

A PIERRE CHAMBRUN MYSTERY

THE
GILDED
NIGHTMARE

HUGH
PENTECOST

Winner of the Grand Master Award from Mystery Writers of America



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A MysteriousPress.com
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Contents

Part One

1

2

3

Part Two

1

2

3

Part Three

1

2

3

Part One

“AS OF YESTERDAY,” I said, as casually as I could manage, “the Baroness Zetterstrom had one million dollars in cash deposited in a personal checking account in the Waltham Trust.”

Chambrun’s eyes twinkled at me from under their heavy lids. “You have some kind of prejudice against a million dollars, Mark?”

“But in a checking account!”

Chambrun looked down at a pink card on his desk. “Two four-room suites,” he said, “and three intervening single rooms with bath. The two suites go at three hundred dollars a day apiece, and the three single rooms at sixty-five dollars a day each. That comes to seven hundred and ninety-five dollars a day without tips, food, liquor, or any other pleasures. The reservations are for one month. You think she can make it on a million?”

Pierre Chambrun is a small, dark man, stockily built, with heavy pouches under bright black eyes that can turn as cold as a hanging judge’s when he’s displeased, or unexpectedly light up with humor. He’s been in the hotel business all his life, and has reached the pinnacle of that profession as resident manager of the Beaumont, New York’s top luxury hotel. He would, I think, be irritated at the suggestion that there might be a better hotel anywhere in the world. He might make a grudging concession to outer space, but he’d have to be shown. French by birth, he came to this country as a small boy, and he thinks now like an American. But his training in the hotel business has often taken him back to Europe, and he can adopt a Continental manner to please a queen. He’s a brilliant linguist. I’ve never counted the number of languages he can speak fluently. The Beaumont is his world. He often says it’s not a hotel but a way of life.

Somewhere in the distance, sunning himself on the Riviera, is Mr. George Battle, owner of the Beaumont, who presumably does nothing but count his money. He rarely interferes with Chambrun’s management of the Beaumont, and when he does it’s in the form of a humbly craved favor.

The Baroness Zetterstrom was one of those favors. “Anything you can do for Charmian Zetterstrom will be appreciated,” Battle had wired Chambrun.

The next day one Marcus Helwig, who described himself as the Baroness’ “steward,” called from London and made the somewhat fabulous reservations—two suites, three single rooms. Without being asked, he’d provided Chambrun with the Waltham Trust as a financial reference. It was routine to check out the reference and I’d produced the answer from the bank.

“Who in the hell is Charmian Zetterstrom?” I asked. A lady who tosses around that kind of money has to be someone.

Chambrun’s face had turned hard and cold, an expression I rarely saw there when I was alone with him. He flicked the ash from his Egyptian cigarette. He seemed to sink a little deeper in the

heavy armchair behind his exquisitely carved Florentine desk. He reached for the demitasse at his elbow and found it empty. I carried it across the thick Oriental rug to the sideboard, where his Turkish coffee-maker is constantly in operation. I filled the small cup and brought it back. His eyes were almost hidden behind the deep pouches.

“Baron Conrad Zetterstrom belongs in the black part in time,” he said.

I knew what he meant by that. There had been four years out of his life when he’d fought in the French Resistance.

“A conniver, the king of the Nazi sadists, reported to have been a sexual deviate of the most extraordinary flamboyance. And rich. While Germany slowly lost its life, General Zetterstrom salted away a huge fortune in Swiss banks. After the war he escaped prosecution in the war crimes trials. Some kind of legal shenanigans. He bought himself an island in the Mediterranean and built what has been described as a Shangri-La that would have made the late William Randolph Hearst drool with envy. They say it was the Kingdom of Evil on earth. He died two years ago at the age of eighty-four. He left his entire empire to his widow, an American girl he married about twenty years ago. She was just out of her teens then—an unsuccessful film actress, rumored to be extravagantly beautiful, able to match the old man’s taste for sadistic debauchery. Now she is the widowed Baroness Zetterstrom. She has come away from her island fastness for the first time since her marriage. She is still said to be breathtakingly lovely.”

“What bothers you about her spending her money here?” I asked.

“That she may try to turn the Beaumont into a club for the international queer set.”

“And if she does try?” I asked.

He looked at me as if I’d asked a totally absurd question.

“Out on the sidewalk on her seductive bottom,” he said. ...

On the eve of the arrival of the Baroness Zetterstrom I was in my third year as public relations director for the Beaumont. It says so on the door of my fourth-floor office—MARK HASKELL, PUBLIC RELATIONS. In the beginning I’d been feeling my way around in the job like an infant learning to walk, guided by Shelda Mason, my glamorous and agitating secretary, who’d worked for my predecessor and made me feel like anything but an infant. For two years now Shelda and I had been teetering on the brink of matrimony, but the life we live is so exciting, so full of change and crisis and engrossing problems, that somehow we haven’t taken the plunge. Actually, the hotel had become our life. Both she and I had what she calls “Chambrun fever.” We felt possessive about the Beaumont. It was our town, with its own mayor in the person of Chambrun, its own police force, its own public services, its cooperatively owned apartments, its facilities for transients, its nightclubs, its cafés, its restaurants, its quality shops opening off the lobby, its complex human relationships.

Like Chambrun, Shelda and I had become jealous of the Beaumont’s reputation. At the end of the

official working day I found myself changing into a dinner jacket and spending the evening moving about from one bar to another—within the hotel—through the ballroom, the private dining rooms, the Blue Lagoon nightclub, the restaurants, making certain that the Swiss-watch efficiency of the place was in perfect order. Shelda says I'm like Marshal Dillon, checking out Dodge City every night. Sometimes she makes the rounds with me. Sometimes she goes to her little garden apartment a few blocks away and waits for me to join her. I live in the hotel myself, and Shelda's place is the only "hideout" I have from the buzzing activity of the Beaumont's world. Of course Chambrun knows where to find me; and Jerry Dodd, the hotel's security officer. We don't have anything so lowbrow as a "house detective" at the Beaumont.

