

SEPTEMBER



10¢ ACE G-MAN STORIES



WANTED— IN THREE PINE COFFINS

ANOTHER STIRRING SAGA
OF THE SUICIDE SQUAD
by EMILE C. TEPPERMAN

LAST OF THE FIGHTING AINSLEYS

A THRILLING LONG NOVEL
by DAY KEENE

WYATT BLASSINGAME
AND OTHERS

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A386 — Engagement Ring of rare beauty with 3 diamonds and 2 simulated sapphires or rubies in colorful contrast; 14K yellow gold mounting.

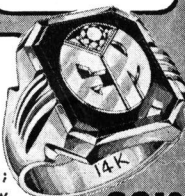


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1402 — Massive Initial Ring for men. Brilliant diamond and 2 initials on genuine black onyx; heavy 14K yellow gold mounting.

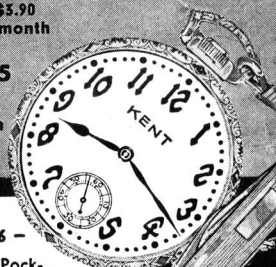
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\$2.15
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D220 — 2 matched brilliant diamonds and simulated sapphire or ruby in heavy 14K yellow gold ring for men.

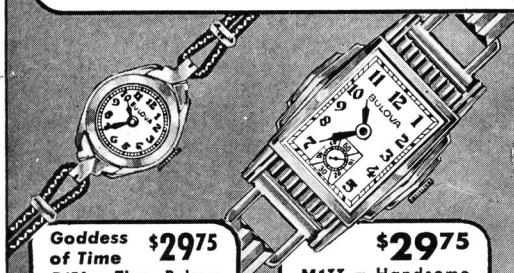
\$3995
\$3.90
a month

\$1295
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1906 —

Kent Pocket Watch with 7 jewels; chrome case. Knife and chain included.

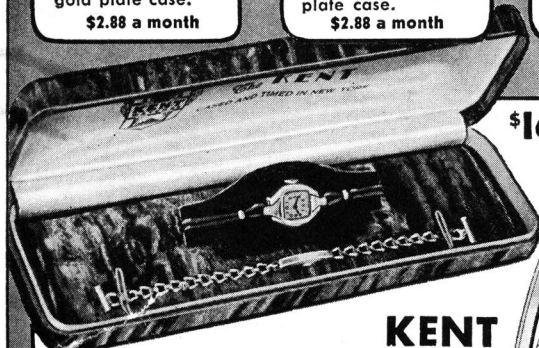


Goddess of Time \$2975
R154 — Tiny Bulova Watch. 17 jewels; 10K yellow rolled gold plate case.
\$2.88 a month

\$2975
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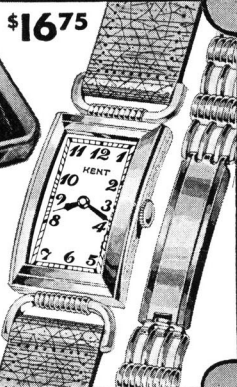
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BILL SAID "YES"
HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW



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THANKS

OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO



YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE. THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING

TOM SAID "NO"
HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"



BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME



SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO



GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE

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ACE G-MAN STORIES



Volume Eight

September, 1941

No. Four

TWO POWERFUL AND DISTINCTIVE LONG NOVELS

WANTED—IN THREE PINE COFFINS.....Emile C. Tepperman 10

Swift and certain death rewarded those who dared to fight the Nazi secret sabotage on our West Coast. Could even the famous Suicide Squad save those teeming defense factories from systematized destruction, when that desperate trio must wage war on two fronts—against the ruthlessness of Nazi madmen, and honest law as well!

LAST OF THE FIGHTING AINSLEYS.....Day Keene 84

Young Ainsley sprang from a glorious line of Texas fighters—and he wouldn't fight! Not until he wore the coward's brand; until he was enslaved by Nazi murder agents; until he realized that he alone had one slim chance to keep the Stars and Stripes aloft—by dying!

TWO SWIFT, DRAMATIC F.B.I. NOVELETTES

GHOSTS KILLED FREE.....Wyatt Blessingame 36

The Ghost—that fabulous G-Man-without-credentials—dodges the police long enough to find the president of Murder for Profit. But by then the Ghost had been forced to become a subscriber to this brutal murder ring—as well as its intended victim!

FEED THE FEDS WITH HOT LEAD.....William R. Cox 66

Phil Towne wondered, as did his F.B.I. chief, how a crook, officially dead, could return to plague the nation with an epidemic of bank robberies and wanton killings. Phil found the answer down among the trackless Florida Keys—where he had to place his life in the hands of his only suspect!

A SMASHING, UNDERCOVER AGENT STORY

BORDER GRAVES FOR G-MEN.....Anthony Clemens 54

Death waited in Monterrey, but Big John Larson, crack undercover agent, was willing to accept the challenge of the leader of the Nazi spy ring—with nothing more to back him up than a girl who was ready to betray him, and a boy who had already sold his country to the dogs.

—AND—

ONCE MORE WITH GUN AND BADGE.....The Editor 6

From pioneer town marshal to modern G-man—we've been lucky!

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU

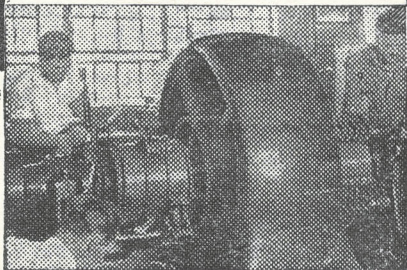


AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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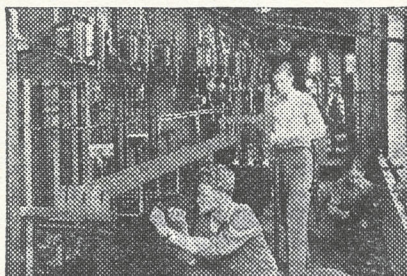
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Once More With Gun And Badge

AMERICA, through all of its turbulent and colorful history, has in time of stress been singularly fortunate in the personnel and character of its law enforcement agencies. From the days of the frontier town marshal and horesback sheriff, through the glamorous, exciting chapter of the Texas ranger and our hard-riding border patrol, right through to those lawmen heroes of the present day—the F.B.I.—this country has taken second place to none in the quality, courage and resourcefulness of its law enforcement officers.

The F.B.I. pledge—as significant and stirring as any oath of office ever taken by man—is indicative of the idealism and high devotion to duty which is a part and parcel of this great modern law-enforcement organization.

“Humbly recognizing the responsibilities entrusted to me, I do vow that I shall always consider the high calling of law enforcement to be an honorable profession. . . .” These, the opening words of this pledge, seem to us to constitute the essence of its meaning. The spirit of friendly cooperation uniformly exhibited by these superlatively well-trained men is well expressed in a later section of this remarkable pledge:

“As a neighbor, I shall bear an attitude of true friendship and courteous respect to all citizens; and as an officer I shall always be loyal to my duty, my organization, and my country; I will support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

It is, of course, that last sentence which has acquired a new and grave significance today. For the F.B.I. has become, in the past few months, our first and foremost line of defense against foreign espionage, subversive activities, sabotage and those dark and hidden fifth column activities

which have, operating under various guises, robbed successive European countries of the power and the sinews of self-defense. It is reassuring, in this hour when those same dark powers have turned their attention to the United States, to know that we have such a growing army of selfless, skilled and tireless workers as a strong bulwark against the sly, interior machinations which have ruined a dozen lands.

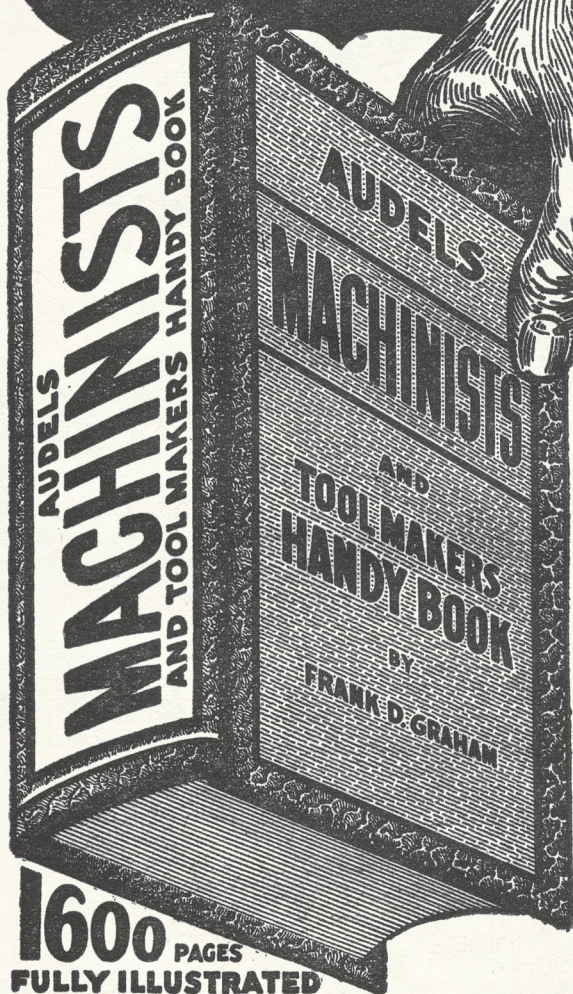
This magazine has attempted during recent months to portray for its readers something of the grim, relentless drama of this constant undercover warfare. In stories, written expressly to our order, we have tried to give you, in fiction form, a broad picture of those various dangerous activities in which the agents of the F.B.I. today find themselves so largely engaged. From an organization occupied for the most part with the suppression of national domestic crime—wherein, as you know, its successes were almost fabulous—it has grown almost over night into the finest, most wide-spread outfit of highly trained counter-espionage agents the world has ever known.

It is only natural that a magazine long since dedicated to the courage and the ideals of the F.B.I. Service should today be devoting the greater part of its space to these new and in many ways more dramatic wartime activities.

ACE G-MAN STORIES has made extensive plans to give you complete coverage during the coming fall and winter of this most exciting, hidden battle of our times. David Manners, a comparative newcomer to the pages of this magazine, has just completed a story which we consider a fine example of the fiction fare which this magazine has prepared for you. He has called his story “SCHOOL FOR NAZIS,” and it deals with the efforts of

(Continued on page 8)

AUDELS NEW MACHINISTS HANDY BOOK NOW READY!



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(Continued from page 6)

an F.B.I. man attached to the New York City office of the Federal Bureau to destroy at its source a sudden deadly upsurge of metropolitan sabotage.

Two agents started on this important assignment, but almost immediately one of them in a successful attempt to prevent the destruction of New York City's great Croton Reservoir paid the final price of his loyalty to the service. Gabby Parker himself barely escaped death that time, and it dogged him continuously during what proved to be the most dangerous and tricky battle of his career. . . . Take for example the occasion of his capture by the high Nazi officers who were preparing an armed invasion base, and combining with it a Nazi school for captured Americans, in Long Island Sound:

Gabby could hear the lap of water under him, and he knew he was lying on a pier. He looked up and he could see the roof of a shed above him. After a moment, he heard footsteps beside him. A hand clutched his good left arm, and a face leaned over his.

Lily Steufel whispered breathlessly, "They've gone for a minute. Hold still." She began frantically at the wire that bound his ankles.

Gabby stared at her. The gleam of her eyes. The glint of her red-blond hair. This was no time for questions.

"Wrists first!" Gabby gasped.

She worked madly, sobbing in pain as the wire dug into her soft hands. She broke a fingernail, caught it to her red lips. "The beasts!" she said.

Gabby pulled loose his hands. He tried to help her in loosening his ankles. "What is this they got here?" he asked. "A training school—headquarters for their espionage?"

They both heard footsteps at the same moment. Gabby twisted his head, and he saw the two men coming back, carrying oars.

"Quick, Lily! Hide!"

"No!" she gasped defiantly. "I won't let them—kill you. I've done enough! I don't care what they threaten or do to me now! I'm through!"

The footsteps were loud now. The men were talking. They were only yards away. The girl pulled at the wire, and her haste only tightened the twisted knots. Gabby pushed her hands away, tried to untwist the hard braids. His fingers slipped on the wires.

"Hide!" he begged. "Hide!"

"No!" she said. "Get in the boat! We'll finish there! I'll go with you! I can't stand it any longer in this place."

She shoved him, and he rolled over the pier. He fell on a hard, uneven boat bottom, striking his head against the sheets. The small rowboat rolled and rocked under him.

I'll get help, Lily," Gabby swore. "I'll clean out this nest of rats. I'm not altogether clear what's what. But they'll pay—"

"No," she pleaded. "You can't! You mustn't! They've planes at their disposal! Radio! U-Boats! This is their base for entry into the United States! It's a guarded fortress!"

The men coming up suddenly let out a shout. The girl threw off the boat's chain. She steadied herself to jump into the boat.

Guns flamed. The sharp whine of bullets. Lily Steufel gasped. Gabby saw her clutch her throat; sink down.

"Gott forgive me!" she gasped. "They had my parents in Europe—in Concentration Camp. They—they threatened—make them suffer—unless I— Oh, Gott forgive—"

"SCHOOL FOR NAZIS" is, in our opinion, one of the most vivid fiction stories that has come out of the present war. It will be published complete in the next issue of ACE G-MAN STORIES.

THE EDITOR.

THEY CALL ME THE "CHARLES ATLAS" OF PEORIA!

by H.W.

YES SIR! People call ME the "Charles Atlas of Peoria," which is my home town. They've named ME after the man who won the title "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man!" And they are not kidding. They wouldn't DARE. Not with the fighting build, bulging muscles, smashing strength I've got now—the body that made me CHAMPION of the crowd!

But a short time ago I was a weakling—the "sissy" who took a back seat every time other fellows began showing their muscles. I had to sneak away whenever they did feats of strength. I *knew* what it meant to be the sorriest-looking specimen of the bunch. I wanted a real he-man build more than anything. I determined to get it. And I DID!

Here's How I Got My New Physique

Well, after a little while, my friends rubbed their eyes and looked at me twice. They couldn't believe I was the same person! Because I WAS a different person. And you can't blame me today for getting a big kick out of seeing that "What-a-Man!" look in their eyes whenever I strip for gym, beach, or around the swimming pool!

How did I do it? What *made* me "The Charles Atlas of Peoria?" The answer is—**Charles Atlas HIMSELF!** His marvelous method of "Dynamic Tension" made a NEW MAN of me. And now read what Charles Atlas himself has to say to YOU:

**I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a
NEW MAN!** And it only takes
15 minutes a day

Charles Atlas

Fellows, I know what it means to be skinny, flabby, half-alive. I myself was once a 97-lb. weakling. Ashamed of my body. Afraid to stand up against anyone else, knowing what a beating I'd take. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension"—the amazing method that changed me from a frail nobody into winner of the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now the secret that worked miracles for me has worked them for thousands of others.

In just 15 minutes of your spare time every day (right in your own home) my "Dynamic Tension" method can give YOU a new body. I can give you a solid armor of whipcord muscle. I can put smashing strength into your arms. Tireless stamina into your legs. Strong shoulders, deep chest, firmly-muscled abdomen that will make others exclaim, "There goes a HE-MAN!"

What 15 Minutes A Day Can Do For You

And "Dynamic Tension" digs down inside your body, too! If wrong living and lack of proper exercise have weakened you—here is the best natural "medicine" on earth. Just give "Dynamic Tension" 15 minutes daily. I'm ready to

PROVE every word I say. Prove it to you first with actual photographs and letters from men I have made over. Then prove it with an actual TRIAL that will OPEN YOUR EYES—a trial that costs you NOTHING unless it really works!

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

My famous book, "Everlasting Health and Strength," shows in actual photographs exactly why "Dynamic Tension" is your first step to new health, brimming strength, and the handsome build of a champion. This great book is my FREE GIFT to you. Rush this coupon NOW! Address me personally.—CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83H, 115 East 23rd St., New York City.

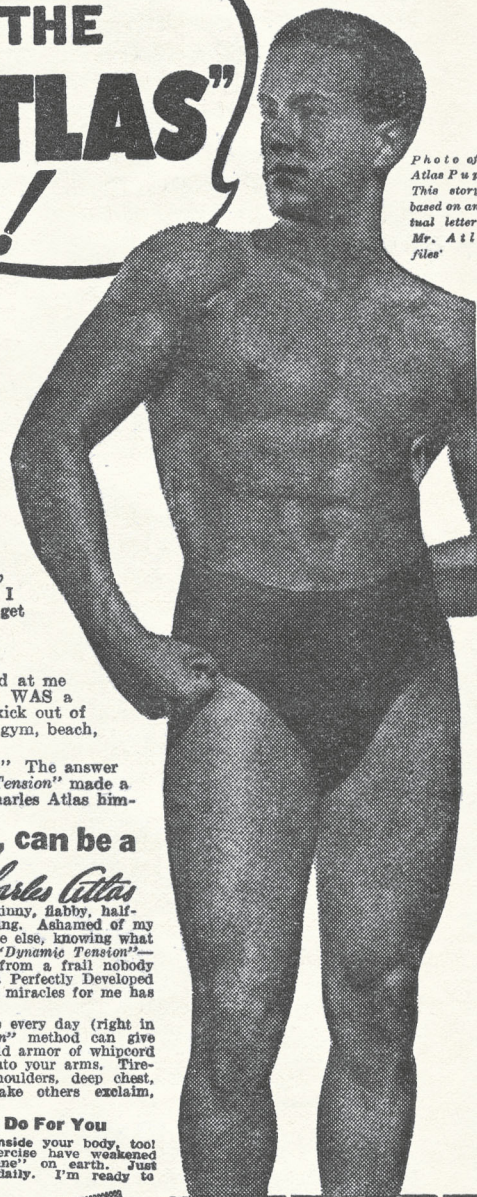
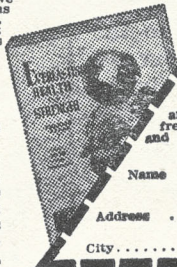


Photo of an Atlas Pupil. This story is based on an actual letter, in Mr. Atlas' files.



Photo of CHARLES ATLAS, holder of title: "World's Most Perfectly-Developed Man."



**CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 83H
115 East 23rd St., New York City**

I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—and full details of your TRIAL OFFER.

Name (Please print or write plainly)

Address

City State



Hot flame seared their faces, and bullets whipped a leaden hail about them.

The sinister tentacles of Naziism were finally making themselves felt in America, and those who dared fight back were mercilessly murdered! Only the Suicide Squad could stand up before the deadly wave of destruction, but those three cavaliering conquerors of crime were already enmeshed in their own grim battle—dodging the very laws which they fought to uphold!

WANTED— In Three Pine Coffins

*Spine-Tingling Novel of the
Suicide Squad*

By Emile C. Tepperman



CHAPTER ONE

The Reaper Stalks

A MAN named Petrie, unaware that he had only one more day of life credited to him, glanced swiftly about, then stepped into a Telegraph office. He went to one of the desks and seated himself in such a way that he could look through the plate glass window out at the street.

His hand was steady as he took one of

the blanks and printed his message in block letters:

MR. JASON WELLINGTON
HOTEL HALSEY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

AUNT MINNIE BUNKO IN PLACTIC
VERDANT TONIGHT. GRISLY LATE
HORN OF GAMMA BUT NORING
FITEN ZENEDU. CRAM FOURTEEN
THROUGH THE MIDDLE.

PETRIE

As he wrote he consulted a small card, which he held under the light in a certain way. When he was through, he took out a match, lit it, and burned the card down to the last corner, holding it between thumb and forefinger until it was nothing but ash.

Still watching the street carefully, he took his block-lettered message to the counter, and handed the form to the girl.

She frowned. "Sorry, but we don't accept code messages, except for the Army or Navy—"

She broke off at sight of the identification card case which the man, Petrie, opened and flashed before her.

"Oh, of course, Lieutenant," the girl said quickly. "This message will go out at once!"

"I'll wait to make sure," said Petrie, quietly.

He turned his back to the counter, and continued to stare outside. His ear followed the clicking of the key which sent his message. Apparently he was an expert in Morse Code, for he nodded when the operator had finished. He must have had that message of his memorized letter perfect.

He said, "That was correct. Now, if anyone should come in and make inquiries as to what message I sent—"

The girl nodded. "I understand, Lieutenant. You can be sure I won't say anything."

Petrie smiled crookedly. "I have no choice but to trust you. I hope—for the

sake of all of us—that I haven't made a mistake."

He turned and went out, walking warily, still unaware that his credit account in the book of life was running down to the narrow margin of twenty-three hours. Perhaps he didn't care.

The electric clock in the Telegraph Office said: *Four-fifty-one. . . .*

* * *

JASON WELLINGTON hurried out of the Hotel Halsey in Washington, D. C., and rushed to a cab.

"War Department!" he ordered. "As fast as you can!"

Five minutes later, the man named Jason Wellington was standing, breathless, at a desk in an office on the fourth floor of the War Department. Behind the desk sat a gray-haired man in civilian dress. He held the rank of Major-General, and he was in command of every ramified branch of the United States Military Intelligence.

Jason Wellington thrust a telegraph blank into the general's hand.

"This just came, sir. God, we've got to move fast! Petrie couldn't telephone, because my wire was tapped, and I had inserted the coded warning advertisement in the personal columns of all the newspapers where our men are operating. There may still be time—"

The general's eyes dropped to the telegram. Underneath the printed capital letters, Wellington had written the decoded message:

GESTAPO AGENTS HERE IN FORCE
PLOTING SOMETHING BIG FOR
TOMORROW NIGHT. SUPREME
CHIEF OF NAZI AGENTS OPERAT-
ING FROM THIS CITY. THEY HAVE
SPOTTED ME AND I AM HELPLESS.
NEED AID. SEND HELP CORNER OF
SEVENTH AND MYRTLE TOMOR-
ROW AT THREE-THIRTY USE IDEN-
TIFICATION CODE FOURTEEN.

The general's face was grim. "Aunt Minnie," he said.

Aunt Minnie was one of the half dozen code words which Military Intelligence used to designate the German Secret Service in America. Each of the code words referred to a different, specific branch of those activities. "Aunt Minnie" meant that branch which was being operated through the consular offices, directed by agents who enjoyed diplomatic immunity and who could move with much greater freedom than ordinary agents.

"If Aunt Minnie is involved, we've got to watch our step," the general said. "I have orders not to do anything which might provoke a diplomatic break at this time. Have you any men in the Coast City area whom you could send in there?"

Wellington shook his head. "This isn't a job for Military Intelligence any longer, sir. Any action taken by a United States Army officer would take official color—"

"Yes, yes," the general interrupted. "Yet, we've got to get help to Petrie!"

"But how, sir? Even if we could send our own men in there, we haven't got a sufficient number to be of any help. If Aunt Minnie is operating in force, as Petrie says, we should give him a couple of dozen men. The most we could spare from other duties on the Coast would be five or six."

"I have another idea," said the general. "Leave it to me."

* * *

Five minutes after Jason Wellington had gone, the general got out of a staff car in front of the Department of Justice Building on Constitution Avenue. Three minutes later, he was talking with the Chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, in a room where no one could possibly overhear a word of their conversation.

"Have you got two dozen men on the

Coast, whom you could assign to a dangerous, critical mission?" he asked.

"Sorry," said the Chief. "The answer's no, General. We're increasing the F. B. I. staff as fast as possible, but we're still short of men—"

"You've got to help me," interrupted the general. "You've *got* to find the men." He produced the decoded telegram. "It's a job for a squad of men who are willing to take chances."

"I see." The Chief of the F. B. I. acquired a sudden, faraway look in his eyes. "Maybe I can help you after all. I have one man free in San Diego at the moment, and two in Oakland—"

"Please!" the general cut in quickly. "You don't understand the gravity of the situation. When I said two dozen, I meant just that."

"These three men," the Chief of the F. B. I. went on imperturbably, "are—Kerrigan, Murdoch and Klaw."

The general's eyes flickered for a moment. "I see. . . . The Suicide Squad." His fingers drummed on the glass desk-top momentarily. "But they may be throwing away their lives."

"That," said the Chief, "is what they've been trying to do right along. So far, they're still hale and healthy."

"You think then that they'd be willing to do it? To go against the whole damned Gestapo. One false step might cause them to be wiped out in an instant."

The Chief smiled. "I rather think they will accept the assignment—when I've made plain the danger involved."

"All right then," said the general. "I'll insert a coded advertisement in the personal column of the Coast City *Courier*, advising Petrie that Kerrigan will contact him at the specified time."

IN A hotel room in San Diego, Johnny Kerrigan heard his phone ring. He came out of the bathroom where he had been shaving, picked up the phone.

"Johnny," said a voice, "do you know who this is?"

Kerrigan's eyes suddenly gleamed and his teeth flashed in a quick grin.

"Ah!" he said. "I've been hanging around here all day, waiting for a call from you."

"Go downstairs, Johnny, and phone me on my private line, from a fool-proof booth. I have something for you and your pals."

Kerrigan hung up, finished his shaving in record time and went downstairs. He found a booth in a small cigar store, and called a certain number in Washington, from memory. Immediately, the same voice answered.

"All right, sir," said Kerrigan, "I'm ready."

"This is an SOS from Military Intelligence, Johnny. There's a man named Petrie in Coast City. You're to contact him at three-thirty tomorrow. You can make it with time to spare. Dan and Steve are flying in from Oakland, but they won't reach Coast City till five o'clock. I've reserved a room for them at the Coast Hotel. Get in touch with them there. The three of you are to give Petrie any assistance he requires. It seems he's on to something pretty big. It's outside the jurisdiction of the Military, yet it isn't a civil crime, either."

"Sounds like a riddle."

"It's a fol-de-rol called diplomatic immunity. It may require drastic action not sanctioned by law—"

Johnny Kerrigan grinned into the phone. "I never heard of the law," he said, "What's it?"

"Something that won't help you if you get in trouble. You'll be disowned, repudiated and prosecuted, if you're caught doing anything illegal—provided you're alive. It's your own private war. So the idea is—don't get caught."

"Check," said Johnny. "Where do I contact this Petrie?"

"At Seventh and Myrtle, in Coast City. . . . Have you got the list of Military Intelligence identification codes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Use Number Fourteen then. Good luck, and God help you."

Johnny grinned once more. "Thank you, sir. God helps those who help themselves!"

✱ ✱ ✱

AT TEN o'clock the next morning, a man named Horst Keppler was sitting in a room in an office building on the main street of Coast City, half a block away from the German Consulate building.

This man Keppler was tall and distinguished, the very picture of a diplomat. His waxed moustache added the dignity his position as the newly appointed Vice Consul of the German Consulate required—and it served to hide the thin and merciless line of his lips. This office in which he now sat was not connected with the Consulate; it was not even known to the regular consulate staff.

Horst Keppler was talking to another man, who was bending over his desk. This other man was fattish, with a pudgy face and a pair of sly eyes that hid themselves behind thick spectacles. On the roster of the Gestapo, he was listed as Herr Doktor Fritz Albrecht, but in other countries he was known by other names. Coast City knew him as Professor Harold Cornish, and he was supposed to be a Swiss mechanical engineer in the employ of the Lane Locomotive Works. But the accomplishments of Professor Harold Cornish, *alias* Doktor Fritz Albrecht, went far beyond those of engineering.

At this moment, he was demonstrating one of those accomplishments to Keppler.

They had a newspaper spread before them. A copy of the morning edition of the *Coast City Courier*. It was opened to

the personal column. Albrecht—or Cornish, as he preferred to be called, for the time being—held a thick finger on the personal item which read:

ROGER: Mother madder bit gracious.
Kerrigan belongs gamma cold tonight.
Good luck.

Albrecht's small eyes were glittering. "It was difficult to break down the code which Petrie sent yesterday, but this one is easier, Herr Keppler."

Keppler grunted. "The Americans are fools. They still do not understand the meaning of total war. In our country, a telegraph office would not be left unguarded. It was easy for my men to break in there last night after they closed, and to copy the only coded message in their files for the day."

"I hope your men left no trace of their visit?"

Keppler smiled. "My men are experts, do not fear."

"That is good. So, we know that Petrie sent a call for help to Jason Wellington, the Military Intelligence undercover man in Washington. We know they are aware that Wellington's wire is tapped."

Keppler glanced down at the personal item in the *Courier*. "This, then, is their answer to Petrie? It is in the same code?"

"The same general code, with minor changes. It was not difficult, as I said. Here is the translation."

He produced a slip of paper from his pocket, on which was written:

PETRIE: The Chief has arranged for the Suicide Squad to help you. Kerrigan will contact you at the time and place specified.

"I see," said Keppler. "The Suicide Squad. They have always been a thorn in our side, *nicht wahr?*"

"Yes, yes. But today is their last day. They come to their death. You must allow nothing to interfere with our objective in Coast City. We must cripple or destroy

the Lane Locomotive Works, which is making heavy tanks for the British."

"Our plans cannot fail. They have been well conceived—" Keppler inclined his head toward the other— "thanks to your genius, Herr Doktor."

Albrecht waved the praise aside. His little eyes had become almost fanatical. "There is another who must also die."

Keppler nodded. "My esteemed chief, the Consul?"

"Exactly. Johann Strang is out of sympathy with our cause. His son, Paul, has gone to an American university, and is more American than German. Strang—or his son—is quite capable of betraying us."

"I shall see that it is taken care of, Herr Doktor," Keppler said softly.

"And you, Herr Keppler, shall be promoted from vice-consul to consul. Let us hope that this will be only one small step in your career. Some day, who can tell—" the small eyes became dreamy—"you may even be my assistant—when I am the Deputy-Fuehrer of America!"

Albrecht straightened suddenly. "And now, Herr Keppler, I leave you. I have important business. I must make all arrangements at the Lane Locomotive Works."

He strode to the door, stopped for a parting admonition. "Do not underestimate this Suicide Squad. You must make very sure that they die today."

"Have no fears, Herr Doktor," Keppler told him. "Erase the Suicide Squad from your mind—consider them dead. I stake my life upon it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Murder in the Dark

JOHNNY KERRIGAN stopped at the corner and looked around.

The girl in the tan pullover sweater and the short sport skirt was still fol-

lowing him, with a covered tennis racket under her arm. He had noticed her when he got off the train, only a half hour ago. She was not furtive, nor did she seem to be making any effort to conceal the fact that she was tailing him. Indeed, had she wanted to attract attention to herself, she could not have succeeded better than by wearing sport clothes and carrying a tennis racket down here in this queasy slum section of Coast City.

Johnny saw her stop, perhaps fifty feet behind him. The later afternoon sun glinted on her auburn hair. Passing men turned to give her a second glance. But she paid no attention. Her eyes did not leave Johnny Kerrigan.

Johnny frowned, and glanced at his wrist watch. It was exactly three-thirty. He lit a cigarette, then stood there, absently fingering the matchbook, the cigarette hanging from his lips. Idly, his fingers tore the match-book cover; he began to pluck out the remaining matches one by one, and drop them at his feet.

A seedy-looking bum with a three-day growth of dark beard had been wandering aimlessly near the curb, looking for discarded butts in the gutter. The bum approached Johnny.

"How about a lift for the needy?" he asked.

Johnny looked at him impersonally. "It's raining in England today," he said.

The bum's eyes flickered. "Yes," he replied. "It's raining bombs in England. Stukas. You're Johnny Kerrigan."

"And you're Petrie, of Military Intelligence. . . . Be careful. I've been followed from the station. Don't look now. It's that girl in the tan sweater."

"I spotted her," Petrie told him. "Her name is Ellen Lane. Her father owns the Lane Locomotive Works."

Kerrigan whistled. "What's brewing?"

"We can't talk here any longer," Petrie broke in. "They've spotted me. They know who I am, but I think I've given

them the slip temporarily. If I haven't, I'm a goner—and you, too. But we'll soon find out. Meet me in twenty minutes in the East End Theatre. It's a cheap movie house two blocks west. Ten cents admission. It won't look too strange for a bum who's just made a touch to blow a dime on a movie. I'll be in the last row on the right hand side. Sit down next to me. But don't talk to me till I speak first."

Petrie had spoken swiftly. Now he raised his hand. "Slip me a coin to make this look real. We've talked here too long as it is!"

The Military Intelligence man whined his thanks as Kerrigan gave him a quarter. Petrie walked away.

Johnny lit another cigarette with his last remaining match, and looked around, as if he were expecting to meet some one who was late. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the girl in the tan sweater approaching him—Ellen Lane—the daughter of the millionaire locomotive manufacturer, Parker Lane.

She came alongside of him, and her level blue eyes looked up into his gray ones. She was not smiling.

"You're Kerrigan, aren't you?" she asked tautly.

Johnny feigned surprise. "I beg your pardon, Miss?"

She made a gesture of impatience with her free hand. "Please—please don't deny it. You were pointed out to me at the station. I can't be mistaken."

"I'm sorry, Miss," Johnny said, smiling. "You must have mixed up with some one else."

"Stop it!" she said, her voice rising a bit. "You must listen to me. You came here to meet a lieutenant of Military Intelligence. I want to warn you that the appointment will not be kept. That lieutenant of Military Intelligence is dead. Get out of town before they kill you, too!"

Johnny said, "If this is a practical joke,

all right. But if you're serious, you better find this Kerrigan that you think I am. My name happens to be Smith."

"Oh, you fool!" She turned away from him swiftly. Then she turned back, and stretched out an impulsive hand. "Please—believe me, I'm telling you the truth. Your life is in danger. They know whom you've come to meet. They won't let you get farther than any of the others. At least, if you won't go away, be careful!"

and slid into the folding wooden seat immediately beside him.

He waited a couple of minutes, but Petrie didn't speak.

Johnny looked around, noting that there was no one near them. He stole a look at the Military Intelligence man, then stiffened, his eyes suddenly hard.

Petrie's head was slumped on his chest. His arms hung limply at his sides. A knife protruded from the back of his neck, the

Follow the thrilling adventures of these three crime-crusaders in future issues of this magazine. Mr. Tepperman tells us that he gets as big a kick out of writing these stories as you get from reading them; and he's promised to keep the Suicide Squad in action for a long while.

Then she swung on her heel and hurried off.

Johnny let her go. He made no attempt to stop her, to question her further. But his eyes were thoughtful as he inhaled the cigarette smoke. And he was watchful. He turned and walked slowly away toward the river front, in the opposite direction from that taken by the girl in the tan sweater.

At the next corner he turned left, entered a subway station. A train was just pulling in. He boarded it, watching behind him to make certain that no one had followed him. He rode two stations, got out and took a taxicab back down to the east side. He got off a block from the East End Theatre, and walked the rest of the way. He was right on time. It was just twenty minutes since Petrie had left him.

He bought a ticket and went inside, into the darkness of the movie house. They were showing a news reel.

Johnny waited until his eyes were more accustomed to the lack of light, then found his way to the right hand side. He spotted the figure of Petrie, sitting in the last row,

handle supporting Petrie's body, keeping him almost erect.

