegranate tree in full bloom; then an apple tree laden with apples. “If the murderer sells the farm, for certain he will keep a part of it for himself. And I know which part that will be. And then, yes, someone can come and look; or watch which tree he waters the most.

A goatherd and his flock appeared in the distance. If it were up to Black, under no circumstances would he like to be buried under a tree. The sheepdogs were getting close.

Of Men and Mannequins

HE WAS SITTING opposite Phoebus Black and his assistant Stevis. He was of medium build, no distinctive features, with an almost imperceptible smile drawn on his face. He stated his profession as being that of a journalist. “The kind that doesn’t have a by-line,” thought Black.

He was a member of the Romantic Movement (RoMo). They must have heard of it – it had been recently formed. In the past he had been a member of The Supporters of Temperance, which had been born out of the dissolution of the great party of the Correct but had been beaten by a landslide in the last elections.

His name was Pavlos Kapelouzos.

RoMo, as he explained, was made up by well-known doctors and lawyers, a few civil servants and various retirees. They all kept loose contact with the Movement. “We are against the close bond of the voting body with the party, unlike the communists and the socialists. Of course we believe in justice, but otherwise...”

This was all fine and well, but what exactly was he doing in a Private Investigations Bureau like Phoebus Black’s?

He cut to the chase. “My visit has to do with the country’s security. My party has evidence that a nihilistic organization that has contacts with various rackets abroad intends to...”

He paused. Did Black want to help in the case? Certain clues needed to be further investigated. If he agreed, he would make him an appointment with the president of the party, Loukas Seremetis, at the RoMo headquarters in a central district of Athens on A— Street.

Black accepted.

The appointment was made for the next day.

HE HAD HEARD of Loukas Seremetis. Now he observed him as he went on with his monologue from behind his long narrow wooden desk. He was tall, muscular and wore gold-rimmed glasses. The effect he had on people was dizzying. His palms flapped back and forth like bats over a heap of documents that he had fished out from the back of a drawer a few minutes ago. He paused with a quizzical look on his face. He inspired confidence.

The President of RoMo had also done his stint with the youth party of the Correct. He had also been associated at times with the moderate wing and at others with the right wing. During the Extremist phase, he had withdrawn from political activity, but the police had come knocking on his door once or twice. At the elections, after the Extremists, he fortified the Moderate Forces Front (MFF). Immediately after that he founded RoMo. How did he make a living? He was the legal counsel for a bank and he also owned property. Once he had also been a congressman.

His hands finally stopped moving and rested on the desk.

“... To recapitulate, these two documents prove that the *Black Table Organization* is related to a nihilistic organization in Israel and Western Europe and a similar Cypriot organization. The fact that the nihilists are anti-Semites doesn't prevent the circulation of all this evidence in practice. In any case, the document reveals the relations of *Black Table* with a fanatic Islamic organization.

However, this is not the time for political analysis. The evidence speaks for itself. Your mission in specific, Mr. Black, is to find the M-2 File, of whose contents we are only vaguely aware.”

“And what does this M-2 mean?”

“It could stand for Mission-2 or Mediterranean-2.”

Pavlos Kapelouzos was sitting under a framed sign: *SUPPORT THE SMALL PARTIES WITH THE GREAT TRADITION*. He gazed at Seremetis with devotion and eyed Black closely.

“But this is totally unbelievable. How is it possible for these people to declare a new state on an island of the Mediterranean, as you say they will? With what means? Whose backing? In the space of an hour they would all be rounded up.”

“Everything's possible, Mr. Black. Of course, this is not the 19th century. However...” The President of RoMo spoke as he gathered up the papers spread out on his desk. “Behind *Black Table* there are strong economic and political powers at play. Organisations with private yachts and helicopters will probably take part in the operation... So will secret agents and smugglers. The Mediterranean has always been fertile grounds for operations like these.”

“But I still can't get my head around it,” Black repeated.

“Suppose that during an international crisis they gather on a mountain on island X or on some farm or other. From their radio-station they're talking about the island gaining political independence. They say that the Mediterranean is in danger

because of the foreigners and anarchy. Or something else. But what exactly they're going to do, when and where, is something we will find out from the M-2 File."

"You have to give me some kind of lead to start out with. I don't know anything and you know a lot more than you're telling me. How am I going to track down this organization?"

"Do you accept the assignment?"

"Yes."

