

Window to the West

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This N. Muna—he was a queer one indeed. When he painted a seascape and hung it in a museum, you got wet looking at it. He got money for paintings not yet dreamed of and then took his sponsors for a joy-ride that gave them far more than their money's worth.

Illustration

IT was almost closing time when Nicolas Muna came into the Neustadt-Kingsland Gallery. He walked quickly, but with growing irresolution, ignoring rows of paintings on either side, and his pace slowed as he approached an alcove at the

far end of the gallery. At the entrance he paused, looked about, and confirming that he was alone and unobserved, put on a pair of smoked glasses and went in.

Opposite him, fifteen feet across the alcove, hung a painting listed in the catalogue as *Window to the West, by N. Muna*. It showed a latticed window and a view seen through its numerous panes; a view of a shore, white sand, green sea, red sky. Because it occupied a wall by itself, and because it was hung low enough to foster the illusion, it seemed to be a real window—but one that gave on a scene no human eyes had ever beheld, except for Muna.

He was a tall, bony man, with a shock of shining black hair as wild as a mane. His eyes were dead, deep in their sockets behind black lenses, his mouth a line, but his clasped hands—hands, considering his loose white suit and tennis shoes, incongruously encased in chamois gloves—were alive, tormented, the long fingers locked in a struggle, slowly pulling apart.

Now he came closer. Suddenly he tore away his glasses. His dark eyes roamed the canvas with rapture.

The glowing pigments, ordered and divided by the black lattice-work, achieved the unearthly beauty of a stained glass window... but the same lattices kept the elements of the larger scene from fusing... became, indeed, bars through which one might gaze at an alien world forever beyond attainment...

But the seascape was receding. Sky and sand and sea were rushing into the frame. The frame began to grow, larger and larger still, until it was gone and Muna stood alone on the shore, looking down to a cold and lifeless sea.

The sun was lost in white haze, the waves hung frozen. White on the white sand lay the skull of an albatross. Beside it stood a monstrous turtle, its shell banded black marble, the carapace cut with infinite facets. The turtle's head was drawn into the shell, but the terrifying, gleaming red jewels that were its eyes were open. The eyes, Muna knew, had fire in them.

In a moment it was done, and Muna turned and ran.

OUT of solicitude for Nicolas Muna, the sea-going ANENOME IV had been anchored short of her dock, well out in the cove. This was meant to keep sounds of a party aboard the yacht from disturbing the peace of a villa that stood among pines, overlooking the cove. The villa, a luxurious lodge of marine feeling, on grounds that included several out-buildings, one of which Muna occupied, was named *Land's End*. Its owner, Avery Kingsland, loved the place; it was his favorite vacation residence, as home base for his yacht. But, because of Muna, not once during the long summer now ending had the ANENOME IV put in here, or Kingsland set foot on the property.

These circumstances, and related matters of a far stranger character were presently being discussed by Kingsland and one of his guests on the yacht. The others aboard were making the most of their holiday, within bounds, swimming, diving from the bowsprit, sunbathing topside in advanced stages of somnolence and nudity, or sharing the comforts of an awninged afterdeck and its powerful bar.

Among the drinkers, though separated for privacy, were Kingsland and his guest, an Englishman named Peter St. Pons. The two were vastly dissimilar. St. Pons was portly, ponderous, more a large mammal than a man, wearing gaudy tropical play-clothes over a skin innocent of undue exposure to sun. Kingsland

was slight, nervously handsome, glass-in-hand—a nautical man of distinction, impeccable in manner and dress. His speech was something else again.

"Find out what that wild man thinks he's up to," said Kingsland. "Find out, that's all I ask, and I'll deal with him... I've done what I can to make it easier for you—this whole weekend was arranged just to let you get at him—but it won't be easy."

"Here's luck," said St. Pons. "...Who did you say I was?"

"An art critic from London, feature writer and so forth."

"Really? How did it sit with him?"

"I don't know. I don't understand Muna. He's an odd combination, a simple Mexican from the hills, and a hot, educated young intellectual. But you're supposed to be something of a specialist in the, ah, the art field, aren't you? You'll get along. Just let him know you despise rich Americans."

"I see..."

"He says I haven't any feeling for art. How the hell am I expected to feel? I have an equity in everything he produces. If he destroys a painting he doesn't like, he's inflicting a property loss on me, isn't he?"

"Exactly."

"I discovered him. Last November, in Mexico. I discovered him and brought him to New York. When he said he couldn't work there, I took him up here to the Cape. He was only supposed to use one of the cottages—I'd rebuilt it for him as a studio—but the way he carried on when I used *Land's End* once last May, he's had sole occupancy since he got here in February. And what have I to show for my investment? A handful of canvases he brought from Mexico, and after that just one—the one he set on fire in the gallery."

A steward brought fresh drinks. Kingsland sampled his morosely, St. Pons with relish, after which he said, "May I ask about your contract with Muna? Doesn't it call for a specified number of paintings within a specified time?"

Kingsland gestured impatiently. "You can't talk to him about things like that. He says, 'Paintings are not potatoes' and that's it. Besides, it's unnecessary. Muna is prolific. He's a genius; I believe that no matter what he does; but what good does it do him, or me, or anyone, if he burns up everything he doesn't like?"

"Is that what he says?—he doesn't like them?"

"No, that's not at all what he says. He says they catch fire by themselves."

"I beg your pardon?" said St. Pons, startled.

"That's what he says," said Kingsland. "Remember, this is all by telephone; I haven't seen him since May. He phoned me in New York on August fourth, as I well remember, and simply told me his paintings—everything he'd done—had caught fire by themselves and been consumed. What was more, he warned me that *Window to the West* was potentially dangerous—his words—and that if I didn't burn it myself, it was liable to happen spontaneously."

"Spontaneously indeed," St. Pons murmured. "What did you say?"