On that night before the arrival of the Baroness, things were so orderly at the Beaumont I should have been forewarned that it was some kind of lull before a storm. I wasn't. I was particularly hungry for Shelda that night and I took off for her place shortly after eleven o'clock. The golden-blond love-of-my-life was wearing an enticing, pale-blue negligee, under which was only Shelda. She was poring over a collection of fashion designs which were part of the plan for a couturier's show she was running for me the next day. A pair of shell-rimmed glasses were perched on the end of her nose. I am the only person who's ever seen her wearing glasses. Woman, thy name is Vanity.

She waved toward the kitchenette and said: "On the rocks for me."

I went, and came back with two double Scotches. She pointed to a little package, gift-wrapped, on the edge of her work table.

"For you," she said.

The presents we give each other, except on major occasions like Christmas, or any day I'm particularly in love, or vice versa, are usually jokes. I opened the package and found in it, folded in tissue paper, a pair of the black eye-patches that people sometimes wear to keep out the light when they're trying to sleep.

"How come?" I said, preparing for the joke. "I only have insomnia when I'm lying very close to you, angel, and then I like it."

"They are for you to wear when the Baroness Zetterstrom appears on the scene."

I grinned at her. "She's that torrid?"

Shelda scattered the drawings on her desk and produced some newspaper clippings. They were from the London *Times*. There was a photograph of the Baroness arriving at Shannon Airport about ten days earlier. The picture showed a small, dark, svelte woman surrounded by an army of retainers. Shelda couldn't possibly be forty. I said that.

"The photograph doesn't show the wrinkles that must exist at the corners of her eyes and around her neck," Shelda said. "Why do you suppose she wears black glasses?"

"Bright sunshine."

"To hide the truth about her age," Shelda said. "You notice the young man standing just to her

left? The one with the long hairdo? She pays him to service her—as we used to say down on the farm

“How do you know?”

“Read the clippings,” Shelda said.

According to the clipping, the young man was Peter Wynn, the Baroness’ “secretary-companion.” I guess that was polite-British for gigolo. The whole retinue wore black glasses. There was a tall, slightly gray-haired man with a thin, hard mouth that looked as if it had been sliced into his face, who was identified as “Marcus Helwig, legal adviser to the Baroness”; a short fat man called Dr. Malinko, her medical resident; a blond Brunhilde called Mme. Brunner, personal masseuse to the lady, Heidi, a pretty German-looking girl who was described as “personal maid,” and in the background a lean, tweedy man with a kind of tense look to him, who was described as John Masters, bodyguard.

“I wish they weren’t coming,” Shelda said.

“Why?”

A little shudder happened under the blue negligee. “Woman’s intuition,” she said. “That bit of spells trouble.”

I quoted Chambrun on what would happen to the lady if there was any trouble.

“Why does he wait till after the fact?” Shelda said. She got up and went away into the bedroom.

“Perhaps because she has a million bucks to spend,” I said. “That’s the first entry on her personal file card. Deposited yesterday in the Waltham Trust.”

No answer.

“To hell with the Baroness,” I said.

“I’m way ahead of you,” Shelda called to me.

There is a secret card-index file at the Beaumont that would drive a professional blackmailer out of his greedy mind. Every client, past or present, is recorded in that file, and most of them would have been pleased at how much the Beaumont knew about them or how they were evaluated by the staff. There is a code system used on the cards that tells a great deal more than the name, address, and marital status of the customer. Under “financial” there are three ratings—I, 2, and o. The o arbitrarily stands for “over his head,” meaning that that particular guest can’t afford the Beaumont’s prices and shouldn’t be allowed to get in too deep; I is for millionaire and 2 for the just very rich. The code-letters mean a lot. A means the subject is an alcoholic; W on a man’s card means he’s a woman-chaser, possibly a customer for the expensive call girls who appear from time to time, despite our efforts, in the Trapezoid Bar; M on a woman’s card means a man-hunter. MX on a man’s card means he’s double-crossing his wife, and WX means the woman is playing around. The small letter d means diplomatic connections. A lot of U.N. people make the Beaumont their headquarters. Governments can afford our prices where individuals often can’t. If there is special information about a guest it is noted on the card. If that information isn’t meant to be public knowledge in the front office, the letter C indicates there

information in Chambrun's private files.

On the morning of B day, which was how the day of the Baroness' coming was described by the staff, I took a look at the file cards covering the lady and her retinue. On the Baroness' card was simply the indication that she was a number-one credit risk and the letter C, meaning Chambrun had no further information. The others were equally bare. The credit portion simply indicated that Charmian Zetterstrom was responsible for the lot of them. The sky was the limit.

"One million bucks worth of hell-raising," Mr. Atterbury said to me. He's the day reservation clerk who never refers to the card file because it is all computerized in his head. "If it wasn't for Battle's cable I don't think the boss would take them in." His smile was thin. "All connecting doors between the two suites and the three single rooms are to be unlocked. They'll be able to play music in the beds in there without attracting attention."

"Do you care?" I asked.

Atterbury shrugged. "The rooms are soundproofed," he said.

You develop habits in my kind of job. At a quarter to one each day I go up to the Trapeze Bar for one very strong, very dry vodka martini on the rocks. One sets me up for what is apt to be the busiest part of the day for me; two make me sleepy. I don't go there just for the drink, but to see if there are any luncheon guests of special importance to the hotel's public relations—big-time politicians, movie stars, or someone newsworthy in the social swim.

But I enjoy the drink.

On B day I found a friend at the bar. I sat down beside him and signaled to Eddie, the bartender, for my usual. Sam Culver was in the process of filling a charred black-briar pipe from a yellow oilskin pouch. Sam is somehow what you expect from a chain-pipe smoker—easy going, philosophical, with a gentle humor. He's in his early forties, and he maintains a slim, muscular figure by careful eating and a daily workout in the Beaumont's gymnasium on the twenty-first floor. I think he plays squash almost every day. I made the mistake of taking him on one day. I'm younger and should get around faster and with more vigor than Sam, but he cut me to ribbons. He's a tactician of the first order. He managed to stay in front of me in center court and had me running from side to side and up and down until my tongue was hanging out. I understand the squash pro has trouble with him.