The president's face brightened again. "That's easy. We've done a lot more work than you think." He gave Kapelouzos a knowing look. "On 49B S— Street there's a six-story apartment building. On the left as you drive up the street. On the ground floor, to the right of the entrance, there's a bar. To the left of the entrance, there's an office with a sign saying UPOS, which stands for Union of Politically Organized Supporters. These two places are connected. You'll find a lot of clues in this building that are of interest in our case."

Black glanced at Stevis. "And what's the police doing about it?"

"Look, Mr. Black. This type of bar is a dime a dozen in Athens. The police doesn't know what we know." He placed his palms flat on the desk again. "That's all for today. I'm certain you will be able to help us nab these bastards. When that happens, the only thing we want – and I'm speaking as the president of RoMo – is to be the ones to expose this shocking conspiracy. Goodbye."

He closed the door behind them.

NIGHTTIME. Stevis got out of the car in the Athens district of Ambelokipi. He started walking home to his place in the Zographou area, about half an hour's walk. He was pleased. His boss had placed his confidence in him. Black had insisted with the two RoMos that his assistant be present at the meeting. But Stevis hadn't uttered a word the whole time. Not that he didn't have an opinion of his own. But he wanted let Black's mind take its own course.

At the same time Black was driving towards the northern suburb of Maroussi. There was heavy traffic on Kifissias Ave. It was the first time he undertook such a case. But why not? Since political parties had started working with polltakers and advertising agencies, discovering private detectives was the next step. However secure *Black Table's* filing cabinets were, he would find that valuable slim file. As

long as Seremetis' information was reliable. He parked in his building's basement garage.

THE TALL, slightly humpbacked man who sold tickets to tomorrow's Soccer Derby on the black market pulled Black to the side and tried to convince him to leave things well alone.

"Even I wouldn't stick my nose in this business. That sly fox with the cold face, Petroulakos, is capable of suspecting even me. You must have heard of Petroulakos. He's the one that runs the bar. But we don't know if it belongs to him or not."

"What are your relations with this crowd? Excellent, I presume."

They were at the top side of Omonia Square. There were small groups of men standing all around. They were all talking about soccer.

"When I was working at the K— district Department, there was not one single sergeant willing to pay him a visit. What do ya think? And when I was assigned the Student detail, he had given us a hand with some of his people. He was a Commie-eater. Vanopoulos' man. You know, the congressman. He got exactly 100 votes in the Laconia county."

Black glanced around. "So how long have you been on this lucky assignment?"

"Three months. It's an arm smuggling case involving some shady characters that hang out here."

"I'm buying coffee."

"OK."

They turned down Dorou Street and went into a café.

BLACK HADN'T told Lieutenant Malafouris about *Black Table* or about the M-2 file. He served him some other story. But the lieutenant didn't care. As if he would have believed Black was looking for a teenage runaway. In his line of work everyone lied, but they still understood each other. It's better not to know what exactly is on the other guy's mind. In any case, if Black had his mind set on meeting Petroulakos, Malafouris had no reason not to help him out. Quite the contrary in fact. Wasn't it Black who had served him up a case on a silver platter and Malafouris got his

promotion? You don't get something for nothing. And you don't cough up when you want to. You do it when the other guy wants you to.

LATE EVENING. The time was 10:30. The bar was called Rainbow though the sign was a bright red. It was a cross between an ouzo restaurant, a café and a bar. There were five people playing cards. One or two were on the electronic games. A few others were betting on the soccer games and some others were sitting at the tables, chatting or flirting. The man to woman ratio was 3:1. Sitting at the bar were two pretty women with dyed blonde hair. The lights were low; so was the music.

They ordered three double Scotches and Petroulakos arrived at their table with four – one for himself too. The lieutenant made the introductions. Old buddies – the two of them had met in Australia. Fifteen years together in Sydney. Then they packed their bags and came to Greece. “Time to get married!” Stevis laughed. He gulped his Scotch as if he had spent his life drinking buckets of it. He stated that he loved sports, only that in Australia they overdid it with the rugby. He had missed soccer though. Did they bet on the games here? That was his thing. Couldn't he have one little weakness too? He took out a pack of cigarettes and offered Petroulakos one. Winfields. Australian cigarettes. If someone had lifted the back of his jacket, they would have seen the Amco label on his jeans. If they had checked the label on his blazer, they would have seen Mister John. They had gone all out this time.