"I was stunned. Months of work wiped out, and here he was telling me to do away with the one painting I had—which he hadn't actually given me, to begin with. It was the only one he'd show me when I was here, so I just took it along and—"

"May I break in? You say *Window to the West* was the only painting he'd show you? Then you saw nothing of those later burned?"

"Not a glimpse. He refused, said they weren't ready to show."

"And how did he react to your taking the painting?"

"Annoyance... anger... he said he hadn't decided whether he'd finished working on it. I promised not to show it before he saw it again... I wish you could have seen it," Kingsland said, his eyes half closed as though to conjure up the image. "A masterpiece. But I didn't show it. For three months I kept thinking I'd wait until I had more, possibly of equal caliber, and I'd hang them together..."

"When did you hang it, Mr. Kingsland?"

"The week after Muna told me the others had burned. August tenth, a Monday. I thought about what he'd said, about his warning..." Kingsland finished the sentence by shaking his head. "I wanted to see what it would stir up if I hung it just for a few days, without any fanfare. The next day, before anyone worthwhile even knew about it. Muna showed up at the gallery."

"Found out rather quickly, didn't he?"

"Apparently."

"Hmmm," said St. Pons, looking very wise. "And what did he say about that little incendiary visit? How does he reconcile it with his talk about," he smiled faintly, "spontaneous combustion?"

"It proved his point," said Kingsland wearily.

"I beg your pardon?"

"All he had to say when I called him was, 'Mr. Kingsland, I tried to warn you.' Period."

"But his presence at the gallery?... Isn't he aware he was seen?—that it's known he deliberately set fire to the painting?"

"I haven't discussed it. Not a word."

"May I ask why not, Mr. Kingsland?"

"Look at it my way, St. Pons. Am I going to prosecute him for it? I am not. You know painters, you know how they can go through a new phase, absolutely dedicated, then suddenly it's over and they're sick of it?... You find them painting over on the same canvas, slicing up big ones to make small ones..." He sighed heavily. "My interest lies in preserving our relationship, if possible. My hope is that it was a phase, that he's through destroying his work. Even part of the output of a genius is plenty, but I don't know ... I don't know..." He stopped talking to watch a group of sun-worshippers descend from the upper deck.

One of them, a dark-haired young woman in a bikini, very well put together, came walking over to Kingsland and St. Pons.

"...Dolores, my dear, will you join us? Have you two met?"

"Oh yes, Mr. St. Pons? Don't make room for me, I'm not staying." Her voice was husky, and from her accent and the cast of her features—high, polished cheekbones, sloe eyes; a lovely face—St. Pons guessed she was Mexican. "Just one drink," she said. "We're going motor-boating."

"No, no," said Kingsland in dismay. "Please, no motor-boating. I promised Muna absolute quiet during his working hours."

"But he isn't working. Look, see him out there?"

Kingsland focussed a pair of binoculars on a tall, spare figure slowly ambling along the shore. "You're right. Care to use these, St. Pons? Dolores, my pet, what shall it be?"

"Absinthe."

"Isn't it somewhat early in—"

"Absinthe!"

"...All right." He called the steward.

"Striking fellow," said St. Pons, putting down the binoculars. "Marvelous head, good bones."

"Are you a painter too, Mr. St. Pons?"

The Englishman beamed. "A Sunday painter, Miss Chilon,"

"Oh, they're the best kind. But I mean it. They paint for enjoyment. When they approach a canvas, it's fun, not life or death. I don't ever want to meet another man who can't wait until Sunday to paint... or the Sunday after, if there's something better to do." She took her drink, downed it quickly, then picked up the binoculars and looked out at Muna. "He's sitting on a rock now," she said. "How thin he looks—how very tired and drawn..."

Abruptly she pulled the glasses away from her eyes, furious.

"What's the matter, my dear?"

"He has a telescope! He was looking right at me and laughing!"

Both men smiled and relaxed. "What of it?" said Kingsland.

"Nothing! The fool!—laughing!... Good-bye, I'm going..."

"Have fun," said Kingsland.

"Yes, do," said St. Pons, and when his eyes returned from following her across the deck, he said, "Attractive," and had a long pull at his gin.

"...Well, St. Pons, anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I've been wondering. Is it possible Muna's reason for showing you only one painting was that, actually, he had no others? You seem surprised; allow me to continue. Do I assume correctly that your arrangement with Muna includes fairly sizeable advances of money against future sales?" When Kingsland nodded yes (more than surprised, he seemed wrenched, unhappily, from other thoughts), St. Pons asked, "And these advances have not been cut off, have they?"

"No... What are you getting at?"

"Simply this: if Muna had no other paintings, he could cover up by claiming they were lost in a fire, and keep getting his money."

"Come now, St. Pons. Muna had been here months. Why shouldn't there have been other paintings?"

"Oh, I don't know... Painters have sterile phases, too."

"Not Muna," said Kingsland with finality. "He'd have left here long ago. Paint is Muna's life."

St. Pons smiled wanly. "Not a Sunday painter, I take it?"

Kingsland glanced quickly, searchingly, at the Englishman, then said in level tones, "Dolores Chilon was Muna's fiancée at one time.... Anyone who knows Muna knows he must paint. You're way off base, St. Pons." He paused, then added, with unexpected sharpness, "What about a painting we know he burned? Was that done to alibi a lack of productivity?"

"No, sir, to bolster an alibi, possibly. You see, Mr. Kingsland, in a case like this, where Lloyds has insured an artist's work, sight unseen, it's important to establish that the work did exist."

"But what difference does it make? I haven't claimed damages at all, for anything. I don't want the slightest breath of bad publicity for Muna. I notified Lloyds because I am legally obligated to do so, and while I welcome your company's investigation, I am perfectly willing to sign a waiver and cancel this policy outright."