Petrie's account was closed on the Books. The luminous dial of Johnny Kerrigan's watch showed: Three-fifty-one. . . .



KERRIGAN sat very still in the dark wondering if the killer was still in the theatre. Watching the audience, he could discern no heads turned to look at him. But he had that universal instinct of the fighting man for scenting danger, the definite sensation of being watched.

Slowly, he reached out and touched Petrie's hand. His fingers found something clutched in Petrie's fist. It was a pencil.

Kerrigan's eyes narrowed. He produced a small, bull's-eye flashlight from his vest pocket and flicked the light on, directing the beam first at the back of the seat in front. His guess was correct. Petrie had scribbled a message of warning for him. It was fairly legible:

*"They have me trapped in here—killers inside and a machine gun outside. They won't let me leave here alive. If I'm dead when you arrive, go to 23 Slocum Street. * Knock twice, then three times. Give the password, AMERICA FOREVER. You can trust the person you will meet there. Don't let them get you!"*

Johnny doused the flashlight, and set about erasing the lower part of the message. Petrie must have been at the end of his rope, to have risked leaving that address and password written there, hoping that Kerrigan would be the first to find it. But Johnny couldn't know, now, whether the killers had seen it too. If so, they would be at 23 Slocum Street before him—

He heard a swift, scraping movement behind him.

Johnny Kerrigan was big, the biggest of the trio of fighting men who were known as the Suicide Squad. He towered head and shoulders above Stephen Klaw, and he topped Dan Murdoch comfortably. His wide, stevedore's shoulders, the solid massiveness of his frame might have given the impression that he was a slow man on his feet, and perhaps a slow thinker.

Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Where a question of physical combat arose, Kerrigan reacted with the split-second timing which is second nature to men who live with danger.

That scraping sound of leather sole upon hardwood floor at his back had hardly reached his ears before he threw himself forward and to the right, in a twisting, snake-like motion.

Something swished viciously down past his shoulder blades, and then there was a dull thwack as a knife-point embedded itself in the veneer of the wooden bench upon which he had been sitting.

Johnny swung around to face the killer who had driven the knife. The man was a powerful fellow, almost as big as Johnny himself. He was wearing a soft hat like Kerrigan's, and thin kid gloves. It was his gloved right hand which held the knife.

The attacker's eyes glittered in the dark as he yanked at the handle, desperately yanking it out of the wood for another attempt.

Kerrigan's laugh was soft, lost in the overtones of the newsreel sounds. On the screen they were showing the goose-stepping march of Nazi troops through the Balkans, with the hob-nailed shoes resounding in regimented unison upon the cobbled streets of a once-peaceful village.

And strangely enough, that clatter of Nazi boots in the village five thousand miles away was to have a deciding effect upon the fortunes of the Nazi plans here in America. In covering the sounds of the struggle there in the back of the East End Theatre, it contributed no little to the events that followed.

The struggle was one of life and death, with no quarter asked or given. And it was silent, because Kerrigan's big right hand drove out to grasp the knife-man's throat with fingers of steel, while his left seized the assailant's right wrist.

The two men stood chest to chest across the narrow back of the bench, straining in mortal combat. The knife-man's muscles bulged with the effort to push his blade home against Johnny's grip on his wrist, while Johnny grimly kept his hold on the killer's throat, his thumb pressing against the windpipe.

It was a struggle of muscle against muscle, of body against body, with every ounce of strength and will thrown into the scales, and death for the loser.

KERRIGAN grunted, let go his hold on the thick throat, and seized the knife-wrist in both hands. He jerked downward, and a gasp of pain escaped from the man's lips as the bone cracked. He dropped the dagger.

Johnny let go of him, vaulted over the back of the seat, and caught him by the coat just as he was turning to run.

The fellow snarled, stooped and

snatched up the knife in his left hand, tried to slash with it. Johnny stepped in again, and smashed home a left and a right to his face, rocking him back off balance so that the knife could not be swung. The fellow turned to run, heading for the exit at the side.

Johnny started after him, but the man was already at the exit door. He ripped it open, and leaped out into the alley.

Kerrigan was only a couple of feet behind him, coming fast. Abruptly, he heard a sound which slapped against his eardrums with the dread familiarity of doom. It was the sound of a machine gun, beginning its deadly stutter of death.

Johnny stopped short, remaining just inside the theatre, out of the line of fire of that deadly spray of bullets in the alley.

But the other man was already out in the open, facing the gun. Johnny saw the flashing, spitting muzzle of the machine gun, farther up the alley, toward the street. Petrie had warned him of this. The knife-man must have known about it too, but he was probably dazed by his broken wrist, confused and panic-stricken at his failure.

Whatever the cause of his error, the knife-man was paying for it with his life. He was the same build as Kerrigan, and he wore the same kind of hat. That gunner out there must have been sure that it was Kerrigan. The spray of machine-gun bullets was a little high, but not too high to miss the knife-man. . . .

Almost before the machine-gun ceased its chattering clatter of destruction, Johnny Kerrigan was out in the alley, with a big service revolver in his hand. He glimpsed the figure of the machine-gunner slinging the weapon to his shoulder and turning to run toward a car parked out at the curb, in front of the alley's mouth.

Instinctively Johnny raised his gun. The machine-gunner was an easy mark—Johnny had only to pull the trigger. But his eyes narrowed; and he lowered the gun

without firing, an idea growing into a plan within his brain.

He made no attempt to stop the fleeing car into which the machine-gunner had leaped. Instead, he knelt swiftly beside the dead killer, and went through his pockets. The man had removed all identifying marks from his clothing, as well as all objects from his pockets.

Kerrigan took off his own hat and dropped it beside the dead body, picking up the knife-man's hat in exchange. It had fallen from the fellow's head as he had stumbled out into the alley, and had consequently escaped a riddling. It was in servicable shape.

Johnny thrust the hat on his head, and dashed out of the alley. He heard shouts from the theatre, where the audience had finally awakened to the fact that a real struggle had been taking place right behind their backs. But there was no rush of people out into the alley. They had heard the chopping machine-gun, and they had no desire to court its chattering attention.

Kerrigan ducked down the street, crossed to the other side and disappeared into another alley, just as a uniformed policeman came pounding down from the corner.

Kerrigan stood in the shadows for a moment. The officer, fortunately, had not noticed him.

Johnny found a cab and climbed into it, ordering the driver uptown to Slocum Street. As they pulled away to the accompaniment of the sirens, Kerrigan nodded in bleak satisfaction. That knife-man was no longer recognizable, and he was lying there with Kerrigan's hat beside him—a hat with the initials, JK, in the band, and the maker's name plainly stamped on the label. That dead man would be assumed to be one, Kerrigan, of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Johnny intended to make the most of that piece of good luck.

CHAPTER THREE

The Lady and the Gun

SLOCUM STREET was residential. It was an old, conservative street, with no great apartment houses. At one time, the aristocracy of the city had lived here. Now these rambling old houses set back from the street, shaded by venerable elms, were a bit seedy and run down, with peeling paint and patched roofs. Several of them had "Furnished Rooms" signs, and on the ground floor of Number 23 there was a modest card:

STELLA LAWRENCE
Dressmaker

Kerrigan had his cabby drive past the house without stopping. He got out at the next corner, his keen eyes scanning both sides of the street. He was not yet sure whether that message left by Petrie on the back of the motion picture theatre seat had been seen by anyone else. If it had, then 23 Slocum Street would be covered.

But he could spot nobody in the street, nor could he see anyone lurking at the windows of the neighboring houses.

He walked back from the corner, turned into the flagstone path, and went up the three steps of the porch to the door. Another card over the bell just gave the name of Stella Lawrence.

Kerrigan didn't ring the bell. He remembered, as if it was etched indelibly in his brain, Petrie's death-message: *Knock twice, then three times.*

If Petrie had said knock, that was what he had meant. But if Petrie's killers had written that message after killing the Military Intelligence man, that signal might be a trap. It was conceivable that the killers had written the message. Kerrigan knew how thorough were the men with whom he had to deal. They made their plans carefully, and then, just to make doubly

sure, they made another, supplementary set of plans, in case the first one failed.

He shrugged, raised his hand, and rapped the signal.

He waited, outwardly at ease, inwardly keyed to the steel-spring tension that could erupt into lightning-like action.

From within came the sound of movement, close to the door. A bolt scraped back. The knob turned, and the door opened wide.

Kerrigan looked into a dim hall, from which all light had been excluded.

Facing him, about five feet from the door, was the girl in the tan sweater.

She looked just as she had looked earlier. She was still holding that covered tennis racket under her arm.

"Come in," she said.

Johnny Kerrigan didn't move. His eyes swept down the hall behind her, to the open doorway that led into a living room. He could discern no sign of life in there, but he noted that she was five feet from the door. She could not have opened it and stepped back that far. Someone else had opened the door—someone who waited behind the door.

"Good afternoon, Miss Lane," Johnny said, still not moving.

Her eyes flickered. She moved the tennis racket a little. It was resting under her arm, with the wide part close to her body and the handle poking out to the front.

Kerrigan's blood raced as he noted that the end of that handle was not covered. And it was not wood. It was a round, open muzzle! Inside that cover was no tennis racket, but a small sub-machine gun!

The girl was breathing fast as she pointed the disguised gun.

"Come in," she repeated.

"Sure," said Kerrigan. "Always glad to oblige a lady."

He started forward, threw himself in to a low tackle, and hurtled the short distance between them like a driving catapult.

The girl uttered a startled cry. "Paul! Help!"

SHE could have pulled the trigger and sent a blasting hail of slugs into Kerrigan's body; but his motions had been utterly deceptive. His slow drawl and his even slower start had caught her off guard. And his quick switch to blinding action had taken her completely by surprise. In the second which she needed to ready herself, he struck her, winding his arms around her waist and carrying her backward with him.

Kerrigan swung her off her feet, snatched the machine gun from her and threw it into a corner. Then he drew his revolver, and swung to face the door, holding her struggling body close to him.

He leveled his gun at the young man who had been hiding behind the door, with an automatic pistol in his hand.

"All right, sport," said Johnny. "Start shooting any time you like."

The young fellow was tall, hardly more than twenty-five or twenty-six, with blond hair and light blue eyes.

He said, "Let go of Ellen!"

"Put down the gun, sport, and I'll let her go."

"Put it down, Paul," the girl said tiredly. "He'll kill you."

"Let him kill me. I don't care any more. He'll kill us both anyway."

"You're crazy," Johnny said. "I won't kill either of you. I don't kill kids. I leave that to the Nazis."

The boy's eyes opened wide. "You—you're not—one of Keppler's men?"

Kerrigan laughed harshly. "Ask your girl friend. She knows me. She called me by name this afternoon."

"Put the gun away, Paul," the girl repeated. "And close the door. Let's talk to him. I think we've made a mistake."

The blond young man hesitated, watching Kerrigan covertly.

Johnny grinned. He kept his hold on

the girl, but he replaced his revolver in its holster.

"There!" he said. "How's that for disarmament?"

Paul slowly lowered his own automatic, and put it in his pocket.

"Let's go inside," Ellen said, and led the way.

In the living room, the radio was turned on low, to the news reports. Paul put his arm around the girl's shoulders, and they both faced Johnny Kerrigan, studying him, not quite sure of themselves.

"Well?" asked the girl.

"You came over to me today, at the corner of Seventh and Myrtle," Kerrigan said. "You called me by name, warned me to go away. You told me that Petrie, the Military Intelligence man, had been killed."

"Yes," she said. "I told you that."

"How did you know?"

"Before I answer that," she said, "I want to know if you're really Kerrigan. Prove to me that you're Kerrigan."

Johnny took an identification card-case from his pocket, flipped it open, and showed it to her. Paul peered down at it carefully, studying the picture and comparing it with Johnny's features.

"He's Kerrigan, all right," he said.

Suddenly the girl smiled. "I was sure you were Kerrigan, but after I talked to you at the corner of Seventh and Myrtle, I thought perhaps I'd been mistaken. You see, I stood right behind two men at the railroad station who were watching for you. I heard one of them tell the other who you were, and that they were not to follow you, because they knew just where you were going. He said you were to meet a man named Petrie at the corner of Seventh and Myrtle, and that you would be followed from there."

"Tell me more about this," Johnny said grimly. "Who were those men?"

"Two agents of the Gestapo here in Coast City."

THE GIRL glanced inquiringly at Paul.

He nodded. "I think it's safe to tell him. Go ahead."

She looked back at Johnny. "I'm Ellen Lane. This is Paul Strang. We're engaged. He's the son of Johann Strang, the German Consul here. His father hates the Nazis. He has refused to cooperate with them. He told Paul a little of what was going on, and Paul told me. There's a man named Fritz Albrecht here in Coast City—a terrible man. He's in charge of all sabotage work in America. They must be plotting something tremendous to bring him here in person. What it is, we don't know. But we *do* know that Paul's father's life is in danger. We also know that they got hold of the message that Petrie sent to his headquarters, and that they decoded an ad in the personal column of the *Courier*. They killed Petrie, and they were going to wait till you met your two friends, Murdoch and Klaw, and kill the three of you at once—"

"Just a minute," Johnny interrupted. "You told me before that they had killed Petrie. When did this happen?"

"This morning at eleven o'clock."

"You're sure?"

"Of course we're sure. They killed him out in back of Paul's father's house. They shot him with a machine gun."

Johnny nodded. "Then Petrie couldn't have met me this afternoon at three-thirty—"

"That's what Ellen's been trying to tell you!" Paul Strang exclaimed.

"What would you say," Kerrigan asked them, "if I told you that I did meet Petrie at three-thirty?"

"Impossible!" said Paul. "My dad went out of town on a secret mission, and while he was out, Petrie called up and said he was coming over—about something important. Dad was working secretly with Petrie, giving him information about Nazi activities. It was because of

the information my dad gave him, that Petrie wired Washington for help."

He paused, his arm tightening around Ellen. "Well, Ellen and I waited up for Petrie. We watched for him through the back window of the upstairs bedroom. He was supposed to come in through the rear. We saw him coming across the open lot, from the back street, and then we saw the car coming along the street behind him. He was too far away for us to warn him. Someone stuck a machine gun out of the car and blasted away. Then the car streaked away."

"Did you see Petrie's face?" Kerrigan asked.

"No. He was too far away. But it was his build, and we were expecting him."

"I'm sorry," said Johnny. "It wasn't Petrie who was killed this morning. I met him. He was killed all right—but not till four o'clock this afternoon!"

The faces of the boy and girl were suddenly white. "Then—then who—"

"I hate to ask this," Kerrigan said slowly, looking Paul Strang squarely in the eyes. "But—what did your father look like? Was his general build the same as Petrie's? Could you have mistaken your father for Petrie?"

He had his answer in the sudden ghastly look of pain in the boy's eyes.

"Yes!" Paul whispered. "God help me, I could have been mistaken!"

"I'm sorry," Johnny said.

The boy's face suddenly hardened, his blue eyes flashed. "They knew they were killing dad! The beasts! They had to get rid of him, so he wouldn't spoil their plans. Well, they haven't heard the last from the Strangs! I'm an American! I have my citizenship papers. With dad dead, I'm not afraid of them any more. By God, I'm going to avenge my father if it means killing the whole damned Nazi crew!"

"I'm with you, Paul!" the girl whispered.

Just then, the voice on the radio changed. A local newscaster came on. Ellen hurried over, and turned the volume up. The announcer was saying:

Two more killings have quickly followed the murder of the unidentified man who was machine-gunned this morning, behind the home of the German Consul. This time, one man was stabbed to death in a motion picture theatre, and the other was blasted by a machine gun, in the same manner as the morning's victim. Police are at a loss to assign a motive for these killings. No identification was found on this morning's victim, or on the body of the man who was stabbed. But the man who met his death by machine-gun fire in an alley beside the East End Theatre has been identified by his hat. It contained initials and a Washington men's clothing store ad-

dress. Through this address, it has been established that the victim is John Kerrigan, an F. B. I. agent. . .

Ellen Lane and Paul Strang turned to look at Johnny.

Kerrigan chuckled. "Don't believe everything you hear. Those boys wanted me dead, so I obliged by leaving my hat. Now let's get out of here."

"Where?" demanded Ellen.

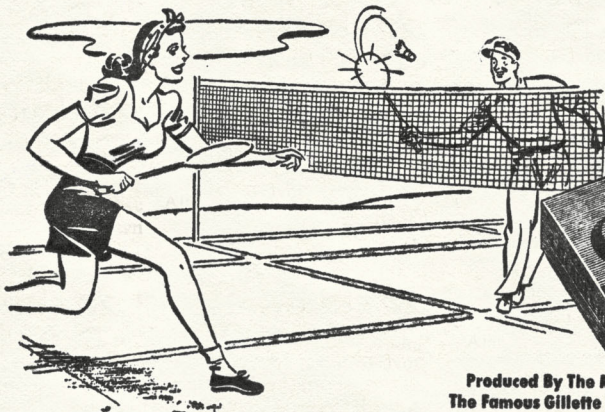
"To the Coast Hotel. My two friends ought to be in by this time. They'll be interested to meet my corpse!"

CHAPTER FOUR

"You Can't Kill a G-Man"

IN ROOM 504 of the Coast Hotel, Dan Murdoch snapped off the radio, and stood for a moment with his hand on the knob. His eyes were fixed

**To get a shave that is a shave
And look well-groomed in record time
Use Thin Gillettes. Think what you save!
Why four swell blades cost just a dime!**



Outlasts ordinary
blades two to one!



Produced By The Maker Of
The Famous Gillette Blue Blade



Save Extra Money! Get The Big New Economy Package, 12 For 27c

blankly on the wall. Then he turned around slowly and faced his partner, Stephen Klaw.

"I don't believe it!" he said hoarsely. "Johnny wouldn't let them shoot his head off with a machine-gun—like any dumb lug!"

Stephen Klaw sat very stiff and straight in his chair.

"We have to find out, Dan," he said. "We have to find out if that was really Johnny." He got up, went to the window, and pulled the blind back a little. He peered out through the crack.

"One of the two guys who followed us from the airport is out there across the street, watching this window. The other one must be downstairs in the lobby."

"Let's find out from them," Murdoch said. "Let's bring one of them up here, and—"

"No. If Johnny's dead, he'd want us to carry on. We've got to find out what Petrie had to tell him. If Petrie's dead too, then we must find out some other way. Johnny'd want us to clean up for him."

These two—the other two-thirds of the Suicide Squad—were not ones to show emotion. But each knew how the other felt. They had come a long way together, the three of them. Their lives, individually and severally, were long ago forfeit to the laws of chance and the odds on death. It was their job to pull the beard of the Grim Reaper. Not for nothing were they known as the Suicide Squad. They never got a routine job, but were kept in reserve for the cases which called for their particular qualities—reckless daring and a total disregard for personal safety. It was the way they wanted it.

Once there had been five men in the Suicide Squad. Then only four. Then three.

Now, Murdoch and Klaw sat in this hotel room and wondered whether they were only two. Tomorrow, there might be only one—or none.

Johnny Kerrigan had once punched a senator's son in the nose; Dan Murdoch had once shot a croupier to death in a crooked gambling house; Stephen Klaw had once told a Senate Investigating Committee chairman to go to hell when he had been asked why he had shot to kill, in a gun battle with bandits.

Such offenses would have brought about the immediate discharge of any other F. B. I. men. But such was the record of these three, public resentment would have been raised at their dismissal. The Chief of the F. B. I. had used this argument to good advantage on several occasions in refusing to fire them.

He had been allowed to keep them in service on the condition that they were never given ordinary assignments, where they might come in contact with the powers-that-be. So they got only those jobs which the Chief hesitated to assign, or even to ask for volunteers. They took the jobs gratefully, because it was in their nature to seek that kind of danger. They would have been unhappy—without Death at their elbows.

They had always hoped the end would come for all three of them together; shoulder to shoulder, they'd go down with blazing guns.

"If they really got him," Stephen Klaw said tightly, "we'll give them a show they'll never forget!"

They had just gotten into the hotel a few minutes ago, without baggage. When the Suicide Squad was working on an assignment, they never carried baggage. They worked without benefit of laundry. Theirs was a simple system: they bought fresh clothes, and gave away the dirty. In this way they were never hampered by possessions. Their salary, plus their expense account, adequately covered this unique method of working. Though they never bothered to submit an expense account, the Chief of the F. B. I. thoughtfully issued generous vouchers for them

whenever he figured they needed money. For money was the last thing in the world to which Kerrigan, Murdoch and Klaw ever gave any consideration.

Dan Murdoch had come up alongside Steve, and was peering cautiously out the window.

"Well," he said. "It looks like somebody in the hotel is getting company!" A police car had pulled in to the opposite curb. Two plain-clothes men and two uniformed policemen had descended from it. They were crossing toward the hotel.

"I don't like the looks of it," Steve muttered. "They could be coming for us."

"The police in this town are supposed to be okay," said Murdoch.

"Yes. But we ought to play it safe."

"The next room is vacant," said Murdoch. "I saw the key in the reservation box. One of us could cover from there—"

"You do it, Dan."

Murdoch shrugged. He took a set of passkeys from his pocket, and went to the connecting door. In a moment he was through, into the next room.

He wasn't any too soon, for almost at once a knock sounded on the corridor door.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

* * *

STEPHEN KLAU'S eyes became dark and hot. "Close the door, Dan."

As soon as Murdoch had closed the connecting door between them, Klaw went to the corridor door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"Open up," said a voice. "This is Captain Warren of Homicide!"

Steve opened the door.

The headquarters men who had descended from the police car were grouped close to the door. Captain Warren was a large, florid man, with a pair of keen gray eyes. He showed his badge and stepped

in, followed by the plain-clothes man and the two uniformed policemen. He eyed Steve carefully.

Klaw was slim and wiry, so youthful in appearance that he could have been mistaken for a college kid on vacation. Few people, looking at him, realized that his compact frame carried one hundred and sixty pounds of bone and muscle.

Captain Warren said, "You don't look like a murderer."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Murderer?"

Warren motioned to the plain-clothes man beside him. "This is Sergeant Rand, also of Homicide." His eyes strayed around the room. "I thought there were two of you."

"There were," said Steve.

"What happened to the other fellow?"

"I murdered him."

"Now don't get funny!" Captain Warren barked. "How long you been in town?"

"You're asking too many questions," Steve replied. "Suppose I ask one. What are you doing here?"

"We're after a couple of murderers," Warren told him, suddenly smooth again. "We were tipped off that the two killers who machine-gunned that man at the theatre were hiding out in this room. Whoever did that job also pulled the one the morning, near the German consul's house. Anything you say may be used against you—"

"Thank you," said Steve. His eyes were bright and hot. He was being accused of having murdered Johnny Kerrigan! "Of course, if that's the case, I'll answer any questions you have to ask."

"You had a friend with you. Where is he?"

"He left for Alaska five minutes ago—"

Sergeant Rand broke in angrily. "He's one of these wise-guys, Captain. Let's take him in—"

Warren raised a hand. "Wait!" He

was watching Steve. "All right, never mind your friend for the moment. What time did you get in town?"

"We checked into the hotel at exactly three-fifty-nine. You can check at the desk."

Warren nodded. "Time enough to knock off that guy at the theatre and to get here."

"That's right," said Steve.

"Where do you come from?"

"Oakland, last."

"What's your business?"

"I'm in the exterminating business," Steve told him. "I exterminate rats."

Sergeant Rand uttered a short, barking laugh. "How do you get rid of them? With machine-guns?"

Warren nodded to the two uniformed men. "Go through the room. See what you can find."

"I have no baggage," Steve said.

"I can see that," Warren observed. "It's not baggage we're looking for."

From the bathroom, came the voice of one of the cops. "Here it is, Captain!"

He came out with an extremely long and narrow suitcase. "It was in the bathtub, hidden by the shower sheet."

The cop put the suitcase on the floor and snapped the catch. The lid came open, revealing a shiny, well-oiled machine-gun!

"Well," said Captain Warren. "What's your story?"

"Offhand," Steve replied, "I'd say that you planted it here."

Warren's face flushed. "You little squirt—" He took a step forward, raising a fist.

Steve didn't give an inch. He looked up into Warren's face, smiling thinly, tightly. "Yes, Captain?"

Warren stopped short, his fist still raised. "You're lucky I don't believe in roughhouse!" he growled.

"Lucky?" Steve retorted. "With a machine-gun planted in my room? And a murder rap tied to it?"

WARREN frowned, studying him closely. "There is something smelly about this. You're just a kid. You don't look like a hopped-up gunman who'd work a chopper as cold-bloodedly as this one was worked."

"Thank you, Captain. Do you mind telling me how you knew about that gun?"

"We were tipped off. Anonymously."

"Then this could be a frame?"

"Sure it could. But you're not helping yourself much. What time did you get into town?"

"At three-thirty-seven, from an airliner at the airport."

"Did you come straight here?"

"No, we walked around the town a little, to get acquainted with it."

"So you can't show an alibi for three-fifty-one?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Well, who are you?"

That was a question Steve couldn't answer. He couldn't say that he was an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, here on official business. Because the Chief had told him, as he had told Kerrigan, that this was to be the Suicide Squad's private war. They were here on official business, all right—but unofficially.

"The name is Klaw," he said. "S. Klaw."

"I know that!" Warren growled impatiently. "It's on the register downstairs. It doesn't mean a thing to me. Tell me more, if you're interested in beating this rap. I'd like to help you, but you're not making it easy."

"I'm sorry, Captain," Steve said sincerely. "I really appreciate the way you're handling this. But there's no more I can tell you."

Warren shrugged. "In that case, I'll have to take you in. I haven't any choice but—"

Suddenly, from out in the hall, there came a wild, frantic scream, followed by a high-pitched shout.

"Help! They're killing me! Help!"

The cry was drowned out by two thunderous revolver shots. The echo of the shots rolled away, and was followed by the slamming of a door somewhere out in the corridor.

Everybody in the room sprang to attention. Warren swung toward the door, followed by Rand and the two cops. For the moment, Stephen Klaw was forgotten.

"It's a killing!" Warren shouted. "Let's go!"

He tore open the corridor door and dashed out, drawing his service revolver, with Rand and the others at his heels.

The smell of cordite was pungent in the hall, indicating that the shooting had taken place right out here. But there was no one in sight.

"Spread out!" Warren ordered. "Casey, Wolfe, try every door! Rand, cover the emergency exit! Watch the fire-stairs! I'll cover the hall out here in case he tries to make a break for the elevators."

Inside his room, Stephen Klaw did not seem at all excited to this new activity. He stepped calmly to the corridor door, closed and locked it, then called, "Okay Dan. You can come in."

Dan Murdoch entered grinning, through the connecting door of the next room. A smoking revolver was still in his hand.

"How did I do, Shrimp?"

"Not bad, Mope. That scream was a work of art. And you spaced the shots nicely, too. They'll be looking for a body in every room on the floor."

"Now all we have to do is get out of here," said Murdoch.

He went to the window, opened it.

Steve was already yanking sheets off the bed, and tearing them into strips, then twisting them around and knotting them together. No useless words were spoken, no useless instructions given. They had worked so long together that they could

almost read each other's minds; they could tell what the other would do under given conditions. And now, as they made a short rope of the sheets, they thought of Johnny Kerrigan. . . .

There was more to this job than mere personal escape from a trap. Now they had nothing to look forward to but being hunted day and night. It would have been easier to declare their identity to the police, and quit, to wire Washington that events had made it impossible for them to continue; that other men must be sent in their stead.

But that was not the way of the Suicide Squad. They had to find out what had really happened to Kerrigan. They had to square things up for him.

Murdoch fastened one end of the knotted sheet to the radiator, pulling hard at it to make sure it wouldn't give under their weight. Then he threw the other end out of the window. The improvised rope was just long enough to reach the window of the room below.

"You first, Shrimp," he said.

Steve shook his head, and bowed elaborately. "After you. . . ."

They were kibitzing around to cover the much deeper feeling which was gnawing at each of them. Their memories were warm with the incidents of a hundred adventures which three of them had shared together.

"I think I'll take this little toy along with me," Steve said, indicating the suitcase with the machine gun, which Warren's men had left on the floor. He closed the lid, tied another bit of sheet through the handle and around his waist, so that it hung free. Then he went over the sill.

HAND over hand he climbed down to the window below. Hanging there a moment, four stories above the ground, he peered in through the closed window. There was no one inside. He raised his head and nodded to

Murdoch, who was watching from above.

"Snap it up, Shrimp," Murdoch called. "I think your friends are coming back. They must smell a rat."

"Here we go," said Steve.

He lashed out with his right foot, shattering the window pane. Then he swung himself over the ledge, into the room.

A moment later, Dan Murdoch joined him. From above, they could hear some one banging hard at the door of the room they had just left.

"Nice timing," said Murdoch.

Steve untied the valise from around his waist, picked it up. The two of them sauntered out into the corridor.

The hall was full of people, milling around and asking excited questions.

"This is an outrage!" a fat man was saying shrilly. "I thought this was a respectable hotel—"

"So did I!" said Dan Murdoch. "My friend and I refuse to remain here another minute!"

They made their way to the elevator, but there was no escape that way. A small crowd was gathered around the shaft, but the cage was not running.

They hurried past, went around the bend, and made for the fire exit. They sped down the stairs, Murdoch in the lead. They encountered no one on the third floor or second floor, but on the way down to the main floor they almost ran into Sergeant Rand, who was on his way up, with his service revolver in his hand.

He saw them coming. He raised the gun.

"Stand still!" he shouted. "So it was all a trick—"

Rand was at the foot of the stairs, and Murdoch, a little in advance of Steve, was on the sixth or seventh step. He bent down, doubling up almost into a knot, and literally rolled the rest of the way, straight at Rand.

The sergeant cursed, and lowered his revolver for a shot at Murdoch. But some-

thing came sailing through the air and struck him on the shoulder with irresistible velocity. It was Steve Klaw's valise that had appeared as though shot from a catapult.

With uncanny timing—almost as if he had known exactly what Dan was going to do—Steve had slung that valise.

The sergeant staggered backward, without firing his gun. Dan Murdoch got in front of him, smiling apologetically.

"I regret this exceedingly, Sergeant," Dan said in that suave way of his, and drove a hard fist to Rand's jaw. The blow scarcely traveled five inches.

Rand went down, cold. Murdoch rubbed his knuckles. "The sergeant has a pretty tough jaw. Remind me to apologize to him sometime."

Steve picked up the valise again. "So far, you're batting a thousand, Mope. Let's go!"

They left Rand lying on the floor, and went out through the emergency fire door, into the alley alongside the hotel.

There was a lot of excitement out in the street. A siren was playing a wild dirge, and people were crowding toward the hotel entrance, around the two police cars which were pulling up.

Murdoch and Klaw stepped out into the crowd unobserved.

"Which way do we go, Dan?" Steve asked. "East or west?"

"I think," Dan Murdoch said in a queer, choked voice, "that we will go across the street and punch somebody square in the nose for giving us gray hairs!"

Steve's eyes glinted joyfully as he followed Dan's glance.

"Thank God!" he whispered, his strong fingers on Dan's shoulder.

There, in a taxicab across the street, right behind a police car, they saw Johnny Kerrigan sitting with Ellen Lane and Paul Strang. Johnny was grinning at them like an Andalusian ape.

CHAPTER FIVE

Subscription—to Death!

HERR HORST KEPPLER was absently polishing his monocle. He was not any too happy.

"But my dear Doktor Albrecht," he said, "you must at least grant that I have accomplished a good deal today. My men have eliminated Johann Strang, who was the most dangerous to our plans, for he knew so much of them. In addition, we have liquidated the Military Intelligence man, Petrie, as well as that Kerrigan."

Professor Harold Cornish, alias Doktor Fritz Albrecht, was pacing up and down the secret office. He turned his small eyes, cloaked by the thick-lenses, upon Keppler.

"All that is not enough, Keppler. I gave you instructions to eliminate the other two—Murdoch and Klaw."

"That is true, Doktor Albrecht. But a peculiar circumstance arose. My chief lieutenant—Max Gussnig—has disappeared. It was he who stabbed Petrie to death in the motion picture theatre, and who also sent Kerrigan, out into the alley where he was cut down by my machine-gunner. But I have not heard from Gussnig since. Perhaps he was spotted by some one at the theatre, and has had to lie low for a while. It was through him that I intended to issue orders to eliminate Murdoch and Klaw. But I've had to

handle them in different fashion, by throwing suspicion upon them for the other killings. I had a machine-gun planted in their room, and informed the police."

"But they have escaped, Keppler."

"They are devils, Herr Doktor. They are very clever."

"Yes, they are very clever," Albrecht agreed. "We should have men like them working for us. Men who can think quickly in an emergency. Not men who flounder around when the slightest detail goes wrong!"

As he said this he looked directly at Keppler, who grew slightly pale.

"I did my best, Herr Doktor—"

"Your best was not enough!"

"And yet, I have succeeded in reducing the danger from those two. They are even now being hunted throughout the city—by their own police. Sooner or later they will be caught. Probably shot on sight."

"Well," growled Albrecht, "I do not feel comfortable while those daredevils are loose. There is no telling what they will do next. Above all, we must keep them from meeting Paul Strang."

"I am sure they are too busy hiding from the police, to be in a position to contact anyone."

"Well, we shall see. We shall see."

Albrecht picked up a telescope from the desk, and went to the window. From here was afforded a clear view of the eastern end of the town, where the great manufac-



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turing plants of Coast City were located. Dominating all the others was the huge, sprawling layout of the Lane Locomotive Works, spread out over forty acres of land, with huge funnels leaning up into the sky, and red-flecked smoke-plumes seething out in the gathering dusk. There were tremendous blast furnaces, forging and welding shops, and a huge assembly plant which alone covered seven acres.

Swinging his telescope, Albrecht sighted the proving grounds, where tanks were being tested, day and night. After the final okay, these machines of war would be ready for the long voyage to Britain.

Albrecht's pudgy face was working strangely as he studied that great unit of American industrial strength which was forging weapons to oppose the Nazi juggernaut abroad.

"Tonight it shall be destroyed!" he muttered. "Utterly destroyed. Tomorrow there will be no smoke-stacks there, no shops, no men. Nothing!"

He lowered the telescope and swung to face Keppler. His eyes were burning with a frightful, fanatical intensity.

"Our plan must proceed according to schedule. Nothing shall stop us. For six months I have worked in that plant—studying, planning. I know every nook and corner of the shops, I know its vital parts. Tonight, when I go back to work on the night shift, I shall bring them a present they will never forget!"

* * *

KEPPLER was awed by the fanaticism of the man. "You cannot fail, Herr Doktor. You are too clever for them."

"But you must do your part, Keppler. Do you understand your duties for tonight?"

"Thoroughly, Herr Doktor. At six o'clock, when the night shift goes on, the fifty men whom you have supplied with

false identification cards and badges, will enter with the other workers. Each will go to the spot which you have designated on the blueprint map of the plant. At each spot there is a flame-thrower, twenty-five of them in all."