Sam is a writer. He made quite a lot of dough in Hollywood early in his career. He now writes a column which is syndicated three times a week across the country and around the world. Sam writes about people, gently, perceptively, amusingly. Gossip doesn't interest him. Each piece is a little nugget of character analysis. Many people are flattered to be the subject of one of his pieces. Not a few run at the sight of him. They know how clearly he sees through sham, the false front.

"Just the man I wanted to see," Sam said, after he'd got his pipe going. "Know your habits, so I was waiting."

"At last you're going to interview me," I said.

A cloud of blue smoke floated around his gently smiling face. “Believe it or not, Mark, I have a hatful of notes on you. The man who sees all and knows, surprisingly, nothing about what he sees.”

It wasn’t meant to be wounding. I didn’t take it as a dig.

“Surface facts are your job and you’re an expert at collecting them,” he said. “Below-the-surface facts are my job. Harder to come by, but, I tell myself, more interesting. I am now, however, in search of a surface fact.”

“Be my guest.”

“Do you know what time the Baroness Zetterstrom is supposed to arrive today?” Sam asked. He nodded to Eddie, who’d brought my martini, indicating he wanted a refill.

“She arrives at Kennedy at two o’clock,” I said. “If the plane’s on time and she bays her way through customs in a hurry, she should be here in the neighborhood of three o’clock.”

He just nodded.

“You aim to do a piece on the mystery woman?” I asked.

He looked at me, his smile just a little tighter than normal. “Mystery woman? I knew Charmian Brown when she wore pigtails,” he said. “Grew up with her. She’s complex, but not mysterious.”

“I didn’t know anyone knew her. It’s rumored she hasn’t been off her island for twenty years. Zetterstrom brought the world to her there, according to Chambrun.”

“The word is *bought*, not brought,” Sam said, staring into his blue cloud of smoke. “I’m interested to see what all that has done to her.”

“Made her perhaps the richest woman in the world,” I said.

“There you go with surface facts,” Sam said. “In my terms, it may have made her the poorest.” He tamped down the tobacco in his pipe with his forefinger. “Know that fellow at the end of the bar?”

I looked. A tall, dark, good-looking man in a worn tweed jacket was brooding over a whiskey on the rocks. I guessed he was about Sam’s age.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Not a Beaumont regular?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him before.”

Sam’s smile grew tighter. “I don’t think Charmian will be pleased to see him,” he said.

“Again—who is he?”

“His name is Stephen Wood,” Sam said.

“Do I have to pry it out of you with a can opener?”

“Drama is uninteresting when it’s explained in advance,” Sam said. “But I suggest you watch the confrontation when it takes place.”

“I have ceased being fond of you,” I said.

“Oh, I’m playing it all very lightly, Mark. The cheerful smile hiding the cancerous growth.” His face had gone rock-hard. He slid down off his bar stool. “I think there’s time for a leisurely luncheon

before the lady puts in her appearance.”

I watched him head for the stairway to the Spartan Grill. ...

At two thirty-five that afternoon Mr. Atterbury received a phone call from Kennedy Airport. It was Helwig, the Baroness' steward. They were, Helwig said, through customs and they would arrive at the hotel in about a half an hour. Helwig trusted that all would be ready for them. All would, Atterbury assured him.

I was notified and I went down from my fourth-floor office to the lobby, leaving behind me a protesting Shelda.

“Someone has to mind the store,” I told her.

The luncheon crowd had pretty well gone back to its offices on Fifth and Madison when I got downstairs. The lobby was relatively quiet. There were, however, two rather interesting observers occupying two of the big overstuffed armchairs. Sam Culver was working on a pipe with a little pocket tool. The man named Stephen Wood was several chairs away from Sam, chain-smoking cigarettes. A waiter had brought him a whiskey on the rocks. I saw him toss half of it down in one swallow. His black eyes were fixed on the main entrance, and they looked hot and hungry.

I walked over to Sam. “On the level, what's with your friend Wood?” I asked him.

Sam glanced at the dark man. “I'd say he's been pouring it on,” he said. “Must have had half a dozen whiskies since we last saw him.”

“Is he going to make some kind of trouble?”

“Too bad,” Sam said. “It's your job to prevent it, isn't it?”

“Sam, Chambrun's your friend,” I said.

He sighed. “I've been indulging myself in small-boy mystifying. I don't think he'll make any public trouble,” he said., “I think he just wants Charmian to see him.”

“And then what happens?”

“Presumably Charmian's blood starts to run cold,” Sam said.

Just then I saw Jerry Dodd across the lobby. He's a thin, wiry little man in his late forties, with a professional smile that doesn't hide the fact that his pale, restless eyes are always searching for a sign of anything inimicable to the Beaumont's best interests. Chambrun trusts him without reservation and his performance over the years as security officer has justified that trust. He's a shrewd, tough, yet tactful operator.

“It seems the staff is of the opinion the Baroness will do a strip tease as she comes in through the revolving door,” he said when I joined him. I noticed that a great many staff people seemed to have found business in the lobby.

“You know the guy in the corner chair—name of Stephen Wood?” I asked.

Jerry looked. “New to me,” he said.

“Sam’s hinting around he might try to make trouble for the lady,” I said.

“Thanks for the tip,” Jerry said, and moved casually toward the staring Mr. Wood.

At that moment the cavalcade from Kennedy arrived at the front entrance.

There were three large, magnificent-looking, air-conditioned Cadillacs. Two of them carried people and the third a collection of luggage that might have been manufactured in the mint. Water, the Beaumont’s elegant doorman, reached for the rear door of the first Cadillac, which obviously carried the queen. He was fast, but not fast enough. The door opened and out popped a man whom I identified from the newspaper clippings as John Masters, the bodyguard. He was slim, hard-faced, wearing a tightly belted trench coat, black glasses, and a black hat with the brim pulled down over his eyes. His hands were in his pockets and I visualized hair-trigger guns. He was right out of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*—pure camp.

Masters looked quickly up and down the street, satisfied himself that Fifth Avenue was devoid of assassins, and gave a brisk nod to the occupants of the car.