"Fair enough, Mr. Kingsland," said St. Pons mildly, "but there remains the question of Lloyds continuing insurance on your other properties. What if Muna had burned down the gallery? Similarly, if there was indeed a fire at *Land's End*, the threat of loss concerns us. Lloyds is uneasy about clients playing with fire. I hope you understand."

Kingsland nodded and looked over the rail. The motor-boat was circling the yacht. Dolores Chilon sat in the bow, in her bikini, like a figurehead, and neither man seemed disposed to carry on further talk. Presently St. Pons produced a pen and a small red notebook; and began to make coded entries.

BY nightfall the party from the ANENOME IV was ashore. It had expanded considerably. Reinforcements had come by land and sea; from Provincetown, mostly on bicycles and in small European sports cars; a boatload from Race Point, and two station-wagons from New York. The guests were divisible by half a dozen types, as though turned out in a nearby ceramics factory which had a wide, though not local, reputation for hand work. They wore everything from milkhands' attire to formal costume, and among them were to be found people from book houses, ad agencies, show business, magazines, such as writers, photographers, set designers, models, directors, musicians, producers, with the usual heavy sprinkling of moochers, loafers, nuts and bums.

An orchestra furnished noise, an exclusive catering service furnished everything else, including detectives to watch the silver. The conversation went something like this:

HE: (Tall, young, bald, glasses, sack suit): "I wonder what that is they're preparing to roast in the barbecue pit?"

SHE: (Sandals, pony-tail, pedal-pushers): "It's either a small calf or a large dog."

Another sample:

HE: (Beard, blue jeans): "Why is Margo crying?"

SHE: (Dirndl, pigtails, barefoot): "Her psychiatrist won't dance with her."

Still another;

HE: (100% Orion): "Frantic ball, huh, sweetie?"

SHE: (Strapless): "Crazy."

This one too:

EVERY KINGSLAND: (Cummerbund): "I wish you'd cut down on your drinking just enough to make it possible to dance with you."

DOLORES CHILON: (Taffeta): "If I didn't have to dance with you, I wouldn't drink so much."

"That's a hell of a thing to say to me," said Kingsland.

"I'm in a hell of a mood," said Dolores.

"Well, you wanted to come," said Kingsland.

He saw St. Pons beckoning from the sidelines, then go out on the terrace. He maneuvered Dolores off the floor, took her outside and sat her down. Then he lit a cigarette for her and joined St. Pons twenty feet away.

"Mr. Kingsland, I hate to be relentless, but I can't seem to locate Muna anywhere."

"Well, what can I do? Keep looking."

"Yes... The fact is, I thought Miss Chilon might know..."

"What gave you that idea?"

"They were together earlier, so—Have I offended you, sir?"

"You have not. When was this?"

"About an hour and a half ago."

"I didn't know," said Kingsland. "I'll ask her." He went back to Dolores. She had found a drink on the terrace. They spoke briefly, then Kingsland returned to St. Pons. "Nothing," he said. "Just nose around. He's around here somewhere."

"You don't think he's left the premises?"

"I don't see why he should. The party's here."

"Somebody's making a fire on the beach out there," said St. Pons.

Kingsland turned and saw a small blaze far down the shore, where it curved out to sea to become the north side of the cove. It flared up for a moment and died. Again it shot up, and again it went out.

They waited expectantly, but nothing happened...

Dolores Chilon came toward them, sliding a hand along the rail to steady herself. "Who wants Muna?" she asked. "Do you want Muna, Mr. St. Peter?"

"I'm anxious to meet him, Miss Chilon."

"That's good, that's fine, because I don't want to meet him... You go meet him and tell him I said go to hell."

"I'll be glad to, Miss Chilon. Do you know where he is?"

"He's waiting down there." She pointed vaguely. "Where the little fire was just now. Tell him what I said... Tell him it's too late... too..." She began to cry, very quietly.

"I'm sorry," said St. Pons. He nodded politely, walked to center of the terrace, and descended a stone stairway to the beach.

Kingsland stood there, patient, martyred, his handsome face twitching, making no move to touch the girl, waiting for her to stop.

The night was moonless, dark, and St. Pons had difficulty reaching his objective. The scalloped shoreline made it hazardous to estimate how far up the roaring, foaming surf might reach: the alternative to wet feet was sand in his shoes; St. Pons didn't like it, moreover, there was a chill in the air. But he was spurred on and heartened when, halfway there, for the third time a fire started up, and this time it lasted.

He found Muna in the lee of a grassy promontory, in a hollow between the beach and high dunes. "Hello, Mr. Muna," he said, crossing the perimeter of the firelit area.

"Hello," said Muna. "Who are you?"

He was sitting on a section of a huge, bleached log, dressed in sports clothes, looking very neat and bright. The fire made his skin gleam and brought excitement to his eyes. He did not attempt to get up.

"My name is St. Pons. Mr. Kingsland spoke of me, I expect?"

"From London?—the critical writer? I remember." He extended a relaxed friendly hand, and for the first time St. Pons noticed that he was wearing soiled chamois gloves. "I saw you this afternoon on the boat with Mr. Kingsland and Lola Chilon."

"Yes, I saw you too. As a matter of fact, I have a message for you from Miss Chilon. She asked me to say she isn't coming."

Muna laughed. "That's all?" he said sadly. "I knew that."

"Well," said St. Pons indefinitely, and shifted his stance. He took out a cigarette case, offered one to Muna, lit both, and felt better equipped to linger without imposing.

"She's drunk, huh?" said Muna.

St. Pons smiled. "I'm a lenient judge, Mr. Muna. I believe in being charitable."

"That's good," said Muna.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" asked St. Pons. "I'd like to cozy up a bit before I start back."

"You are welcome, Mr. St. Pons. To share a fire is the basis of hospitality. What is the name of this brand?"

"Three Castles."

"Too sweet."

"Matter of taste. To me, Mexican cigarettes taste like Burma cheroots."

"I must try them. How do you know about Mexican cigarettes?"

"I've been to Mexico. I'm a student of Mexican art."