"Exactly," said Albrecht. "I made those flame-throwers myself, in that plant, while they thought I was working on their new tank designs. The stupid Americans!"

"They are no match for us," Keppler said smugly.

Albrecht waved impatiently. "Go on. Go on with the plans."

"I will be among those fifty men, of course," Keppler continued. "We will wait until you give the signal. Three sharp blasts of your whistle, followed by two blasts. At the signal, I will lead ten men to the office. There, we will seize the manager and the executive staff. We will also take the tank plans. In the meantime, the *flamenwerfer* will be spreading fire and destruction throughout the plant. We will wait at the gate with our captives until you have set off the secret mine which you placed under the floorboards of your own workshop. Then, we will all leave the plant and escape in the special cars which I have prepared. We will go directly to the beach, where dories will be waiting to take us off to our waiting submarine. We will take the executives with us to Germany, where they will be questioned for the purpose of forcing them to disclose the secret speed-ratios which make their tanks so fast, and which you have been unable to steal."

"Good!" grunted Albrecht. "Also, you must remember that I want the girl, Ellen Lane. She will be there tonight. She comes every night. She must be taken back to Germany with us. Once she is in our hands, we can force her father to become a friend of our cause, instead of a friend of Britain. Parker Lane is an important figure in American life. If he

should suddenly change his views, he will command a great following among Americans who admire him. So do not forget the girl!"

"I shall not forget, Herr Doktor. She shall be my personal responsibility."

Albrecht was picking up his hat and cane, when a strange look crossed his face. Instead of saying good-by, he continued to talk in a loud voice. He came over to the desk, snatched up a pencil. Still talking, he wrote: *There is somebody listening at the door!*

Keppler's eyes narrowed. He opened a drawer, and snatched out an automatic. Then, while Albrecht continued his monologue, Keppler stepped over to the door, turned the knob, and pulled it open.

Young Paul Strang stood in the hall.

"What are you doing here?" Keppler demanded.

"I came to see you and Herr Doktor Albrecht."

"How did you know I had an office here?"

"I followed you once or twice, when you left the Consulate."

Keppler stepped out in the hall, glancing up and down to make sure Paul was alone. Then he prodded the young man with his gun. "Get in there!"

He pushed Paul roughly into the room.

The Herr Doktor threw an acidulous glance at Keppler. "Is this the efficiency with which you operate? You have allowed this young cur to ferret out your secret headquarters!"

Albrecht turned his small eyes upon Paul. "Why have you come here?"

"To talk with you, Herr Doktor."

"How do you know who I am?"

"My father told me about you. Last week, we saw you in the street, and he pointed you out to me. He said if ever there was trouble here in Coast City, I could be sure you'd be behind it."

"Ah, so!" said Doktor Albrecht. "What is it that you wish to say to me?"

"I want to ask you a question," Paul said. "I want to know why you murdered my father!"

FOR an instant, the Herr Doktor Albrecht was silent. He exchanged a swift glance with Keppler, and then his thick lips wreathed themselves into a smile. "Ah, so! You know that your father is dead. And you believe that it was I who ordered his execution."

"It was murder," Paul said. "This isn't Germany. The laws of Germany don't go here."

"You are mistaken, my young friend," Albrecht replied softly. "A German is subject to the laws of the Third Reich—wherever he may be. Your father was executed because he was a traitor."

"You mean," Paul said hotly, "that he was murdered because he couldn't stomach your damned Nazi treachery?"

Albrecht shrugged. "Have it your own way. Words will mean nothing when the Third Reich finally triumphs. As for you—the day shall come too late for you to see it."

"You can't kill me, too," Paul exclaimed. "You won't get away with it. My father was a subject of the Third German Reich. But not me. I'm an American citizen. My mother was an American. I'm naturalized. I'm not subject to your laws."

He took a step forward. "I don't know what name you're using here in Coast City, Herr Albrecht, but I aim to find out. I intend to find out what it is you're up to, and I'm going to spoil your little game when I do find out!"

"My poor young friend!" Albrecht smiled coldly. "You have talked yourself into an early grave!" He nodded to Keppler, who had reversed his automatic, and was standing just behind Paul. "Now, Keppler!"

Herr Keppler started to bring the gun down on Paul's head in a vicious, skull-cracking blow.

But his arm froze in mid-air. A sharp knock sounded at the door.

"Wait!" Albrecht ordered. "I must not be found here. This young fool does not know what name I am using in this city. But some one else may recognize me!"

He stepped close to Keppler and whispered, "I will leave by the side door. Get rid of whoever it is, then dispose of young Strang. You can leave his body here. After tonight, we will not need this office."

Keppler nodded, his gun digging into Paul's back. Albrecht stepped over to a side door, opened it and slipped out. That door led through another office, into the service corridor; from there he could make his way, unobserved, out of the building.

The knock at the door was repeated.

Frowning, Keppler went and opened it. Dan Murdoch was standing there, holding half a dozen good magazines.

"Good evening," Dan said politely. "Would you be interested in combination subscriptions to America's most popular magazines? We have a special offer—"

"*Gott im Himmel!*" snarled Keppler.

He started to close the door, but Murdoch had his foot in the opening. "Surely you read magazines, mister? Don't you want to help me work my way through college? Now for two dollars and fifty cents—"

"Get out!" Keppler screamed.

Dan Murdoch shrugged. "All right, if that's the way you feel about it. But you're missing a real bargain."

He took his foot out of the door. Keppler tried to close it, but suddenly something was jabbed into his side. He had turned away from Paul Strang for a moment, and Paul was now poking a gun into his ribs.

The Nazi Vice-Consul's face grew mottled with rage.

Paul moved quickly out into the corridor. He took Dan Murdoch's arm. "Let's see those magazines of yours," he

said. "Maybe I'll take a subscription."

"Why that's fine, mister." Murdoch smiled, and together they moved down the hall toward the elevator.

Keppler fingered the gun in his pocket. He remembered his orders from Albrecht to kill young Strang; but he also realized that in order to do it now, he must also shoot the magazine salesman. To do that, here in a public corridor, would bring plenty of trouble—it would mean that he would not be free to keep his tryst with Albrecht for the big blow-off!

The elevator stopped at the floor. Paul Strang and Dan Murdoch got into it.

"Lucky fool!" Keppler muttered. "If that magazine salesman had not happened to come to the door, you would be dead by now!"

He couldn't know that the "magazine salesman" had not come to the door by accident at all, but rather as the result of a beautifully timed plan.

CHAPTER SIX

Interol

AT six o'clock every night except Sunday, four thousand men left mammoth Lane Locomotive Works Plant, and four thousand others entered. The change of shifts was an inspiring thing to behold. Only a few months ago, the plant had been crawling along at one-fifth capacity, on a single shift. Now, under the spur of a driving faith in our own way of life and a deep-felt conviction that it must be defended at all costs, this great industrial plant was operating at two hundred percent its former capacity. New shops had been added, new assembly lines, new manpower—and a new spirit.

These skilled workers, coming in with their lunch boxes, wore the happy expressions of men who know they are earning a living and, at the same time, serving their country. . . .

Kerrigan, Murdoch and Klaw stood with Paul Strang near one of the five employees' gates, watching the workers.

Each of them wore a badge, with his picture and a number on it. Ellen Lane had got them those badges, without which they wouldn't have been able to enter the plant. For months now, she had taken an active interest in the operation of the plant. The workmen loved her; their families swore by her, for she had visited many of them when they were sick.

Steve Klaw had braved the police hunt in the city, to go to a photographer's and have the pictures of himself, Kerrigan and Murdoch printed into the spaces on the badge. Thus, they were all armed with their passports into the Works.

"The way I figure it," Murdoch said, "this must be the place that Albrecht and Keppler are interested in. When the door was open, I got a quick look into the office. There was a telescope on the desk. And the window looked right out toward this plant."

"If you're right," Steve Klaw said, "it was a clever piece of work to send Paul up there. If you're wrong, we'll be wasting our time tonight."

"We might as well go in," said Johnny Kerrigan. "The whistle will be blowing in a minute. If anything's slated to happen, we'd better be inside."

The four of them joined the moving throng, and passed through the gate without being challenged.

Paul Strang looked a little worried. "I'm going over to the Executive Office. Ellen will be there. If anything breaks, I want to be near her."

"Right," said Stephen Klaw. "The program is to separate now, sort of snoop around. If nothing happens in an hour, we meet at this gate."

He glanced around. To the left were the proving grounds for the baby tanks; beyond them, the testing field for the heavy tanks. The baby tanks, under a new

plan being formulated by the British, were to be used as a screen for the big monsters. These little ones could travel at sixty miles per hour, and the important secret of the Lane Locomotive Works was their hundred-ton tank which was geared in such proportion that it could travel at the same speed. It was the secret which Albrecht wanted so badly.

"You better take the proving grounds, Shrimp," Kerrigan said. "You took a course in tank maneuver. If there's anything screwy going on over there, you'll be able to smell it out."

"All right," said Steve. "And you better take the forge. Dan will take the Assembly Plant. Remember: Back here in an hour!"

STEPHEN KLAU moved out into the proving grounds, one of a hundred men. His keen eyes studied these others, then swept on to the field, where an experimental baby tank was waiting to be tested.

He was halfway across the grounds when he heard the shrill whistle—three sharp blasts, then two. The sound cut across the field, stopping the men in their tracks. It was a new sound.

Almost at once, a great red streak of fire burst into life behind them, near the gate. It flamed across the yard, struck against the steel of the Administration Building. The hot flame seared the face of the building, swung down and slashed through the windows—at the workers inside!

At the same time, other flame-throwers burst into fiery brilliance in other parts of the plant. Screams came now from all sides.

Stephen Klaw cursed under his breath. Albrecht's men had struck without delay. How many of them there might be, he had no way of telling, but that they would be well organized, he was sure. Their plan would succeed, unless he and Kerri-

gan and Murdoch stopped it. Three men against an organized group of destruction!

All over the place now, the terrible *flamenwerfer* were hurling blazing death at the workers. Thousands of men and women were running about madly, in frenzied panic.

Steve caught sight of Murdoch and Kerrigan, together, their guns blazing in unison as they fought back a group of flame-throwers from a great milling throng of workers. Kerrigan and Murdoch weren't going to join him. They were going to stop right there and protect those defenseless men and women.

Steve groaned. They were throwing away their lives! They couldn't hope to hold those *flamenwerfer* off for more than a couple of minutes. When their guns were empty, they would go down. . . .

Steve deliberately turned and ran in the opposite direction!

The men around him had dispersed, seeking shelter as best they could, and he had the field to himself. He covered it like a sprinter, heading straight for that baby tank in the proving grounds.

There was no one near it. He climbed up into the open turret, breathing a silent prayer that it was fully equipped and ready for an action test.

He slid in under the controls, and his practiced fingers found the starter button. He shoved it in, fed her gas, and the tank rumbled a quick response.

Steve Klaw breathed another prayer, one of fervent thanks, this time. The tank reacted to his every touch on the controls. He sent it hurtling across the field, toward where Kerrigan and Murdoch were fighting off the *flamenwerfer*. The machine bounced over a rough spot, jolting him hard, but he only grinned, and stepped up the speed. He pulled the trip of the manifold machine-gun on the front of the turret, and let go with a trial burst. The slugs sang across the field, high over the *flamenwerfer*.

Kerrigan and Murdoch saw him coming. They shouted to him.

The *flamenwerfer* saw the tank too, and turned their attention from the slaughter of defenseless men and women to a real battle. Steve, his eyes glittering with unholy pleasure, lowered the sights of the machine gun, and sent a burst right into their midst. The hail of slugs from the quadruple-banked forward machine-guns mowed down the flame-throwers.

Steve headed straight for Johnny and Dan, yelling for them to climb aboard. The danger was far from over, for most of the flame-throwers were coming from other parts of the vast plant, in a mass attack on the single tank. At their head was the pudgy figure of Doktor Albrecht, with Keppler at his side.

Steve spied Ellen Lane and Paul Strang, off to the left, running toward them. Paul staggered as a bullet hit him.

Far to the right, Steve spied the source of that shot. Some of the Nazis had captured the guard tower near the gate. They were entrenched there with machine guns and they were raking the yard.

Steve headed the tank toward Ellen, who was trying to support Paul Strang and run with him at the same time. Kerrigan and Murdoch reached them at the same time, and Steve swung the tank around in such a way as to shield Ellen and Paul from the machine-gun in the guard tower.

Dan Murdoch got hold of Paul, hauled him up, and dumped down inside the tank. Then he stood next to Steve, head and shoulders out of the turret, disdainful of the barrage from the guard tower. He swung the rear machine-guns to bear on the Nazis—just as the attack from the *flamenwerfer* broke against them.

THE flame-throwers were spread out in open array, under the direction of Albrecht and Keppler. From three sides at once, the hot fire concentrated on the tank.

Steve held the machine right where it was, for Kerrigan was trying to boost Ellen Lane inside. He couldn't get a hold on the smooth metal side, and Dan Murdoch swiftly ripped off his belt, fastened it around a strut, and let the other end hang.

"Grab it, Johnny!" he yelled, above the sounds of battle.

Kerrigan grinned. He had his arm around Ellen's waist. With his other hand he gripped the strap, and boosted himself up. As soon as he was on, Steve swung the tank around and headed right into the thick of the flame-throwers. Kerrigan dumped Ellen inside, alongside of Paul, and took his place at the port guns. Now, the three of them worked those machine-guns like men possessed. Kerrigan and Klaw turned their fire on the flame-throwers, while Murdoch concentrated on the guard tower.

Hot flame seared their faces, and bullets whipped a leaden hail around them. But the three grinning ghouls of destiny didn't heed the fire or the bullets. They rode down into the flame-throwers without slackening speed. . . .

All through the fight, Stephen Klaw

kept his eye on Albrecht. At last, there were only a handful of the flame-throwers left. They had taken refuge in a corner, at the angle where two buildings met. And now, as the tank headed toward them, they threw down their deadly weapons and raised their hands.

"Kamerad!" they shouted. Foremost among those who shouted surrender were Albrecht and Keppler.

Stephen Klaw growled. "Do we have to let those rats live?"

"I think not!" Dan Murdoch said softly. He pointed at a mob of men—workers in the plant—who were sweeping down upon the Nazis.

Ten minutes later, Dan Murdoch said soberly, "Well, Albrecht and Keppler died quickly, anyway. If they had ever got back to Germany, they might have died the hard way, as penalty for failure."

Kerrigan, Murdoch and Klaw looked at each other solemnly. Then they looked at Ellen Lane, who was binding Paul's wound, and whispering in his ear.

"H'mph!" said Kerrigan. "Let's get out of here."

"Let's get a drink," said Dan Murdoch. "I need one."

THE END

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Ghosts Killed Free

A Novelette of Uncle Sam's Undercover Ace

By Wyatt Blassingame

For a price, Murder for Profit guaranteed that any designated person would meet with "a fatal accident." Brian O'Reilly—sought as the Ghost by criminals and police alike—was, surprisingly, a paid-up subscriber to this murder ring. And he was also, less surprisingly, intended victim number one!

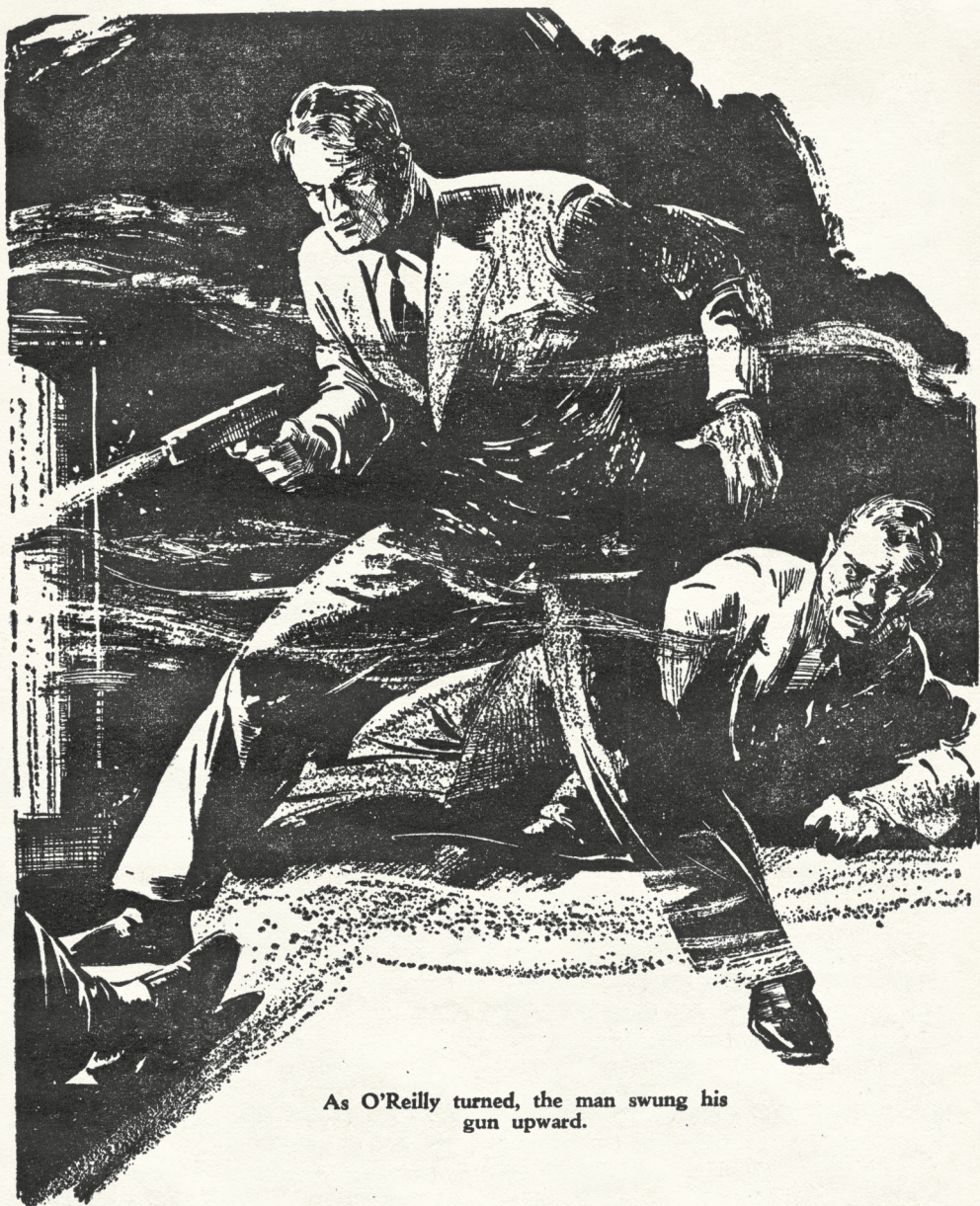


CHAPTER ONE

The High Price of Murder

IT WAS the Purple Room of New Orleans' most expensive hotel. A band played honey-smooth music and a few couples danced. The dim light

gathered intensity, and it flashed on jewelry; on women's powdered shoulders, on the rigid black simplicity of evening suits. Waiters passed back and forth with their peculiar noiseless ability. A well-fed, pink-cheeked man entered the Purple Room alone, shook his head at



As O'Reilly turned, the man swung his gun upward.

the head waiter, and turned to the right. He looked like a business man, a successful salesman—and he was. He sold murder at high prices.

At a table toward the rear of the room, another man was sitting alone, a white gardenia in the lapel of his evening clothes. The salesman of murder stopped at his table and said, "Mr. Jones?"

"Yes," Jones said. "You're Smith?"

"Correct," said the salesman of mur-

der. He sat down, carefully studying the man opposite him. The other was a tall, gaunt-faced man of indeterminate age, somewhere in his thirties probably. His evening suit was quietly expensive, perfectly tailored. His hands were long-fingered and strong, well manicured, but showing evidence of physical work. He might have been a successful business executive; yet that high, rounding forehead and the great, hawked nose did not

go with the man who had never done anything but clip coupons.

"Maybe he got those coupons by murdering the men who had owned them," the salesman of murder thought.

"Well, Mr. Jones," the salesman said. "Our plans are complete, I believe."

"What are they?"

The salesman hesitated. "They are quite satisfactory, I assure you. The president of our company doesn't like to discuss them before they are—put into effect."

"I don't like to do business with a firm whose chief keeps himself a secret," the tall man said.

"But surely you can understand why he does that."

"Yes. And you can understand why I want to know your plans. I am paying for a job. I want to know it will be well done. It is not the sort of job from which I want any kick-backs, later."

The man who called himself Smith said slowly, "Very well. But there is the matter of money."

"I have it." The money appeared almost magically in the tall man's hands. It had not been there a moment before and his hands had not seemed to move; yet the money was there, a thick stack of bills held so that no one but the salesman could see them.

"Let me hear the plan," the tall man said.

The salesman slowly disengaged his gaze from the money. "This old man you wish us to—contact—lives alone. It has been rumored that he keeps money in his house, and during the last few days those rumors have been started afresh—by employees of our company. Because of these rumors, and because of the appearance of the house afterward, the police will figure that robbery was the motive."

"This gentleman we have in mind," the tall man said, "does not let strangers

into his house. The place is well locked and has burglar alarms. I did a bit of investigating before I came to your firm."

"Yes. But our president has been studying the layout for several days. It appears that this old gentleman whom we are discussing had a son who left Louisiana almost thirty years ago. That son has not been heard from since. Two of our most trusted operators will go to the house and claim to have a message from his son. The president is sure that will gain admittance."

"When?"

"Tonight," the salesman replied. "As soon as we've closed the deal."

"Very good." The tall man's stack of bills slid smoothly across the table top. "You will get the rest here, tomorrow night, after the story has appeared in the papers." He stood up and went out of the room, walking with a slight stoop to his shoulders, balanced so that he could move swiftly, in any direction.

Once outside the hotel he took his car from a parking lot and drove through the French Quarter. He made sure he was not being followed, then turned out Esplanade, his foot heavy on the gas. He was heading for the house of the man he had just arranged to have murdered.



IT WAS a big house, beyond the fringes of the city. A small bayou was a dark, protective arm around it, and the weed-grown grounds separated it from the road. The tall man left his car in an abandoned barn a quarter mile away and ran the rest of the distance. The night was still young, and there was a half moon overhead with fitful, tattered clouds blowing across it. The tall man was scarcely more visible than a shadow as he approached the house from the side, keeping low among the weeds and unkempt shrubs.

The house looked dark and deserted, but some of the windows showed tiny slits of light beneath drawn shades. The tall man avoided the wide stairs which he knew were wired to ring a bell inside the house if stepped on. He leaped, caught the wide balcony and swung himself effortlessly up. Full-length French windows opened onto the balcony.

From an inside pocket the tall man produced a piece of light, pliable steel about a foot long, weighted at one end with a sharply pointed head. Swung against the glass of the window, it punctured a neat, bullet-sized hole, making a sound no louder than a dropped penny. With a piece of wire the man reached through the hole, lighting his work now with a needle-sized glow of light from a flash. He loosened the burglar alarm wire which ran along the top of the window. Then he opened the window from the inside, still working through the hole he had made.

Inside, he stood listening. He had never been within the house before, although he had prowled the outside a half dozen times, planning this. But he could only guess at the layout of the rooms, and he could not afford to make any mistakes. For with him a mistake meant not only failure in his mission. It meant death.

So he stood there now, listening—and he knew almost instantly that something

was wrong. The place was too quiet. There was an electric tension in the air. A man whose life is constantly hunted develops a sixth sense of danger. He can sense it as though it were an odor.

There was the swift light tap of a single step. The light blazed on, filling the room. The tall man whirled, fast as the light almost; a gun appeared in his hand. But he did not fire. He was suddenly still, as immobile as a creature turned suddenly into marble.

Across the room from him the girl said, "Drop your gun! Drop it quickly!"

She was quite beautiful, tall and slender, dark-haired. Her face was pale; there was fear in her eyes, but there was determination also. The gun she held centered on the man's chest was steady as a rock. Her finger was tight on the trigger, so tight that the slightest tremor would squeeze it the last bit of the way.

"Drop your pistol," she said again, in that husky voice where fear and courage mingled.

The tall man offered a slow, disarming sort of smile. He was very close to death and he knew it. His muscles were contracted as though he could feel already the impact of the bullet.

His face showed nothing but good-humored surprise. "Certainly," he said. "But I didn't expect to find a girl here."

"Drop the gun!"

"I've already dropped it. See?" He



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held out his hand toward her, and the gun was no longer in it.

"Where . . . ?" she asked.

"I tossed it over there on the bed."

She looked toward the bed. And as she did the man moved—a fluid, soundless motion that had him at her side before she was even sure the gun wasn't on the bed. His hands closed on hers, removing her gun.

She tried to leap away. She opened her mouth for the immortal defense of women: screaming. His left hand closed over her lips while his arm circled and pulled her back against him.

"Don't!" he instructed softly. "I'm not going to hurt you or Mr. Duval. But don't yell. It means Mr. Duval's life!"

She was terrified, and yet something in the very sound of his voice, in the earnest expression of his face, seemed to reassure her. She ceased to struggle, and when his hand moved a little from her mouth, she whispered, "Who—what do you want here?"

The man hesitated a long while before he answered. "I want to save Mr. Duval's life," he said. "There's going to be an attempt to murder him tonight."

He did not tell her that the attempt would be made by men whom he himself had hired to commit the crime. He did not tell her why he had hired them; nor did he tell her who he was. There were many things that he—the ghost of a man who had once been a Federal Agent, who still walked and breathed and felt, but who was officially dead—could not say.

CHAPTER TWO

Between Cops and Crooks

IT WAS only an hour short of dawn when Brian O'Reilly entered the Department of Justice building and took the elevator up to the Chief's office.

The Chief looked tired. The effect of sleepless, weary, hard-working hours showed in his square face, but he smiled at O'Reilly.

"It's good to see you, Brian. It's always good to see you."

O'Reilly said, "It's always good to be here. This place that every other crook hates to even hear about is the one place in the world where the Ghost is comparatively safe."

The smile faded slowly from the Chief's face. "I've got a job for the Ghost," he said.

"You generally have. What now? Spies?"

"Not this time."

They were both silent then, remembering the first case of counter espionage which Brian O'Reilly had undertaken. It had been given him here in this same office, the two of them sitting facing one another across this same desk. "It's work that has to be done," the Chief had said. "But the odds are ten to one against the man who undertakes it, I'm afraid."

"When I was a magician, calling myself The Ghost, there were suckers who wanted to bet fifty to one I couldn't get out of milk cans and locked trunks," Brian O'Reilly replied.

"This will be harder than any escape act you ever pulled on the stage. And you'll have to work on it as a free agent. You'll even have to resign from the F.B.I. before you tackle it. Because it's so delicate, the Government must pretend to know nothing about it. If you're caught, we don't know you."

"Well, worry about it when I'm caught," Brian O'Reilly said; and he had tackled the job under his old stage name of the Ghost. He hadn't been caught—but he had been forced to kill the agent of a foreign power. So now the Ghost was technically an outlaw wanted by the very men with whom he had worked. As he

continued to work under the name of the Ghost, police attributed first one crime to him and then another. All the crimes they could not solve they laid at his invisible doorstep, until he was a fabulous name in crime with a reward on his head—dead or alive. He was hunted and hated by every honest policeman—and feared by every dishonest one. And organized crime learned too that when the Ghost took part, organized crime came off very badly. So the criminals of the nation as well as the police were gunning for him. That he survived was due to his ability, and to the fact that few persons had seen and recognized him—and lived.

Now, the Chief said, "It's murder this time, Brian. A huge, organized system of murder for profit. How many murders the gang has committed we don't know; we have a list of a half dozen deaths officially called accidents, but we believe they're the work of this murder gang. We know of at least twenty murders in eight states. Recently the gang has turned to extortion. They demand ten, thirty, a hundred thousand dollars, and threaten death if they are not paid. They don't make empty threats."

"The Allen case?"

"The Ellender case, the Raymond case—plenty of others. Yesterday they killed a Federal employee in New Orleans."

"So it's our business now," O'Reilly said.

"Yes. Even before yesterday I've had men working on it whenever possible. At a time of crisis such as our nation is experiencing now, crime is even more dastardly than under normal conditions. Crime breeds hate, and there should be no hate of one another in this country today. We must have unity as never before. But there are agents in this country who prey on people who have suffered as a result of crime—they tell them such things could not happen in a

country run by a dictator. People forget that crime has existed since Cain; they begin to believe that it is the result of a decadent form of government. These agents use the work of criminals to undermine the morale of the nation."

"I've seen examples of what you mean," O'Reilly said. "That type of scum which takes advantage of the national crisis to commit crimes."

"It's that way now. We've got to put this mob out of business. But the nation is swarming with spies: these so-called accidents to army airplanes, to munitions plants. Every man in the department is swamped with work. I can't tell them to drop everything else and hunt down these murderers."

"Where is the center of this ring?" O'Reilly asked.

"We have reason to believe it is in New Orleans. And we have reason to believe that one man is the brain of the whole organization. If we can get him the whole thing will fall apart. It will become nothing but a bunch of cheap crooks we can pick up any time."

Brian O'Reilly tamped out his cigarette and stood up. "I'm on my way to New Orleans," he said.



IT HAD taken him three days to locate a man who knew of the murder ring; one more day and he had met one of the small fry, a hanger-on. But he hadn't made much progress up the ladder until he let it be known that he would pay ten thousand dollars to have a murder committed.

O'Reilly had selected an old hermit, Charles Duval, as the man he pretended to want murdered. He'd heard something of the old man's habits, and knew it would be hard to get at him. O'Reilly hoped that the brains of the ring would look over the situation—and the Ghost might catch

him while he was doing so. Brian knew that the old man was safe until the down payment on the crime was made.

But though he watched Duval's house, O'Reilly didn't get a lead on the chief of the murder gang. The men he'd contacted were becoming restless and he was afraid to stall longer, lest the gang grow suspicious.

Tonight he had made contact with the first lieutenant of Murder for Profit, and made his payment. He would play it this way, he'd thought. He finally knew the lieutenant of the gang, and if he could capture the hired killers, he would have two leads, one of which should take him to the man he was after.

But he had been sure the old man lived alone. He had not expected to find a girl here in this house.

As he ceased to hold her tightly, she turned to face him. Her cheeks were bloodless; doubt and fear struggled for possession of her dark eyes.

"Who wants to kill Grandfather?" she demanded. "Why would anybody want to kill him?"

"He's your grandfather?" O'Reilly was surprised.

"Yes," the girl said.

"When did you come here?"

"Today. I've always lived in California, but my father died a few weeks ago; and just before he died he made me promise to come see Grandfather. Dad and Grandfather quarreled when Dad was a boy; after Dad ran away from home he never wrote to his father. . ."

"What made your grandfather such a hermit?"

"I think it was something that started even before Dad ran away as a boy. Brooding about that, year after year, has made Grandfather worse. He hates almost everybody now. He hates banks—" She checked herself.

"And he keeps a lot of cash in the house," the Ghost said, smiling. "Well,

I didn't come for that, so you don't need to worry."

"What did you come for?"

"I—"

Downstairs, an old man's thin, querulous voice called suddenly. "Grace! Grace! What's that noise up there? Is that somebody you're talking to?"

The girl started to answer, then stopped, her throat swollen with the words. The Ghost was tense. She could call to her grandfather and he'd have no chance to stop her this time.

"Grace!" the old man shouted. "If you don't answer I'll ring the burglar alarm! In five seconds!"

The Ghost cursed under his breath. If he fled, the murderers he had hired might arrive at any moment; and they would kill not only the old man but the girl, too, in order not to leave any witnesses. But if he stayed, and the police captured him here, it meant his own death. They'd learn his identity sooner or later. When they did. . .

Then, slowly, the girl was speaking. "There's no one up here but me, Grandfather. That's the radio you hear."

"Radio? What radio? I don't have any radio," the old man shouted.

"I brought one with me."

They could hear the old man muttering to himself. Then a door closed, and there was only silence from below.

The Ghost took a long, relieved breath. "Thanks," he whispered.

"I don't know why I trusted you," she said. "I don't even know why you're here."

"To save your grandfather's life."

"Who are you?" she asked.

Brian O'Reilly looked down at her, a queer and bitter loneliness upon his face. He said, "It doesn't matter, except—"

A bell clanged. The sound ran through the house. "That's the bell that rings when somebody is on the front steps!" the girl said softly.

"The men who want to murder your grandfather!" O'Reilly moved swiftly to the head of the stairs. As he paused there for an instant, looking down over the bannister, he saw the old man come into view. He was carrying a pistol and moving cautiously toward the barred front door. If he reached that door—if he let those men in when they pretended to have word from his son—they would murder him instantly.

And if O'Reilly tried to stop him, the old man would open fire on O'Reilly. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Grow Mad for Murder

THE Ghost stepped silently back to the girl's side. "Stop your grandfather!" he whispered. "Take him into a back room and keep him there—no matter what you hear!"

"But how—?"

"Get him there! If he opens that front door they'll kill him!" As she started past him, he added, "And don't let him turn in the police alarm!"

She almost stopped, then kept on down the stairs, looking back at him over her shoulder. Once more there was doubt and uncertainty in her eyes. He could not hear what she whispered to her grandfather, but after a moment she led the old man toward the back of the house. Yet even as she went she glanced up the stairway with that curious look of uncertainty upon her face, and O'Reilly wondered if she was going to turn in an alarm. He knew he couldn't blame her if she did. He was surprised that she had trusted him this far.

He heard a door close softly as the

girl and old man went into a rear room. He heard the click of a lock. Almost immediately afterward came the dull thud of someone knocking on the front door.

The Ghost went quietly down the stairway into the big, sparsely-furnished hall. The light was dim here, coming from a single overhead bulb. There was the smell of dust and disuse and decay. On the front door the knocking started again, and the sound of it reverberated along the empty hall.

The door was of heavy oak, studded and barred, with a small peep-hole cut in the center. The Ghost switched off the single hall light, then lifted the peep-hole cover and peered out. The front porch was dark, but beyond the overhang of the roof the night was washed with moonlight. Against this bluish backdrop O'Reilly could see the outline of two men.

He studied them for an instant, making as sure as possible that he had never seen either of them before; then he said in a thin, old-man's voice, "Go away! You've got no business here! Go away!"

One of the men said, "Aren't you Charles Duval?"

"I don't know you. Go away!"

"You had a son who left home thirty years ago. We've got a message from him."

So they were sticking to the original plan, the Ghost discovered. They had learned the old man had a son; but they hadn't known that the daughter of that son had turned up here unexpectedly.

The Ghost started to unbolt the door. He let it creak open, but kept the thick planking between him and the men.

"Come in," he whined.

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"Where's the light? What's it so dark for?"

"Here's the light," the Ghost said. The men were inside the hall now, and he shoved the door shut as he reached up and clicked on the light. In his right hand he held a gun, pointed almost casually between the two killers. "Put your hands up," he instructed calmly. "Then turn around and face the wall."