Petroulakos was about 5'8". He wore a barman's jacket, a cross between a sweater and a blazer. He was one of those few men from Laconia without a moustache. Perhaps he had had one during the German Occupation in W.W.II. He was well-groomed and wore lemon-scented cologne. His eyes darted around the room. Every so often he let out a raspy laugh, like a cough struggling to emerge. He didn't seem suspicious of Black or Stevis.

Eleven-thirty. Black was on his third double Scotch and was flirting with the two blondes faking a British accent. Stevis was telling aborigine jokes. A brunette left the bar and came and sat with the men. She introduced herself. Nina. From Sparta. Maybe *she* was telling the truth. The raspy laugh again. Petroulakos winked at Stevis and gave him a friendly slap on the back.

ONE MONTH later, in mid-January at the UPOS headquarters, the members of the union were having an assembly. The twenty chairs were filled and the rest of the

people were standing. Stevis was way in the back. He glanced round. Young men in army-style jackets and tight black pants tucked into high boots. Other people of varying ages were formally dressed. Ten trilbies and twenty pairs of dark glasses. It felt like a funeral.

Petroulakos was speaking. “We are not interested in what organization our members support. As long as they are fanatic about it. It is above profession and family and anything else: fanaticism for the party! Fanaticism is the means and the end. And politics? Politics for us are a sport, a passion. That’s why sports for us are politics.”

His teeth were black and his face drawn and tired. “And let us not forget! Our Union is everything! It is above all parties. It is what gives us the material means, health insurance, legal coverage. Even though our charter specifically states that fanaticism is above all, we would like to ask our members to please avoid clashing with one another at the stadiums as far as possible.”

Someone placed two trays with filled glasses in front of the speaker. “On the occasion of accepting three new members to our organization, let’s drink to their health and to achieving our Union’s goals.”

They all rose to their feet. On the walls all around there were color posters of all the major league soccer teams. National flags. A helmet. A transparent soccer ball with a crossbones inside. An American Confederate flag. And a mannequin: padded with foam like an astronaut. The members used it as a punching bag.

In Petroulakos’ left hand the glass of brandy; in his other raised hand, a razorblade. Two-three others took barber’s razorblades out of their pockets. They opened them. Outside the rain was falling hard. They began.

O Goddess of Hope!

O Politic!

May this blade lead me to Chaos...

They drained their glasses. They left. Scattered to the four winds. A few ducked into the Rainbow bar next door.

THE NIGHTLY boozing at Petroulakos' bar and Stevis joining the UPOS didn't help matters at all. He met all sorts of different characters, but the M-2 file was nowhere to be found.

"You'll find a lot of clues in this building that are of interest in our case." Black hadn't forgotten Loukas Seremetis' advice. Three weeks' investigation would be enough. Taking all the necessary precautions, they had rented a penthouse office in a four-story building on M— street directly behind the building on 49B S— Street. The only thing dividing the two buildings was the back alley.

They started recording everything. They took pictures, bugged the office, staked it out and made speculations. Everyone was suspect.

Seremetis asked to see them again. He showed them the proofs for *The Romantic Democrat*, the official RoMo newsletter. This issue would be coming out in ten days. On the first page there was mention of a nihilistic organization that was about to put into effect a plan to overturn the political *status quo*. "I know that *Black Table* will give the go-ahead very soon. It's our duty to stop them in time. I'm sorry, Mr. Black, that you weren't able to help us."

They had told Seremetis all they knew. The only thing they hadn't mentioned was the import-export office front they had opened on M— Street. Nor of course did they tell him about Pavlos Kapelouzos whom they had twice photographed secretly entering the building on 49B S— Street.

LATE FEBRUARY. Sunday. The Soccer Derby was at its peak. After the games about a thousand people had blocked the traffic on P— Avenue. The members of UPOS were in the front line. Armored cars. Gunshots. Stevis and a few others were in charge. "Even if you get arrested, don't worry," Balafouris had told him, "I'll take care of it."

Firemen, parachutists and police officers with trained dogs arrived on the scene. Stevis had to get out of there. Something important was going down at the UPOS headquarters tonight. Petroulakos had let a couple things slip. Then the tear-gas. He climbed over a blockade. He turned down a side street.