"Do you know where Villahermosa is?"

"Yes, but I haven't been there. It's down in Yucatan?"

"No, in Taba, but that's close enough. I come from Villahermosa. It's wonderful there, not like here, so cold, you can feel the winter coming, it's in the wind." He took a deep breath and nodded in confirmation. "The air is changing. Tell me, whose work do you know?"

"Anguiano, Mendez, Charlot... Pena, Lugo... Aguirre, Zalce..."

"That's wonderful! That's very nice. Do you buy paintings?"

"When I can afford them... May I add that I've been hoping to see some of your work too, Mr. Muna?"

"Thank you," said Muna, graciously, sadly. "But I'm not a Mexican painter anymore. I am a Yankee. I live here where the ocean is wild and cold, and there is ice. I eat boiled potatoes, and I have winter underwear."

"Yes, but your art must still be essentially Mexican."

"That's what you think," said Muna.

St. Pons hesitated, then said resolutely, "That's a very provocative idea. There may be a good article in this."

"No," said Muna, "I don't think so. A painting is to be seen. Writing about painting is like painting about writing. When you write about me, you say what you think I am, not what I am. Only my painting says what I am."

St. Pons was silent. The fire had burned down, and Muna rose to feed it from a heap of driftwood and dry brush. It shot up with a roar and a shower of sparks.

Muna followed their flight, then threw on some small logs and poked them into position with a charred stick. St. Pons pulled back from the heat.

"...Isn't the wind a bit too vigorous for this?"

"I'm very careful," said Muna. "Fire is my element."

"Your element," St. Pons repeated quietly. "How do you mean?"

It was a moment before Muna spoke, turning slowly from his contemplation of the flames to St. Pons. "There are four elements," he said. "The earth, the air above it, the water around it, and inside it—fire. Each element is a separate world, each has its inhabitants. All people are related to one of these elements, sometimes more, sometimes less, but always more to one element than to the others?... Do you know what I am trying to say?"

"Y-e-e-s, rather, except possibly about each element having its own inhabitants... I suppose we'd say birds, animals and fish—leaving out other forms of life—inhabit the first three elements, but what about fire?"

"Fire is different," said Muna. "Fire is not only an element, it also inhabits the element. It's as if to say that air was an element in which nothing could live, except the air itself."

"But, Mr. Muna, you can't just say that the air has life?"

"Not air, no, but fire has life."

"Are you speaking of life in the sense of a living organism, capable of response, movement, nutrition, growth, reproduction?"

"Fire is alive," said Muna. "Right now, we three are alive here—you and me and the fire. I do not say it does not fulfill your laws, but fire has its own laws. You know scientists say the only difference between living and nonliving systems is entirely one of complexity ... but the complexity of this system, of fire, is not understood, except by those whose element it is."

"Are there many?"

"I don't know. Perhaps this is something I have yet to find out. It is only a few months that I myself have come to understand fire."

"How does one come to this understanding?"

"Fire chooses to tell them."

"You mean it has an intelligence that communicates with people?"

"Yes."

"With you?"

"Yes." Muna smiled suddenly. "Lola Chilon is coming."

BOTH men looked toward the house. Swimming in light, high on a hill, it gave the impression of hanging in the sky, until one perceived there were stars above and to either side of the house, but none below. Indeed, the darkness between them and the house was impenetrable.

"How do you know?" asked St. Pons, getting up.

"The fire told me," said Muna.

The next moment the Englishman started violently as a woman's voice, not far away, called out in fright, "Nico! Nico!"

Muna said, "It has been very pleasant to meet you, Mr. St. Pons," and walked out into the darkness, toward the voice.

But St. Pons had quickly recovered his composure and purpose; as Muna walked off parallel to the shore, St. Pons struck sharply inland; when he had gone a short distance, he stopped and looked back. He could hear the girl sobbing. The fire was cut off from view by the dunes, but blue reflected flickers of light rippled the taffeta of her gown as Dolores Chilon appeared, with Muna. Then they too were below St. Pons' level of vision. He began circling back, through an area studded with clumps of beach grass, where his dark tweeds were less conspicuous seen against the sand.

HE had not gone very far before he discovered that someone else was stalking the same quarry. Because they were moving as though coming down different spokes of a wheel to its hub, St. Pons was forced to let the other get relatively closer, or risk being seen himself. He watched his rival crawl up the dunes until it was evident he could peer down from the summit. Minutes passed. St. Pons considered his position—a risky, uncomfortable, unhappy position it was—where he could neither hear nor see anything; and whether it was wiser to withdraw... and he might have done so if it had not been for the extraordinary color the air around the knoll had taken on.

It was fantastic—a soft halo of transparent violet light that hung like a veil in midair. What was more, the phenomenon had evidently made the other man raise his head, and in the violet light St. Pons saw that his companion in snooping was Avery Kingsland.

Then three things happened almost together: Kingsland stood up on top of the dunes, Dolores Chilon screamed, and the violet haze turned to smoke and was instantly whipped away by the wind.

When Kingsland then descended the slope to the other side, St. Pons scrambled forward to take the spot just vacated. He reached his point of vantage just in time to see Muna walking away, heading back toward the house. Dolores was sitting in the sand, staring into the fire. Kingsland was standing close by, looking after Muna.

St. Pons swiftly turned his attention to the fire, hoping to find something that would at once explain what he had seen, but there were the logs, the brush, the gnarled driftwood, being normally consumed, otherwise unchanged, crackling peacefully among docile flames.

"Shall I take you back to the house now?" said Kingsland.

"No," said the girl, "I'll go back alone." She had apparently sobered; from her drawn face and lusterless eyes, St. Pons surmised she had made a hasty transition to the hangover stage. Shivering, she rose, but stopped Kingsland from wrapping his dinner jacket around her shoulders. Something in his expression made her seek out his hand momentarily. "I'm sorry, Avery," she said softly. "I thought I could tell him, but I can't..."