They stared at him, unmoving; neither had yet drawn a gun. They were both short men, but one was heavy-shouldered with a square, fat face that bespoke stupidity. It was the other, the Ghost knew instantly, who was the most dangerous. His face was lean and savage. His lips were pale, thin, and the tips of his teeth showed in two smooth, white lines. His eyes were green, with curious yellow flecks in them.

"Your hands," the Ghost said. "Get your heads underneath them."

The thin man said, "You're not Duval."

"How unfortunate for you."

"You're the man who paid to have Duval killed."

"That's me," the Ghost said.

The yellow flecks in the man's eyes seemed to whirl together, to flame insanely red. From the corner of his mouth he said, "Take him, Sam!" and his own hand flashed for his gun in a gesture almost too quick for the eye to follow. At the same instant the heavy-shouldered man reached for his gun.

The Ghost could have shot them both, for the thick-shouldered man was not as fast as the other; but he wanted them alive, and he was very sure of himself. Too sure. . . .

The Ghost's left hand flashed out and caught the wrist of the thin man, even as the man's hand closed on his gun. Then the Ghost spun, stooping, and flipped the little man straight over his shoulder against the wall. The whirl put him al-

most beside Sam, and as the man's gun came free of its holster, the Ghost struck with his own gun. He struck hard, and heard the crack of bone in the gunman's wrist.

Then he was turning back toward the man he had thrown, still quite certain of himself. The man lay sprawled on the floor, facing the door, away from the Ghost. But as O'Reilly turned, the man swung his gun upward. His single shot smashed the bulb overhead. His flailing foot landed on the Ghost's knee, and the Ghost staggered backward.

THERE was an almost steady jet of fire as the automatic roared and bullets smashed into the wall beside O'Reilly's head. He fired back, once, twice, moving as he did so, aiming low for the man's leg. With the second shot came the scream of pain."

The front door banged open. Swinging, it blocked the entrance from the Ghost's view for an instant. In that instant the little man leaped through and went sprinting across the porch. The Ghost tried to go after him, but was blocked by Sam, the thick-shouldered man, who was staggering trying to escape. The Ghost knew then that must be the one he'd shot in the leg. He'd thought it was the other.

When he got around Sam, he could see the thin man clearly in the moonlight. The Ghost skidded to a stop.

A cloud slid over the moon—darkness blotted the man from view. The Ghost cursed and leaped down the steps. Now, the moon was breaking free of the clouds; flecks of silver light spotted the yard. The Ghost jumped behind a myrtle bush and waited. Behind him he could hear the wounded man blundering down the steps. But he was not worrying about the man with a broken arm and a bullet hole through one leg—that one couldn't get away.

Moonlight spread softly over the front of the house, over the wounded man who was trying to escape. Across the weed-grown lawn a gun cracked once. The heavy-shouldered man cried out, spun half around, and fell. Then darkness closed down and the Ghost was running again, heading for the place where the gun had sounded.

Maybe there had been a third man left in the car, maybe the motor had been idling; but suddenly the sound of it grew to a roar and the Ghost, still running, saw the dark shape begin to move away down the road. He fired, but the car was moving quickly. Then it was out of sight, running without lights through the darkness.

There wasn't a chance to catch it, and the Ghost wasted no time on vain effort. He ran back across the wide lawn, a sick feeling of frustration within him. He'd been so sure of himself! Too sure! And because of that, one of the men had got away, and had shot the other before escaping! The Ghost was almost a foot taller than the wounded man, and the moon had been clear at the time of the shot.

The thick-shouldered man had been shot down to keep him from talking!

The moon was clear again when the Ghost found the man. He lay doubled up in the thick grass like some wounded animal, his face tilted up toward the night. The Ghost could see blood at the corners of his mouth. His eyes were open but glazed. The front of his coat, he clutched with both hands.

He was not dead. He was making feeble, whimpering noises to himself.

The Ghost knelt beside him. "Who was it ordered you to come here and kill Duval?" he asked.

Probably the man never heard him. He continued to mumble. Leaning closer the Ghost caught some of the words. "Benny—you didn't have to shoot me, Benny

... I wouldn't have talked. I ain't ever talked, have I . . . ?"

The voice faded out for a moment. His breath made a little bubbling at his mouth. Then the words came again. "But you like to kill, don't you, Benny . . . ? We was buddies, just punks in Hoboken when you killed that cop. You found out how easy it was to kill . . . You built up the business just so you could kill. You'd plan the jobs and have the rest of us help, you'd make us bring the guys to you sometimes—but nearly always you'd do the killing . . . It was because you liked to, wasn't it? But you didn't have to kill me, Benny. I been your pal since we were kids. . . ."

The voice grew thick and stopped again. And now the Ghost could hear the sirens were coming along the road which fronted this house. Either some passerby had heard the shooting, or the girl had turned in the alarm. He couldn't blame her. . . .

With a fierce but gentle desperation he shook the dying man. "What's Benny's last name? Where can I find him?"

Life was fading fast from the man's eyes. But for an instant they came clear again. "He'll kill—you. And the old man in the house too—because—he won't fail, even if he's been—double-crossed. Because—he loves—to kill. . . ."

"Where will I find him?"

"I . . ."

The police sirens were shrieking to a halt in front of the house now. The moon was cloud-covered, but searchlights began to swing and waver across the lawn. Cops called to one another.

"Where will I find Benny?" the Ghost asked desperately.

"In—" A searchlight caught them suddenly in its fierce white beam. At the same instant the man's head fell back limply.

Cops were shouting: "Hey you! What's going on there?" Other cops

were running from several directions.

The Ghost fired from his kneeling position and the searchlight blasted into darkness. Then the Ghost was running, leaning forward, dodging to right and left. There was the crackle of shots and bullets whipped the bushes to the right and left of him as he ran.

CHAPTER FOUR

Come Into My Parlor

HE DROVE slowly back toward the city, his nerves alert to every sound and movement around him, his brain busy with his problem. He could not go back to the hotel where he had lived as Mr. Jones and from which he had made contact with the men who sold murder for money, because he knew that the thin man with the yellow eyes would have that place watched. The dying man had said, "He'll kill you, and the old man in the house too! Because he won't fail, even if he's been double-crossed. He loves to kill!"

"He knows where I've been living, and the name I've been using," The Ghost thought. "And I know now that he's the man I'm after, the head of the murder ring!" The muttering of the dying man had told him that. The man had whispered, "You built up the business just so you could kill. You'd plan the jobs and have the rest of us help . . ."

Benny was the man he sought; but he did not know Benny's last name nor where he could be found; and he had no proof that could be turned over to the F.B.I. He was almost as far from capturing the man as he had ever been—but there was one big difference: Benny and his gang would be waiting to kill him on sight; they knew the hotel where he had been staying and where his clothes were. The Ghost was still in evening clothes and he couldn't go around

in them forever. And he wasn't an easy man to fit.

There was another thought in his mind as he drove back toward the city. Sam had whispered, "We was buddies, just little punks in Hoboken when you killed that cop."

So Sam and the little man with the yellow eyes had been friends since childhood—yet Benny had cold-bloodedly murdered his friend to prevent his talking. "It's because you like to kill!" Sam had said.

In his mind O'Reilly was building a picture of the man he was hunting—and by whom he was hunted. A man who *liked* to kill! A man gone mad with the lust for murder! "You'd plan the jobs and have the rest of us help. You'd make us bring the guys to you sometimes—but nearly always you'd do the killing," was Sam's description of his boss—a man who killed for the insane joy of murder! And yet a man with a brain capable of planning dozens of murders that the police could not solve!

"He'll keep after me," O'Reilly thought. "He won't know why I double-crossed him, but he knows I did. And a man like that won't let a double-cross go. And maybe, like Sam said, he'll try to kill old man Duval too, just because he won't be stopped on anything he undertakes. . . . If he goes after old Duval, there's the girl. . . . If he killed Duval, he would have to kill her too!"

Fear made a cold hollow in his stomach as he considered this. If death **struck** the old man or the girl, it would be because of him. He had given Charles Duval's name to the murder ring as the man he wanted killed, simply because he had to give them some name, and because the setup at Duval's home had offered possibilities for the Ghost. He had been sure there would be no real danger to the old man. And now—

He remembered how the girl looked,

standing there in the upstairs bedroom, her face pale but determined, courageous. He remembered the way her dark hair curled under, and he remembered her level dark eyes and her red lips.

"It was strange that she should have trusted me and helped me as much as she did," he thought. "Even if she did turn in the police alarm after the shooting started. I'd like to see her again, when this trouble is over. . . ." But he knew he wouldn't. He was the Ghost, a man with a price on his head, hunted by police and crooks. For him trouble was never over.

But at least he must make sure that nothing happened to the girl because of him.

It was easier to decide than to put into effect. His car was rolling through the outskirts of the city now, the street-lights making inverted cones of brightness through which insects flashed and disappeared. He knew what Benny looked like, but he didn't know his last name or where to find him. He knew what Benny's lieutenant, his front contact man—the one who had called himself Smith, when he talked to the Ghost at the hotel—looked like; but he didn't know Smith's real name or address either. He couldn't go back and watch Duval's house because the police had seen him. They'd certainly recognize him again as long as he wore evening clothes—and it was sure death to fall into the hands of the police.

Then, abruptly, he knew what he was going to do. He didn't know how to find Benny, but Benny knew how to find him. Benny would have the hotel watched, and it wasn't likely that he would have the Ghost murdered on sight. The dying man had said, "Nearly always you did the killing—because you like to kill!" Wouldn't such a person want to kill the man who had crossed him? Would Benny shoot on sight there in front of the

hotel—give the Ghost no chance but run the risk of capture by the police himself—or would he try some more subtle method?

"You'd make us bring the guys to you . . ." the dying man had muttered. Was that how he would try to work it this time?

"It's the only chance I've got," the Ghost whispered aloud. "It's the chance I've got to take!"

His mind made up, he stepped harder on the gas, going straight down Canal Street until he turned off and drove directly to his hotel.

* * *

HE WASTED no time now. His breath came fast and shallow. A bullet might strike between his shoulder blades at any instant. He appeared casual, and yet his deep-sunken eyes were probing everywhere. He gave the car keys to a bellhop, said, "A U-Drive-It. Have it charged to my bill," and turned to go inside.

Across the street a man moved in the shadows, leaning forward. The Ghost saw the movement as he started up the hotel steps. He swung back so that for a moment the car blocked him from the man across the street. A group of men were coming out of the hotel now. The Ghost stepped quickly back of them, bounded up the steps and got behind one of the building's pillars. Then he was inside the lobby, walking casually again.

Half-way across the lobby he saw the man sunk in a chair reading a paper. The Ghost angled away. The man tried to appear as though he were still reading the paper, yet he turned far enough to face the Ghost.

A couple of drunks were going toward the elevators. The Ghost stepped in between them. "My friends!" he said, and

put an arm around each of them. He staggered a little. "All we need is a first tenor."

One of the drunks said, "I sing tenor."

"My God!" the Ghost said. They were safe inside the elevator now. "I thought you were old Howard Happybottom. Good old Howard!" He mopped perspiration from his forehead, but it was icy cold and not caused by embarrassment.

Outside the door of his room he paused, listening. There was no sound as he unlocked the door, swung it open on darkness. He stepped through, spinning, closing the door behind him. Still there was no sound; and by the pale light through the uncurtained windows he made sure he was alone in the room. He locked the door, pulled the shades on the windows, and turned on the light.

He changed clothes swiftly. It was a magician's dress suit he'd been wearing, with all the innumerable hidden pockets that make possible so much of a magician's skill. The Ghost no longer confined his practice to the stage and he had other clothes just as effective, and since his brush with the police they'd be looking for a tall man in evening clothes. There would be trouble enough without the police.

He was just getting into a fresh suit when the knock sounded on the door.

He took a long breath. His lips were curved in a smile, but his mouth felt dry. Then he unlocked the door and pulled it open, keeping it between himself and the open doorway.

It was the man who called himself Smith, looking more bland and inoffensive and business-like than ever. His cheeks were ruddy, his smile polite, but his eyes had a calculating look in them. The Ghost closed the door again, locked it.

The pink-cheeked man said, "I know our appointment wasn't until tomorrow

night, but a few unexpected matters turned up on our business deal."

"So I heard," the Ghost said.

"They are so unusual, the president of our company would like to discuss them with you."

"Benny?" the Ghost asked casually. "Where is he?"

The other man's lips tightened a fraction; the hard look in his eyes grew brighter. "I am to take you to him."

"Suppose I don't want to go?"

There was a moment's pause. The smile was set and impersonal on the man's face. "I can't force you to go. But if you do come, I can assure you that everything will go smoothly, that you will have no trouble. The president is interested in you—as a possible member of his organization."

"I see," the Ghost said. "But just where do you fit in this business, Mr. Smith?" And when Smith did not answer, "As vice-president in charge of contacts with the more exclusive clients?"

"You might put it that way."

"I should think you'd make a better president than Benny. He's just a common kill-crazy."

He saw the flash in Smith's eyes, saw him hesitate before he said slowly, "He has other qualities."

"Courage," the Ghost said. "You must have courage enough to take over an organization before you can run it. What cut of the profit does Benny get, and how much do you get?"

"That's immaterial, at the moment. Are you going with me?"

"How do I know this isn't a plan to butcher me as soon as I am out of the hotel?"

"I told you it wasn't. The president has an idea he may be able to use you in his organization. I don't know just what happened tonight, but you seem to have made an impression on him."

"All right," the Ghost said. "But—"

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He took a small revolver from his coat pocket, cocked it, and holding the hammer back with his thumb, replaced it in his pocket, pointed at Smith. It was a small revolver and you didn't notice the outline of it against the pocket unless you looked carefully. Smith was looking carefully. "Just in case something happens to me," the Ghost said, "I would, even if dead, let go this hammer. These are explosive bullets, quite messy."

"I hope you hang on tightly to that hammer," Smith said.

"I will—if nothing happens. Let's go."

They went out and down together in the elevator. They went across the lobby, the Ghost a few inches behind the other man, talking pleasantly, gesturing with his left hand. They went down the front steps together. Here Smith paused.

The tiny beads of sweat made half-circles beneath his eyes. "Who are you, really?" he asked.

"The name's Jones."

"But really who—?" He checked himself. A big chauffeur-driven car had pulled up to the curb and stopped. Smith opened the door. "Get in, Mr. Jones."

"After you, my dear sir."

Smith grunted and got into the car. "Continually curious, aren't you?"

"I hope to be continually alive," the Ghost said. "Once you discontinue life it's hard to renew your subscription."

They drove into the French Quarter. The car stopped in the middle of a dark block.

Smith and the Ghost got out. "Through here," Smith said.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man Who Sent Benny

THERE was an alley-like entrance between the unwindowed walls of two buildings, so close together that the Ghost could have reached out and

touched both of them. After twenty feet the passage opened into a flagstone courtyard, eerily dark. There was the odor of the river here and of the pre-dawn fog, and on the damp flagstones their shoes made very little sound. Somewhere in the courtyard a fountain was playing, and they could hear the bell-like trickle of water.

Smith knew the way well. He found a door and knocked. The door opened into a long, dimly-lighted hallway. The man who had opened the door was squat and ugly and held a gun in his hand as if he knew how to use it.

"So you got him," the man said to Smith, and he came forward, the bulk of him suddenly dangerous.

The Ghost said, "My thumb is slippery."

Smith said quickly, "The president wants to see this fellow. There's not to be any trouble."

They went down the hall, past two more guards, up a flight of steps at the top of which a third man sat, smoking, a gun in a shoulder holster. If he had to shoot his way out, it wasn't going to be easy, the Ghost thought.

Finally they were in the room with the president of Murder for Profit, and the Ghost looked about.

It was a big room with a low ceiling, so that the length and breadth of the chamber was accentuated. The walls were wood, stained so dark they were almost black; and on them hung several huge, grotesque oil paintings. There was no light except for a desk lamp, bent low, so that its vivid glare hit the top of the desk and reflected backward. Behind this desk, his face illuminated by this up-wash of light from the desk-top, sat the man who gloried in murder. His face looked more lean and hungry than ever, and his tongue touched palely at the corners of his mouth as he looked at the Ghost.

The Ghost said, "Hello, Benny. Glad to see you again."

The little yellow-flecked eyes of the man behind the desk squinted narrowly. "So Sam wasn't dead," he said. "The rat talked."

"If Sam had been alive to talk I wouldn't have had to wait for Mr. Smith to bring me here. If I had known where you were I'd have come myself." As he spoke the Ghost was glancing around the room. There was a guard on each side of the door behind him. With Smith and Benny that made four to one, not counting the guards in the hall outside. As far as he could see there was no other door, no other exit except a barred window on the right.

Looking at those bars he knew it was an exit for nothing larger than a bird—which he, unfortunately, was not.

"You would have come here?" Benny asked. "Why?"

O'Reilly had let himself be brought here, and now he had to talk his way out. If he could get free without alarming these men, he could give the address to the F. B.I.—but first he had to be free.

The Ghost said blandly, "I heard of your organization. It's not a bad one. All it needs is somebody with brains to take over and make it into a really paying business."

"Brains!" He saw the yellow flecks in the man's eyes gather as they had done once before that night, begin to burn red. "You fool! You talk about brains after walking in here! You—"

"Don't," the Ghost offered quietly. Into the silence which followed the word he said, "There's a gun in my pocket pointed at you, Benny. A cocked gun, loaded with explosive bullets, and just my thumb holding back the hammer. If one of these apes back of me should fire, it would mean death for both of us."

THE man's eyes turned completely flame-colored. He half-rose out of his chair, shouting curses at Smith so loudly he couldn't hear the other's explanation of how the Ghost had kept that gun on him all the way here.

The Ghost said pleasantly, "Your pal Smith—at least that's the name I know him by—was sort of hoping I'd put a bullet into you, Benny. He wants to take over the mob."

"That thinks—" Benny checked himself swiftly. There was cunning in the pinched, animal face now as he looked at the Ghost. "Who are you anyway?"

"One of the Jones boys."

"Smart boy, huh? So smart you want to help me run my business."

"That's it."

The little man's hands lay flat in the glare of the desk lamp. They were small, white, delicate hands, but they were strangely hideous. The pale hair on their backs glowed in the light so that the hands were like small, furred animals.

"I'll tell you how smart you are," the man said. He was leaning forward above his hands now, the sound of his breathing audible in the room. "You're so smart you're going to be dead in one minute. And I am going to kill you." His hands twitched, curled up into small white balls. "I am going to shoot you in one minute. And after you have kicked a while I'll put a bullet through your head."

"Remember this gun in my pocket?" the Ghost asked. "Anything that makes me move my thumb is going to hurt you."

The little man behind the desk laughed. There was something horrible in the sound. His eyes shifted from the Ghost to one of the men at the door.

"From where you stand, Buck, can you see this guy's right elbow?" Benny called. The man at the door said, "Sure."

"Put a bullet through it. I'll take my

chances on that spoiling his aim." And to the Ghost, "Buck can strike a match with a gun at twenty feet. He won't miss the elbow. Let him have it, Buck."

The Ghost heard himself speaking. It seemed to take hours for the words to form in the room, and he had only split seconds in which to speak and act. His tongue seemed so dry it would scarcely move; and the fingers of his left hand, coiling, twisting with the incredible skill and precision of years of stage training, seemed structured of unbendable wood. Then the words were there in the room:

"He may miss if somebody shoots first, if the man over there, the—"

Chaos exploded. The room, the world went mad. No one had seen the Ghost flip the torpedo with his left hand. All they saw as their eyes turned to follow his statement was a sudden, roaring, absolutely blinding glare of blue-white light that erupted from floor to ceiling. And in that same instant the Ghost was moving to the left. The bullet from Butch's gun plucked at his right sleeve, burned across his elbow—but without shock.

Then the Ghost was whirling, crouched on one toe like a dancer, eyes shut until he was completely around. So that only he and Butch were not temporarily blinded by that first gigantic flash of light.

But Butch had swung unconsciously toward it even as he fired. He tried to turn back, blinking; and the second shot from his gun went into the floor at his feet. He fell across it—the Ghost's gun was small, but the bullets from it did terrific work at short range.

The blinding, blue-white fire died out almost as suddenly as it appeared. The second guard was staggering, one hand pawing at his eyes, firing crazily. The Ghost shot once and the man went backward.

Benny's gun thundered into action now. He was still blind from the glare,

but that would pass in seconds; and a gun was a thing as natural to his hand as hunger to an animal. Crouching back of his desk, he fired at the sound of the Ghost's pistol. He was inches wide. The Ghost shot, but he was turning fast, and his bullet ripped into the desk.

The man called Smith shot. He was sobbing, frightened, pawing at his eyes, blind—and lucky. His slug struck the Ghost's left forearm, spun him around. But even as he turned he put one of his own bullets into Smith's middle. The man stopped, and then began to reel.

The Ghost had finished his spin now; he was facing the desk again—aware he was too late! Benny was standing half erect, holding his gun caressingly. He could see now. He could judge to the instant how much quicker he would be than the Ghost. And he waited until the last instant with that terrible smile upon his lips. Then he fired.



HE'D been watching the Ghost, not Smith. Even as he pulled the trigger, Smith fell against him and his shot went wide by feet. The Ghost, firing deliberately, did not miss.

Outside the door men were shouting; they came pounding down the hall. Even as the first of the guards flung himself against the door, the Ghost reached it, flipped the lock. A gun crashed on the other side and the door jolted, but held.

The Ghost was leaping back across the room now, thinking Benny must have had some other way out, some way beside that one through the whole house! But the bars in the window were firm. He began to knock the oil paintings from the wall.

He found the door back of the third picture. No one but a man who had built his own escape devices would have noticed the misfit panel. But even now,

with the door located, he could not find the hidden catch. His fingers moved with trained fury while men fired into the locked door behind him.

Then the panel swung open, and he leaped through. . . .

He was on a rooftop running. There was a trap door here but he avoided that. From the second house it was only a one story drop into a courtyard where he had never been before.

After that he kept his left hand in his pocket so that the blood, flowing down his arm, would puddle in his pocket, not drip on the ground. From a telephone booth in a dancehall on Royal Street, he dialed long distance, then gave a private number in Washington. The voice that answered was clipped and brisk.

Brian O'Reilly, the Ghost, said, "This is the fellow who used to be known as B.O., now better known as the Little Man Who Isn't There." He gave the address

where the gun battle had taken place. "Have the boys pick up anybody they can there. But the number one and two men are cold muttons."

"And you?"

"I'll be heading north soon. But first, I want the address of a crooked doctor."

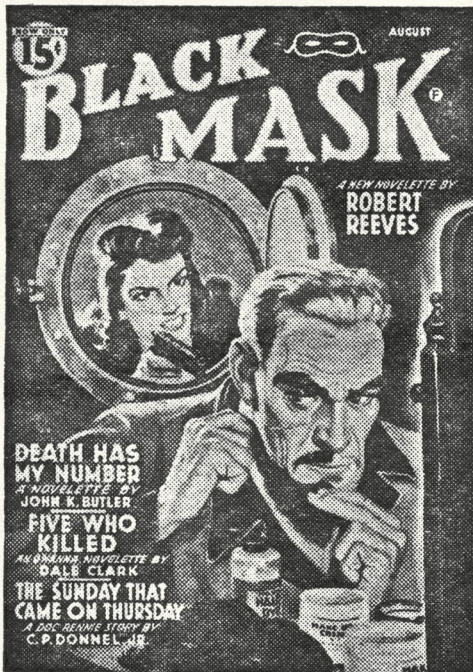
"What's happened?"

"I've got a bullet burn on one arm, a bullet hole in the other."

When he went out of the telephone booth, the arm with the slug in it was beginning to hurt like hell. To keep his mind off the pain he thought about old Charles Duval's granddaughter. He would like to see her again, he realized. He played with the idea of calling her.

Then the sight of a cop coming down the sidewalk brought him back to reality. The blood was beginning to drip through his coat and he didn't want the cop to notice. Brian O'Reilly went swiftly across the street, into the shadows.

THE END



DEATH HAS MY NUMBER . . .

Shuddered Addison Aldrich, the notorious attorney, who heard the voice of doom calling to him over the wires on that fateful night when a forest fire raged in Las Flores Canyon— You'll enjoy this dramatic novelette by JOHN K. BUTLER.

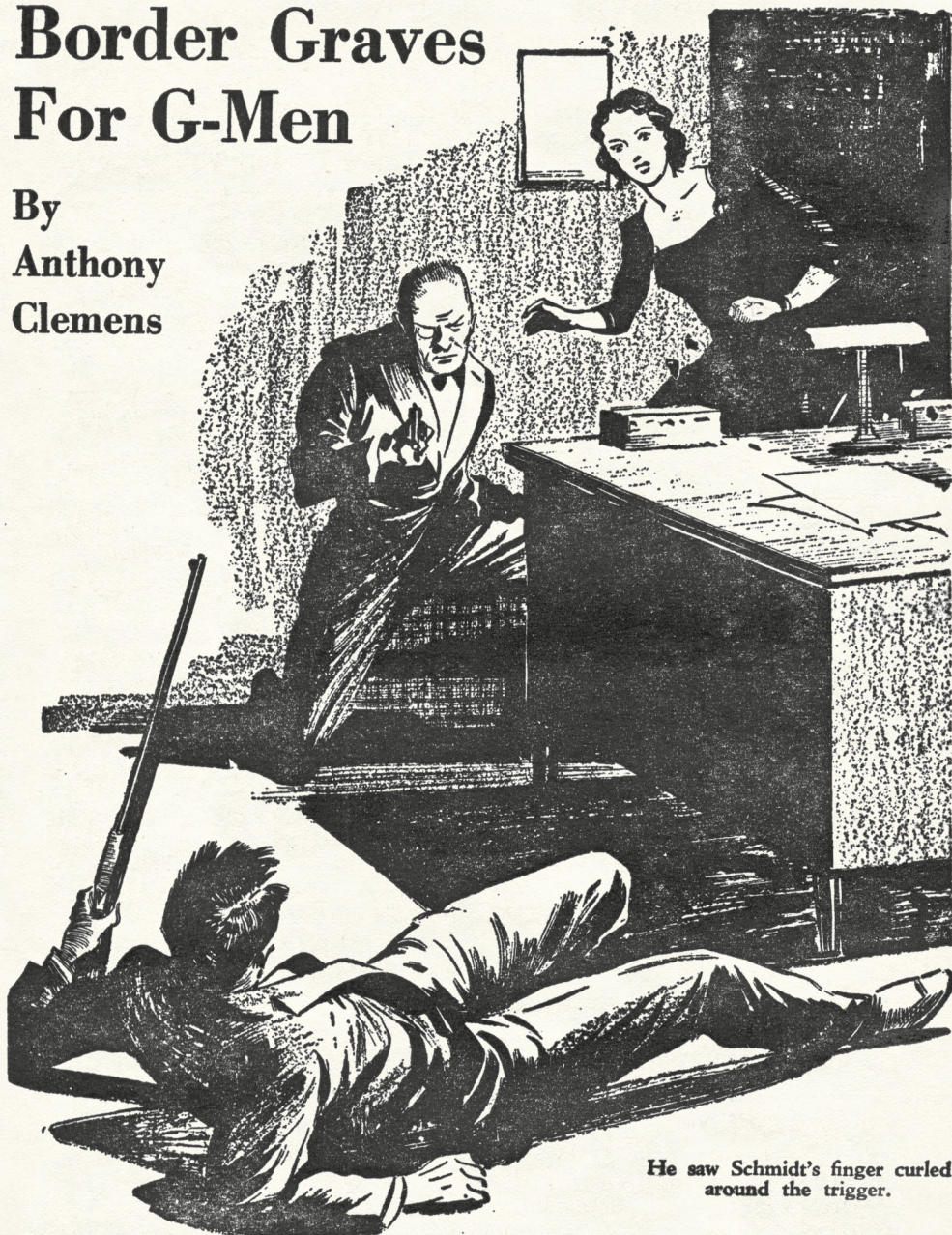
DALE CLARK'S suave house dick, O'Hanna, discovers that the swank San Alpa is headquarters for a convention of murderers—the *Five Who Killed*.

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Plus stories by C. P. DONNEL, Jr., EATON K. GOLDTHWAITE and others—in the great AUGUST issue on sale JUNE 20th!

Border Graves For G-Men

By
Anthony
Clemens



He saw Schmidt's finger curled
around the trigger.

Big John Larson kept a date with destiny below the border, where G-Men's lives are cheap. And for a partner in the fight to come, he chose a youngster who had already sold his country to the dogs!

THE border was quiet tonight. Big John Larson drove through Nuevo Laredo, and swung on to the International Bridge. The radiator of Big John's car was hot. He had driven the hundred and twenty-five miles from Monterrey in an hour and a half. The clock in his car read eight-forty-five.

The Mexican Customs smiled broadly when Big John drove up. "*Buenas noches, Señor Larson.*" He waved a hand. "It will not be necessary to search, Señor. Three times a week you cross the border, yet never do we find contraband in your automobile."

But he looked at the speedometer. Earlier in the evening, when Larson had come across from the Texas side, this man had also glanced at the speedometer. Big John could almost see the gears clicking in his mind as he made a swift mental calculation. The speedometer had shown 15,200 miles on the way in. Now it showed 15,450. It was easy for the Customs man to calculate that Big John had made a return trip of two hundred and fifty miles.

"You have been to Monterey, no, Señor?"

"No," said Larson. "I've been fishing."

"Ha, ha. You have catch something? You have bring it back? I do not see it."

"It's in the trunk compartment. Want to see it?"

"No, no, Señor. I know how you joke. Always you ask me to look in the trunk. Always there is nothing."

Big John Larson allowed a hint of a smile to tug at the corners of his mouth. He had a hundred peso note in his hand, folded up small. He handed it through the window. "Buy some Easter clothes for the *bambini*, Juan."

"*Gracias, Señor. Gracias!*" Then as Big John drove off across the bridge, "*Vaya con Dios, Señor!*"

Larson waved acknowledgment of the thanks. He drove to the other end, and stopped once more, in front of the American Customs booth on the U. S. side.

The United States Customs guard leaned his head in through the window. "Hello, Larson. Are you clean tonight?"

Big John smiled. His hands were tight on the wheel. "Go ahead and search if you want to, Evans."

The Customs man scowled, glancing at the line of traffic behind Big John's car—tourists, returning from their brief evening across the border.

"Go ahead, Larson," he growled. "You're always clean on your return trips. We'll get you one day—on the way out."

"More power to you," said Big John. He shifted gears, and sent the car on.

On the American side, the town of Laredo was busy. Tourists wandered up and down, peering in shop windows and brushing shoulders with uniformed men on leave from Fort McIntosh. Here and there, a husky M. P. walked alertly.

Big John turned off the main street, drove for a block or two, turned a corner, and then suddenly doused his lights. He braked to a stop, studying the rear-vision mirror. There was no movement on the street behind him. Satisfied that he was not being followed, he started once more, without lights. He turned into an alley between two low buildings, and parked the car close to a doorway. He got out and went swiftly around to the rear.

In a moment, he had the trunk compartment open.

There was a man inside.

HE WAS a big man, and it had been a tight squeeze. He was doubled over, his head almost between his knees. His hands were tied behind his back; he was gagged and blindfolded.

Big John Larson laid strong hands on the bound man, dragged him out of the trunk compartment, and slung him over his shoulder. He closed the lid, and walked swiftly with his burden to the doorway. Holding the man easily on his shoulder, he fumbled with keys, opened the door, and went inside. Once within, he deposited his prisoner on the floor, and locked the door.

He felt around the room in the dark, to

make sure that all the shutters were safely locked. Only then did he light the stump of a candle which rested on a rickety table. With a clasp knife, he cut the rope which tied his prisoner's hands. He took off the gag and the blindfold, without saying a word.

The prisoner was a stocky man, with dun-colored hair which was cropped in a Teutonic pompadour. He was conscious, and he blinked in the flickering light of the candle. His hand rose to touch a great welt on the side of his jaw.

"What did you hit me with?" he asked in a thick, guttural accent.

Big John smiled bleakly, and showed him a fist. "With this, Herr Roemer."

Roemer's face darkened. "You are a fool, John Larson. In Coahuila, and Nueva Leon, and in Tamaulipas, they know you as a gun-runner and a smuggler. You have made much money. But now that you have dared to kidnap me, your life is worth nothing."

He looked around the grimy room.

"We will be found. I have powerful friends in Monterrey. They will not rest till they have found me. An' they will know how to deal with you!"

"They won't find us, Herr Roemer," Big John said. "I know my way around as well as those friends of yours."

The sputtering candle reflected a flickering, vindictive pin-point of hate in Roemer's small eyes. "You are holding me for ransom?"

"Yes. I want ten thousand dollars—American." He smiled. "I'm sure your friends will pay it. You're pretty important to them."

Herr Roemer nodded slowly. "Yes. They will pay it." He fumbled in his pocket, and produced paper and pencil.

Larson got a board and gave it to him. Roemer rested the paper on the board, and wrote in German script:

bearer of this note. He requires payment of ten thousand American dollars for my release. I have been blindfolded, and I do not know where he is keeping me. I believe it best that you pay him, without question. You may accept his word that he will free me at once. His word is good. Heil Hitler!

Hans Roemer

Roemer looked up at Big John. "You pledge your word that you will set me free as soon as you have been paid?"

Larson inclined his head. "As soon as I have been paid, I will return here and set you free."

"You will open that door, and let me walk out of here, unmolested."

"Yes."

"I accept your word, then. You have always been known to keep it."

He handed the note to Big John.

Larson's eyes were inscrutable as he scanned it. He said tonelessly, "There's no address on it."

Roemer smiled. "Go to Monterrey, to Number 26 Calle Verdad. You will ring the bell five times quickly, and hand the note to the man who opens the door."

"Sorry," said Larson. "I've got to know the people I deal with. Your friends are too powerful in Nuevo Leon Province. I can't afford to act blindly."

Roemer shrugged. "That is the only way."

"All right, then," said Big John. He tore up the note, and threw the pieces away.

Roemer's eyes widened. "What—what are you going to do?"

"Tie you up, and drop you in the Rio Grande," Big John said grimly.

The German scrambled to his feet desperately, raising the board which he had used for writing. He gripped it by an edge, and swung it at Larson's head.

Big John danced away, with amazing speed for a man his size. He stepped in and smashed a left to the side of Roemer's head. Then he seized Roemer's wrist and twisted until the German relinquished his grip on the board.

Heil Hitler! I am a prisoner of the

Big John kicked the board into a corner. He picked up the rope from the floor, advanced toward Roemer.

The German started to back away, licking his lips. "Wait," he said hoarsely. "Wait. I will do as you ask."

"Write another note," Big John instructed.

Roemer looked around for the board.

"Write on the floor," Larson told him coldly.