Out came another man, tall, square-shouldered, wearing a black Chesterfield with a velvet collar. He also wore black glasses, and gray hair showed under the rim of his black fedora, brim jerked downward. Helwig and Masters stood on each side of the open car door. The third passenger, however, did not appear.

The second Cadillac, instead, started to disgorge. Out came a short, obese little man, black-coated, hatted, and glassed like the others. He carried a small, black medical bag. This was Dr. Malinkov, “physician in residence.” He moved, uncertainly, toward the revolving doors. He was followed by two women: a blond Amazon in her early fifties wearing a tweed coat with a mink collar and a little mink toque on her ash-blond hair; and a small, very pretty girl, also blond, carrying a black miniature poodle who yipped disapprovingly at Waters.

The two women and the three men now made a sort of alley between the first Cadillac and the door. Out of the car stepped another man, also wearing black glasses. But there the black motif ended. He was hatless, and his red hair was long, mod-style. He wore a double-breasted overcoat of pale-blue tweed with a heavy fur collar that looked like what I think sable looks like. The bottoms of his trousers were tight-fitting and, so help me, bright red. His shoes were a matching red in suede. He turned and held out his hand to the last passenger in the Cadillac.

The Baroness made her appearance, controlled but brisk. Her coat was black sable, her hat black sable. The coat was a three-quarter-length affair, and all that was visible below it was a pair of very shapely legs covered by sheer stockings that were, in effect, invisible. Her skirt was obviously fashionably short. One gloved hand held the coat together tightly at her throat. The other hand just touched the gigolo’s fingers as she came out of the car and moved, quick and lithe, across the sidewalk. Helwig, the gray-haired man, wheeled in front of her, and Masters, the bodyguard, moved directly behind her. It was as if it had been rehearsed many times. The girl with the pet poodle and the

gigolo, Peter Wynn, came next. The Amazon and the doctor brought up the rear.

Did I mention that Charmian Zetterstrom also wore black glasses? The lights from the lobby chandeliers made them glitter as she came through the revolving door and started for the desk. She looked around, cool, self-possessed. She moved with the grace of a professional dancer. She suggested youth and a controlled vitality that were extraordinary for a woman of what I knew her age to be.

The whole campy entrance was ludicrous but I found my impulse to laugh choked off abruptly by my throat. Charmian Zetterstrom's hidden glance rested on me for a moment, held on me steadily. A cold wind ran along my spine. I felt like a helpless insect about to be pinned to a collector's card.

Then she looked away, and I realized my hands had been clenched so tightly that my fingers hurt. Helwig was at the desk, talking to Mr. Atterbury.

Charmian Zetterstrom stood a few feet away, surveying the lobby with an air that wouldn't have pleased Chambrun. She gave the impression that the Beaumont looked pretty run-down to her.

Johnny Thacker, the day bell captain, and half a dozen bellhops came staggering through the revolving door with the gaudy luggage from the third Cadillac.

And then it happened. Stephen Wood was standing face to face with Charmian Zetterstrom.

"Charmian!" he said. His voice cracked like a pistol shot.

She looked at him, apparently completely undisturbed. If the sight of him made her blood run cold, as Sam Culver had predicted it might, there was no way to tell. And there was no time for a second reaction from her.

Masters, the bodyguard, acted so swiftly I couldn't really follow his moves. The back of his right hand seemed to catch Wood on the Adam's apple, like an axe blade. There was a gurgling cry from Wood as he tottered backwards. Masters' left hand, a triphammer, then caught him on the point of the jaw and Wood went over in something approximating a back somersault, and lay still. Masters was instantly standing over him, waiting for him to move, which he didn't.

Jerry Dodd, caught off base for one of the few times in his career, gave Masters a shove which wasn't expected and sent him staggering a few steps away from the prostrate Wood. Instantly there was a gun in Masters' hand, pointed straight at Jerry. Somebody screamed. I think it was the girl with the pet poodle.

"Put that away and get your whole goddamned army out of here," a cold voice said.

I turned to look at Chambrun, who was walking straight toward the gun, placing himself squarely between Masters and Jerry Dodd. I tried to move, and felt as if I had on diver's boots. It was Masters who wavered, not Chambrun. The bodyguard slowly lowered his gun and dropped it back in the pocket of his trench coat.

Charmian Zetterstrom was at Chambrun's elbow. "I apologize for Masters," she said, her voice cool and clear as brook water. "I have been in some danger recently and he was only doing his job. You are Mr. Chambrun?"

Chambrun turned. "I am Pierre Chambrun."

"George Battle has spoken of you with the utmost regard."

"And he engages me to run this hotel, Baroness. I will not have this kind of horseplay." He looked over to where Johnny Thacker and two of his boys were helping Stephen Wood to his feet. The man's eyes were glazed, and a little trickle of blood ran from one corner of his slack mouth. "You know this man?"

"I've never seen him before in my life," Charmian Zetterstrom said, looking steadily at Wood. "His approach was so sudden, so startling, that Masters did the only thing he could do. You will concede, Mr. Chambrun, that a bodyguard can't wait until after an attack is made to go into action. It couldn't matter less what happens after it's too late. You do agree, don't you?"

Helwig, his face expressionless, his eyes hidden by the black glasses, moved in. "Your rooms are on the nineteenth floor, Baroness. They are ready." Chambrun might not have been there so far as Helwig was concerned. He signaled to the bellhops, the gigolo, the doctor, the Amazon, and the pood carrier. They all started toward the elevators.

Charmian Zetterstrom gave Chambrun a bright, questioning smile. "With your permission, Mr. Chambrun?"

"No more gun-wavings," he said. "No more strong-arm stuff."

"Unless it is absolutely necessary," she said. She turned toward the elevators, and came face to face with Sam Culver. He was smiling too, his slow, gentle smile. She walked straight past him as though he were part of the lobby furniture. So much for having grown up with the lady in her pigtailed days.

"Now that," Sam said to me, softly, "is the way to play a poker hand when you don't hold any cards."