She turned to go, and

Kingsland overtook her and put his arms around her from behind. He started to speak, but never got past the first syllable, as suddenly the fire erupted with a blinding white effulgence. Kingsland and Dolores had their backs to it, and saw only the instantaneous light around them, but St. Pons caught the flash itself, though at an angle. Instinctively he covered his head, his brain spinning rings of

light, still seeing the last image before he ducked—the picture of Kingsland falling to his knees, a fraction of a second after the silent explosion.

Nor was there a sound in the minute that followed, and when St. Pons looked again, Kingsland was still crouched on the sand, but the girl was gone. The Englishman waited, keeping out of sight until Kingsland got to his feet, unwilling to come upon the man while fear was so plain on him. But then he stood up on the slope, as Kingsland had done, and remarking loudly, "Why, Mr. Kingsland, I didn't expect to find you here," he climbed down to join him.

"Hello, St. Pons. Did you... did you see that flash of light?"

"I most certainly did, sir. That's what brought me back."

"Then you were here before?"

"Yes, with Muna. Then Miss Chilon came and I left."

"...What do you think that light was?"

"I'm very curious about it." St. Pons was pushing the logs apart with a stick. "In fact, before that, I thought I saw another odd manifestation here, a sort of violet glow?"

"I saw it too. It ended just as I got here." Kingsland's hands were trembling. "What are you looking for?"

"I'm not sure. Do you recall smelling anything unusual?"

"...Smelling anything?"

"I was thinking of sulfur. It burns with a beautiful violet glow—and with an odor, a characteristic, unmistakable odor."

"No... Would sulfur make that bright flash?"

"Scarcely. But other things might." He was killing the fire, gently probing the embers. "Mr. Kingsland, you say the violet light ended just as you got here. Is it possible Muna did something to the fire at that moment—a single quick move might be all—that could account for either, or maybe both, the ending of the violet light and the subsequent flare-up?... I have in mind," he added, "the possibility that Muna carries things, whatever they are, in his gloves."

"...Yes, he was wearing gloves, wasn't he?" said Kingsland dully. "I forgot that... St. Pons, what are you thinking about? You know something, don't you? What went on here between you and Muna?"

"We talked." He was scooping up ashes from the fire in two envelopes. "A conversation unique in my experience." He stamped out the last remaining sparks. "Let me tell you about it, sir," St. Pons began, as they started back to Land's End.

LONG before they reached the house, the Englishman's account was done; it was a credit to his memory for exact quotation; not once did Kingsland interrupt, nor did he comment at its conclusion. They walked most of the way in silence. But when they were close enough for the din from the party to break in on them, Kingsland stopped.

"St. Pons, I suppose you know what you're doing. I don't know what to make of all this goddam hellish nonsense... I'm very tired now."

He turned and walked on alone. St. Pons let him.

The party was at its height.

There were people everywhere. The music blasted, the dance floor rocked. Everybody shouted. They shouted hello, they shouted good-bye, and they shouted

everything they had to say in between. The driveway was clogged, the barbecue pit was overrun, and the bar was barricaded behind empty cases and cartons against a mob whose temper smacked of insurrection.

Eventually St. Pons got a drink, but he did not have time to enjoy it. He was about to sit down on the terrace when Kingsland came out, descended the stairs, and began crossing the floodlighted parking space to the outbuildings clustered on the other side. St. Pons followed, but, forced to a more circuitous route, he had lost Kingsland by the time he was among the group of smaller buildings. There were no lights in any, and those close at hand were shuttered, but moving carefully, St. Pons progressed to a point where he suddenly heard a pounding and a rattling—the sounds of someone at a door, then Kingsland's voice.

"Muna, open this door... I know you're in there."

He began rattling the door again, but only briefly before he stopped and switched on a flashlight. St. Pons, around the corner of a neighboring cottage, saw the beam of light travel up and down the door, saw it come to rest on a heavy padlock placed rather high up. It was locked, hasp over staple; obviously no one could be inside, unless there were other means of entry. Apparently there were none, because with his discovery, Kingsland went back to the party.

St. Pons was not far behind. At the house, Kingsland disappeared upstairs, but soon he was down, wandering from one room to the next, scanning every face, widening his search to the grounds. Finally, when he marched off down the beach, St. Pons got himself a gin and settled comfortably on the terrace. It was as good a place as any for observing a wild goose chase...

Many drinks later, long after midnight, the house began to grow quiet. The orchestra had quit, a subdued radio played. The headlights against the sky were all from cars that were leaving. Scattered along the shore were numerous little fires; snatches of soft, sexy laughter and guitar music floated on a capricious wind. St. Pons, at length aware of his unshakable conviction that every one of the fires was surrounded by a lambent violet aura, decided he was in need of a sobering drink. The ravaged bar was unattended. Two couples, dancing to radio music, paused when an announcer interrupted with a report of a hurricane named Carol on its way to Hatteras, and a tentative warning to small craft. "It's in the wind," he remembered Muna saying, "The air is changing." Outside the wind blew in weak, fitful gusts.

Later still, Kingsland returned. He climbed the terrace stairs exhausted, and staggered past St. Pons without seeing him.

St. Pons took out his notebook. Methodically, he entered the time, 3:40 A.M., and beside it, the fact that Kingsland had come back soaking wet, wearing only trousers and socks. Then he too went upstairs to sleep.

IT was dawn when Muna made his way up the slope from the cove. His shoulders were hunched against the cold, but he walked slowly, very faintly whistling, watching morning light touch leaves and stones. Past the slumbering lodge, he turned toward the cottage where he had lived and worked for almost seven months, and when he drew near—because this was the last time he would ever again see it at daybreak—he stopped to survey it, to record in his memory its three chimneys like red fingers reaching skyward, its barred windows where

sunlight entered cut into rectangles, its green-black ivy glistening with moisture, dancing in the wind...

