

The Probable Man

I

The black car drew alongside, then swerved in front of their roadster. Brakes squealed. David Conn kicked the door open, shouldered the heavy rucksack and grabbed Hilda's wrist.

"Come on!" he said.

The gloom of late afternoon lowered as they ran panting across the fields. Conn saw the grass alongside whip, and a fraction of a second later heard the crack of a gun sounding from behind. Hilda gasped.

"They mean business," Conn said.

He twisted his head as they ran. Shapes followed them through the dusk. Five-six-seven. If only he could find cover. But they were running across a broad open lawn that looked like a fairway. Two hundred yards to the left he saw the jet outline of bunkers; a green topped by a fluttering flag.

"This way!" Conn grunted.

Shots sounded again, sharp and clear in the April evening as they tumbled over the edge of the bunker down into a soft sandpit. Conn got the rucksack off his shoulder, turned and squirmed up the side of the pit, facing their pursuers. He slid his gun out and fired at a dim shape. Hilda came up alongside to watch.

"Get down," said Conn. "They want you."

"Alive," said Hilda, "not dead. I won't be any good to them dead."

"I will," said Conn.

He tried to catch his breath. Beyond pistol range the seven black figures closed to a tight group and consulted. Conn counted cartridges. Two clips. Twelve. It wouldn't be enough. They would wait until it grew a little darker and then rush. He couldn't afford to lose time. He had to get to the machine by eight—and that gave him less than an hour to fight and win an impossible battle.

“Save a bullet for me,” said Hilda.

Conn looked at her quickly. The soft blond hair and blue eyes. This, he thought, is downright weird. I fall in love with a girl who died a thousand years before I was born. I look at her full lovely mouth and I want to kiss it, and all the time I know her mouth has been dust and ashes for a thousand years.

“That's stupid talk,” Conn said. “You don't know what I can do.”

“Maybe you don't know what Nazis can do,” Hilda answered. “They'll take me back to Holland. They'll use me for political blackmail. They'll keep me locked up—like Leopold of Belgium. Save a bullet.”

The seven forms were still consulting. Conn knew what their big problem was. They were wondering how to avoid killing Hilda in the attack. It was getting black rapidly. Conn sent two slugs their way just to let them know. Then he stole another glance at Hilda. She smiled tremulously.

“I'm thinking that you're beautiful,” Conn said.

“You're thinking how sorry you are you ever got mixed up with a refugee,” Hilda answered. “You're wishing Prime Minister Pietjen never had a daughter—”

“No,” Conn said. He was beginning to lose control of himself at the thought of anyone wanting to hurt Hilda. “It just occurred to me that a thousand years ago our name

might have been Cohen. It makes me want to shoot straight.”

“A thousand years?” Hilda stared.

“Listen,” Conn said. “I haven’t had the heart to tell you. I was waiting until the last minute—until I reached the place I’m headed for, up the side of that slope there. Can you guess what I meant when I said—a thousand years?”

“No,” Hilda shook her head. “It sounds crazy to me. All I know is that you were in a hurry to get some place when they cut us off. You told me last month you were a reporter from the West Coast—”

“Reporter is right, but not from the coast—” Conn fingered the revolver nervously “Maybe you won’t believe this—”

Hilda nudged his elbow. The forms had separated. He could barely see them. Through the hush of nightfall he heard the faint squeaks of shoes on dewy grass. Conn waited while his heart thumped.

They would rush from all sides, he thought, and in the night he might get one or two at the most. Then the rest would pick up Helga. She’d be bound and gagged, and in a month she’d be back in Holland. She wouldn’t be Hilda any more. She’d be Hilda Pietjen, daughter of the prime minister, just another chip in the Nazi poker game. And he’d be dead in the bunker, a thousand years before he’d been born.

A spike of red flame flared and cracked. Conn fired at the flash. It had been a signal. Feet thumped on the turf. Conn thought: What have I got to lose? He got to his knees and scrambled to the lip of the trap, exposing himself. He fired the last shots carefully at the looming shapes, and as the echoes boomed, he rolled down into the pit, fingers

groping for the last clip. It seemed to him that floodlights were sparking around him.

A black figure hurtled over the bunker and came down at him. Conn dropped the clip and smashed his empty gun in the man's face. At that moment a second caught him on the flank and bore him down. Grit seared Conn's cheek. He rolled with flailing arms and drove an elbow into the man's neck.

He tried to get to his feet in the shifting sand. The man kicked him heavily in the belly. Conn fell forward, fists pumping toward the jaw. Cartilage squished and the man groaned and slumped. Then Conn's right drove against the jaw. Everything was still.

"No more?" Conn croaked. Hilda helped him up, her eyes distended with fright. Conn repeated: "No more? There ought to be. I couldn't have killed five men with two shots." He examined the surrounding fairway closely. In the glow of the rising moon he saw nothing. The turf looked torn.

"No more," Hilda said. "Oh, darling, I—"

Conn took her in his arms and kissed her. This, he thought, should be the last paragraph. Nothing else comes after this but "They lived happily ever after." and then "The End." He nestled his bruised cheek against her silky hair and tried to memorize its scent. At last he pushed Hilda gently away.

"I've got to go now," Conn said. "It's nearing night. This is goodbye, Hilda, for a long time. Maybe forever—"

Even in the darkness he could sense the way Hilda stiffened. She stepped back a little, her hand raised to her lips.

"Oh," she said.

Conn said: "It's not what you think, darling. I love you, but—" Too overwrought to continue, he hunted shakily for his revolver and clip, found them at last and tried to brush out the sand.

"I think we'd better go back to the car," Hilda said.

"No, I'll walk the rest of the way," said Conn. "It's not far to where I'm going—in a sense." He shouldered the heavy rucksack, paused for an instant. Suddenly he grasped Hilda's arms and shook her a little. "You've got to understand," he said. "This is something I must do. I'm not a free agent—I've got a tremendous responsibility."

"Don't talk," Hilda said. "Excuses don't make it any easier to understand."

"You're not making it any easier," Conn said.

Hilda broke away from him and tried to struggle up the side of the sandpit. Conn helped her up. They stood on the open fairway, feeling the night breeze cool their faces.

"Listen to me a moment," Conn said. He pulled out the keys of his roadster and handed them to her. "This is for the car. It's yours now. I won't be needing it, ever again. Hilda, this isn't the way I wanted to say good-bye. I thought we'd drive to the place and I'd explain there. The apparatus would have made understanding easier for you. Maybe this way is better after all. We'll part here. You'll drive back to the city, hating me. Pretty soon you'll forget—"

She took the keys in silence, eyeing him contemptuously. Suddenly Hilda slapped his face. The blow stung. Conn grinned wryly.

"All right," he said. "Good-bye—"

He started toward the hill where the machine was cased. After a dozen steps he turned his head and dimly saw Hilda standing there in the night. After a dozen more he heard her cry: "David!" And then again in an altered, almost