JERRY DODD AND FRANK Williams, one of the assistant house managers, helped a still tottering Stephen Wood to the hotel infirmary, which is on the lobby floor just behind the reception desk. The day nurse, Miss Kramer, sat Wood down in a chair and proceeded to clean up his bloody mouth and chin while she called for Dr. Partridge, the house physician. Miss Kramer is one of those jolly professionals who insists on asking, "How are we feeling?" or "Would we like a pillow back of our head?" She's in the infirmary all day with very little to do except, perhaps, to help someone get a chunk of soot out of an eye, or bandage a cut finger for a busboy who's handled a steak knife injudiciously. When she has anything that looks remotely like a real case she becomes slightly more than intolerable. Wood squirmed under the touch of her square, capable fingers. He was having difficulty talking. Evidently that vicious blow at his throat had temporarily paralyzed his vocal equipment.

Chambrun appeared on the scene before Dr. Partridge could be pried away from his backgammon game in the Spartan Bar.

"You've gotten his name?" he asked Jerry Dodd.

"He's having difficulty speaking," Jerry said.

"His name is Stephen Wood," I said.

"How do you know?" Chambrun asked.

"Sam Culver knows him."

"Is he registered here?"

I picked up a telephone and called Atterbury at the front desk. Stephen Wood was not a guest of the Beaumont.

"Mr. Wood," Chambrun said, "do you want to bring assault charges against the Baroness's bodyguard?"

Wood shook his head, slowly, from side to side.

"What were your intentions when you confronted the Baroness?"

Wood just stared straight ahead.

"He's not armed," Jerry Dodd said. Jerry hadn't made any sort of formal search, but in the process of getting Wood to his feet and helping him to the infirmary he'd evidently made certain there were no weapons hidden under the tweed jacket.

"What was your purpose?" Chambrun asked again. His voice wasn't friendly.

Wood moistened his lips. His voice, when he tried it, was a husky whisper. "I—I made a mistake," he said.

"Mistake?"

"She—she isn't the woman I thought she was."

“You called her by her first name,” I said.

“It was a mistake,” Wood said, his eyes lowered.

“It is a little difficult to mistake the Baroness for someone else,” Chambrun said.

Wood swallowed painfully. “Nonetheless,” he said.

“Who did you think she was?” Chambrun asked.

“Someone else,” Wood said.

“Someone else named Charmian?” Chambrun asked.

“I tell you it was a mistake,” Wood said. “I thought she was someone else.”

“Someone else named Charmian?”

“For God’s sake, how many times do I have to tell you it was a mistake? Please, I’d like to get out of here.”

“Not till Dr. Partridge has checked you out,” Chambrun said. “We have possible lawsuits to consider. What is your address, Mr. Wood?”

Wood muttered the name of a flea-bag hotel on the West Side. “There’ll be no lawsuits.”

At that moment Doc Partridge came in, grumbling. The dice had been rolling well for him for a change and he resented being called away from a winning streak.

“I want a full report on what you find,” Chambrun said. He turned for the door, giving me a little nod that indicated he wanted me to go with him. Out in the lobby he turned to me, exasperated.

“What do you make of that double talk?”

“It was no mistake,” I said. I gave him a brief account of my conversation about Wood with Sam and how Wood had been waiting in the lobby for Charmian Zetterstrom’s arrival.

“Tell Sam Culver I want to see him in my office,” Chambrun said, and started away. He was stopped by a signal from Atterbury at the desk. We walked over. Atterbury was smiling his sphinxlike smile.

“You are summoned into the Presence,” he said to Chambrun.

“Be good enough to speak English,” Chambrun said.

“You are to wait upon the Baroness at your earliest convenience. I quote. Helwig, the steward just phoned down. Maybe she doesn’t like the wallpaper in 19-B.”

Chambrun looked at me. “See what she wants. And get me Sam Culver.” He walked briskly away.

Atterbury grinned at me. “Watch your step,” he said. “I understand she eats attractive young men alive.”...

No two suites at the Beaumont look alike. Floor plans are much the same, but each one has been individually decorated to give it its own character. 19-B is a gem of eighteenth-century French delicacies. It is strictly designed to satisfy female taste; the four rooms are in different pastel shades with gold the basic furniture color. The paintings on the walls are not reproductions, but who the

artists were only Chambrun knows. A woman was supposed to squeal with delight when she first walked in. There was a huge double bed in one of the bedrooms, a single in the other. There was a small, very modern kitchenette.

I was admitted to the suite by the blond poodle carrier after I had explained that Chambrun wasn't available at the moment and that I was his deputy. The girl seemed doubtful until Charmian Zetterstrom's clear, cool voice came to us from the living room.

"Ask Mr. Haskell to come in, Heidi."

She sat on a gold-brocade-covered love seat, facing me as I walked in. The black glasses were gone, and she had the bluest blue eyes I can ever remember seeing. She had on a simple pale-yellow shift that ended several inches above very shapely knees. The lovely legs were tucked up under her on the love seat.

She was, I told myself, something of a miracle. She had married Conrad Zetterstrom twenty years ago. She had to be close to forty. Without the facts you couldn't have believed it. The dark hair had the sheen of a bird's wing. That can be managed in a beauty shop. The yellow shift was high-necked but her arms were bare. I looked for a little forty-year-old flabbiness near the armpits. There was none. I looked for the lines around those magical blue eyes and on the slender neck that Shelda had promised me would be there. They were nonexistent. If there was anything tell-tale at all, it was that the pale skin was obviously overlaid, skillfully, with some sort of pancake makeup. It had the texture of an actor's face, which has been cold-creamed each night and twice on matinee days. Her body looked firm, and young, and exciting. The Amazon masseuse must be a genius, I thought.

"Come in, Mr. Haskell," she said. "Please sit down." She gestured toward a frail-looking armchair next to the love seat. "Can I have Heidi get you a drink?"

She was apparently completely organized after less than half an hour in her new quarters.

I sat, feeling a little as though I'd been called on the carpet by my fourth-grade schoolteacher. I had, I may say in passing, been madly in love with that fourth-grade teacher. I declined the drink.

"You are Mr. Chambrun's assistant?" she asked.

"I'm the hotel's public relations director," I said, "which means that I am also its number-one trouble shooter. There's something that displeases you?"