Muna opened the padlock and went in. As he closed the door, a new fire sprang to life in the fireplace, and where a moment earlier the room had been dark and cold, all was bright and cheerful. He mounted a stairway to the bedroom directly above. Here too there was a fireplace, with logs and tinder awaiting a spark. Muna had but to think of it, and the fire was lit.

He began to pack his belongings.

It was nine o'clock when Muna, his activity shifted downstairs to the living room, responded to a crackling from the fireplace by opening the front door and leaving it ajar. Presently someone used the knocker, and Muna called, "Come in, Mr. St. Pons."

The door swung open and St. Pons appeared. He glanced from Muna—across the room, on his knees, packing sketchbooks in a suitcase—to the corner walls near the door, and Muna, aware that the Englishman was hunting mirrors or other reflecting surfaces, did not hide his enjoyment of the other's confusion.

"Sit down, won't you? I'll just finish this and we'll have a steaming kettle. I've been expecting you."

"Have you indeed, Mr. Muna? You're very kind, not to say clairvoyant..." He found himself staring at a low table before the fire, on which stood a tin of tea, another of maté, two small teapots, and ready cups and saucers, and he added, with a slight frown, "As a matter of fact, I seldom impose early morning visits. However, from the bustle at the dock, there may have been a change in plan, and I did want to speak to you again. I notice..." and now he was gazing fixedly at the strange way the flames were behaving, each small tongue of fire curving in toward the center of the fireplace, joining under the kettle to make a solid, pressured jet, "... I notice," said St. Pons, looking away, "you too seem to be rather busy..."

"Yes, I'm leaving here. As you know, last night changed many plans." Muna got up and pushed the suitcase aside.

"...As I know, Mr. Muna? How do you mean?"

"Come," said Muna smiling, "I know who you are and why you came here. Let us talk openly. You are an unusual man, Mr. St. Pons, and I have a fondness for conversation." He took the kettle. "Tea?—or do you perhaps care for maté?" He was wearing cotton work-gloves.

"Tea, thank you." He prepared the teapot and Muna poured. "And thank you for being honest. It does make things easier... May I ask, as long as we're talking openly, how you know who I am?"

"The fire last night," said Muna. "Whatever was spoken before a fire, I know."

St. Pons said, "You're discouraging me at the outset, Mr. Muna."

"But isn't this what you want to know?" Muna sat down opposite St. Pons. "Please don't think I am making sport. I appreciate that it is difficult to comprehend these statements. It is like learning a new language... like learning the language of fire, which comes very slowly, even after one has grasped the idea." He stirred the steeping maté tenderly. "How strange all communication is, especially to a foreigner in a strange land; he can scarcely accept that people around him understand each other by means of bewildering, apparently unrelated sounds. But in time, if he is interested, he learns to relate these sounds and

extract their meaning. It is the same with fire. Not only the sounds, but the smoke, the sparks, the shape of the flames—all these relate to each other and make a language. And there is more. Take the smoke, for example, where one must consider the color, the density, the speed of manufacture, the convolutions, the odor, the rate of dissipation, and so on. It is very complicated, and as I told you last night, I am not more than a beginner, but fire and I can communicate quite well."

He poured maté into his cup and drank, holding the cup awkwardly in the palm of a gloved hand. St. Pons turned to the fire to confirm—as he had glimpsed from the corner of an eye—that the flames were now curving out, away from the center, keeping the kettle below boiling. He sipped his tea thoughtfully.

"Mr. Muna, when you speak of fire, is it a plural entity? Is fire one or many?"

"Fire is a word like mankind. Mankind is one, but many. As with mankind, there are individual differences, but life is the same for all." He took a brown cigarette from a package on the table, then rolled a sheet of paper to a taper, stuck it in the fire and lit his cigarette on its tiny flame. "You see?" he said, indicating the taper. "This is how fire reproduces."

"Yes, Mr. Muna," St. Pons said dryly. "I see."

"You asked me last night," said Muna. "You mentioned growth and movement, nutrition, and response, and of all these, reproduction is the most difficult to understand. I am only demonstrating."

"Mr. Muna," said St. Pons, "assuming that you're serious, what do you prove when you light one fire from another? How are you demonstrating that fire is capable of reproduction," he shook his head, "when you are responsible for it?"

Muna asked, "Do you say a flower cannot reproduce because it depends on a bee to carry pollen? Am I less a part of nature than a bee? Fire depends on mankind. This is central to comprehending the life force of fire, the force that seeks existence. It comes to life in many ways. Sparks are an evidence of this effort; true, there are many sparks, and few ever do reproduce, but a fish lays millions of eggs, and sometimes none of these eggs becomes a fish. Lightning is another way. Is lightning unnatural? Do we not recognize that certain chemical reactions may cause fire, or mechanical principles based on the laws of friction? Are not all these natural?"

"But they are too accidental, too haphazard. Many ages ago fire found a much surer way. Consider how impossible are our industries, our commerce, our arts, without fire. Man's domination of other species on earth dates from the time that he began to serve fire—for it is, at least to me, a great question which is more dependent on the other—and I sometimes think that the primary function of mankind may be to insure the existence of fire. A cow in a pasture has a view of the world in which she finds mankind very useful; men feed her, shelter her, care for her in every way, and all they want is her happiness and her milk. Fire has made itself indispensable to man; it has civilized him and given him great blessings, and all it asks in return is to be used, to exist. As we sit here, it warms and lights this room, it has brewed your accustomed morning drink and mine, it holds us in its charmed circle..."

"Good Lord," said St. Pons under his breath. He started to say something, stopped, shook his head and laughed. "Mr. Muna," he said, "I don't know whether you or the fire is the more hypnotic."

"We are collaborators," Muna smiled. "Even when fire is without use, it prevails on us to make it, just to watch the flames, to sit and think and be fascinated."