Roemer knelt and wrote. When he finished, he folded the note; on the back of it he wrote:

Herr Ernesto Schmidt
Calle Verdad 26
Monterrey

Big John took the paper. "That's more like it. I know you've been working with Schmidt."

Roemer said, "You are very foolish, Larson, to try a thing like this. Herr Schmidt will close all roads from Mexico. He has influence, and he can do it. You will be caught. And then—a firing squad. You promised to return and release me. I know you will keep your promise. And while you do so, your escape from Mexico will be blocked."

Big John laughed harshly. "What makes you think we're in Mexico now?"

Roemer's face paled under the light of the flickering candle. He opened his mouth to speak, but Big John thrust the gag into it, and tied it securely. Then he bound the German's wrists and ankles.

★ ★ ★

BACK in the center of town, Larson parked in front of the National Hotel, and went inside. In the lobby, several people greeted him. A small man with a sharp nose came hurrying over to stop him.

"Larson! I've been waiting for you." He pulled Big John over into a corner

and whispered, "I've got a job for you. Twenty cases of Mauser rifles, right outside of town. Get 'em to Costa Rica for me by the first of the month, and there's two grand in it for you—"

Big John shook his head. "Not tonight, Sanchez, I'm busy."

Sanchez' face showed interest. "Something big in the wind?"

"Something big," Larson agreed. "See me tomorrow."

He left the little Latin, and went over to the desk. "Did a Mr. West register here tonight? A Mr. Horatio West?"

The clerk nodded. "Yes, Mr. Larson. He said he was expecting you. He's in Room 109."

Larson took the stairs to the first floor, and knocked at the door of 109. It was opened almost at once.

The man who opened the door looked at Larson, and then exclaimed gladly, "John! I was afraid you wouldn't get through! I've been kicking myself all evening for letting you go!"

Big John smiled. "It wasn't so hard, sir." He stepped inside. The man who was registered as Horatio West closed the door and locked it.

A portable radio was going, on the desk near the window. A young man of about twenty-eight was sitting near it, turning the dial. He looked up, ignoring Larson, and said, "Here's the nine-thirty news broadcast from San Antonio."

The announcer was saying:

"The wave of sabotage which is sweeping the country threatens seriously to cripple our schedule of war production. It has been definitely established that the guiding genius behind the immense ring of saboteurs is Ernesto Schmidt. But the efforts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been hampered by the fact that Schmidt has taken refuge just across the border, and is therefore out of the jurisdiction of the F.B.I. It is rumored that the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation is even now visiting a border town, in a desperate effort to find some means of checking Herr Ernesto Schmidt's activities..."

Big John Larson's eyes narrowed. He turned to the man who had admitted him to the room. "Good Lord, sir! How did that news get out? How did they find out about your being down here?"

The Chief of the F. B. I. threw a significant glance in the direction of the young man at the radio.

"John," he said, "I want you to meet Ned Eggers—Senator Eggers' son. He has made some contacts which he thinks will enable him to track down Ernesto Schmidt."

Young Eggers looked up. "How do, Larson," he said carelessly.

Big John frowned. "Was it you who gave out the information that the Chief was down here?"

"What of it?" Eggers demanded. "I was just answering the reporters' questions, and I hinted that your Director would be at the border, to help me nab Ernesto Schmidt."

"Is that *all* you told them?" Larson demanded sarcastically. "You didn't by any chance tell them that the Chief would be registered at the National Hotel?"

Eggers flushed. He got to his feet. "I didn't come here to be insulted—"

"Just a minute," the Chief interrupted. He put a hand on Big John's arm, but spoke to Eggers. "Let me explain to you, Eggers, that John Larson is one of the F.B.I.'s most valuable undercover agents. He's spent years down here along the border, building up a reputation as a hard-bitten adventurer with no respect for the law. He has connections in the underworld on both sides of the line. If it should be known that I am here, and that he has visited me, all his years of work would go by the board."

"Well," Eggers said sullenly, "if he's so good, why hasn't he located Schmidt?"

"I think I'll do that tonight," Larson said quietly. He turned to the Chief. "I've got an address, sir—"

"Sorry," Eggers interrupted. "But

you'll have to work with me tonight. You fellows have had plenty of time, and got no results. I have a definite contact."

Larson asked, "What kind of contact?"

THE Chief hurried to explain. "Eggers here, has met a young lady who has become quite interested in him. She knows a man in Monterrey who is willing to reveal the hiding place of Ernesto Schmidt. Eggers proposes to go there tonight with this young lady, and get that information. Yesterday, before I knew about this thing you were working on, Senator Eggers himself asked me if I had a man on the rolls who was thoroughly familiar with Mexico, who could go along as a bodyguard for his son. I mentioned you. So, the senator insists that you go along."

"Now look here, Larson exploded, "this will queer my game entirely. I haven't much time—"

"I'm sorry," the Chief said. "I did everything I could to persuade the senator to accept some one else in your place. But he insists on you. He's worried about his son's safety."

"After all," young Eggers said pompously, "a senator's son is entitled to a bodyguard when he risks his life—"

"Cut it!" Big John snapped.

Young Eggers said pettishly, "Very well, then I'll go myself with Miss Morell. If anything happens—"

"Did you say Miss Morell?" Larson was suddenly alert, interested.

"Yes, Miss Lola Morell. She's the young lady who's going to take me to Monterrey tonight."

"How did you happen to meet her?"

"I don't see that it's any concern of yours. But I don't mind telling you. She was introduced to me at a dance in Washintgon last week. We've become quite interested in each other."

"Sure," said Big John. "Where is she now?"

"I'm to meet her at the International Bridge in ten minutes. She's going to drive me to Monterrey."

"I'll go with you!" Big John said suddenly. "But we'll make the trip in *my* car."

"It's a good thing for you that you reconsidered," young Eggers said. "My father would have had your job—"

"It so happens," the Chief interrupted, "that Larson is resigning next month—he's going into Military Intelligence. Frankly, I'd sanction his refusal to accompany you, and accept full responsibility. However, if he is willing to go—"

"Yes, sir," said Big John. He exchanged a significant glance with the Chief, who nodded.

"I'll be waiting here for word from you, John—all night," the Chief whispered.

"You won't say that I'm a G-man," Larson told his companion, as he drove towards the bridge. "You'll just say you've hired me as your chauffeur for the night."

"Now look here," Eggers burst out. "I'll not take orders from you. I'll say whatever I please. Miss Morell is entirely trustworthy."

Big John stopped the car suddenly. He held his right fist before Eggers' face. "If you drop just one little hint that I'm a G-Man, I'll crack your jaw with this," he grated.

Eggers flushed, and dropped his eyes.

Big John started the car again, and drove on in silence.

At the head of the International Bridge, a long, sleek Hispano-Suiza was waiting for them. The girl who stepped out to greet young Eggers was tall and slender, with a long throat and a narrow delicate face which was warm and vibrant. It was easy to see how a youngster like Eggers could go overboard for her.

"Good evening, Ned," she greeted. "You're just on time—"

Seeing Big John towering over her, she stopped, frowning.

Eggers said, "Lola, this is—er—Larson. I've hired him to chauffeur me."

"But I have a car."

"Sorry, Lola. It's my father's orders. He's always worried about me."

She shrugged. "All right, then," and turned to the car.

Larson held the door open for her. She stepped into the rear, and Eggers took a seat beside her. Larson closed the door, then went around in front and got behind the wheel.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Monterrey," Lola Morell ordered.

"Whereabouts in Monterrey?"

"I'll tell you when we get there!"

Larson put the car in gear and drove on to the bridge. They passed the American Customs with no trouble, except a frown from Evans. At the Mexican side, Juan waved them on with a friendly hand. They swung through the Mexican town on the other side, then on out to the new Pan-American Highway.

Lola Morell said, "You are well-known to the Customs, Mr. Larson. It must be convenient."

"In my business," said Big John, "it's convenient to know everybody. For instance, I know you."

"Indeed! I've heard of you, of course. But I don't think we've ever met."

"We haven't. But I've met some friends of yours."

There was a short silence. Then Lola said, "How interesting!" and turned to talk with Ned Eggers in a low voice. She didn't seem eager for Larson to name those friends.

★ ★ ★

BIG JOHN drove at a steady pace of seventy-five miles an hour. Vallecillo, Sabinas, Hidalgo, Cienega de Flores flashed by. Eggers, who had

never been across the border, kept asking questions, and Lola Morell supplied the answers.

"I was brought up here in the Province of Nuevo Leon," she explained. "I know this country well. My family has lived in Monterrey for six generations."

"You have a brother, haven't you?" Big John asked over his shoulder. "Ponce Morell?"

She uttered a little exclamation. "Y—yes. How did you know?"

"I get around," he told her. "I pick up a lot of things. I heard your brother went to Spain three years ago. He was fighting for the Loyalists."

"Yes." She whispered the words.

"You heard from him lately?"

"No," the girl said.

Larson asked nothing further. He drove on, smiling bleakly into the darkness ahead.

The lights of Monterrey suddenly flashed into view as they topped a rise. Larson grunted, "Here we are. Where do you want to go?"

"The City Hall," Lola said.

Big John slowed up going through the outskirts of Monterrey. As they crossed the Santa Catalina River, Independence Hill was visible to the west, high and forbidding.

Big John waved a hand toward the hill. "That's where old Zachary Taylor beat the Mexican Army, in 1846."

"The Mexican troops fought very bravely," Lola Morell snapped. "They were allowed to retain their arms and ammunition."

"That's right," Larson agreed. "No Mexican has to feel ashamed at remembering that battle. But there are a lot of Mexicans today who forget that the United States gave their country back to them when we could have kept it." He paused briefly before he added. "If the Nazis ever get power here, they won't give the country back to the Mexicans!"

At the Plaza, he brought the car to a stop. Lola Morell and Ned Eggers got out. She took Egger's arm.

"We'll walk from here," she said. "It's not far. And Larson will have to remain behind. The man we are going to see insists that we come alone."

Eggers looked a little nervous, glancing around at the proud old buildings which flanked the Plaza. Some of them had given way to modern structures, but it was still quite different from an American city.

"Do you think it'll be all right?"

She smiled encouragingly. "Of course, Ned. No one even knows who you are." She started off, her arm linked in Eggers'. "Wait here, Larson," she called back.

"I'll be all right," Eggers said quickly. "I have a gun."

"Sorry." Big John shook his head. "I must go along. Remember your father's orders."

"Impossible!" Lola exclaimed. "It will spoil everything. The man we are to see is in hiding. His address must not be divulged!"

"Would it be on the Calle Verdad, by any chance?"

An involuntary gasp escaped her. Her dark, mysterious eyes rested on Big John for a long instant. Then she whispered, "Perhaps you had better come along."

The Calle Verdad was a dark, dead-end street, ten minutes' walk from the Plaza. They stopped in front of it, and Lola Morell said, "Wait here."

She went to a door and felt for a bell. Big John, watching carefully, saw her press the button five times. The door opened immediately, just a crack. Lola whispered something with her back to Eggers and Larson. She talked for a long time, in Spanish. Once her voice rose a little, but Larson could not catch the words.

Eggers was getting nervous. "It's so dark—"

Big John smiled grimly, and took his arm. "There's no turning back now, Eggers. You've got to go all the way!"

"What—what do you mean?"

"Up there—" Larson raised his eyes—
The first floor window!"

A man's head was just discernible in the shadowed darkness. Alongside it was the barrel of a rifle, carefully trained upon them.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Eggers. "It—it's a gun! What does it all mean, Larson?"

"It means," Big John said, "that you are now standing in front of the headquarters of Ernesto Schmidt!"

ball with them. Why, she's scared stiff—"

"Then what'll we do—"

He broke off as Lola stopped talking with the person inside the door. That person was apparently satisfied, for the door opened wider.

Lola turned and smiled. "We can go in now."

Big John pushed Eggers forward. "Carry on," he said.

Ned Eggers squared his shoulders.

"Like old Zach Taylor!" he answered. He went through the doorway after Lola, his hand in his pocket, on his gun.

Big John Larson whispered, "Don't start anything till I give the word. Take

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"**B**UT—but Lola said she was taking me to a man who could tell me about Schmidt, not to Schmidt himself!"

"Well," said Larson, "isn't this better? Suppose you had found out where Schmidt was hiding? What would you have done?"

"But why should she bring me here?"

"Because your father is a senator, and the chairman of a powerful Congressional Committee handling national defense problems. If Schmidt has you in his hands, he can compel your father to do certain things. They have ingenious methods of torture down here. Schmidt could probably exert great pressure on your father."

Young Eggers groaned. "What a fool I've been! Lola's betraying me!"

"They're probably using pressure on her, too. She has a brother in Spain. He's in Franco's hands now. They've no doubt explained to her just what diabolical things they'd do to him, if she doesn't play

your cue from me. Remember that, son!"

Eggers nodded.

The door closed behind them. Immediately, a bright overhead light was snapped on. Eggers and Larson found themselves facing three men who stood in the doorway to the room beyond. Each of these men was pointing a rifle at them. Lola had disappeared.

The three men were not Mexican. Their features were hard, without a spark of human sympathy. Their figures were curled around the triggers.

Eggers stirred uneasily, still keeping his hand on the gun in his pocket. Out of the corner of his mouth, he whispered, "These three guys remind me of the Nazi storm troopers we see in the movies these days."

"That's what they are," Big John told him. "I know them well. The one on the left is a chap named Johann Folges. The middle one is Max Breitung. The one on

the right is Otto Sprecher." He smiled at them, genially. "Good evening, gentlemen. Is this the way to receive a friend?"

Otto Sprecher growled, "Do not speak, Larson. Do not move!"

From the room behind them, came a precise, autocratic voice: "Bring them here!"

Otto Sprecher stepped to one side, Max Breitung and Johann Folges to the other, leaving the doorway clear.

In the next room, a man sat at a broad desk. His head was shaved, giving him somewhat the look of a vulture. He was wearing evening clothes, with a bow tie. His thin, bloodless lips were curved in a faint smile.

Big John Larson said, "Good evening, Herr Ernesto Schmidt."

Schmidt stirred impatiently. "Be silent! If you make trouble, you shall be killed at once. Come in here, both of you."

They advanced into the room, with the three troopers behind them.

"Disarm them!" Schmidt ordered, in English.

Ned Eggers threw a quick, questioning glance at Larson.

Big John shook his head faintly in the negative. They allowed themselves to be searched. The troopers took the gun from Ned's pocket. Then they turned their attention to Big John. With him they were far more careful than they had been with Eggers. Folges stood behind him, with a rifle muzzle pressed close against the small of his back, while Breitung searched him carefully. Big John had no shoulder holster, but in the back pocket of his trousers, Breitung found a compact little thirty-two calibre automatic.

Breitung stepped back, and turned to the man at the desk. "It is done, Herr Schmidt."

Schmidt nodded. "Remain at the door."

The three men stepped back, their rifles poised.

Schmidt turned to Ned. "I shall re-

quire you to write a letter to your father, Eggers, advising him that you are a prisoner. Sit down there and write. I shall dictate." He motioned to a chair at the other side of the desk.

Big John Larson said, "Don't write it, Eggers!"

ERNESTO SCHMIDT scowled. He motioned to Otto Sprecher and the other two guards. "Take him out. Dispose of him!"

"One moment, please," Larson said. "I have a letter for you, Herr Schmidt." He made a motion to put a hand in his pocket, and a rifle barrel was immediately thrust into his back. He shrugged. "You can find it for yourself, then."

Schmidt's eyes narrowed. "Where did you get this letter?"

Big John merely smiled.

Ernesto Schmidt motioned to Sprecher, who put a hand into Larson's side coat pocket. He brought out the folded note, with Schmidt's name and address written on the back. Schmidt took it, unfolded it slowly, and spread it on the desk.

His face showed nothing. He raised his eyes to Larson. "You have kidnaped Hans Roemer?" he said.

"Exactly. And since Roemer is your right hand man, you will probably want to get him back."

"Quite so, quite so!" said Schmidt. "I'm glad that I did not kill you. You shall talk before I kill you. You will tell us where Roemer is."

"Gladly," said Big John. "He's in Laredo. Go get him, Schmidt."

"Impossible!" the spymaster snorted. "You're lying. You shall be made to tell the truth!"

"Eggers," Big John said, "I think that now is the time!" He spoke confidentially, as if he and Eggers were the only ones in the room. "This man Schmidt," he said, "is dangerous to the United States. Alive, he may cost us thousands of American

lives, and the loss of millions of dollars worth of munitions and war gear. To be certain of his death, it would be worth sacrificing an entire army division."

"I see," Ned Eggers replied softly. "So it's certainly worth your life and mine."

"Exactly. Let's go!"

"Zowie!" yelled Eggers. He was sitting only two feet from Schmidt. He launched himself at the German, winding his arms around the man's neck, tangling with him, carrying him to the floor behind the desk, chair and all.

At the same time, Big John hurtled the desk and landed on the floor beside them.

During that brief instant of chain-lightning action, the three troopers had hesitated to use their fives, for they would have been almost certain to hit their leader. Now, however, they rushed forward, shouting with rage.

Ned Eggers was struggling on the floor with Schmidt, and Big John let them alone. He pawed in the drawer of Schmidt's desk, and found a big Luger which the spymaster had put there.

He came to his feet with a hard, set smile on his face, and met the rush of those three armed men. They were almost upon him when the heavy Luger began to thunder in his hand, bucking powerfully with each shot.

Breitung and Folges went down under the slugs, but Sprecher had sprung to one side, in order to come around the desk. Just as Big John swung the Luger around toward him, Sprecher brought his rifle barrel down upon Larson's wrist in a vicious sweeping blow. It sent the Luger bouncing out of Larson's hand.

Sprecher was intent upon capturing Big John alive, for he knew that they must yet extract from him the information concerning Hans Roemer. When he saw Big John disarmed, he uttered a hoarse shout, and swung the rifle once more, aiming at the head.

Larson lifted his injured hand, and took the full force of that powerful blow on his forearm. He felt a sharp, knifing pain flash like an electric spark from fingertips to elbow, as the steel rifle barrel shattered the bone. But his face remained grimly set; he leaped in to engage Sprecher at close quarters. His right arm hung limp and useless at his side, and the pain of it brought sweat to his forehead. But he smashed a left square into Sprecher's face, and then followed to grip the trooper's throat in the powerful fingers of his left hand. He forced Sprecher back against the wall, so that the Nazi could not squirm out of the grip, around his windpipe.

SPRECHER had dropped the rifle, and he flailed viciously at Big John's face with both fists. Big John's reach was longer than Sprecher's, so the blows did not land. He kept tightening his hold on the man's throat.

Sprecher's face lost color; his mouth went open, gasping for air. He tried to bring a knee up to Big John's groin, and Larson had to step in close to avoid it. Now, Sprecher struggled to hit Larson's face. He swung wildly, desperately, with the frenzy of a man who saw death slowly constricting its coils about his throat.

Larson's right arm was useless to ward off those blows, and he could only stand there and take the punishment, trying to keep the inexorable pressure upon Sprecher's throat.

Laughter rumbled deep in his throat, and he held on to Sprecher's throat. At last, the blows became less powerful, and Sprecher's hands fell to his sides. A shudder passed through his body, and his head fell forward, his frame sagged.

Big John grunted, and let go. He swung around, without even trying to wipe the blood from his face, and looked for Ned Eggers. He was on the floor, tangled in a death struggle with Ernesto

Schmidt. But he was losing. The kid was game, but he didn't have the experience in deadly fighting which Ernesto Schmidt had acquired through the years. All the young fellow was trying to do was to hang on to Schmidt, to prevent his escape. He had his arms wrapped around Schmidt's middle, and was hanging on, keeping his head sunk against the German's shoulder.

But just as Larson turned around, Schmidt got a hand under Ned's chin and jerked hard. Ned's head went back with a snap; his arms flew wide.

Schmidt sprang to his feet, saw Big John, and uttered a cry of rage. He snatched up the Luger which had been struck from Big John's hand.

Larson dropped to one knee. His fingers tightened around the rifle which Otto Sprecher had dropped, but he had only his left hand with which to manipulate. He raised it to his shoulder, and knew he was slow. Much slower than Schmidt, who only had a revolver to aim and shoot. Nevertheless, Big John Larson was going to die trying. He saw that ugly hole of the Luger's barrel staring into his face, while his rifle was only halfway to his shoulder. He saw Schmidt's face, an ugly mask of fury behind the weapon, taking certain, careful aim. He saw Schmidt's finger curled around the trigger.

Ned Eggers was on the floor behind the desk. His head had struck against a corner of the desk when Schmidt had broken his hold. The young fellow was groping around groggily. In a moment he would be in full possession of his senses again. But a moment more would be too late.

Larson was smiling. Schmidt would get him. But Larson was a powerful, rugged man. Even after the hammer-blow from that Luger struck him, he hoped to be able to raise the rifle for one single shot—a shot that would take the spymaster with him—

And then, just as Schmidt's finger was tightening on the trigger, a white figure appeared in the doorway. It was the girl, Lola Morell. She uttered a strangled cry, and threw herself at Schmidt. Her hurtling body struck Schmidt's arm just as he fired. The slug went wide to the left, missing Big John by a foot.

Schmidt's curse was drowned by the thunderous bark of the Luger as he thrust Lola Morell to one side, and swung the gun around for another shot.

But now, Big John Larson had the rifle at his shoulder, holding it with one hand, and pressing the stock back against his shoulder to keep it steady. Carefully, he pulled the trigger.

The powerful gun blasted, and the quick whine of the speeding slug sounded like the wail of a siren in the confines of the small room. The steel-jacketed bullet hurled Schmidt back against the wall with irresistible force. For a second it seemed almost as if the slug had nailed him to the wall.

Then he sank slowly to the floor.

Big John got to his feet.

He smiled at Lola Morell. "Thank you," he said.

She came to him swiftly. "You know why I—helped them?"

He nodded. "Because of your brother."

"Yes, yes. I—was frightened of what they would do to him, there in Spain. But just now, I was thinking. I was thinking that you two, you and Ned, were eager and willing to give up your lives for the United States, which you love. I—I love Mexico, no less. My brother would have it so, I am sure."

"Good girl," said Big John. "Better go now, before the police come. There's no one left alive in this house. No one to tell what part you played here tonight. Perhaps they will not even harm your brother."

She put a hand on his sleeve. "Until we meet again, then!"

She turned, and swiftly kissed Ned Eggers, then hurried from the room.

★ ★ ★

LARSON was already at the desk, rifling through papers, scattering them in every direction when he saw they were not what he wanted. He pushed Schmidt's body out of the way, and went through all the drawers without success, while Eggers watched him. Then he turned to Schmidt's body. It was in the right hand vest pocket that he found the small black book. He thumbed through it swiftly. He looked up and nodded at Eggers.

"This is it, all right. It has the names of every sabotage agent working for Schmidt in the States. Let's get out of here."

"What about Lola?"

Big John shrugged. "Let her go. She's just another victim of the Nazi system."

They walked out of that house and down the street without being stopped. No police appeared. No one was even curious enough to stick a head out of the window. Down here, they had learned

by bitter experience that it is healthier to mind your own business.

At the Plaza, they found an all-night restaurant that had a telephone. Larson pushed into the booth, and put through a call to the Chief. He was holding tightly on to the black book.

"We'll read this list to the Boss over the phone," he told Eggers who was crowding close to him. "By the time we get back across the border, every one of these saboteurs will be rounded up!"

Eggers lowered his eyes. He was fidgetting uneasily. "Look here, Larson, I've been an awful heel. I was a pompous, stuck-up jackass. I didn't know what it was all about. I didn't realize what you boys in the F. B. I. have to go up against—"

Larson grinned. "For a senator's son, you turned out all right, kid. Here—" he thrust the little black book into Eggers' hand, and got out of the phone booth—"you can make the report to the Chief. And tell him to tell your old man that his kid is okay with the F. B. I.!"

Ned Eggers swallowed hard. "Gee!" he said. "Gee!"



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FEED THE FEDS WITH HOT LEAD

Another Action-Packed "Phil Towne" Novelette

By William R. Cox

Against this sudden national epidemic of bank robbery and wanton killing, local police were helpless. So it became a case for Phil Towne, the F.B.I.'s crack agent—who was offered no choice but to place his life in the hands of the very man he suspected.



CHAPTER ONE

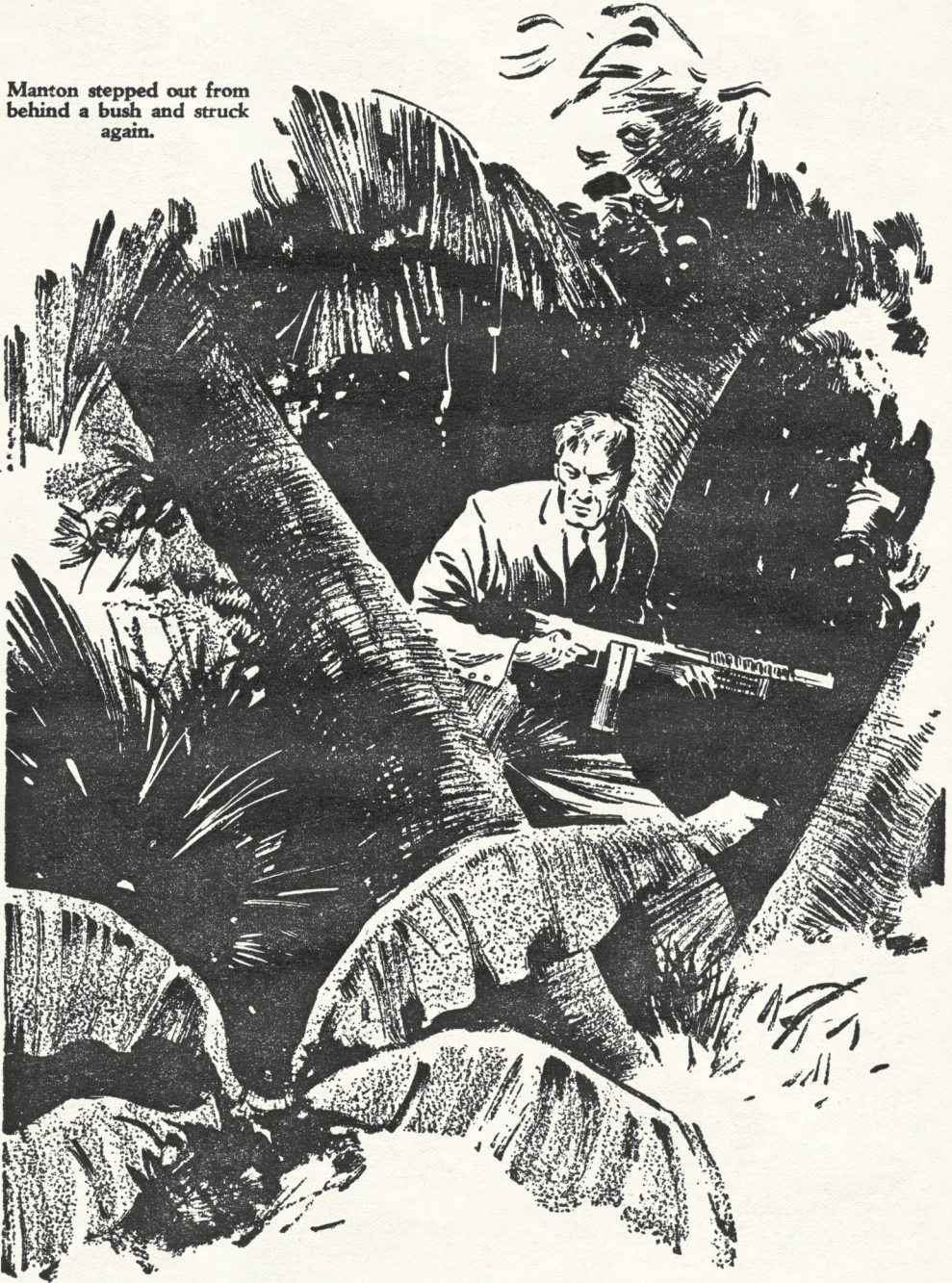
Banks and Bullets

PHIL TOWNE sat quietly, playing with the paper cutter on the Boss's desk. The little man was across from him—a mousey little man, as incon-

spicuous almost as Phil Towne himself.

The Boss said, "This is John Storm. He can tell a remarkably clear story of this latest bank robbery. I want you to hear it, Phil. The *modus operandi* in every instance has been the same, and

Manton stepped out from behind a bush and struck again.



there have been a hundred bank holdups in the past few months. It's unbelievable that they can get away with it."

Phil picked up the piece of smudged white paper which John Storm had picked up in the bank that day. It was lettered neatly enough:

"Mile, six one-tenth, turn left white house with green bl.; turn rt. two-tenths slow and sharp left. Mile, two three-tenth, hit pike 45. Mile seven mac. rd., turn easy left. Mile, two four-tenth, turn right slow sharp, turn. . ."

Phil said, "Tell us, Mr. Storm."

The little man said, almost apologetically, "I have a photographic memory. It's a sort of freak, you know?"

The Boss said, "Phil knows. He has one, too."

The little man nodded and began to speak:

"The Citizens and Northern Bank is at West and Jopper Streets. They got hold of the janitor, made him open the doors at precisely 8:15. By that time the money was in the cages and the tellers were ready for the day's business. Of course the time-lock was set on the vault, but there were ten thousand dollars on the counters. I once worked in a bank, and I sort of guessed what was going to happen.

"Two of them came inside. One stayed at the door. The other must have been one in the car. They had revolvers and wore masks, but I'd know them if I saw them again. The leader was a medium-sized man, heavy-set—I gave all the descriptions before.

"Well, in five minutes it was over. Exactly five minutes. They raked all the money into canvas sacks, placed the silver in cigar boxes they had with them. No one had a chance to do anything, because they knew right where the alarm signals were and kept everyone away from them.

"I could almost swear I'd seen the

leader before. There was something about the way he moved. He sort of dragged one leg.

They were backing to the door when your man came in through the side door. The leader turned and saw him. He said, 'The Boy Scout! You're early. Boy Scout.'

"Then he shot Himes. He hit him the first time, as Himes was going for his gun. But he fired five more shots, and I don't think he missed once. He just stood there, and you could see his mouth under the mask. It was twisted and hard and cruel. He certainly hated Himes."

THE Boss said, "Thank you, Mr. Storm. I know you've repeated this many times, but I had to have Phil hear it."

The little man said, "I wish you could catch that leader, so that depositors like myself will be safe."

"I wish so, too," the Boss said grimly.

John Storm left the big office. Phil played with the piece of soiled, folded paper. Finally he put it aside, shaking his head.

The Boss said, "That's Mike Gard's *modus operandi*, to the last detail. But Gard was shot trying to escape from Joliet. They buried him. We have the prints card in the dead files!"

"They might have buried someone. But this Mike Gard's 'run-and-gets.'" Phil pointed to the piece of paper.

The Boss said perplexedly, "There have been scores of these robberies, all successful, using the same m. o., all in the past few months. Gard couldn't be in all those places at once. Yet, no other bank robber could match Gard for efficiency. He's the greatest crook that ever lived."

The hard-bitten agent said, "There won't be a bank left in the East if we don't stop it. They're passing the bonds they nab. Insurance companies are buy-

ing them back—even if we can't prove it."

"It must be stopped at the source. Where do they escape to? How do they manage to disappear with every road covered by radio twelve minutes after a holdup?"

The Boss continued quietly, "It's another job for you, Phil. This is a big thing, extending from the Coast to the Rockies. In these times we can't afford a wave of bank holdups."

Phil said, "Okay. I'll take it on."

"Himes was a good man," the Boss remarked. "He's the third agent we've lost. They know they're safe enough except from us. They never kill local law; they just run away from it. But they'll shoot you like a dog."

Phil smiled. "I've been shot like a dog. Like a cat I've lived to be shot again."

The Boss watched his lone wolf agent go out the door. Outside that office it was difficult to picture Phil Towne as the scourge of evil-doers, the killer of dozens of vicious criminals. Phil was useful *because* of his appearance rather than *despite* it. His was the art of being inconspicuous, and his years of service had instilled in him the ability to raise this anonymity to an asset of highest degree.

He walked down the street, a drab figure in a neat blue suit, tan shoes, a gray hat. He was one of a million John Does, a man going about his quiet business in a modest way. He looked harmless as a kitten.

A taxi stopped at the curb. A man's voice said, "Get in, Towne."

Phil looked at the occupant of the cab. The man had mobster written in every line of his face; in the dilated eyes which bespoke cocaine. The gun had been steady, but the finger too tight on the trigger.

Death was staring Phil Towne in the face. . . .

Phil said, "Picking us off as we leave

the building these days, eh, pal?" and got into the cab.

The gunman's voice was a pitch too high for his face. "There won't be any more of you Boy Scouts left in another month! We'll show you guys!"

The cab driver was in on this, too—a smart fellow, with a gypsy look about him. The cab snaked through traffic, heading for the Alexandria Bridge.

Phil said, "You boys are gettin' mighty tough, all right."

"Too tough for you," boasted the gunman. He kept the gun far enough from Phil to grab, and his finger never left the trigger. Phil slouched in the corner, his hat tilted back on his sparse, brown hair.

They hit the bridge and started over into Virginia. Traffic was heavy. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and this was the cherry blossom season. People from all over the nation were down to drive along the banks of the lovely Potomac. The cab got jammed in the outer lane and couldn't move for a moment.

The doped gunman was calm enough while the cab was in motion. They're all like that, Phil thought. As soon as the flow of action stops, they go off.

The gun did not waver, but the man who held it snapped, "Can'tcha get goin', Moe! This is gotta be timed!"

The driver snarled, "Take it easy, wise guy. This ain't no plane. You're gettin' too used to—" He broke off as he shifted into first.

The gunman leaned forward, growling, "Don't talk back, Moe. You know how I stand in this outfit. I don't take no talk from—"

Phil made his bid with that miraculous speed he had acquired in his years in service; the speed which was unbelievable, even when witnessed. The gun appeared magically in his right hand.

Moe opened his mouth to warn the gunman. The words were drowned in the

loud explosion of the .38 which Phil handled so adequately.

The gunman slumped, his weapon dropping to the floor.

Phil said to Moe, "Drive on."

The driver was white as a sheet. He stammered, "Cheese! Con had the drop on ya! I never seen no guy beat a drop!"

"Get moving," said Phil impatiently. Heads were craning out of the cars on the bridge, horns were honking. Phil Towne could not afford to be the center of attention in a mob scene. He had things to do.

The cab crawled off the bridge. Phil stepped out of the car, his gun back in the shoulder holster. He said, "Beat it, Moe. Just keep going—until the cops stop you."

Moe's mouth still hung open. He said, "Cheese!" and drove on.

Phil found a cab going the other way, into Washington. He got in and said, "The Willard. Don't hurry."

They were closing in on the F. B. I., he thought. They were bolder than any band had ever been—picking an agent up in front of the office! That was hot! Wait until he phoned the Boss about that!