"On the contrary, I couldn't be more delighted with the arrangements you've made for us."

For some idiotic reason I remembered Atterbury's remark about musical beds. "How can I help you?" I asked.

"I want to give a party," she said. "Except for a short stay in London this is the first time I've been off Zetterstrom Island in twenty years. I want to—how do you say?—do it up brown."

"Fine," I said. "Parties are our business. Anything from coming out balls to intimate dinners in the private dining room."

"I have something modest as to numbers in mind," she said. "Say fifty to seventy-five people"

She leaned back a little, blue-shaded eyelids half lowered. “I want an *apéritif* such as no one has ever drunk before. I want hors d’oeuvres such as no one has ever seen or tasted before. I want a dinner that will make the world’s gourmets concede it tops anything they’ve ever feasted on before. I want wine from strange, exotic places that go down like liquid gold. I want music that will make the guests swoon with delight.” The eyelids rose and the blue eyes fastened on me. “Can you arrange all that, Mr. Haskell?”

“Mr. Amato, our banquet manager, is your man. He will jump up and down with pleasure at the prospect of planning a dinner on which there is no cost limit. I assume there is no limit.”

“None.”

“Let me talk to him. When he’s had a chance to formulate some suggestions I’ll arrange for him to come to see you. How soon do you want to give this dinner?”

Her eyes were very bright. “I’m like a child giving a first birthday party. I wish it could be tomorrow. But I know it’s impossible. I want it as soon as your Mr. Amato can arrange for all the things I’ve requested.”

“It shouldn’t take too much time,” I said. “Amato knows exactly where to go for the most unusual rarities.”

“There is one other thing,” she said. “The guest list.”

“Oh?”

“I have been what you might call a recluse all these years. I have very few friends.”

“Fifty to seventy-five are more than most people have,” I said.

“Oh, but I haven’t anything like that number of friends,” she said. “Three or four at the outside that I know are in New York. I particularly want to have a man named Samuel Culver. He is the only one who must.”

“Sam may not be very pleased with you at the moment,” I said. “You cut him dead in the lobby a little while back.”

The blue eyes widened, and I thought I saw a slight nerve-twitch high up on a lacquered cheek. “He was there?”

“Inches away from you,” I said.

“Oh, my God!” she said. Then: “It must have been the excitement. I was so eager to get away from the trouble Masters had caused—if you see Sam, will you explain?”

“Sure,” I said. “He probably understood. He’s an understanding-type guy.”

“Don’t I know it?” she said.

“Does Stephen Wood go on your guest list?”

“Who is Stephen Wood?”

“The man your Masters slugged in the lobby.”

“Of course not. He’s a complete stranger.”

“So let’s get back to the guest list,” I said.

She smiled at me. “You are to supply the guests,” she said.

I just stared at her.

“Surely there must be hundreds of fascinating people in the worlds of art, music, science, politics, theatre, who would be intrigued at the prospect of a fabulous dinner and an opportunity to meet the much-talked-about and mysterious Baroness Zetterstrom.”

“Well, yes, but—”

“I leave the guest list to you, Mr. Haskell.”

I felt tongue-tied. “Shall I convey an invitation to Sam Culver?”

“Please, no,” she said. “I’d like to do that myself. But if you will explain to him how I happened not to see him in the lobby, and ask him if he’d come to see me, I’d be grateful.”

“My pleasure,” I said.

A relaxed smile lit up her strangely lovely face. “Since we will be involved closely with the details for the party, Mr. Haskell, can we stop being formal? What is your first name?”

“Mark.”

“May I call you Mark? And you will call me Charmian. So that’s settled.” She sounded as though she’d just decided on the precise hour for D day. “You may tell Mr. Chambrun that I am altogether delighted with his emissary, and that he needn’t make the effort to apportion any of his valuable time to me.”

She held out her hand, and I think I was expected to kiss it, Continental fashion. I wasn’t up to that. I just touched her fingers with mine and gave her a half-comic little bow. At the same moment I felt as if a mild charge of electricity had gone through me. ...

Sam Culver lives at the Beaumont. He owns one of the smallest cooperative units in the upper regions of the hotel, a comfortable living room, small bedroom and bath, and a tiny kitchenette. The living room, except for casement windows looking out over the East River and the 59th Street bridge, is walled-in by books. The furniture is heavy and comfortable. Sam does quite a bit of traveling and often the small apartment stands empty. Maintaining this *pied-à-terre* is the only indication in Sam’s way of life that he is anything more than very modestly well-off.

When Sam was reached with the message that Chambrun wanted to see him in his office, I called Chambrun on the house phone and suggested that they get together in Sam’s apartment.

“I think I know what you want to see me about, Pierre. Wouldn’t there be less chance of interruption up here? It’s not a simple story.”

And so, while I was being subjected to the special charms of the Baroness Zetterstrom, the mountain went to Mohammed.

When Chambrun was settled comfortably in a deep armchair, a Dubonnet on the rocks—the

strongest drink he ever takes during working hours—on a side table by the chair, Sam began to talk, filling a pipe from a variety of tobacco tins on his desk.

“Mark has told you, Pierre, that I said Stephen Wood might turn Charmian Zetterstrom’s blood cold when he confronted her. It didn’t happen. Either she didn’t know him or she has at last become the greatest actress in the world.”

Chambrun flicked the ash from his Egyptian cigarette into a silver ashtray next to his drink. Sam was holding a lighter to his pipe.

“You know Wood and some history that connects him with the Baroness?” Chambrun asked. “She ignored him, says he is a complete stranger; he says he made a mistake. She is not, he says, the woman he thought she was.”

Sam puffed blue clouds. “You know me, Pierre, on the subject of surface facts versus subsurface truths. The surface facts may be a little puzzling to you. I think it’s true that Charmian never laid eyes on Stephen Wood before. I think it may also be truth of a sort when Wood says Charmian isn’t the woman he thought she was.” Sam grinned at Chambrun. “You think of me, I imagine, as a reasonably sober, well-oriented, unneurotic, fundamentally moral person. If you were to discover that I was, in fact, the Boston Strangler, you might say, ‘He’s not the man I thought he was.’ Wood was speaking that way, I think. He wasn’t mistaken in thinking she was Charmian Zetterstrom. But when she didn’t react at the sight of him he concluded she was not the woman he’d thought she was.”