"Yes," said St. Pons slowly, "and there's such a thing as abnormal fascination, where possibly destructive impulses come into play—among pyromaniacs, for instance. Or don't you agree?"

"Of course. Whatever man uses is subject to his destructive impulses as well as his creative ones, not only individually but collectively... Witch-burning, book-burning, the ordeal by fire, are ancient in history... the new H-bomb is perhaps a more modern example. But just as with human beings, the life force of fire is sometimes bound up with destruction. When a fire experiments with movement, starting, say, in a forest, the results may be excellent from the fire's point of view, in that it learns something about moving from one place to another. For us, however, this experiment may be a disaster."

"I see. You think of a forest fire as an experiment in movement?"

"Not of a necessity, but possibly. Fire uses the winds, the air currents, much more skilfully than an albatross."

"Why does fire undertake these experiments?"

"For the same reason humans want to go to the moon. Intelligence is curious."

"And how, Mr. Muna, do you account for your intimate knowledge of all these... facts?"

"They came to me through my painting, my work, and a deep personal unhappiness." Muna sighed and threw his cigarette butt into the fire. Flames enveloped it with a rainbow of color; there was a tiny flash and the butt flew apart with a hundred sparks. It made Muna smile again. "There are great tensions in painting, what you might call a sort of emotional friction. This relates to the painter's difficulty in dealing with a three-dimensional world in a two-dimensional medium..."

"In the world of fire we deal with a world of two dimensions, where neither motion nor, consequently, friction, exists. Fire there corresponds to life in the embryo, as something latent. Where and when does life begin for fire? It begins when latent fire crosses the division into our world of three dimensions, where motion and friction are synonymous. This is the problem of fire if it wants to live—it must go from the latent to the real. The same is true for painting. If it wants to live, it must somehow ignite in the spirit of the beholder; its spark must travel from the two-dimensional canvas to the three-dimensional human..."

When Muna stopped speaking, St. Pons rose. "I can't say that I really understand you, Mr. Muna," he said, choosing his words carefully, "but I have learned a great deal."

"Good," said Muna.

"Do you mind if I have a look around the place?"

"Please feel free. My sleeping quarters are upstairs, my studio is through this door. I will go on packing."

TEN minutes later, St. Pons left. He stopped, after his tour of inspection, only long enough to ask again whether he might see some of Muna's paintings; the refusal this time was tempered by the explanation that they had all been crated; he thanked Muna and went out.

When he had gone, Muna took off his gloves and began addressing some of the wooden crates. He did this by moving a finger an inch or so above the boards; as he traced the letters in air, they appeared in the wood, burned in with fire, smoking the least bit.

St. Pons found Kingsland on the dock, directing the fueling of his yacht. He was in a bad state, dirty and disheveled, barking at the crew impatiently, angrily. St. Pons made a wary approach, but as soon as Kingsland saw him he broke off work and came down the dock to meet him halfway. "I've only got a minute," he said, wiping sweat from his face. "I'm leaving here and I'm not putting in at New York. There'll be a car at your disposal, or you can fly back if you prefer."

"Fly? In this weather?"

"It won't last. But suit yourself."

"Mr. Kingsland, I've just come from seeing Muna and—"

"Save your breath," said Kingsland sharply. "I'm through with Muna. I don't want to hear anything about him."

"Nevertheless, sir, if Muna has had access to the Anenome, I most urgently advise you to go over her thoroughly, stem to stern."

"Why? What do you know?"

"It isn't what I know, it's what I fear," said St. Pons, and he paused deliberately, taking the time to light a cigarette, to handle matters at his own pace. "Mr. Kingsland, Muna is in a dangerous mood. He's clever, he hates you, he may be unbalanced. So far he's confined himself to superior variety hall magic—I think I've detected uses phosphorus—but I hate to think what might happen if he goes further. He's a fraud and a fake, but if he should plant yellow phosphorus aboard, for example, which ignites spontaneously at ninety-three point five degrees Fahrenheit—"

"You're wrong, St. Pons," Kingsland said flatly.

"Possibly, but the pattern is ominous."

"You don't know anything at all about Muna, do you?"

St. Pons said grimly, "I know he destroyed a painting in your gallery, and he may have destroyed others here. I know he's determined to make sure that you do not in any way profit from your relationship with him."

"What are you trying to say, St. Pons?"

"If you'll forgive me, sir," the Englishman said slowly, "I feel that Muna will try to prevent your departure with Miss Chilon aboard."

Kingsland's neck muscles strained; he struggled with his rage, but his voice was low and controlled when he spoke. "Miss Chilon is my wife," he said. "Muna found that out last night, on the ANENOME. Shall I tell you what he did when he found out? He pointed a finger at me—from fifteen feet away—and my clothes caught fire. I had to jump overboard to save my life. Now you take that and explain it with tungstate and magnesium, but I'm getting out of here. I'm sailing the ANENOME first stop Cuba, and I'm taking my wife with me, and neither hell nor high water is going to stop me."

With that he turned and walked away, and St. Pons went back to the house.

But the morning wore on and still the ANENOME IV remained at the dock.

There was nothing for St. Pons to do but wait. *Land's End* was being shut down. A squad of handymen repaired the damage of the night before, tidying the lodge and grounds, sealing the cottages anew, but the smoke from the three chimneys of Muna's studio continued unabated. By early afternoon, the shutting down of the house had reached a stage where lunch consisted of canned food and leftover cold cuts. Only half a dozen or so of Kingsland's guests were still left, hanging on until their cars arrived, and St. Pons found their talk interesting.

"Do you really think they're married?"

"Why not? Avery seems unhappy enough."

"Who wouldn't be?—married a month and no honeymoon till now."

"A fine honeymoon, with the MacPhersons going along."

"Cuba's a long way off, dear. They might want to play bridge."

"That's if the bride stays aboard after she sobers up."

"She'll stay, all right. She's locked up in her cabin."