Stevis was at the Rainbow in ten minutes. Nina was at the bar. There were five-six people at the tables. He downed a brandy. As soon as he found a chance, he

slipped towards the toilets and from there out the back way, which led to the back entrance of the UPOS headquarters.

He put his ear to the door. He tried a skeleton key in the back door lock. The door opened. He went in. He locked it again. Darkness. Another door. He was in the offices.

He waved towards the darkened windows of the penthouse apartment in the building opposite. He slipped into the mannequin. The night before he had made an incision so he could get inside it. He could hear, breathe and even see a little.

Footsteps. He barely had time to find a position, leaning against a wall. He heard them pulling the blinds closed.

THE BLINDS of the UPOS headquarters did not prevent Phoebus Black from seeing into the room as he focused his binoculars on it from a fifty-yard distance. Petroulakos walked into the room first and turned on the overhead light. The RoMo President followed him. The former locked the glass door. Black could only see parts of them, sometimes the upper half and sometimes the lower and they paced up and down. What he wouldn't give to be able to hear them.

He was envious of Stevis. *He* could hear. The others had begun.

PETROULAKOS: Anyone who bothers us, we (he drew his level palm across his neck in cutthroat fashion). Don't send me Kapelouzos again. You should have come yourself.

SEREMETIS: I don't want you. I want your leader.

PETROULAKOS: (muffled laugh)

SEREMETIS: Petroulakos, I know things you don't know. Tell him it's in his favor to meet me.

PETROULAKOS: You think you're some kind of wise guy because you picked up a tip or two from that clown, the industrialist. He got sick of financing you and he sent you here to get you out of his hair.

SEREMETIS: We're doing our job and Haïnoglou is doing his. RoMo is not about to sell out. But everybody knows about Haïnoglou's relations with your groups. And another thing. I know about *Black Table*.

(In Stevis' limited field of vision he could make out Petroulakos' bright red face, his arteries roping up his neck.)

PETROULAKOS: Don't even breathe those two words...

(A muffled cry. Seremetis. The razorblade in Petroulakos' hand flashed in Black's binoculars. Stevis stayed perfectly still.)

SEREMETIS: Your time is up, Petroulakos. *The Romantic Democrat* has already gone to press. It tells all about the M-2 File, you and the bar. Your ideology is washed up. You're finished. If I can make a deal with your leader, I'll keep the paper out of circulation.

(An explosion out in the streets. Gunshots. Sirens.)

SEREMETIS: Let's go!

PETROULAKOS: What kind of deal?

SEREMETIS: You're goners anyway. Hainoglou won't help you. Either go ahead on your own with the M-2 plan or give the file to me. I'll delete your names from the *Romantic Democrat*. Otherwise...

PETROULAKOS: You're bluffing, Seremetis. It's your brain that's all washed up. You're looking for followers. We, on the other hand, will always be in demand.

(He stood next to the mannequin and slashed it twice across the face. Black sprinted to the door of the small apartment and then down the stairway.)

Stevis felt terribly dizzy. Petroulakos had the mannequin in his hands and was slashing it all over. The blade screeched as it scraped against the internal aluminum layer.

A muffled laugh.

The tear gas was still exploding on S— Street. Shouting. The trampling of feet.)

PETROULAKOS: Everyone underestimates the power of nihilism. Nobody knows who our leader is nor will anyone ever find out. You're finished Seremetis. Wake up! Go suck up to some bigger party.

(A loud bang. Seremetis with a gun in his hand. Petroulakos looked at the mannequin in amazement. He slumped to the floor. The mannequin teetered for a bit and then steadied itself.)

BANGING on the glass door. The RoMo president froze to the spot with indecision. He looked back over his shoulder.

"Freeze! Right where you are!"

It was the voice of the mannequin.

A kick. The glass door broke. It was Black.

Stavis started moving, blocking Seremetis' way. Horror was drawn on his face. The mannequin moved towards him slowly and steadily. Voices. Five-six UPOS members appeared at the broken glass door. Blood everywhere, ripped clothes covered their faces. Two were holding automatics.

Stavis emerged from the mannequin. Seremetis in a chair. The pistol on the floor.

“This man here,” said Black, “killed the president of your party. There were others too but they ran towards D— Square.”

Stavis nodded in agreement. He climbed over the jagged glass of the broken door. He pointed meaningfully towards Seremetis.

Black and Stavis ducked into the tear-gassed night covering their faces. M— Street was only a few yards away.