“Which in plain English means—?”

“Stephen Wood is a German Jew by birth,” Sam said. “His name originally was Wald, German for ‘wood.’ Ten years ago his twin brother, Bruno Wald, was perhaps the top romantic leading man in German films. You have to realize, Pierre, that over here the Zetterstroms and Zetterstrom Island have never been heard of by more than a couple of dozen people. In Europe they were famous. There was endless talk about the wild parties, the incredible luxury, the debaucheries. Everybody and his brother in the upper echelons of society and the arts, and the simply rich, tried to wangle invitations to the Island. They were few and far between, and the people who did get there came back curiously silent about what had actually gone on. Perhaps because they hoped to be reinvited; perhaps because they couldn’t risk talking lest they themselves be talked about. This enhanced the mystery of the place, and made the uninvited all the more eager.

“If you can imagine Stephen Wood with more flesh and muscle on his bones, his dark eyes laughing and not tortured, the grim lines of personal agony erased from his face, you might have a picture of his brother, Bruno Wald. The Wald brothers were identical twins at birth. But they became easily identifiable as they grew to manhood. Bruno was bold, dashing, high-spirited; Stephen was dark, brooding, almost satanic. Well, ten years ago Bruno found himself the recipient of an invitation to Zetterstrom Island. He accepted with delight. He was flown from Athens to the Island on Zetterstrom’s private plane. A week or so later Stephen received a telephone call from Marcu

Helwig, the Zetterstroms' steward, or manager, or whatever he calls himself. He was sorry to report that Bruno Wald had been lost at sea in a yachting accident. He had drowned. His body had not been recovered.

"There was a three-day excitement in the German press. Bruno was, after all, a popular matinee idol. There was also an opportunity for much gossip about the notorious Zetterstroms. But the Greek authorities who investigated as a routine matter found no reason to doubt the story. There had been a storm at sea—I suspect a small hurricane. Several fishing boats had been lost on the same day.

"I should say here that Stephen had no reason to doubt the story either. He attended a memorial service for his brother in West Berlin and then he came to the United States. He's an electronic engineer and he had been offered a very good job with a firm here in New York. Whenever he was introduced as Stephen Wald he was suddenly recognized as a sort of double of his late brother. To avoid the endless talk and gossip about Bruno he changed his name to Wood.

"The tragedy of Bruno Wald's death was long forgotten by the public. Stephen, I think, despite the close tie with a twin, had managed to throw it off and involve himself totally in a new life. The one evening, ten years after Bruno's death, Stephen came home to find the wreckage of what had once been Bruno, waiting for him on his doorstep. Bruno was very much not dead."

"You're going a little fast for me," Chambrun said. "Bruno was not dead. Why hadn't he communicated with Stephen?"

"That is the nub of the story," Sam said. He looked at his pipe, which had gone out. He hesitated and then put it down, regretfully, on his desk. "It was almost simply instinct that made Bruno recognizable to Stephen. He was skin and bones. His face was lined, the color of ashes. He wore old stained clothes that looked as though they'd come out of a rummage sale. Bruno had always been a great dandy. When Stephen spoke to him, recognized him, Bruno burst into tears, like a frightened child. He needed Stephen's help to struggle down the inner hall to Stephen's apartment. Inside, he collapsed on a sofa, weeping.

"You can imagine the questions that poured out of Stephen. What in God's name had happened to him? Why hadn't he been in touch? The answers finally came choking out of Bruno. There had been no yachting accident. He had arrived at Zetterstrom Island that day ten years ago for his long weekend visit. He didn't take time to describe the old Baron's Shangri-La, but his shaken voice implied that everything about it was now loathsome to him. He had been there only a few hours when the beautiful and glamorous Charmian made it quite clear to him that she was his for the asking. Bruno had, quite frankly, gone there anticipating some sort of exotic experience. Charmian, evidently, was to be it.

"Bruno was incapable of describing to his brother that experience as it must have been. But making love to Charmian had evidently surpassed anything he had ever thought of in erotic imaginings. There were no other guests on the Island that weekend. For three or four days Bruno was totally involved with the lady. He was young in those days and he could satisfy all her requirements.

But presently, despite the wild excitement of this love affair, carried on quite openly under the eyes of the old Baron and the elaborate staff of people, the time came when Bruno had to get back to West Berlin to meet a film commitment. It was then that the old Baron called him into his study. He asked Bruno how much money he was making in films, and then offered to double it if Bruno would stay on the Island. Charmian wanted him as a permanent possession.

“Bruno thought the old man was kidding, but he wasn’t. The whole situation was suddenly revolting to Bruno. He refused, politely, and asked when he could be flown back to Athens. The Baron then made the position quite clear. Bruno was not going to be flown back to Athens. If Charmian wanted him, Charmian was going to have him. He was a prisoner. Bruno thought it was a miserable joke, and then he found out it was very much not a joke. Charmian had been prepared to buy him, and if he couldn’t be bought she would keep him anyway.

“A few days later there was actually a storm at sea. That was when word was sent back to the mainland that Bruno had died in a yachting accident. The whole situation was unbelievable. There were no telephones to the mainland, no way Bruno could manage to communicate. He told himself that if he continued his relationship with Charmian for a few days she would tire of him and the whole ghastly situation would resolve itself. But presently he realized that it didn’t matter whether she tired of him or not. He became aware of other people on the island for the first time. He recognized some of them. The Baron’s island was being used as a haven for some of the most wanted German war criminals. Knowing this he was lost. He realized they would never let him go back to the world again. But she didn’t tire of him. He began to be torn to pieces by a terrible panic. It was for real. He began to try to plan some sort of escape. There was the plane, and Bruno was a licensed pilot. There were half a dozen powerboats. He was very cagey about it. He watched the comings and goings carefully. His idea was that he would steal one of the powerboats. He decided he would select one that had been recently used, so there’d be no question of a cold motor. He picked his moment, after dark, and raced for the boathouse. He chose the launch he’d been watching, its engine still warm to the touch. His finger was on the starter button when John Masters, the lady’s bodyguard, whom you saw in the lobby, rose up out of the cockpit, grinning.