"But isn't that against the law?"

"My dear, she's his wife. Her only recourse is a divorce."

"Of course. What do you suppose all this ghastly hurry means—and in the face of a hurricane? He's afraid she'll come ashore and run off with that Mexican painter of hers. You notice he's still here too?"

"All I say is, it's things like this happening in Massachusetts that gave the south its reputation for hospitality. Cold cuts!..."

BY late afternoon the yacht had not sailed. Her troubles seemed endless. At one point there was a great commotion on the dock, and St. Pons learned that a fuel line had parted and a large quantity of oil had been lost. Then the MacPhersons left the yacht and came to the house. Crewmen carried their luggage. From MacPherson, St. Pons learned that a pump had burned out a bushing, and with this new delay, mindful of the steadily worsening weather, Kingsland's last two guests had experienced a change of mind.

"I've never seen him like this," said Mr. MacPherson. "The officers say the hurricane is going to hit this region, and Avery seems bent on heading right into it."

"It's a suicidal urge," said Mrs. MacPherson. "Like the lemmings of Norway, drowning instead of mating."

"Frankly," said Mr. MacPherson, "I think Avery's made the same choice."

WITHIN the hour, cars arrived and the last of the guests departed. St. Pons, alone now except for the workmen, watched the cars go down the road, barely able to find their way through the swirling clouds of sand torn loose by the rising wind. It was impossible to tell now if Muna's chimneys were still smoking, but St. Pons had seen Muna during the afternoon, loading a small, disreputable-looking van with his belongings, and the van had not left. On the dock, activity continued unremittingly. The surface of the cove was broken with crested wavelets, and radiating banks of cirrus filled the sky...

Just before twilight, Muna emerged and joined St. Pons as he stood on the terrace, braving the near-gale to keep watch on the ANENOME. Muna seemed subdued, but in good spirits. "Well, Mr. St. Pons, we are by ourselves now," he smiled. "What has kept you here?"

"You, Mr. Muna."

"Why is that?"

"I want to make sure you don't set the place on fire."

Muna laughed. "You don't understand. I would not misuse fire."

"That's very reassuring," St. Pons said dryly. "May I ask what is keeping you here?"

"I'm waiting to take Lola Chilon home with me."

"Do you know she's married to Kingsland?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter." He smiled. "Annulments are very simple in Mexico, especially for Mexicans."

"Do you know she's locked in her cabin?"

"She will get out," said Muna simply. "We are meant for each other, and that is why we have such trouble. Just as I am of fire, she is of earth—and when you have fire and earth together, what do you have?—a volcano. In the same way, take Kingsland. His element is water, and that is why he is not afraid to defy the storm. And what do you have when you mix earth and water? Mud. Very bad, you see?"

"And how do you explain your relationship with Kingsland?"

"Mix fire and water, and you get—vapor—a relationship that is without substance."

"How clever," St. Pons murmured. "Can you perhaps tell me what my element is?"

Muna nodded. "Air," he said, turning to go, but he paused long enough to add, "And when you mix air and fire, Mr. St. Pons, the result is hot air..."

Some minutes later, inside the house, St. Pons methodically noted this conversation too in the copious record in his little leather book.

AS darkness fell, a lobster boat came running before the storm to seek shelter in the cove. Shortly afterward, the crew of the ANENOME appeared at the lodge. They huddled against the terrace rail, watching lights moving on the dock, and the first officer told St. Pons that all but two men had quit the ship, in spite of Kingsland's offers of enormous bonuses. "The man's daffy," he said. "Look down there, sir. You can see they're casting off."

St. Pons was amazed. "I thought surely he'd realized he daren't attempt it... Can he run her with only two men?"

"It's a very dangerous proposition, even in good weather."

"Isn't there some way to stop him?"

"No, sir. If it were a merchantman, I could complain she's not seaworthy, and the law would force him to apply to a district court or a justice of the peace, for clearance, but it doesn't apply to yachts..."

The lights were gone from the clock. Sand swept by in blinding force, carrying past whole branches and young uprooted trees, and the sound of the gale grew to a terrifying shriek. The ANENOME's running lights came on, twinkling through the gloom.

Then suddenly a wall of fire shot up from the water, a massive curtain of flame forty feet high, between the ANENOME and the cove; it arched like a horseshoe, the yacht and the dock inside, both ends touching the shore.

Standing there, braced against the rail, St. Pons could see outlined against the fire four running figures, fleeing the ship, reaching the dock. Only then could he move, and he raced after the others, down the beach to help them.

LONG after the excitement had died away, things were still hazy in St. Pons mind. Upstairs, Kingsland was in a doctor's care, and the house was very quiet. The radio said that soon the hurricane named Carol would be Cape Cod history. Then St. Pons would leave... but now he needed time to think... to remember, and to think...

He remembered the way Muna had looked, his face impassive, content, as he led Dolores Chilon Kingsland to the van... and the van disappearing into the night and the storm. He recalled what the ANENOME's officers had said about the fantastic fire in the cove... how the oil the ship had lost had remained on the surface of the water, there to be ignited and to blaze... how the wind had cleared the water around the ship and the dock, and kept the flames from either, until at last the fire had harmlessly burned itself out...

And all this, thought St. Pons, all this was no more than an incredible series of coincidences, not even a trick, nothing that related to human agency, not magic, not inexplicable, not frightening... nothing but facts, to be added to facts, to produce an answer...

He started to take out his little notebook for a final entry, but as he reached into his pocket, his arm stiffened. Slowly his hand came out, clutching in paralyzed fingers the remains of paper and red leather, now entirely reduced to ashes.

His jowls hung loose, his little eyes spun dizzily, unable to focus on the horrifying object in his hand. Then, mercifully, his breath came out, the air bursting hot from his lungs, blowing the ashes from his hand. He watched them settle slowly on the rich red carpet, all around his feet, and he stood there, trying to think... to think...

Illustration