TWO men came out of Penn Station in Newkirk, and climbed into a cab. One of the men was wide and tall; his arms were long and his hands were big. The other was dapper, medium in height, with murky, shifty eyes.

"Treet Hotel," he told the cabbie.

"Yessir," the taxi driver said. He was a hollow-chested man with a brown, non-descript moustache and sideburns which extended too far down his cheeks. He wore eyeglasses and his teeth were slightly discolored. He drove expertly, however, and made it to the large hotel in good time.

The big man handed over the fare, plus

a twenty-cent tip. The cabbie said, "Thank you sir," and drove away—but he did not return to the Penn Station stand.

He drove around the corner on Packer Place and parked. He slouched down in the cab and took off the glasses, which were fitted with plain sheet glass. Without the disfiguring horn rims, Phil Towne was easily recognizable.

This was Phil's favorite occupational disguise. He had a gift for driving automobiles and an unfailing sense of direction to aid him in finding streets and numbers. Not that Newkirk puzzled him. He had been born and brought up there.

He had chosen this eastern seaboard city because it was necessary to pick up a hot trail. It was silly to go back to the Citizens and Northern to follow cold clues. This mob covered up too well.

Phil knew the Gard system of bank holdup like a book, and he had spent two weeks casing the most likely banks in Newkirk. That was how Mike Gard—who was supposed to be dead—would do it, if he expected to push one in. It was a matter of detail, of driving slowly through the streets, putting together the "run-and-gets chart," first of all. Without these cryptic but accurate instructions, there could be no getaway.

Phil hadn't bothered with the downtown banks. Traffic was too tough. No—it would be one of the prosperous banks on the Hill, or out in the Neck section. But he had several other good prospects, banks he could have knocked over himself without any trouble, had he been in the business. The Farmers Trust was the best.

Phil had played a hunch on the Farmers. He had canvassed the personnel, opening a small account, casing the entire works. He had been in there often, noticing every detail. It was a busy bank, too busy for its own safety. They had no hidden rifle man, for instance. The F. B. I.

had begged every institution in the country to hide out a marksman where he could have a chance against a hold-up mob. It was amazing how many banks ignored the request.

There were other banks in Newkirk, but the Farmers Trust was on the Hill, from which side streets led to broader avenues, thence to Route 49. Phil had hopes for the Farmers. If the robbers chose Route 49, he would have a nice idea of where the gang would make its getaway.

It had been more than a stroke of luck that he had picked up those two men before. He had worked the Penn Station stand eighteen hours a day, hoping to catch sight of a couple of likely prospects. And now he had them.

Trig Collins, the big guy, was an old peterman. Phil had his history cold in his mind. Trig had done plenty of time for the hundreds of thousands he had stolen. The dapper man was smarter, but had not been as big-time as Trig. He was Trainer Cole, spotter, organizer and car-handler for many of the mobs about the land.

Bank robbers are like that, Phil knew. They work with different men each time, if possible. But they're all well-known to the authorities by their m. o.

So here were Trig Collins and Trainer Cole in Newkirk, and Trig had once worked with Mike Gard in the Middle West. Their presence meant only one thing: A bank was going to get its face pushed in.

PHIL sat up suddenly, starting the cab. He rammed it in gear and drove rapidly down the street towards the drug store on the corner. He dashed in the phone booth.

He said, "Treet Hotel? Gimme Mr. Collins' room."

Collins, he had remembered, never bothered with an alias. The big man was

so contemptuous of John Laws that he was reputed to walk into Police Stations just to chat with the captain—and get information about the neighborhood in which he planned to rob a bank!

Within the receiver, Phil heard Collins' answer. Phil draped a handkerchief across the mouthpiece of the instrument and his voice became a singing whine. He said quickly, "Trig? This is Manny. Remember me?"

"What is this?" growled the voice. "Who you wanta talk to?"

"Nemmine, Trig. Let it go. I wast' tell you the Farmer's. Thassall. Just—the Farmers."

Phil hung up. It was pretty crude, but if this was as huge a mob as he thought, there might be some chance. He went out and got into the cab and drove out on the Hill.

It would have been swell if he could pick up Trig and Trainer and drive them himself, but he knew better than that. These men were cautious, clever, cold-blooded artisans of the bank robbing business. They would steal a car and use it to case the job. Then they would grab another one to do the real work. That was Mike Gard's way.

Phil cruised around, keeping to the route which he had figured in advance, the retreat from the Farmers Trust which would be most advantageous for the mob. Inside of an hour he spotted them in a black coupé.

Cole was driving. They were moving slowly and Trig was making notes. Phil followed them just far enough to see that they were on the right track. Then he took no further chances on being discovered. He parked, and made for another phone booth. He called the Special Agent for the district.

He said, "Remember—let 'em loose. I want to know where they go; that's the important thing. Even if they rob the bank. The important thing is to know

the hangout. It'll be three or four hundred or a thousand miles, so don't expect to hear from me again for awhile."

"Okay, Phil. Watch your hide."

Phil went back to his hack. The Farmers Trust would be lousy with G-Men from now on. The bank holdup would be a spectacular failure.

But men would escape. They would follow the "run-and-gets" of Trig Collins to Route 49, because that was where Phil would pick them up. There was only one way to stop this sort of crime—at the source, somewhere in the distance, where Mike Gard lurked, planning coups against the banking institutions of the country.

Phil started to drive off the Hill. He had to have the governor removed from the hack—he'd need speed if he was going to follow a fast getaway heap. He knew a garage man who could be trusted.

The black coupé came skidding around the corner on two wheels. Phil had time to jam on his breaks and head for the curb, as he snatched at his gun. He got a glimpse of Trig Collins, scowling, his automatic belching flame. He heard Cole yell, "You got him!"

Something hit Phil Towne in the head. He fell away from the wheel and there was a great noise; then butterflies were flapping silken wings in front of his eyes. . . . The blackness descended swiftly.

This, he thought, must be Death. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Man Who Limped

THE bandage was too tight. Phil tried to get his hand up to it and failed. He was too weak. He opened his eyes and there sat the Boss.

Phil said, "They had me spotted."

The Boss said, "Don't talk. You had a narrow escape—creased your skull,

gave you a pretty bad case of concussion."

Phil said, "Tell me."

"They went through with it," the Boss replied. "They had a couple of local hoodlums in on it. The locals were shot, but we let Collins and Cole get away. They didn't get a dime. We hadn't found you yet—you were in the hospital for a day before we knew who you were. You had no identification on you, of course."

Phil said, "They got clean away?"

The Boss frowned. "Our men followed them out to Route 49. They went off the road and hoofed it—disappeared in a spot near Plantfield, the lake country. We had a plane checking, but everything in the air was accounted for. It's uncanny, Phil."

"The lake country?" Phil closed his eyes again. When he opened them he asked, "Any army ships around? Any other government planes?"

"Why—I guess so. You know how it is with this defense program."

Phil got his hand to his head. "Check all army planes for that day. If there is one over—it's theirs. They'd disguise it to look like a government plane."

The Boss said, "You'll be laid up a couple of weeks, then you'd better take a vacation—"

Phil threw one leg over the side. The room and the Boss spun around, and a nurse came running.

"Gimme a few minutes to get my bearings," Phil said. "Boss, have those planes checked. I'm goin' to the lake country as soon as I learn to walk again."

"You've only been here three days. You can't—"

"Three days!" howled Phil. "Why'd you let me stay here three days?"

The Boss seemed startled.

Phil said, "Okay, okay. It's my own fault, I guess."

He got his clothes out of the closet. He reeled like a drunken man, but the Boss did not try to stop him. The Boss

knew all about Phil Towne. This slim, unimpressive-looking agent was the nearest thing to a superman the Boss had ever seen. For this the Boss was grateful, and not disposed to interfere.

Four hours later, Phil was being driven by a trusted colored man into the lake country around Plantfield. The Boss had checked, and there was one army plane left over after all had been counted.

They had lost the trail at Cortez lake, where the water was shallow. Men could have waded there, easily. Phil shook his head, going along to the lake. There was plenty of room for a takeoff—if the plane had been an amphibian.

He referred to his list of planes up that night. The new Aviation Control Board was reported to have an amphibian up that night—which made it a cinch. A duplicate plane, seen at high altitude, could have gone undetected.

Phil found a cottage on the shore of Lake Cortez. There was nothing in it of benefit to him. It was clean as a whistle—too clean. Someone had made sure there were not traces. Outside, there was a landing pier, but no boat.

Phil stood on the end of the pier, his head aching under the bandage, as he stared at the calm, blue water. Then he sat for a moment, humoring the weakness which persisted in his legs. The landing platform was a bit rickety, with signs of decay in the light pilings which supported it. Phil looked down.

IN A moment he was over the side, reaching as far as he could. He grew dizzy and nearly fell in, but he got hold of the object he'd noticed.

It was a piece of plant. He smelled it. The lab could tell him, he knew; but he

was fairly certain this was sea-grape.

It grew, Phil remembered, on sandy shore. The waxy green leaves were poisonous, but there was a white blossom which, for a brief spell during spring in the sub-tropics, was beautiful.

Phil had seen sea-grape in its native habitat. There was a girl in Florida. He had long wanted to find time to marry Myra Horne. She had shared adventures with him time and again, and now he had her hidden, in the west, against the revenge of this new mob of criminals. Myra had once pointed out the sea-grape to Phil, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

He rode back to town, holding the dead bit of plant in his hand. An amphibian, taking off from a Jersey lake, leaving behind a Florida plant—

It would be fairly simple if the coastline of Florida were not so vast, if there were not thousands of islands nestled along that coastline. . . .

The Boss said, "You should rest awhile. I can put Ruse on the job."

"You need Ruse on the fifth-column stuff," said Phil doggedly. The bandage was off and he was wearing a soft hat. He had to get the next plane out of Washington and he was in a hurry. He was not disguised, and for this job he had sworn not to use disguise again.

He said, "Those guys declared war on me the last time I walked out of this office. Now I'm declaring something myself."

The Boss said restlessly, "That's not smart. We ought to send a batch of men to close in on them slowly.

"Let me handle it," Phil begged. "No mob ever beat me yet. Let me try it again!"

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The Boss said, "Okay, go ahead. If you get in trouble—"

"I'm in trouble," Phil cut in. "They've got me spotted. They know me, and when I'm so easy for them to spot—it's me or them."

Which was true, and the Boss knew it. Phil's value to the service lay in his ability to go about unrecognized, to ferret out stray clues that other agents, working in pairs or in groups, could not find. This new mob, which seemed to anticipate Phil's every move, was the greatest danger he had ever faced.

Phil went down to his plane quite openly, aware that he was being followed. He studied his fellow passengers. Any one of them might be a member of this nation-wide gang. Mike Gard, escaped somehow from his grave, had certainly planned well. Phil took out the dossier on Gard and read it very carefully as the big ship headed for Tampa.

There was nothing new in the report. Gard was fifty years old. He had been robbing banks for thirty years. He had served ten in jails, had drawn a life sentence, but escaped with two others. He had apparently been killed and buried in a prison graveyard, his case marked "finis" in the files.

Nothing new. Yet someone had engineered the disappearance of Mike Gard, for no one but Gard ever planned bank robberies so carefully; no one but Gard had ever been so uniformly successful.

Yet, in his long career, Gard had fought shy of Federal banks. He knew too well the power of the F. B. I. when a national institution was knocked over.

This new gang, using Gard's methods, took banks as they came, city, county, state—and Federal.

It was something to think about. Phil gazed down at the shadow of the plane far below. He had a strong feeling that he would learn much more about Mike Gard within the next few days. He was

almost willing to bet that Gard would have a delegation to meet him at the air field.

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GIANT murals stared down at him as he regained his forty pounds of luggage from the pleasant-voiced attendant. A dozen people were in the airport station. Phil Towne held his hand in his pocket, his finger around the trigger of a .45 calibre service gun. His head still ached from the last attack. This time he was going to have a shot himself.

He knew the hack driver of old—a cracker boy named Jonas Smith—and had no fears in that direction. He was in the somewhat decrepit vehicle and moving away when the car came out of nowhere towards them.

"Haul over, Jonas!" Phil yelled.

"Creeminy!" Jonas' big hands on the wheel were sure. He swivelled the car broadside. Phil crouched at the window, eager for battle. He had been pushed around enough.

The car was a large one of recent make. Phil saw the muzzle of a machine gun and pressed the trigger of the .45. He had a good chance, he thought, as he fired a second time at the driver of the other car.

His first shot had glanced off the barrel of the tommy-gun rendering it useless. His second missed. Another gun barrel protruded from the car, which moved slowly now, striving for a clean shot. Phil threw a bullet at the white face in the tonneau and ducked. A rifle clanged and a high-power bullet whined through the cab, tearing out a chunk of metal.

"Creeminy!" muttered Jonas from the floor in front.

Phil risked raising his head. He had to take a chance if he wanted his innings.

From the water side of the port sounded a crackling noise. Into the back window of the big sedan tore a bullet which must have come from a good-sized gun. Phil fired again and broke glass on his side. The sedan was caught in the cross-fire.

The startled driver goosed the motor. The new, big car leaped ahead. A motor sounded on the waters of Hillsborough Bay, and a small speed boat skidded away from shore. The death car tore over the roads, retreating towards Tampa.

Phil said, "You can come out now, Jonas. Our pals got run off by a guy with a big gun and a good aim."

"A cop?" asked the shivering youth.

"No," said Phil. "A stranger in a fast boat."

"He was a welcome stranger, Mist' Towne. I was 'bout scared t' death."

At the Terrace Hotel, Phil registered under his right name. He was assigned to Room 302 and went directly up to change to lighter clothing. There were things to think about while he lay in the warm tub, soaking himself and waiting for the pain in his head to lessen before he set out to defy the forces of Mike Gard.

Who had been the stranger in the speed boat? he wondered. No one in the service, because no one in the F. B. I. knew Phil was in town. As a matter of fact, the nearest Special Agent was in Jacksonville and had troubles of his own, what with foreign agents desperate to explore the naval station there, and MacDill Field in Tampa.

Phil was towelling himself dry when the phone in his room rang. He reached out, snapped off the light and went across the dark room with the towel about him, the .45 within easy reach of his hand.

A voice said, "Towne? . . . I used a Sharp's 30-30. Did you get one of 'em?"

Phil said, "Thanks, pal. I don't know. Where can I meet you?"

"At the Columbia Restaurant. I know you, but you won't recognize me. Wait for me."

Phil said, "Right," and hung up. If the phone had been tapped, that would be too bad. But he was right in the open on this, all the way. He had no choice. If he played cozy and fancied himself disguised, he would get killed anyway.

He finished dressing with steady hands. The windows of his room were on the court side. He would have preferred them on the street. He kept the light low and stayed out of range.

Jonas was waiting faithfully, and in ten minutes Phil was in the Columbia, nodding to the waiter, selecting a table in a corner of the patio, a table which commanded a view of the entire room. He eased the gun under his arm, leaving his coat open so that he could make a fast draw.

Phil was toying with his food when the man sidled in and dropped into the chair opposite him.

PHIL said, "Hello, pal. Thanks for the help with that big gun. You sure raced them off."

The man's face was curiously flattened. In his light blue eyes there was some strange emotion which either was fear or the courage of desperation. He was a wide-shouldered man in a neat sports jacket and an open-throat shirt. He was quite tanned, Phil noted.

His nose had been broken once, and his eyes had been battered. He had the look of a prize fighter, but he was not, nor had he been, for his knuckles were unbroken.

His voice was a husky, laryngitic. "Towne, my name is Joe Manton. I know why you're here. I know all about the bank heists. But I can't tell nothin' about me."

Phil said, "I'm not interested in anything but this mob. What's your angle?"

The man's pale eyes became ferocious. "I wanta clean up on 'em. I wanta kill every one of 'em. I wanta cut the heart outa Trainer Cole. I wanta put a bullet in that Trig Collins."

"I don't use stool pigeons," said Phil. "Unless I know all about them."

Manton's chin jutted and his eyes flashed fire. "I'm no stoolie, Towne! If I wanted to stool, there's cops and sheriffs would pay me off. I ain't turnin' this mob in. I'm cleanin' it up."

"Murder?" Phil asked. "You don't like those boys, so you'd kill them all?"

"Call it anything you want. I know you, Towne. You'd as soon wipe 'em out as put the cuffs on 'em. If you'll work with me, I'll show you where they are."

"You know?"

Joe Manton grinned. There was a bicuspid missing on the left side. "Yeah. I been there. It'd take you a year to find 'em, Towne. They could rob a thousand banks while you was lookin' for them. But I can take you there."

"What do you want for all this?" asked Phil.

"Not a thing." The man's eyes narrowed. He said softly, "Not a solitary thing. Except a good gun in my mitts and a man who can stand up under fire. A chance to even up with them—that's all I want."

Phil said, "I've got to know one thing. Were you involved in any of the hold-ups where they killed an agent?"

"I told you," said Manton with dignity, "I ain't a stoolie. I never been in one of their jobs. Get that, Towne. That's important. I never worked with this mob. I got private reasons for wantin' 'em wiped out. But don't figure me for rattin' on them."

Phil sighed. "I have to take your word for it. I have to take a chance that you're a plant. But tell me, do you know Mike Gard?"

"Yes, I know him."

"He's alive?"

"Cert'ny he's alive. He got sprung."

Phil said, "Sprung? He crashed out of Joliet."

Joe Manton grinned again. "He got sprung. That's how this mob—aw, leave it lay, can't you? I can put you on them tonight—before they get another shot at you. They's maybe twenty of 'em out there. But we can try 'em."

"I can get some men," said Phil. "A dozen, anyway. The locals are all right in this town—"

"The mob ain't in this town. And I won't take no flycops to the place," said Manton stubbornly. "You get a type-writer and meet me at Toby's fishing pier at eleven o'clock. I'll take you where the hank heist mob hangs out. That's my offer, as simple as I can make it."

Phil ate through half his steak while the pale-eyed man watched.

"I'll tell you," Phil finally said. "This is all very screwy. You're a wise guy, Manton. You've been around. You know this isn't right. But . . . I'll be there. Eleven o'clock."

Manton nodded coldly. "I figgered you would. Look—when you leave this joint, take the side door. I'll have you covered from across the street, see?"

"Mike Gard's got people everywhere," Phil said.

"Never mind about Gard. Pay attention to your food. It might be a rough night."

Manton grinned. It was not exactly a pleasant grin, Phil thought. Manton got up and strolled out. He had a slight limp which caused him to list to port as he went. He sort of dragged one leg. . . .

Phil stopped eating abruptly. What had John Storm said, back in Washington? "*You could see his mouth under the mask. It was twisted and hard and cruel.*" Phil could visualize Joe Manton's grin under a half-mask. "*He sort of dragged his leg . . .*"

Phil went back to the steak. Forewarned, he told himself, is forearmed. Agent Himes was a good man, with a family. *"He fired five more shots into the body. I don't think he missed once . . ."*

Phil paid the check, tipping the waiter a half dollar. He said, "Is there an exit to this place which isn't conspicuous?"

"Through the kitchen."

Phil nodded. He went out through the vast, clean kitchen. He drew his gun and held it in plain sight. He ducked out into a back lot. There was a fence. He went over it speedily and found an alley to Broadway.

There were lights; people walking up and down. Phil moved along, looking for a cab. He found one and went back to the hotel without further incident.

Behind the locked door and drawn shades of his room he looked to his guns and muttered, "The tough so-and-so!

'Come out the side door and I'll cover you from across the street!'"

"Cover me!" Phil laughed scornfully. "Murder me, he meant."

Phil thought, "But why the date at eleven if he was going to cut me down? . . . Will he be there? . . ."

Manton might have fired that shot into the murder car as a stall. But why should he? And why did the car beat it, if it was all a plant? Why all the fol-de-rol?

Phil sighed. His guns were in good order. He lay upon the bed and relaxed his weary head.

CHAPTER THREE

Into Satan's Sanctum

THE machine-gun loaned by the friendly Tampa detective lay in the crook of Phil Towne's arm. It was ten-thirty and no speed boat had



Even if you are not learning the manual of arms, or swabbing down the deck of a destroyer . . .



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yet drawn near. Phil lounged behind the old boat and kept sharp watch. The boat yard was dark, but there were people at the house, sitting about a table in the bar. The light reflected upon a patch of ground which gave Phil a margin of safety, he was sure. Water lapped against the plankings of moored boats.

The moments ticked away. It was exactly eleven by Phil's watch when a motor roared off-shore, then died with a final, choking cough.

The boat drifted in. It had no cabin, Phil saw. If anyone was concealed thereon, it was impossible to tell. Joe Manton stood at the wheel, his jaw hard, pointing inquiringly at the pier.

Phil waited until the boat was quite close. Then he stepped to the water's edge.

He called softly, "Joe! I'm here!"

Manton turned his head. Phil said, "I've got a tommy-gun. It's loaded and ready to go."

He walked slowly into sight. Manton didn't move. He kept his eyes upon the muzzle of the weapon in Phil's grasp.

Phil said, "I'm cautious by nature, Joe. You sure you're alone?"

"Take a look."

Phil walked down the landing pier, took a quick step aboard the boat. There was no one else on its deck.

He said, "All right. But I'm not putting this gun down, you know."

Manton said without rancor, "That's all right, Towne."

He started the motor and backed out of the slip. In a moment they had turned and were bearing out onto the waters of Tampa Bay.

Above the noise of the motor, Manton called. "It's down the coast. It will take a little time."

"An island?"

Manton nodded. Phil sat aft and nursed the machine-gun. It was a ticklish spot. If they wanted him alive, it would be for

torture, to gain information about the F.B.I. If they wanted him dead, they would sacrifice Manton in a jiffy and ambush him at the island.

No one knew where he was. He had sent a wire to the Boss that told approximately what might happen, but no aid could possibly reach him in time. He watched Manton in the dim moonlight.

After a moment he said, "Where did you do your last stretch, Joe?"

Manton laughed shortly. "Have I got that stir-bug look?"

Phil said, "It's something in the way you hold yourself. You develop a certain poise in jail, believe it or not."

Manton thought this over. "Yeah," he said finally. "I get what you mean. Y'know, it's funny, you holdin' a gun on me, but not takin' me in. Comin' out here to Bosun Key, to get a whack at this mob of heisters."

"It's funny, all right," Phil admitted.

"Bosun Key is seventeen miles south of here. It ain't what you'd think. It's a sorta summer resort, with Square Johns all over the place. The mob has got a big house with cottages. They on'y use it for splits, when the ship comes in with a bundle of gravy."

Phil said, "Do they keep the amphibian there?"

"It's in a boathouse," said Joe. "I know all about that plane."

"I wish I knew your angle, Joe. I don't mind telling you that this setup doesn't look right to me. Why should you be so anxious to mop up this gang?"

Manton said, "You'll find out. You'll get the biggest surprise of your life, Towne, when you find out why I'm on the kill for this outfit."

"Can't you give me an idea of who's down here—what we're up against?"

"Collins and Cole are here. Jig Corio and Steve Kalchuk, the guns, are around, I think. Then there's a bunch of guards. And—the big guy!"

"Mike Gard?" Phil asked.

Manton said nothing. The nose of the speed boat came out of the water. They were racing along, now. They covered several miles in silence.

Phil said suddenly, "Which one of the mob is wide-shouldered, has a hard jaw and limps a little?"

THERE was a moment when Manton stiffened like a ramrod. Then he said quietly, "That sounds more like me, don't it?"

"Does it?"

"I guess I don't blame you for bein' suspicious," Manton said slowly. "I guess you figger I'm it, huh?"

"You could be the guy and have a grudge to settle," said Phil. "But if you killed Himes, Joe, it's curtains for you. I'll down you myself."

Manton said, "I told you I never killed no agent. I told you I never pulled a job with this mob."

"Go on," Phil suggested.

Manton said angrily, "Ahh! I oughta know better'n to tell the truth to a copper. Yer all alike, you guys. If I didn't have to wipe up on this bunch of fourflushin', would-be heisters—"

"Would-be? They've held up a hundred banks. Fourflushers? They've killed three G-Men."

"Okay, okay," said Manton. "They're tough. Lemme have a chance at 'em. We'll see how tough they are!"

Manton adjusted the throttle, reducing the speed of the boat. There was land ahead on the port side. He said, "I run outside on purpose. Inside are docks—also smart guys lookin' over everything that comes in. If they seen—"

Phil said, "I've been wondering how they know me so well."

"The big guy is smart," Manton said.

He handled the boat skillfully, sending it in close to the sandy shore. There were some trees, and a group of Australian

pinus quite closely planted. Between them was an inlet.

Manton said, "The plane's in there. But we can't get in. They got the thing mined."

"Mined?"

"Yeah. They got one of them new-fangled magnetic things to pull the mine out when it's jake to let a boat in."

Phil said, "How are we going ashore?"

"You'll see."

They drifted along, the motor purring lightly. About a mile from the inlet which Manton had pointed out, the boat spun and headed for the shore.

"You'll beach us!" Phil yelled.

Manton said, "Hold tight, G-Man!"

There was a gentle shock. The prow of the boat went well into a sand bank.

Phil said, "We'll never get off! The tide will go out and we'll be stranded."

The tide was turning even then. Manton squatted and drew a Sharp's 30-30, two automatic pistols and various boxes of ammunition from under a tarpaulin. He said, "Towne, if we get away, we won't need this boat."

Phil stood up. "You figure we won't get away, Joe?"

Manton made a package of the weapons. "It's a small war, ain't it? Who knows his luck? I'll go first, so you can watch me and see I ain't crossin' you. They won't be watchin' this stretch. We got a mile walk back to where the first mug will be on guard."

Phil said, "Go ahead. I'm right behind you."

He had to hold the machine gun over his head, with his revolvers wrapped in a piece of cloth, dangerously perched atop. The water was up to his armpits, but it was easy to walk through it. They hit a bar and then it was just a knee-deep wade to the beach.

Manton said, "There's a road up yonder. We'd be an easy target on the beach."

THEY followed a path to the winding, macadam road. Upon each side grew palms, thickets of scrub palmetto. There was sea-grape in abundance, Phil noted.

He distributed the guns, one to his shoulder holster, one to his belt. The salt Gulf water squashed in his shoes, but it was warm. He carried the machine-gun in his hands, the extra rounds in his canvas jacket.

Manton said, "You still don't trust me, Towne?"

"It would be better if I did," Phil answered frankly, "but in my business you have to be careful. Lead on. If we walk into a trap, be prepared to lose your back-bone!"

Manton said grimly, "I'm prepared for anything, Towne. I been here before. We go down this road until we come to the first guard."

They went along silently, and soon the water ceased to make splashing noises in their clothes. It was a clear night and Phil could see every move made by the stocky man ahead. Manton chose a place beside a cabbage palm to halt.

Coming close, he whispered in Phil's ear, "See? He's lightin' a cigarette. You stay here an' watch."

Carefully, he put down his Sharp's and his two pistols. From his pocket he produced a set of brass knuckles which gleamed dully in the scant moonlight.

Manton went silent as a ghost along the dense growth, keeping in the heavy shadows. The guard turned and started towards them, and Phil stepped behind the palm, his gun at attention.

For a moment there was no sign of Manton. Then the guard stiffened, stopped his patrol and peered into the bushes. An arm reached out, striking like a python.

The guard was down, and Manton came out of the bushes. His arm rose, then fell again. In a moment he was back at

Phil's side. "Got to hurry. There's another one to take."

They went swiftly past the fallen man. Phil took a quick look and whistled under his breath. He felt he could trust Manton now, whatever the man had up his sleeve, however dark his past. The fallen guard was proof enough. Manton had deliberately made sure that never again would that member of the mob give the alarm.

The second guard was walking briskly to make his contact with the first. Manton stepped out from behind a bush and struck again with the terrible knuckles. There was the sound of the blow . . . the guard fell forward.

Beyond was a clearing, in the middle of which a large, stone house was set. There were other, smaller houses about, closer to the beach, one or two in the sparse pine woods. All of the lights in the big house were lit, and Manton said, "I figgered it might be like that. They're plannin' another job. The big guy got them all in there. Maybe there's two more guards within hearin'."

Before Phil could respond he was gone. He had a remarkable faculty for swift and instant action. Tiny sounds were all that marked his progress, sounds which presently ceased. Then there was the soft thud of a falling body.

He came back. He said, "Okay. We'll try the joint."

Phil said patiently, "According to your own story there are a score of tough bank robbers in that house. You propose to attack it?"

Manton seemed surprised. "That's what we come for, ain't it?"

Phil said, "Yes. I guess so. But haven't you any plan of action?"

"An m.o.?" grinned Manton. "Well—we oughta come at 'em from opposite sides. But you can't trust me . . ."

Phil said, "You know the ground, so you take the other side of the house."

Come up and wait until I give you a sign. I want to look them over through that window."

Manton said, "How you gonna signal me?"

Phil patted the machine gun. "You'll hear me! These guys have been shooting at me for weeks. I'm going to take one poke at them myself."

Manton said, "Okay, Towne. I heard about you plenty times. Look—if they get me, make the big guy talk. I want you to be sure and get that surprise, see?"

"They won't get you," said Phil. "You cover me and we'll capture the whole mob."

"I'll be listenin' for that chopper to talk, Towne."

He grinned, and his face was very hard and cruel, but there was something in his appraising glance upon Towne which bespoke his character. Whatever he had been, this night he was a good man to have at hand.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Murder Master

PHIL gave his strange companion enough time. Then he slipped across the intervening rods to the corner of the house. He could hear voices through the screened window, which was open to the slight breeze.

A voice came through to him, precise, deliberate, "The failure in Newkirk cost us money. We're not in this business to lose money. This job in Philly must go off—if you have to kill a dozen people. We need money! There are many of us, therefore we must pile up the cash, that all may have a share. Any further mis-carriage of plans, and I shall take steps!"

Trig Collins growled, "That G-Man put that job on the blink."

Phil strained his ears to hear that other voice again. He had heard it before. In

a moment he would remember where.

"You will kill him. I want all of you to go into Tampa and search for him. Towne must be killed."

Phil edged forward, coming to the window. If he could get the tommy-gun through the screen, command the entire room with his fire, he could force them to stand while Manton disarmed them. There was a fine chance . . .

The voice went on, "As for our other friend, I think you know it is also absolutely necessary that he be recaptured. There are some small things we must learn from him. Then he must be executed and his body done away with."

The voice went on, calmly and coolly planning murder. It was a well-educated voice. It never wasted a syllable in its talk of robbery and worse. No one inside the room had the temerity to answer, evidently. Phil gained a position beneath the window. When he stood at full height, he would be able to slash the flimsy mosquito wire with the muzzle of the gun.

He raised his head. The room was long and wide. It contained tables, which were littered with blue prints, maps, drawing boards. Twenty men were distributed on straight chairs, on couches, in comfortable overstuffed chairs. At the far end the leader stood, his back to the wall. Phil ripped the screen with the sight of the machine gun.

He caressed the trigger a little tighter. The machine-gun spattered like a sudden, heavy shower. Lead cut across the room.

Phil said, "The place is surrounded! Everyone hold still!"

Men froze in open-mouthed horror and amazement. Trig Collins said hoarsely, "The G-guy!" Then, for a moment, there was utter silence.

Down at the end of the room, the leader said, "Why, Mr. Towne! We didn't expect you—"

Joe Manton's voice shouted from afar, "Look out! He's got a trick!"

There was a puff of smoke. The leader had moved a foot, evidently, and released a spring. The fireplace seemed to open up as the smoke surrounded him. The lights in the room went out at the same instant.

The Sharp's rifle cracked as Phil turned loose the tommy-gun. From inside came groans and curses and then gunfire as the mob fought back.

Phil ducked away from the too-revealing window. The mob had the advantage now. They had a stone house and at least a dozen men left. There were only two outside to lay siege.

THERE was another window. Phil raced to it, thrust his gun at the screen. From beside him, Joe Manton's voice said rapidly, "Please, Phil. Lemme have that. I know the joint. You take my gats. Lemme have the tommy!"

Phil said, "What's the dope, Joe?"

"We got no chance unless we make it fast," said Joe Manton. "I didn't know about that disappearin' trick that so-and-so had up his sleeve. I coulda had him . . . You know him?"

"I know him," said Phil.

"Okay. Lemme have the chopper!"

Phil said, "You can have it. Give me your pistols. I'll snap-shot them."

"That won't be necessary," grinned Manton.

He handled the machine gun as though he were thoroughly familiar with its workings. Phil took precious seconds to slip a fresh clip into place. Manton said, "It's been great knowin' you. Now, 'scuse me!"

He put out his hand and gave Phil a tremendous push which sent him flying backward.

Manton swept the screen to shreds, tore it down. A bullet promptly sang through it, another and another.

There was a second's silence. Manton backed off, ran a few steps. With the gun held ready, he made a prodigious leap. He went sailing through the window. He was inside the house of the hold-up mob!

It was plain suicide! Phil cursed, getting to his feet, thrusting the automatics into his pockets, drawing the heavy calibred revolvers for this work. The machine-gun's familiar voice began to speak, steadily—not on burst firing—picking shadows, probably, in the long room.

Phil raced around the back. There should be a door through which escape was possible.

He found it. Two men bearing heavy bags were coming through, in great haste. One was Trig Collins, the other Trainer Cole. Phil got Collins with the muzzle of the .45, cracking him across the head. Cole tried to shoot, but Phil threw his slug first, collapsing him upon Trainer.

A shot nearby almost drilled Phil. He wheeled, fired at the burst of flame. A groan testified to his accuracy.

Indoors the din was terrific, now. The machine gun was taking its toll. Phil did not dare fire indiscriminately. He ran into the door through which the men had been escaping.

He was in a kitchen. A man breathed hoarsely, crouching at the door, evidently covering the retreat of the three who lay outdoors. Phil cracked down, and left the man sprawled in the kitchen.

There was a small room beyond. It was empty, dark as the inside of your hat. Phil worked in the rattle of gunfire, looking for a light switch. He found it—but nothing happened. The lights were out for the night.

There was only one smart thing left. He gathered together the bits of a broken chair, piled them, and found a newspaper. He lit a match and kindled a fire.

He got it piled as near the door as possible. Manton was at the other end of

the room. This should scorch the remnants of the mob into Manton's fire—or bring them out where Phil could pick them off.

The flames mounted to the ceiling. Phil reached out and jerked open the door. Flickering light shot across the floor of the big room.

There were men in all positions of violent death. Phil ducked back, not choosing to be caught by Joe Manton's slugs.

The machine gun clattered briskly now. There were some yells, then a voice, "We quit! The house is afire. We give up. Look—we got our hands up!"

The machine gun chanted again. There were no further yells when the deadly chatter stopped. The silence was shocking in such sudden comparison to what had gone before!

Joe Manton's voice, husky as ever, called, "You can put out the fire, Towne. We got 'em all."

"Are you all right, Joe?" Phil asked.

"Yeah," said Joe Manton. "I'm all right. Just put out the fire and come and get me."