“ ‘We’ll always be miles ahead of you, Mr. Wald,’ Masters said. ‘So go back to the house and tend to your knitting.’

“That’s the way it was, not for a few days or weeks but year after year. He could no longer make love to the lady. The sight of her made him retch. But in spite of this he was kept there, brought in her presence every day, pawed, insulted, on occasion actually stripped and flogged in her presence by one of the menservants. This seemed to provide her with some sort of erotic excitement.”

“Ten years of this?” Chambrun asked, in a low, hard voice.

“So Bruno told Stephen that day in New York. Toward the end Bruno came down with some illness. Dr. Malinkov took care of him, but was noncommittal. Whatever it was, Bruno began to was

away physically. The lady seemed to lose interest in torturing him. The guard against escape seemed to relax a little. Bruno wasn't capable of any great physical effort. But one night he made it, in, of all things, a rowboat. There was no moon and the sea was angry. Still, he struggled away from the Island pulling on the oars with hands that began to bleed. He knew they would come after him. They wouldn't dare let him get back to the mainland to tell his story. He knew what he would do if he heard one of the powerboats coming toward him through the night. There was a fisherman's knife on the rear seat of the rowboat. He would take it, systematically cut his throat with it, and slip over the side into the cool death of the sea. He was dizzy with exhaustion when a big wave hit the little boat broadside and capsized it. Bruno managed to cling to the overturned boat, consciousness slowly slipping away from him. He blacked out.

"When he came to, he was lying in a bunk in the hold of an evil-smelling ship of some sort. He had been picked up by a Greek freighter which was on its way to the United States. Bruno thought they must be carrying narcotics of some sort, because they were making no interim stops before New York. They refused to let him use the ship's radio. They didn't treat him badly, fed him whatever there was to eat. Bruno lay for days on his bunk in the hold, alternately sweating and freezing. There was no ship's doctor, and whatever his illness was it was slowly destroying him.

"Then, that afternoon, the ship docked in New York and no one stopped Bruno from going ashore. He called an old family friend and asked for Stephen's whereabouts. He didn't identify himself because the one thing in the world he wanted was to keep word from getting back to the Zetterstroms. They would certainly come after him. He knew too much about them and their wanted friends. That was Bruno's story."

"Not pretty," Chambrun said.

Sam picked up his pipe and relit it. "Stephen's first thought was to get a doctor for Bruno. He was suddenly seized with melodramatic panics of his own. Bruno's story, his presence here, must be kept secret. A doctor he knew had an office down the block—a very busy office. The doctor would talk forever if Stephen tried to impress him with the urgency of the situation on the phone. The doctor's nurse might listen to the story on an extension. So Stephen made his brother comfortable and set him on foot, running for the doctor's office. It took, at the most, fifteen minutes for Stephen to get in to see the doctor, explain, and bring him back, both running to the apartment.

"Bruno was in the bathroom. He was dead. He had apparently cut his throat with one of Stephen's razor blades."

Chambrun's eyes widened. "Apparently?"

"The apartment door was open when Stephen and the doctor came back. Stephen was almost sure he'd locked it when he went out. He convinced himself that someone from the Zetterstroms had been that close on Bruno's heels."

"And the police?"

“They listened, politely, to what was obviously an Arabian Nights’ nightmare. An autopsy showed that Bruno had a malignant tumor, very close to the brain. It could have affected his rationality. There was no Greek freighter moored at a North River pier. There had been one, to be sure, but it had docked only long enough to unload a very small cargo. Radio communication with the captain had negative results. They had picked no one up in the Mediterranean; they had brought no passenger to New York. Stephen found a reasonably patient Homicide detective, who admitted that it was odd there were no fingerprints on the razor blade, Bruno’s or any other’s. He started a laborious inquiry with the Greek authorities, reopening the story of the yachting accident, then ten years back. There seemed to be no question about it. There were half a dozen witnesses to Bruno’s having been swept overboard in the storm. Zetterstrom people, of course. The equivalent of our Coast Guard had searched for the body for many days. They had gone pretty thoroughly over the battered yacht and Zetterstrom Island itself. Naturally there had been ample time for them to get their wanted war criminals to another place of safety. The police were convinced.

“But Bruno was dead in Stephen’s bathroom and he had certainly been alive all those years. Bruno where? There was finally a large, official shrug in both New York and Athens. Obviously Bruno had survived the storm. Probably he’d been badly injured. They suggested a blow on the head which had finally led to the growth of the tumor, which would certainly have been fatal in a few weeks, had Bruno lived. The suggestion was a prolonged amnesia. He could have been wandering all those years somewhere in Africa or the Middle East, a man without identity. Stephen kept insisting that even if Bruno had lost his memory, there were thousands of people who would instantly have recognized him as a famous movie star. True, the authorities admitted, but it hadn’t happened. War criminals? They were constantly being reported seen all over the world—South America, Asia, Africa. They were certainly not on Zetterstrom Island. The case was closed.”

“But not for Stephen Wood,” Chambrun said.

“No, not for Stephen,” Sam said. “He was like the Ancient Mariner, telling his story to anyone who would listen. I was one of the people he buttonholed at a party somewhere. Being what I am, I was interested. It was a colossal story if it was true. But I’ve never been able to find one shred of evidence that proves the whole thing wasn’t some last-ditch delirium of Bruno’s. But today I thought I might find out.”

“The confrontation in the lobby,” Chambrun said.

Sam nodded. “Suppose it was true—Bruno’s story. Charmian arrives at the hotel and is suddenly confronted by Bruno in the flesh—actually his twin, but to her he must almost certainly be a stunning shock. I think Stephen counted on that. She would betray herself when she found herself suddenly face to face with someone who must seem to be Bruno.”

“But nothing happened. God, she was an iceberg.”

Sam nodded, frowning. “I know. Could she have been so controlled when she was unexpected

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