"You're hit!" Phil threw pails of water—the fire was out as quickly as it had been made. He went into the room, stumbling over the leg of a fallen man. He had a tiny torch in his pocket, which he flashed over the hearth stone where he had seen the big guy pull his hocus pocus. He found the master switch at once. Light flooded the room.

★ ★ ★

PHIL TOWNE would never forget that scene. Dead men were piled all around. They had dropped in their tracks, they had tried the windows and were caught halfway out. They had sought the rear door, but Joe Manton had a bead on that portal and they never made it, except those three who were the leaders. The bank mob was wiped out.

Joe Manton sat on the floor, his back to the wall. He was smoking a cigarette, and he was grinning again. Phil hadn't seen him smoke before.

Phil said, "Is it bad?"

Manton nodded, and Phil saw that Joe had got it in his chest. Despite the red-flecked lips, Manton's grin was steady and broad. He said, "Bring in that slob, will you, Phil?"

Phil knew. He went outside and picked up the form of the man who lay beside Trig Collins. The man was wounded, but Phil was not gentle with him.

Joe Manton said, "How about that guy?"

Phil propped the slight form on a chair, got some water. The man opened his eyes and blinked.

Phil said, "The last time I saw him he was informing the Boss about a limping leader in the Citizens and Northern job."

"John Storm!" mocked Joe Manton. "How'd you like it, Storm? Wish you were back clerkin' in a bank? Wish you'd never tried to work Mike Gard's racket?"

The little man looked less like a bank robber than ever. He was very pale and his mouth trembled. He gasped, "I'm—dying. A drink—give me a drink . . ."

Joe Manton laughed. "Like you gave me a drink when you had me here, tied up? When you was breakin' my nose and beatin' me up very hour until I told you all my secrets."

"Pity, Mike. Have pity," moaned the little man.

Phil said, "So you're Mike Gard!"

"Yeah," Manton said. "I'm Gard. They sprung me, Towne. And when I woke up, I was down here and this little fiend was havin' them work on me. I was a bank robber, sure. But you know I never killed anybody. I coulda got clean away by shootin' that Rube cop, but I took the rap in Joliet. I got dough

(Continued on page 112)

• • • Last of The

A Stirring Saga of Dictator Menace

By Day Keene

Branded coward, murderer and traitor by his fellow Texans, Lee Ainsley went out that fateful day to fight the one and only battle of his life, armed with the desperate hope that he alone could stem the latest Nazi menace which threatened: "America will be invaded, and the sky will be black with death!"



Fighting Ainsleys



Lee fired as most Texans shoot, off hand, the way another man might point.

CHAPTER ONE

The Key of Death

*"Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once."
Shakespeare*

IT HAPPENED in Casa Paloma. The sun was a brazen ball of fire hanging low in the western sky. Across the Rio Grande lay Mexico. A group of local riders sprawled in the chairs under the wooden marquee of Abe Meyers'

general store. Only the two well-dressed strangers, in their parked sedan with the expensive house trailer behind it, seemed amused by the scene at the gas pump. The riders had seen it too often.

"Yelluh! That's what yuh are." Old Tom Mathers emphasized his contempt by slapping the youth again. "You marry Jane? Why, I'd as lief marry her to a Mex. Much liefer in fact. Yore a coward, Lee Ainsley. A disgrace to the name of Ainsley."

Lee Ainsley said nothing. The palms of his hands were moist. The fear that was always with him had tightened the muscles of his throat. He knew that by the code of men he should smash old Mathers in the face—that Jane would love him for it. But he couldn't—he was afraid. He wiped the palms of his hands on his apron instead. Tom Mathers was right. He was a disgrace to the name of Ainsley.

Lee looked appealingly at Jane, and Jane Mathers looked away. Her face was white at this public humiliation to which Lee had submitted them both.

She tugged at her brother's coat sleeve. "Please. Come on, Tom. Let's go home. You're drunk."

The grizzled rancher shook his arm free.

"I'll go when I'm good and ready." He wagged a bridle-crooked forefinger under Lee Ainsley's nose. "I fought with yore pa in France, Lee. I cut my teeth on the stories of what great men yore gran'pap an' yore great gran'pappy were. An' they were great men—" He paused to hiccup— "But the Ainsley blood's run thin. Yore jist a no 'count maverick, Lee. An' I don't want yuh hossin' 'round my baby sister no more."

The strangers, big, blond men with ever-ready smiles, chuckled. Several of the local riders guffawed.

A deep flush replaced the dead white of Jane Mathers' face. She tugged at her brother's arm again and said, "Tom!" sharply.

The rancher ignored her.

"Yore great gran'pap fought with Sam Houston at San Jacinto," he told the youth before him. "He was one of our first Texas Rangers. Yore gran'pap fought with Forrest, an' swarmed up Don Juan Hill when he was sixty. Yore own pap died leadin' his company through the hell of Chateau Thierry. They was men. But what are you? A mangy,

white-livered clerk, pumping gas an' suckin' after my baby sister, when the men folk of yore family would have been kissin' their women goodbye an' gittin' ready to pump lead!"

The girl begged. "Tom, please!"

"All right. I'll go," he agreed. He took an uncertain step, then turned for one last taunt. "I'll tell yuh what I think, Lee. I don't think yuh are an Ainsley. I think yore mammy must have tripped yore pa up somewhere."

The insult to his mother was more than Lee could stand. He forgot to be afraid. The muscles of his throat relaxed, his bronzed face paled with anger.

"You take that back, Tom. You say that about my mother again and I'll—I'll kill you!"

The grizzled rancher swayed slightly. "Yuh will?"

Tom Mathers still wore a pair of heavy guns from force of habit. He took one of them from his silver-studded belt and laid it down on top of a cracker barrel.

"All right," he grinned. "I think yore mammy must have tripped yore pa up somewhere. Now there's a gun. Yuh take a shot at me, and I'll believe yuh are an Ainsley."

The little group, even the girl, looked at Lee expectantly.

He eyed the gun, half reached for it; and the fear came back into his throat. His lips grew dry, the palms of his hands wet with clammy sweat. His heart pounded so hard that it shook his body. He turned on his heel and walked into the store, the tips of his ears crimson from the wave of laughter slapping at his back.

ABE MEYERS eyed Lee shrewdly as the youngster started sacking sugar into five pound bags.

"Tom ridin' you again?"

Lee nodded and continued to sack sugar.

Meyers had come to Texas in the eight-

ies with a pack on his back. He'd stayed to see Casa Paloma bloom into the richest cowtown on the north bank of the Rio Grande, only to degenerate, with time, into a debauched and ragged dervish of what it once had been.

The merchant shook his head. "Why don't you stand up to him, Lee?"

"Because I'm a coward," the youngster told him bitterly. "I—I get sick when I think of fighting. I don't want to fight. I want to be left alone!"

The old man rolled a brown paper cigaret deftly with the fingers of his right hand. He tucked the sack between the stump of his left arm and his perspiration-streaked blue denim shirt, and pulled the draw string with his teeth.

"I can understand that, Lee," he said. "I like to be left alone myself. But sometimes one can only have peace by fighting for it. Fighting's like a cold shower. It's hell to get into, but you feel fine when it's over." He lit his cigarette and flicked the dead match out the open door. "What was the argument about this time?"

"My draft number classification." The youngster looked up, defiant. "Tom says I just want to marry Jane right away, so I can maybe claim a married man's exemption and not be sent away to camp next week."

"And?" the old merchant dangled the question.

"Well, I don't want to give a year of my life learning to be a soldier," the youth admitted. "If I can get any kind of chance to get out of it, I will."

Meyers studied his clerk's flushed face thoughtfully, then shook his head. "You don't mean that, Lee."

"I do mean it," the youth protested. "Let those who like to fight do whatever soldiering's got to be done. I don't want any part of it." He warmed to his subject. "What did fighting and soldiering ever do for my family except to get all the men folks killed off? I don't want

to die. I want to live! Peacefully, too!"

The impatient toot of an auto horn cut short the silence which threatened.

"You waited on the strangers for gas?" Meyers asked.

"No," Lee said, "I didn't. Tom riding me the way he did, I forgot all about 'em." He started for the door.

"Don't bother, Lee," the old merchant stopped him. He took off his apron and laid it on the counter. "I'll gas up their car. As long as you feel the way that you do, I don't think I want you should work for me anymore."

The youth stared incredulously at him.

"I mean it, Lee," the merchant said. "In Russia, in Germany, in Italy, in Rumania, in France—it would be I am a Jew." He touched the stump of his left arm. "Here it is I am a *man*! In the last war I fought in your father's company. I lost my arm the night he died—and called it cheap." He shook his head, sighed deeply. "From a family of heroes you come, Lee. Maybe it is, though, that Tom is right. Take what you have coming from the till. I don't want any man who should be such a coward that he wouldn't fight for his country to work for me."

The old man went out the door.

"All right." Lee blustered. "To hell with them." He took off his apron, folded it into a neat square, and jammed it under the counter. "With all of them," he added suddenly. "Jane, too. I'll get along without any of 'em!"

But he didn't mean it. He knew by the sick ache in his heart that he didn't. He was a lonely, frightened kid, up against something he didn't understand.

Perhaps the only person in all Casa Paloma who might have understood was old Doc Seibling. He brought Lee into the world, prematurely, on the night that Lee's mother had received an official telegram informing her that her hero husband had died in France. Doc might have ex-

plained Lee's fear as a psychopathic neurosis, derived from having been born posthumously to a father who came of a family of heroes who had bled themselves white in the service of the country they loved.

But the old doctor wasn't in Casa Paloma, nor anywhere near it. He was up in the pine belt of northeast Texas, with the Army Medical Corps. And when Lee's bruised and shattered body came at last into his hands, after completing its incredible odyssey to manhood, the old doctor could only pray, and hold fast to his inborn belief that heroes die hard.



THE Ainsley ranch house stood in the center of a clump of huge cottonwoods. Lee's great grandmother had brought the seedlings from the more civilized reaches of Missouri in eighteen-thirty-six, the year that Texas had declared its independence. It was a big, aged, rambling affair of rough-hewn timber and adobe that was slowly sinking back into the plains. Since his mother's death, Lee had lived alone in its gloomy solitude, his sole income the few dollars that Abe Meyers had paid him for clerking.

Lee parked his dilapidated flivver in what once had been the Ainsley corral and sat, staring moodily into the darkness. There had been a time when the Ainsleys had owned most of Casa Paloma County. They still did, technically; but it was plastered so heavily with mortgages, and had so much in delinquent taxes against it, that Lee couldn't have sold a square foot of mesquite thicket if he had wanted to.

"I'll get out of here, that's what I'll do," he told the gateless, sagging fence of the corral. "I'll go away to Brownsville, or maybe even Houston, an' get me a job."

Yet, he knew he wouldn't. The Ainsleys never left their land, except to die. And he didn't intend to die. He thought of his draft board notice and winced unwardly. He couldn't go anywhere—except to camp for a year, to become a soldier.

He got out of his car and strode across the corral to the shack where he really lived—his radio room. His neighbors might not think much of him as an Ainsley, but there was one thing they had to admit. He could build and tinker with radios; he could take a handful of tubes, a few feet of wire, an idea, and build a short wave receiver that would pull in China.

"That's one of the reasons why Tom doesn't like me," he told himself. "That darn old drunken, bow-legged, DXer is just jealous of me, that's all."

But Jane didn't care anything at all about radios. It was him she loved—or had loved. And now, through his cowardice, he had probably lost her forever.

Lee kicked open the door to his radio shack and switched on the light. His set, one that he had built almost entirely by himself, was a beauty.

Lee transferred his sudden dislike of himself to the nearest object. "Darn old government," he grunted. "They give us hams a bunch of worthless bands and as soon as we make somethin' of them, they take 'em away from us. To hell with the government, too— No," he amended quickly. "I don't mean exactly that. But I just don't see why they can't let me alone. There's plenty of other guys who like to fight."

He flopped down in his chair, switched on the juice, and began to work the twenty meter band. Until the most recent government ruling he had worked 59 countries. Now it was a different story entirely—he couldn't even talk to any neutral foreign country without taking a chance on some F.C.C. monitor station picking him up. If that happened there

would be a pair of F.C.C. sleuths down on his neck and most likely a two year term in a federal prison, plus a ten thousand dollar fine.

He counted the money in his pocket. He hadn't taken his wages as Abe had told him to, and he had exactly four dollars and twenty cents, which was certainly not to help if he drew a ten thousand dollar fine.

"Maybe," he mused, "when I get to the darn old army camp they'll put me in the Communication corps." He brightened at the thought. Perhaps his year spent in learning to be a soldier wouldn't be so bad after all.

It was then that he heard his call letters.

"What the—" Lee frowned. Those were his call letters which somebody else was pirating.

"CQ . . . CQ . . . CQ . . . W5ZZZ—CQ . . . CQ . . . CQ . . . W5ZZZ," a thick voice droned on monotonously. "Come in HJXX7. . . Come in HJXX7."

Lee turned towards his own transmitter angrily, stopped, curious to know who was using his call letters to ask Colombia, South America, to "come in." The fool would have one of the F.C.C. field sleuths, who were prowling the border constantly in unmarked cars equipped with all-wave receivers and special directional antenna, down on both of their necks. He listened closely. It sounded like old Tom Mathers' voice, a bit blurred and thick, as if Tom were even more drunk than usual.

Then Colombia came in, a hoarse, guttural voice speaking in a foreign tongue which Lee couldn't understand. He waited for the ham who had been pirating his call letters to respond. Instead, the sharp, staccato click of a trained operator's fist began to click off a message in forgotten code.

Which, Lee decided, was too much. He measured the signal intensity. It couldn't

be any one but Tom Mathers. Besides, Tom had been a key monkey in the army.

Lee Ainsley switched off his power and strode out of the shack. His mild blue eyes had turned to steely gray, his lean-muscled underjaw protruded as four generations of Ainsley underjaws had protruded when they were angry. Jane's brother could hate him for a coward if he wanted to—but he couldn't frame him into a ten thousand dollar fine and two years in a Federal pen. That was going too far.



BUT for the light in Jane's room, the Mathers' ranch house was dark.

Light did stream, however, from the open door of the shack that Tom had built to house the elaborate short wave equipment that Lee had built for him when they still were friends. That had been in the days before the pole cat named Hitler had messed up everybody's lives.

"You in there, Tom," Lee called from his car.

There was no answer. Lee snapped off his ignition. As he did he thought he heard the soft purr of a car's motor in the direction of the river. He listened intently for a moment, then decided he had been mistaken. For a few seconds he had wondered if the F.C.C. field car had beaten him to Tom's. It would have served the old fool right.

He walked to the door of the shack and looked in. Tom Mathers was lying over his work bench with his head in his arms and an empty whiskey bottle on the floor beside him.

"Darn you, Tom," Lee began. "Even if you don't like me, you—" He stopped short.

The man slumped on the bench hadn't moved. Lee strode into the shack and shook him. "Tom!" he cried.

The grizzled rancher slumped still low-

er in his chair. Lee's hand felt wet and sticky—and it wasn't sweat. He turned it palm up and looked at it. It was blood.

His heart started to pump the old, familiar fear up in his throat until it almost choked him. Lee forced himself to lift Tom Mathers head up off the bench. Then he let it sink back slowly. Tom Mathers wasn't drunk— He was dead. His throat had been cut.

Lee leaned against the wall for a dizzy moment. He saw the knife where it had fallen on the floor and picked it up.

"Lee!"

Jane's voice turned him to the door, the knife still in his hand.

"Lee!" she repeated. Her voice choked with horror; she turned away and sobbed there against the wall. "Oh, you coward. You coward! You didn't dare fight Tom like a man, so you crept over here and killed him when his back was turned—"

"I never," he protested. "You can't believe that, Jane. I—"

The roaring motor of a car that braked to a screaming stop not twenty feet from the shack cut him short.

"Hold it in there!" a man's voice shouted. "Keep your hands up and no false moves. This is a monitor car of the F.C.C."

"You've killed, Tom. Killed him, Lee." The girl continued sobbing. "You are nothing but a coward. A dirty, filthy coward!"

Lee Ainsley looked first at the dead man in the chair, then at the sobbing girl, then at the open window in the rear of the radio shack. Half-blind with sudden terror, he saw all three through a haze of fear.

"I didn't," he muttered worriedly. "I swear I didn't."

The scuff of heavy boots sounded in the pathway leading to the shack.

"Hold it!" the voice called again.

Lee knew that he should. But he didn't. His pent up fear exploded like a bomb

and shattered his reason to fragments, each of them screaming: run! He bolted through the open rear window of the shack in blind, unreasoning terror. The angry *ping* of bullets swarmed past his ears like wasps. Then one of them stung him, hard. He stumbled, almost fell, regained his feet and ran on into the darkness until it swallowed him up. Pursuit grew faint behind him.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Frying Pan. . .

THE room was small. A hot Texas sun was peeling the cool black skin of night away. The cracked and dirty window shade was rattling in the rising morning wind like a blind but angry diamond-back about to strike.

Lee lay long minutes, staring at the rain streaked ceiling, wondering where he was. With fully awakened consciousness came the throbbing ache in his left arm to remind him. He was in this single cabin at the El Rancho Tourist Court.

He turned his head on the pillow to stare at the crude bandage he'd wrapped around his upper arm. It was soggy and needed changing. The wound was bad—it should have medical attention. But he hadn't dared to go to any doctor; nor did he have any money to pay a doctor if he had dared.

Lee turned his eyes back to the ceiling and wondered what he was going to do. When he had paid the proprietor of the El Rancho Courts the dollar and a half he'd demanded, it had left him two dollars and seventy cents. That was all he had with which to finance a flight from the combined forces of the Texas State Police, the F.C.C., and—when he didn't report to camp on Monday—the Federal Marshal's forces.

Lee Ainsley closed his eyes and the whole nightmare of the past twelve hours swept over him. How he had gotten this

far, he didn't know. His mind was filled with a vague procession of trucks, suspicious tourists; hours of tramping lonely roads.

He beat his one sound fist against the pillow, suddenly, savagely. "All I wanted was to be left alone." He stared with wide, frightened eyes at the rattling shade. "Now the whole State of Texas an' the United States government is after me."

He swung his feet over the bed and stood up. He hadn't even taken off his windbreaker. With just one hand, he hadn't been able to.

"Best thing I can do," he decided gloomily, "is to give myself up and get it over with. I ain't done nothing. An' if I wasn't such a coward I wouldn't have run away last night." He choked back a bitter sob. "Tom was right. I ain't no Ainsley. I ain't got the spine bone of a rabbit."

He opened the door cautiously and peered out. The Laredo morning paper, for which he had paid the tourist camp proprietor in advance, was on the stoop. He picked it up, closed the door and went back to the bed.

The headline concerned himself, he discovered to his dismay:

SON OF HERO SLAYS VETERAN!

In a black-edged box in one corner of the page, the Sheriff of Casa Paloma County announced that he would pay one thousand dollars for the capture of Lee Ainsley—Dead or Alive.

The story proper read, in part:

... Sam Convers and Matt Harris, the two Federal Communications Commission men who made the raid on Tom Mathers' Piedra Negras ranch, have declared that this is definitely a case of Nazi Fifth Column activity. ...

His pain, even his fear, forgotten, Lee read on, wide-eyed. He'd known he was in a spot, but now he saw that spot was even worse than he had feared.

... For the past six months, they state, the

F. C. C. has been troubled by a particularly vicious group of Nazi Fifth Column saboteurs who have been transmitting messages via the 'ham' air waves to Nazi confederates in Colombia, South America, who in turn have relayed further instructions from the Wilhelmstrasse in a secret code as yet unciphered by the U. S. 'black room' experts.

It is believed that Lee Ainsley, dragging the proud name he carries still further in the mire, deliberately gave his own call letters, hoping to place his own guilt on old Tom Mathers, a world war veteran. Mathers, a staunch patriot, had but yesterday afternoon refused to allow Ainsley to marry his sister, believing it a cowardly attempt of Ainsley's to change his draft classification to that of a married man. ...

The youth on the bed flushed crimson. "It's all a dirty lie," he breathed. "I ain't no Nazi. I ain't nothing. An' I never tried to blame nothin' on Tom. All I wanted was to be left alone to marry Jane because I loved her."

He faced the truth, then—the first step in his redemption. "An' because," he admitted bitterly, "I'm a no 'count coward an' I didn't want to go to camp an' be a soldier."

He read on glumly:

... When the F. C. C. men, using an all wave receiver and a special directional antenna, located the exact spot of the tarnsmitting set, they found Mathers' young sister weeping in the doorway of his radio shack and Ainsley standing over the dead veteran, the knife with which he had killed Mathers still clutched in his hand. As Mr. Convers reconstructs the scene it is believed that Mathers caught Ainsley working his short wave radio transmitting set and protested strongly, only to be killed in the ensuing fight. ... Ainsley is known in local circles as a radio genius. It is believed, however, that instead of turning his talents to a fitting use, he has been in the pay of the Nazi government for some time. Reputable witnesses have testified that within three hours of the actual murder Ainsley was heard bitterly protesting the National Conscription Act and vowing that he would never be a soldier in the army of the United States of America. ...

LEE let the paper drop slowly from his fingers. Something welled up inside his throat, choking him—and it wasn't fear.

"It's a lie—all a dirty lie," he managed to breathe finally. "I didn't mean it that way. This is my county, even if I am a coward." He buried his face in his one sound hand. "Oh, darn 'em all anyway. All I wanted was to be left alone."

He fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket and tried to light it. His movements had re-opened his wound, and his whole left side throbbed with pain. He crumpled the cigarette between his fingers and wished that he was dead.

But fear was still within him. It had been ingrained in him so long that his sudden anger had not been able to wipe it all away.

A gentle rapping on the door sent him backing up against the wall.

"Yes?" he stammered.

The door opened slowly. The two well-dressed strangers who had stopped at Abe Meyers' pump for gas on the day before, walked into the room. The last one in closed the door behind him; but not before Lee had a glimpse of the big sedan and trailer waiting just outside.

"Yes?" he asked again, a little uncertainly.

The men merely put their fingers to their lips and motioned him into the tiny, recessed shower. Lee obeyed, wide-eyed. The men began to remove their coats, not speaking.

"They're the law. Federal men," he thought in panic. "They're going to third degree me like I've read about. They're going to beat me, make me confess I killed Tom."

The men didn't stop after they'd taken off their coats. They removed their shirts and ties, then their trousers and their shoes. They folded each garment carefully, and placed them on two chairs. A moment later the loud popping of a motorcycle

spluttered outside. It stopped abruptly in front of the El Rancho Tourist Court office. The two blond men smiled thinly at each other and stretched out on the bed.

Lee had stood in puzzled silence as long as he could stand it. Native indignation overcame his fear.

"Say! What—" He stopped short, silenced by the peremptory forefinger of the biggest and the blondest of the pair.

A heavy, official pounding on the door of the cabin sent Lee cowering again behind the shower curtain. The smaller of the two blond men—and he was six-foot-one—smiled reassuringly at Lee.

"Yes?" the big man called out sleepily.

"State Trooper," a voice from the other side of the door told him curtly. "Open up. We're inspecting all the cabins on the highway."

The big man on the bed rolled heavily, with a great squeaking of the bed springs.

"What is it, Jack?" he mumbled.

His partner yawned audibly, winked at Lee, and ruffled his immaculately combed hair.

"Don't ask me. It's some guy who says he's a cop. And I was almost asleep." He crossed to the door, opened it, "Come in, Officer. What's wrong?"

The state trooper looked first at the expensive clothing folded on the chairs, then at the two big blond men who were watching him with friendly, if slightly puzzled smiles. The trooper dropped his gun back into its holster.

"Sorry, gentlemen." He grinned. "I'm lookin' for a killer. That Ainsley kid who murdered old Tom Mathers over in Casa Paloma county last night." His grin widened. "But I guess neither of you gentlemen is Ainsley."

"No," the man on the bed chuckled. "I'm afraid we're not. We're oil men—Olson and Harper. Perhaps you've heard of us. We used to have a flock of wells over in Mexico, but since the expropriation we've been trying to locate a likely

looking field on this side of the border."

"Yes," the trooper nodded. "I've heard about you fellows." He chuckled. "But why the tourist cabin when you've got that ten thousand dollar house on wheels out there?"

THE smaller of the blond men grinned wryly at the trooper. "To tell you the truth it's full of samples."

"Samples?"

"Yeah. Everytime Sam there sees a likely looking outcropping, he knocks off

guys haven't seen old Ben who runs this court since you checked in, have you? His wife says he stepped out to answer a horn a few minutes ago and she hasn't seen him since."

"We haven't seen him since we rented the cabin," the man in the bed replied. "We only pulled in a little while ago ourselves, and he was talking to some trucker about a tow job down the road."

"That's probably where he is then," the trooper grinned. "Thanks. Sorry to have bothered you fellows."

The smaller of the two men closed the

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a chunk of rock and loads it in the trailer for further analysis. He swears that if we can't find oil, he's going to get him a gold mine."

The three men laughed good-naturedly.

"I'm sorry I had to wake you fellows up," the trooper apologized. "You been driving all night?"

"All night," the man on the bed admitted.

"Didn't see anything of a kid along the highway, did you? A good looking kid, about nineteen, wearing a leather wind breaker, levis, and cowboy boots? About five foot ten, black eyes, black hair?"

"No—no." The smaller of the blond men shook his head. "Not while I was driving."

"He may not even have come this way," the trooper admitted. "Or he may be holed up in a culvert somewhere, dead. The F.C.C. fellows think they pinked him in the left side. We're just combing all the highways to be sure." He opened the door and then turned back. "Oh, say. You

door behind the officer. His partner slipped from the bed, a heavy automatic in his hand.

"He isn't going near the trailer?"

"Never even thought of it," the first man smiled.

They watched in silence while the trooper roused the occupants of the other cabins, made his apologies, straddled his motorcycle and roared off down the road.

"It's all right now, son," the smaller of the two men told Lee quietly. "You can come out from in back of that curtain now. The law's gone."

The two men paid no further attention to Lee. They began to dress. Lee watched them, uncertainly, not quite knowing what to say. He said finally, "Thanks."

"Not at all," the bigger man smiled. "It was just fortunate we found you before the law did. You can be useful to us. We've been looking for you in every possible hiding place between here and Casa Paloma since last night."

Lee's heart began to pound. "You mean

you're—Federal Communication men?"

"Gott forbid," the big man chuckled. "My name is Olson—Sam Olson. My partner there is Jack Harper. Those aren't the names that we were born with, but they will do for now." He studied the wounded youngster's white face thoughtfully, demanded, "*No habla V. castellano?*"

"*Si, señor,*" Lee told him. "I talk Spanish about as good as I do American. Most of us fellows on the border do. Only we'd ask that, '*Habla V español?*'"

"*Bueno,*" Olson beamed. He took a compact surgical kit from his pocket and extracted a scalpel. "Let me have a look at that arm of yours while we talk. Among other things, I'm something of a doctor.

He washed his hands in the sink. He rinsed them and the scalpel with an antiseptic, while the man whom he had introduced as Harper slit the sleeve of Lee's windbreaker with his pen knife. Physically sick with worry, Lee allowed them to do as they wished. They had saved him from the law. They were trying to help him.



THE big man worked deftly, swiftly, talking as he handled the instruments. "I have some brown stain out in the trailer. With your hair and eyes as black as they are we can pass you off easily as our Mexican houseboy."

"How bad is his arm?" the other man demanded.

Olson probed deeply into the wound with his scalpel. "Quite bad. But it will not keep him from traveling. He can work with one hand."

"But look here, mister," Lee protested. "I—" He shut his teeth against the pain as Olson found the flattened slug, maneuvered it into an accessible position, and popped it out with his fingers.

"So," the big man breathed. He glanced up at his patient's face. It was white and drawn with pain but Lee had born the

crude operation stoically and without an outcry. "I thought you were supposed to be a coward."

"I am," Lee gulped. "But it—it hurt so much I couldn't yell. But—who are you fellows? Why are you helping me? What do you want from me?"

Harper chuckled. "Ah. He is not so innocent, our little one. He knows one never gets something for nothing. Not even a friendly hand."

Olson poured some antiseptic into the wound. "You know most of the hams in Texas?" he demanded. "I mean, you know their call letters, their voices on the air, their little mannerisms—their fists."

Lee fought a wave of pain-induced nausea. "Yes, I do," he admitted.

"Good," Harper smiled. "The F.C.C. men have narrowed down our field of operation to a point where they must know both of our voices on the air and the way that we pound brass." He picked up where Olson had left off and began to bandage Lee's arm. "Out in our trailer you will find a short wave receiver and transmitter. Both are powerful enough to bring in, or contact, almost any given section of the world. From now on you will send for us."

"Send for you —" Lee gasped. His heart began its old familiar pound of fear; his throat contracted as it always did when he was frightened. He knew who the two men were—and what they were!

"I—I'll be damned if I will," he gulped. "I may be a coward, but—"

Olson, who was washing his hands at the sink, looked up and said coldly, "It is for you to say. Of course, if you prefer to be turned over to the police to be fried in the electric chair for the murder of Tom Mathers —" He left his sentence unfinished.

"Don't be a young *dumpkopf*," Harper chuckled. "You have the name. You might as well have the game. And once our leader—"

"*Possouf!*" Olson warned him. "You talk too much!" He glared at Lee. "And as for you—We have gone through too much trouble to get you to be annoyed by any belated patriotism you may feel. Now get out in that trailer, quick. That trooper might take it into his mind to come back and try to find the stupid old fool who runs this tourist court."

The palm of his sound hand moist with fear-sweat, Lee Ainsley stood his ground. "Now see here, mister. I—"

The big man slapped him brutally across the mouth.

"Shut up and do as you're told!" He opened the door of the cabin; made certain the way was clear. "Quick now. *Raus!* Into the trailer."

Lee Ainsley did as he was told. There was nothing else he could do. Blood streaming from his mouth, he stepped into the trailer, sickened by the knowledge that nothing either man might do would ever surprise him again. These big, blond, smiling men were killers. Old Ben, who owned the El Rancho Tourist Court, and who had been so conveniently absent during the visit of the State Trooper, hadn't gone very far for his tow job—or he had gone a long ways, depending on how one cared to view the matter.

Old Ben sat slumped in one corner of the perfectly appointed trailer, his washed blue eyes on the door. He didn't see Lee and the smaller of the two big blond men enter. His scrawny throat had been cut, as Tom Mathers' throat had been cut—from ear to ear.

CHAPTER THREE

What So Proudly We Hailed. . .

BLACKIE HART of the F.C.C. monitor station in San Pedro set his phones more firmly over his ears, his sensitive fingers hovering on his dials.

"There it goes again, Swede," he grunted. "Damn that code anyway. Take a cross-bearing with Atlanta on it, will you?"

Swede Ellison nodded and put his fingers to work.

"It's that Colombia, S.A. station," he reported, minutes later. "I wish the cipher experts in Washington were able to puzzle that one out."

Blackie grunted. "I wish those field boys down in Texas could pick up the outfit with whom they've been corresponding for the last few months. I'm beginning to think the whole state of Texas has gone crazy. Half the hams down there are nothing but a bunch of Nazi spies."

"Easy does it, Blackie," his fellow air-sleuth soothed. "Flip it over on the speaker. I want to hear those Texas boys come in."

Blackie flipped the switch, slipped his phones back on his head and listened, his fingers still hovering over his control board.

For minutes they sat in silence, listening to the heavy smash of the apparently meaningless jumble of sound. Then the South American sender stopped abruptly and the clean cut, swinging rush of a born key monkey's fist filled the room. An expert was at work.

"There they are," Blackie said curtly to his partner. "Make the usual recording and take a cross-bearing. I'll give you ten to one it comes out in Texas somewhere!"

Ellison worked quickly, deftly. He set the ever-waiting platter spinning, measured the signal intensity, checked with the monitor station in Atlanta, then shot across the continent to Boston to make certain.

"Check," he admitted. "We make it somewhere on the northeast coast of Texas, up in the pine belt where the army medical corps is conducting those secret experiments."

He looked at the huge map of the United States which completely filled one wall. "Want me to call in both Atlanta and Boston and take a bearing on the signal?"

"No." Hart shook his head. "What good will that do? There are at least a dozen field cars down in Texas pulling it in now." He swore softly. "And what will they find when they trace it? Another baby faced, wide-eyed ham who'll swear he didn't even have his power turned on."

They listened some more to the thin, fluting sound that would have been meaningless to a lay man. To them, trained brass pounders that they were, it was as clear-cut and individual as a signature.

"Nice fist," Swede said admiringly.

Blackie Hart exploded. "Nice nothing! We know the Nazi fifth column over here is up to its neck in sabotage." He paused a moment to listen. "And that same spy cipher, in a dozen different fists, has reported to S.A. from within a distance of five miles of every big army base in Texas, every big industrial center, every trouble spot on the border where—" He broke off shortly, a puzzled frown on his face. "Did you catch that, Swede?"

"Catch what?"

"The way that key monkey hangs on to that second dash in the C, if it is a C, and he's using Continental Code. Maybe those Texas hams are right. Maybe that's the same fist on the key every time—some Nazi with a portable outfit who sets up near their outfits and pirates their call letters to avoid taking the rap himself."

"But that's fantastic, Blackie. Even the Nazis couldn't get away with that."

"Yeah? That's what Czechoslovakia said. And Poland, and Belgium, and Holland, and Denmark, and Norway, and France." The air-sleuth lighted a cigarette, inhaled deeply. He spoke through the film of smoke that trickled from his mouth and nostrils. "Look, Swede. Any monkey who pounds brass for any length

of time develops certain mannerisms. Right?"

"Right," his partner agreed.

"And," the F.C.C. air-sleuth continued, "while the general fist has been different every time that spy cipher has gone on the air during the last two months, whoever is doing the sending, trying to imitate somebody else's fist—"

"I get you," Swede said tersely. "He always gives himself away by hanging on to that second dash in the C. I think you've got something there, Blackie!"

"I know I have!" The chief monitor of San Pedro slipped his phones back on his ears and threw his generator switch. He spoke above the growing whine as the rheostat steps tripped out. "You say you made that cross bearing about where?"

"I'd say—" Ellison studied the map—"somewhere in Panola County, in the heart of the Texas pine belt." He consulted a mimeographed list. "Our nearest field men are in Pineland. Sam Convers and Matt Harris. You remember. They're the boys who were transferred up there from the border when they let that kid Lee Aisley get away from them a couple of months ago."

Blackie Hart opened his circuit.

"Oh yeah, I do remember them. I'll see if I can raise their outfit."

"Better wait, hadn't you, Blackie? If the boys are on their toes they should be raiding that transmitting set that's slapping out that code. Or just about ready to raid it."

"I'll take a chance. Unless they're actually raiding, one of them should be listening in." He swore bitterly! "We've got seven monitor stations, all equipped with the newest of ultra high wave frequency apparatus to cover all wave bands, thirty-two field inspection offices. And a slippery, ham, Nazi spy down in Texas makes suckers of us all. Well, he won't much longer. Not if I'm right about that delayed dash!"

IN TEXAS he was known as Sam Olson, the millionaire oil operator. He had lived in Texas and in Mexico for many years, laying the groundwork for *der tag*. The *Wilhelmstrasse* knew him better as Captain Karl Luderman of the Third Reich Military Intelligence.

He sat, at war with the world, on the stoop of his expensive house trailer, the fragrance of the fat Havana cigar in his smooth-shaven jowls vying with the clean, crisp air of the Texas pine woods in which the trailer was parked. As a vitally concerned, but unworried spectator, he watched the F.C.C. prowler car manned by Sam Convers and Matt Harris speed up the lonely backwoods road and turn into a farm house lane not a quarter of a mile away.

"You turned off your power just in time," he called to his associate inside the trailer. "Have Lee shut up the walls and pull in that antennae. Those fool F.C.C. men are getting faster, closer to us, every time we try this trick.

Curt, crisp orders issued inside the trailer. Lieutenant Otto Olendorf of the Nazi Army Signal Corps, better known in Texas as Jack Harper, appeared in the trailer doorway, a piece of paper in his hand.

"It is here, Karl, he exultated. "But a few more days now.

The big blond man on the trailer steps took his cigar slowly from his mouth.

"*Das ist gutt*. His thick lips curled in scorn. He spat contemptuously. "The fools. The blind, stupid, trusting fools. They divide, they fight among themselves, while our leader waits on the doorstep, ready to enslave them." He spat again. "Bah. In no other country but this one could so many of the people be so blind."

He took the deciphered message from his lieutenant's hand. He read it carefully, tore it into fragments, and made a bonfire of them with a match.

Lieutenant Olendorf sat down beside

him, and drew swiftly in the pine needles with a stick.

"From here, across the Aleutian Islands into Canada will come the false attack—a thousand planes. Out here the Japanese will harrass the Pacific fleet. From here—" He sketched a rough outline of the lower west coast of Mexico, Central America, and the northern tip of South America—"from here will come the real attack. We will feint on the Canal—but strike direct right up through here." He chuckled. "The air over Texas will be black with Stukas, Messerschmitts, and Focke-Wulf Couriers. They'll come by the thousands."

"And our part?"

"As the message instructed. To continue as we have, until the morning of *der tag*. Then we shall strike without warning."

Olendorf added a rough outline of the entire United States to his sketch. "These munition plants—" He jabbed the crude map with his stick—"these ship ways, air fields and factories are to be blown up simultaneously; also these open cities, as an object lesson. That will be the signal for the general up-rising of our undercover troops, Bund members, and saboteurs already in this country. We shall have to fight. They are devils, these Americans, when once they are aroused. But the element of absolute surprise is in our favor. And if the first blitzkrieg should not succeed—" He shrugged philosophically. "It still will have its value. We shall effectively stop any further aid to Britain. America will have her own hands full."

Luderman nodded curtly.

"That is our leader's plan, Lieutenant. Now, as to our next objective."

Olendorf took a Texas road map from his pocket.

"This is where we are." He moved his finger to a red-circled spot, some thirty miles away. "The plane we are to use is

waiting there. It is a private plane belonging to the manager of a local power company who is one of us. The plane is waiting in the lonely clearing of a relay station. By the time we reach it tomorrow morning, it will already be loaded with thermite bombs."

"And here," Luderman drew a small, red circle on the map, "the cream of the American Army Medical Corps is attending the completion of the experiments with methylene blue und a new miraculous heart stimulant discovered by some old Army doctor."

Olendorf frowned. "Our men have been unable to find out the exact result of the experiments or the properties of this new drug?"

"To date they have failed," the Nazi Captain nodded. "So what we can not use—we will destroy." He moved his finger in a circle. "At exactly ten o'clock, saboteurs are to set fires here, und here, und here. At ten minutes after ten, you und I—"

He stopped short, looked up to see Lee Ainsley's brown-stained, haggard face and hollow eyes peering over his shoulder. "Yes?" he demanded coldly.

THE youth moistened his lips. His eyes were haunted, the pallor of his face was plain beneath the stain. He had aged ten years in as many weeks.

"You can't do that." He shook his head insistently. "I've got a friend in there, old Doc Seibling, our family doctor."

Luderman turned slowly. "Never mind what we can do, and what we can't do." His muscular right arm shot out in a short-arm blow, and his hard fist struck Lee fully in the stomach.

"Now stop writhing on the floor, boy. Get up! Get some supper started."

In a fog of pain the tortured youth pulled himself erect and stood in the door-

way. "Yes, sir," he muttered, whipped.

"*Si Señor*," Olendorf corrected.

"*Si Señor*," Lee gasped. He backed into the tiny kitchen of the trailer. His palms were wet and sweaty, but it wasn't fear. It was pain, and self disgust.

"They won't get away with that," he gasped. "Let 'em kill me. I'll find some way to stop 'em."

For two months, with Olendorf at his elbow every minute, Lee Ainsley had sent messages and received them; he had copied the fists and pirated the call letters of twenty different Texas hams. On the occasions that he had refused, Luderman and Olendorf had found measures to persuade him.

Lee Ainsley wasn't afraid of death in itself any longer. He had prayed for it too often. Subconsciously his lower jaw protruded.

"They'll burn old Doc Seibling, will they? And there'll be Stukas, Messerschmitts, an' Focke-Wulf Couriers over Texas? The hell there will!"

His underjaw receded slowly. There was nothing he could do; nothing at all more than he had already done. They watched him every minute. He knew too much. They were planning to kill him soon. Even if he could escape, he was wanted for murder. He was stamped as a Nazi agent, he was wanted by the draft board. It would be his word against that of Sam Olson and Jack Harper. He was a fugitive from justice. They were honored, respected, rich. No one would believe his fantastic story.

Such things simply didn't happen in America. . . .

Lee took a large steak from the ice box and began to flour and pound it mechanically. During the more than two months that he had roamed Texas in the trailer, a dim stirring of something he had never known before had begun to grow in him. It was a pride of State—and Nation—and blood. Old Tom Mathers, or Abe Meyers,

or his father—whom he had never known—would never have acted the way that Captain Luderman and Lieutenant Olendorf had acted. Tom, Abe, his father—they had all been outright men who spoke their minds. They stepped out in the open, made their oration, were shot at and shot back. They died as they lived—honest, unafraid.

The thought of death brought the sweat back to Lee's palms. Sooner or later some F.C.C. monitor station was certain to pick up that delayed dash in the Continental C and know that, despite the variance of call letters and differences in style, it was always the same fist on the key. But if they didn't catch it soon, it would be too late.

The sound of a motor turned his eyes out the window of the tiny kitchenette. A closed sedan was swinging into the clearing where the trailer was parked. Lee fought his neurotic fear as he had never fought it before—and again he failed. He huddled, a mass of quivering nerves, against the sink.



OUTSIDE the trailer, Captain Luderman peered into the deepening dusk.

"Greetings," he said cordially, in his practiced Texas drawl. "Light an' set, strangers. Our Mex boy is just putting supper on the fire."

Sam Convers shook his head slowly as he got out of the F.C.C. field car.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Olson and Mr. Harper. Quite a ways from mining or oil country, aren't you?"

"A short vacation." The Nazi signal corps lieutenant smiled.

Matt Harris got out of the other side of the car. A frightened, wide-eyed youth of eighteen got out with him. He had to—he was handcuffed to Harris' wrist.

"Set, boys; set," Luderman insisted cordially. He opened his cigar case and prof-

ferred it generously to the F.C.C. men.

"No thank you, Olson," Harris said. He made the question casual. "You don't mind if we look inside your trailer, do you?"

"Look inside our trailer?"

"That's right," Sam Convers affirmed. "You know we're Federal Communication Commission men?"

Olendorf assumed a puzzled frown. "Why, yes. At least, so we've heard. But how does that concern us?"

"It's like this, Mr. Harper," Convers told him quietly. "Somebody around here has been sending and receiving messages to and from a Nazi spy base down in Colombia, South America. Messages in a secret and forbidden cipher." He paused and studied the face of the smaller of the two big blond men thoughtfully. "Our directional antennae narrowed down the outlaw transmitter to within a few hundred yards of here—"

"It wasn't me. Honest, mister," the youth handcuffed to Matt Harris' wrist broke in. "I was working my ten meter band and I picked up those same signals. I even heard my own call letters given. But it wasn't me! I didn't have my transmitter on. Honest I didn't."

Captain Luderman looked at Olendorf and smiled. "Can you figure out just what the devil they're talking about, Jack?"

Sam Convers took a sack of fine cut from his pocket. He replenished his chew, his eyes never leaving the face of the man called Olson.

"If Blackie Hart in charge of the monitor office in San Pedro is right, Mr. Olson," he offered quietly, "it's about a pitcher that went to the well once too often." He stuffed the paper tobacco sack back in his pocket. When his hand emerged again, he held an automatic. He motioned the big man away from the trailer doorway. "Maybe you guys are all right, and maybe you aren't. We'll have a look-see."

Luderman winked at his lieutenant, and said jovially, "You boys are making a big mistake. But go right in."

"We intend to," Harris told him.

The two F.C.C. men and the youth handcuffed to Harris' wrist stepped into the trailer, Convers leading. He glanced swiftly into the kitchenette where Lee cowered against the sink.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

Lee tried to speak but the icy hand of fear had clamped down on his larynx. These men wanted him for murder. They would send him to the chair.

"Who are you?" the F.C.C. man repeated.

LEE looked past Convers and Harris to where Captain Luderman stood in the doorway, scowling. And suddenly all fear left Lee Ainsley. His birth and breeding and blood burst through the tightly wrapped cocoon of his fear. All they could do was kill him—and he wasn't afraid to die.

"Watch those guys!" he gasped. "They're killers. They aren't oil men. They're Nazi spies. This is a portable receiving and transmitting outfit." He gulped. "If you don't believe me, look at me real close. I'm Ainsley an' I'm wanted in Casa Paloma for murder!"

"If it isn't Ainsley!" Convers swore. He whirled towards the trailer doorway, then stopped abruptly. An expansive smile replacing the scowl on his face, Captain Luderman was pressing a long-barreled Luger against the spine of the farm boy handcuffed to Matt Harris' wrist. Luderman nodded at Convers' gun.

"Drop it," the Nazi instructed. "If you don't, I'll let the youngster have it through the spine."

Convers' gun dropped to the trailer floor with a sullen thud. There was nothing else he could do.

"We are unmasked, or discovered, or whatever you wish to call it, gentlemen."

The Nazi captain smiled. "But would you mind telling me just what made you suspicious of this trailer, after passing it by a dozen times in the last six months?"

Matt Harris swung the handcuffed youth behind him. He stood with the black mouth of the Luger pressed against the buckle of his belt.

"Just that," he said. "You were always around. That and a delayed dash in that scrambled code you send."

"A delayed dash?"

"That's right. I guess me and Sam were dumb to miss it as long as we did. But Blackie Hart in the San Pedro monitor station picked it up, and he realized that it couldn't be a different ham each time. You see, no matter how you tried to disguise your fist, and you did, cleverly, you always made that one mistake. You hung on to that second dash in your Continental C a split second too long."

Luderman turned to include Lee in his smile.

"So! Our little rabbit wasn't such a rabbit after all."

Lieutenant Olendorf stepped inside the trailer and stood beside his fellow Nazi.

"What are you waiting for, Captain Luderman? It is essential to our plans, to *der tag* itself, that none of them live to talk. No one will hear the shots in an isolated spot like this."

Matt Harris braced himself. He knew they could very well dare these murders. But he stalled for time, time for Sam Convers to regain his gun.

"You wouldn't dare!" he muttered.

"No?" Captain Luderman smiled. He triggered coldly, deliberately, three times.

What happened after that was sheer nightmare. Lee never remembered very clearly just what went on. He saw Matt Harris, dying on his feet, lurch into Luderman and Olendorf to gain time for Sam Convers. Then the trailer was filled with spitting guns, and smoke, and struggling bodies. Lieutenant Olendorf's face

swam through the smoke; and Lee smashed at it, in returned panic, with the meat mallet that he'd been using. Then he felt the crisp night air on his face and the soft give of pine needles under his feet and knew that he was running. Great sobs threatened to tear his lungs, while the air around him was filled with angry lead hornets that stung the trees into which he stumbled. Tiny, vicious spurts of bark and splinters erupted into his face.

Somewhere behind him a man was swearing in German. Then a cold, harsh voice demanded, "You got him, Otto?"

The stream of curses stopped briefly.

"No! It is too dark out here for me to see what I am shooting at. How are the others?"

"Dead," the far away voice answered. "Come, help me hide the bodies in the brush. We've *got* to get that youngster!"

* * *

THE sharp, silver-edged axe of morning was chopping away the black forest of night in huge crimson chips when Lee Ainsley crept to the edge of the clearing. In this solemn pine belt that bordered the Army Medical Corps experimental station, he could see an alert sentry, thirty feet away, pace slowly up and back his allotted post.

For the first time in months Lee smiled. A wan smile, but a smile. There was something solidly reassuring in the trained carriage of the sentry, in the measured tread of his steps, in the dull gleam of the rifle on his shoulder—even in the cocky way his campaign hat dipped smartly over one eye.

With one last, apprehensive look behind him, Lee sank exhausted in a clump of underbrush. Luderman and Olendorf might find him, but not by trailing him. That much he knew. During the course of the long night, once his panic had lessened, he had used every bit of range-craft he

had ever learned to cover his back trail. It had worked in the woods almost as well as it might have served in his own native stretches of mesquite. The stars had been the same; the moon had been the same. The frequent creeks up which he'd waded, and the icy river he had swum, had served the same effect as kindred tricks of range-craft. They had blotted out his trail.

In the excitement of the chase he had forgotten fear; had forgotten that he was a coward. Perhaps, he mused as he fought for breath, that was the way with heroes. They concentrated so strongly on what they were doing that they forgot to be afraid. Lee knew only that he had to get to old Doc Seibling or the commander of the post and tell them what he had learned. Tell them that there were to be Stukas, Messerschmitts, and Focke-Wulf Couriers over Texas.

Still breathing heavily, he looked past the sentry at the silent executive offices, the hospital, the barracks, the hangars of the flying field. As he watched, a bugle call split the air with "Reveille," and the camp awakened.

Men streamed from everywhere and nowhere. Ranks formed where only the frosty turf had been a moment previous. Ranks of joking, laughing, well-trained boys of his own age, who froze to rigid attention as a second bugle call sounded. With a rippling, effortless ease, the Stars and Stripes began its ascent to the tall silver flag pole at one end of the drill ground.

Instinctively Lee got to his feet. "That's my flag," he thought. "The flag that my great grandfather, and my grandfather, and my own father died for."

He stared at the flag in silence until the ranks of men dismissed. Then he knelt, slowly and deliberately. It was the first time he'd prayed since the night that his mother died.

His eyes were glued to the flag. "Look,

God," he said. "I don't care what they do to me, but I've got to tell them what I know. I've got to tell 'em what I heard Captain Luderman and Lieutenant Olen-dorf say."

He paused to review it in his mind—names, places, dates. "I've got to walk right out there and tell that sentry that I want to see the guy in charge, or anyways at least Doc Seibling. Gimmie the guts to do it, Lord, because I'm scared. I got no way of provin' I didn't kill Tom Mathers, an' they'll probably send me to the chair." He gulped. "If I'm not shot for treason first, or sent to jail because I evaded the draft by not showin' up at camp."

He set his jaw. "It really don't matter what they do to me. Just keep my spine-bone stiff enough to get all that I know off of my chest. Make 'em believe me, Lord. I ain't asking for myself. It's for that flag. The flag the men of my family died for."

His eyes still on the flag, he got slowly to his feet and walked out in the clearing.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Brave Come Home

GENERAL MASON, senior surgeon in charge of the north-east Texas Army Medical Experimental Station, was dog-tired. For days he had been working under a terrific strain. He looked impatiently across his desk, then at his watch. It was fifteen minutes of ten.

"Yes?" he demanded. "What now?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, General," his orderly apologized, "but it's that Mexican kid again. He says he isn't a Mexican. Says his name is Lee Ainsley, and that he's wanted by the F.C.C. and the Texas State Police for murder."

"Then why doesn't he go to them?" Mason demanded. "I haven't any time to bother with outside matters. How did

the boy get into the station anyway?"

"He just stepped out of the woods and walked up to the sentry, sir." The lieutenant added less certainly: "He says that he's been touring Texas in a trailer with two Nazi spies for several months, and that fifth columnists working under their direction are going to set this whole section of the pine belt afire at ten o'clock. Then the two spies themselves—who, he says, murdered two F.C.C. men last night—are to fly over the experimental station and bomb us with thermite bombs to make certain that they kill off most of the high ranking surgeons in the army."

General Mason snorted his derision.

"Nonsense. He's either a crank or a publicity seeker. Have him thrown off the grounds. Tell him he'll be arrested if he shows up here again."

"But he wants to be arrested, sir. He says he has definite information that this country is to be invaded by the Nazis. But he won't talk to anyone but yourself or Doctor Seibling. He says that Doctor Seibling knows him."

"Doctor Seibling is not to be disturbed." General Mason looked at his watch again. "And I have no time to sit here discussing an obviously addle-witted boy. Doctor Seibling begins his final demonstration in exactly fourteen minutes."

"Yes, sir."

General Mason drummed on the desk top with his fingertips, the subject of Lee Ainsley already forgotten.

"I only wish that I might have had some part in Doctor Seibling's discoveries," he mused. "It took an old Texas Army doctor to discover what the greatest medical minds in the world had failed to realize: the phenomenal part which methylene blue and this new heart stimulant that he's discovered can play in reducing an army's casualties. Why, Lieutenant, in some of his experiments I've seen old Doctor Seibling—" Mason stopped abruptly and cleared his throat.

"But I'm talking too much. That will be all, Lieutenant. Don't bother either Doctor Seibling or myself again until after the final experiments. That's an order."

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant saluted and closed the door behind him. In the corridor he passed Doctor Seibling. The aged doctor was arguing sulphurously with two high ranking army surgeons. A leather faced, white haired, old Texan, Doctor Seibling's vocabulary was as profane and extensive as his medical knowledge was sound.

The lieutenant kicked himself mentally. "I wish I had gone to the old doctor instead of Mason when the kid first showed up this morning. There's something about that kid that makes me believe him."

Lee stood up, expectantly when the officer entered the guard room.

"I'm sorry, youngster," the lieutenant told him. "General Mason won't see you, and Doctor Seibling is too busy. You better go on in to the nearest town and talk to the local authorities. Sergeant—!"

A grizzled non-com saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Escort this young man off the grounds of the station. See that he doesn't come back."

The sergeant took Lee's arm. "Come on, son. The lieutenant says out."

"But—" Lee began to protest, then changed his mind and followed the sergeant out of the room. His shoulders were squared, his jaw protruded.

General Mason's orderly watched his departure with thoughtful eyes. Sometimes he wished there wasn't quite so much red tape and so many opinionated brass hats in the army. The lad had the ring of truth about him.

OUTSIDE the guard room door, on the path which skirted the hangers and the field, Lee Ainsley had made up his mind that there was only one thing left for him to do. He might be shot in the attempt, but he had to take the

chance. He had to make them believe him, listen to his story.

"Just a minute, please, sir," he said.

The sergeant stopped, and Lee knelt in the shelter of a hangar, ostensibly to tie his shoe lace. He picked up a piece of building brick. The grizzled sergeant was waiting patiently, his eyes on the walk leading to the hospital proper, which was filled with officers who had flocked to the Texas experimental station to witness the experiments of an obscure old army doctor.

Lee got to his feet, the half-brick hidden at his side.

"Plenty of big shot saw-bones, eh?" the sergeant grinned.

Lee said, "Yes, sir." But his eyes weren't following the sergeant's interested glance. They were watching the .45 caliber automatic strapped to the sergeant's thigh. Then they raised to the glittering silver wings of the two-place training plane he had heard being warmed up while he waited in the guard room.

"That plane is ready to take off?" Lee pointed with his free hand.

The sergeant squinted against the sun. "That's right, lad. It makes a regular morning patrol. It—"

The sergeant grunted, slipped to one knee, then sprawled his full length on the ground. The piece of brick had struck him squarely on the temple.

Lee knew a moment of returning panic. "Now I've done it," he gasped. "I've killed a soldier along with everything else I've done. Now they'll hang me sure."

But even as he talked he tugged the heavy automatic from the sergeant's holster and raced out across the field. Half a dozen mechanics saw him and shouted, but Lee didn't even hear them. His blood pounding with a new and strange elation, he ran straight towards the already moving plane. He missed the murderous blades of the spinning propellor by inches, scrambled up on to a wing.

The pilot cut his throttle instinctively, only to find himself staring into the business end of a .45.

"Keep right on going!" Lee screamed above the popping of the motor. "Gun your ship an' keep on goin', or I'll shoot!"

The pilot was a soldier, not a fool, and there are innumerable ways to skin a cat. He gunned his motor, took off and viciously wig-wagged his wings.

Lee had scrambled into the rear cockpit and snapped the safety belt around his waist.

"Don't try that again." He warned as he pressed the .45 against the nape of the pilot's neck. He had to scream to be heard above the slipstream. "Or so help me, Hannah, I'll shoot."

The pilot fought for altitude, then pointed to the cockpit phone. Lee clamped the headphone on his ears.

"Where to, stranger?" the pilot asked laconically. He banked in an ever-widening circle, his eyes on the field below, where the frantic ground crew were already rolling out two other planes.

Lee said gruffly into the phone, "A clearin' in the pine 'bout thirty miles from here where there's a high line relay station. Think you can find it?"

"I do."

"Then fly me there," Lee told him.

He sat back in the cockpit, his black eyes blazing, his jaw thrust into the wind, oblivious to the biting wind that tore at his thin, brush-torn clothes. If he could reach Captain Luderman and Lieutenant Olen-dorf in time and make them talk at the point of a gun, then General Mason would have to believe him.

"I don't know if you're crazy, or what, son," the pilot's voice came through the head phones. "But you're in one sweet jam. Stealing a United States Army plane at the point of a gun is good for at least twenty years in Atlanta."

"Shucks, mister," Lee told him seriously, "that ain't nothin'. When they

catch me they're goin' to electrocute me for murder. That is, if they don't shoot me for treason first."

The pilot shook his head in a gesture which said plainly, "Perhaps I'm the one who's crazy."

"Is this here thing I'm sittin' on a parachute?" Lee demanded.

The pilot glanced back, saw the muzzle of the heavy automatic.

"That's right," he said.

Lee worked his arms and thighs through the straps, buckled them—the pilot giving necessary instructions with each insistent nudge of the gun.

A PUFF of white smoke on the carpet of green below caught Lee's eye. "It's ten o'clock," he shouted into the phone.

The pilot glanced at the clock on his instrument panel. Lee was right.

"What about it?" the airman asked.

His eyes followed Lee's pointing finger. As they watched, a dozen tiny puffs of smoke grow into flames that raced through the tall, dry pine. The pilot cut in his radio, tried frantically to get the dispatcher at the station.

"Ain't no use you doing that, mister," Lee told him. "The Nazis probably figured that there might be a plane in the air. Probably everyone of the fellows settin' those fires has a small, all-wave oscillator tuned in to blot out all incomin' signals in your field man's receiver."

The pilot turned and eyed his unwelcome passenger grimly. He pointed to a clearing a few miles ahead of the plane and three thousand feet below them. A glint of silver shone beside a squat, white masonry building.

"There's your clearing, kid. If you're going to jump, for God's sake jump, and let me get back to the station. The way this wind is blowing, all those big shot army docs will be trapped in there like rats if we don't get some backfires going."

"That's the way Captain Luderman had it planned," Lee shouted into the phone. "You fly me right over that clearin' an' I'll jump." He unsnapped his safety belt and climbed over the coaming to the wing.

"How many times," he shouted as an afterthought, "do you count up to before you pull this thing?"

The army pilot shouted, "Ten."

Lee nodded and looked down. They were approaching the near side of the clearing.

"Don't let no planes fly over the station," he called. "They aim to drop thermite." He let the wind pull him off the wing, his lips moving visibly as he counted.

The plane banked sharply. The white silk of the parachute blossomed into full flower.

The pilot kept his eyes glued to the growing circle of smoke and flames that rimmed the pine woods around the medical experimental station thirty miles away. But his words were of Lee. "That kid is either a hero or a nut."

Dangling from the chute, Lee felt like neither. He felt only a strange elation that he had never known before. His eager eyes searched the clearing below him, and he saw that he was in time. The silver glint he had noticed from above was a plane. As he watched, Captain Luderman stepped from the doorway of the squat, white building.

Lee slipped the safety from his gun. "There'll be Stukas over Texas, will there?" he whispered to the wind.

Voices from the ground reached him. "It's Lee! I tell you that it's Lee!"

Lieutenant Olendorf and a fat faced, big-bellied man stepped out of the building, looking up.

"By Gott it is!" Olendorf smirked. "The fool. The insane little fool. *Aber Willkommen.*"

He drew his long barreled Luger and took careful aim, but he made just one

mistake. He waited too long to fire. The youth dangling from the shrouds of the chute fired first, as he had dozens of times from the back of a sunfishing horse. Lee fired as most Texans shoot, off hand, the way another man might point.

The long barreled gun dropped from the Nazi's hand. He touched his fingers to his forehead and pitched forward on his face.

"I got him!" Lee exulted.

And then the ground came up to meet him. He stuck in a billowing cloud of silk that pulled him from his feet and dragged him along the ground. Lead kicked up little spurts of dust inches from his legs, his head, his heart.

He wondered vaguely why he wasn't frightened, knowing only that he wasn't. He felt no fear, no fear at all, nothing but an irrepressible desire to yell.

"Yeeeeee-owwwwww!"

Then he had the straps of his chute unbuckled and was rolling to his feet. Both Luderman and the fat man were firing at him. Lee shot back coldly, methodically, without haste—as old Doc Seibling had taught him.

The fat-faced man put both of his hands to his stomach and ran for the silver-winged plane. Lee flipped the last shot in his gun at the fleeing figure and saw the man stumble.

"Yeeeeee-owwwwww!" Lee yelled again.

Still clutching his empty gun, he walked deliberately towards the Nazi captain in the doorway of the relay station.

HIS own gun emptied, Luderman tossed it away. He drew a long, thin knife from his sleeve.

Lee grinned his contempt. "You're on the wrong side of the border, Captain. We don't fight with knives over here."

The knife swung up in a glittering arc. Lee stepped in under it, raked the sight of his empty gun across the Nazi's face, and was gone before the knife flashed.

"Besides, you don't know how to fight with a knife," the youngster taunted. His gun barrel slashed out like a striking rattler; and the knife tinkled to the ground. "All you can do is cut old men's throats."

Able to see again, Luderman rushed forward. He tried to clinch. Lee met him with a smashing left that mashed the big man's nose against his face. Then he swung the heavy gun barrel again.

Blind with pain, the big man tried to cover up. "Max!" he shouted. "Shoot him! Get this young fool off of me!"

But Max, the Bund leader who managed the power station and who had dismissed all his employees for the day, couldn't hear him. He was dead.

"Frame me for murder, would you?" Lee said coldly. "Kill old Tom Mathers, would you?" He talked between clenched teeth as he pistol-whipped the bigger, heavier man with a cold thoroughness that would have drawn the admiration of the men folk of his family. "Try to make a traitor out of me because I'm a coward! Try to burn old Doc Seibling, would you? You're goin' right back there to that army station with me, an' tell the general everythin' that dirty range-boss you're a ridin' for is plannin'. There'll be Stukas over Texas, will there!"

"*Gott in Himmel!*" The Nazi Captain finally broke loose and fled inside the power plant.

Lee followed right behind him.

"Now, look, Lee—" The Nazi attempted to reason.

Lee saw a chance to lash out with his gun barrel.

"Gott! Stop it!" the Nazi screamed.

He felt the wall of the main power room at his back and knew he could retreat no further. He edged along the wall towards the manager's desk, where a loaded gun lay in a drawer.

"Please, Lee." He stalled for time. "Don't beat me. I will go with you to the

general. I—" He stopped momentarily, and skirted an open, faulty circuit on the high line on which the relay station manager had been working when they heard the plane. There was enough juice in the open circuit to electrocute a hundred men—and Luderman didn't want to die.

"We had you all wrong, Lee," he stalled. "We—"

His groping fingers, stretched behind him, found the gun. Re-armed, the odds all on his side again, he dropped his whine. His battered lips twisted in an evil smile.

"You idiotic, hair brained fool. You really thought that you could take me?"

Ignoring the gun, Lee grinned at the other's battered face. "I've been doin' pretty well so far."

"But not far enough," Luderman drew himself painfully erect. "I'm going to shoot you now, as you shot Otto und Max." He spat out a mouthful of teeth. "I am going to carry out our plans to bomb the station."

His battered lips twisted in their evil smile. "Und still comes the blitzkrieg without warning." He raised the gun.

"Sure looks like I'm in a spot," Lee said.

He measured his distance between himself and the triumphant Nazi. He could, he decided calmly, close the gap between them and grapple with the man—unless the first bullet struck some vital spot. But could he kill him, before he himself was killed? That was the simple problem. His eyes flickered from the Nazi's face to the faulty circuit of the high line. With luck, he decided, he could hold him.

His black eyes twinkling with decision, he catapulted his slim body at the Nazi, striking downward with his gun barrel.

Lead fingers sprouted from Luderman's gun, picking holes in Lee's chest, his arms, his legs. They slowed him—but they failed to stop him. His free hand reached its objective—Luderman's throat.

"Die, damn you! Die!" the Nazi gasped. He tried to twist free, struck out

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ACE G-MAN STORIES

with hard, short-arm blows at the bullet riddled body of the youth. But the slim, steel talons only continued to tighten on his throat.

There was a rushing and a roaring in Lee's ears, as of a flight of distant planes. He knew that his strength was ebbing and that the end was a matter of minutes—he had failed. There would be Stukas over Texas after all. But at least he could save old Doc Seibling. Perhaps the old doctor could piece at least a part of the picture together.

"Die! Die!" The Nazi's voice was rattling in his throat as he twisted free.

"Let's both," Lee muttered grimly.

The roaring in his ears was growing louder now. With the last of his strength he tightened his slipping grip on Luder-man's throat—and jammed the muzzle of his empty gun full into the faulty, open, high-line outlet. There was a crackling of blue flame, then nothing but silence.

★ ★ ★

There seemed to be something that he had forgotten, but Lee couldn't quite remember what it was. This place was so strange. It looked like Texas, but he knew it wasn't—not the Texas he had known.

As he trudged along the road Lee wished he could remember what it was he had forgotten. Then he saw the three big men on the snow white horses who led a fourth white horse up out of a coulee that was all golden in the last rays of a setting sun, and he remembered. Lieutenant Olendorf was dead. The man called Max was dead. Captain Luderman was dead. And so, Lee supposed, was he. And he hadn't told anyone of the blitzkrieg that was coming, of the Stukas, and the Messerschmitts, and the Focke-Wulf Couriers, that were to sweep up out of Mexico and swarm over Texas.

He stopped and looked back. It seemed he had been traveling on a level trail. But the trail behind him led through a series of tortuous cut banks and prickly pear thickets that could peel the hide right off a man afoot.

While he stood hesitant the trio of big men on the big white horses rode up beside him and stopped.

"Howdy," Lee said, remembering his manners.

The youngest of the trio smiled. He swung down to the trail and held out a strong, bronzed hand. "Howdy. You don't know me, son. I changed my range a few nights 'fore you were born. But I'm your pa."

"And—" Lee took his father's hand hesitantly—"you ain't ashamed of me, pa?"

"Ashamed of yuh?" the next oldest of the trio cackled. He leaned down over his

horse's withers and slapped Lee on the shoulder. "Say. I'll be dad-blamed effen yuh ain't the most hell raisin' Ainsley of us all."

The third big man smiled gently. "We're all right proud to see you, Lee. An' we'd admire to have you stay." His face grew stern. "But have you got your chores all done?"

"No-no," Lee admitted. "I haven't!" He studied the uncompromising, yet friendly and simple, dignity of the old man's face. "I know who you are. You're great grandpa Ainsley."

The old man brought the fourth white horse a little closer. "That's right. But don't you think that you'd best be getting back and get those chores done, Lee?"

The youth turned and looked back at the cut banks studded with prickly pear.

"Yes," he admitted. "I do. But can I make it?"

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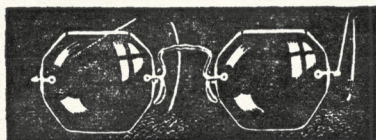
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ACE G-MAN STORIES

His father slipped an arm around his
shoulder. "Of course you can make it,
Lee. A man can do what he has to."

Then the three men on the big white
horses faded. The gold went out of the
clouds and all was cold and gray again.
Lee was climbing through a mist and fog,
fighting his way through thickets of thorns
he couldn't see, thorns that tore at his
naked flesh and made him grit his teeth
at pain almost beyond endurance.

Lee set his underjaw defiantly, "A man
can do what he has to."

★ ★ ★

"**F** EINT on the Canal, false at-
tack through Canada," Lee
breathed laboriously. "Watch
the Japanese fleet. Real attack coming up
through Mexico. Stukas over Texas." He
fought for strength to go on.

Vague figures shrouded in white had
begun to weave through the mists around
him. The air was heavy and sweet with
the smell of some unknown drug. And
somewhere in the mists a familiar voice
was swearing great, blistering oaths. A
hand felt through the fog and touched his.

The familiar voice insisted: "Stay with
him, Lee. Keep fighting, boy. You're
going to make it. You can ride him!"

The muscles of Lee's bullet-shattered
body tightened. Breathing grew less diffi-
cult. He opened his eyes.

Old Doc Seibling, dressed in white,
with a funny gauze mask over his mouth,
was bending over him.

The youth's lips twisted in a smile.
"Hello, Doc," he breathed.

"A miracle!" General Mason gasped.
"I would have sworn that boy was dead.
He had six bullets in him, he'd been
practically electrocuted."

Old Doc Seibling winked at Lee.
"Mebbe he was dead, mebbe he wasn't.
Heroes die hard, General."

LAST OF THE FIGHTING AINSLEYS

"I'm not a hero," Lee gasped. "But I've got to talk."

"Now take it easy, son," General Mason said quickly. "You can talk when—"

"Who's the doctor here, you or me?" the old surgeon demanded. "Right now, talk is the best medicine this boy can have. Go on, Lee. Talk if you want."

Lee talked. He gave names, dates, places, facts. When he finally lay exhausted, the medical station hospital amphitheatre was a hive of bustling men. Some were grave-faced, some were grim—all were determined.

"Did—did I kill that sergeant, Doc?"

"Hell, no!" the old army surgeon snorted. "You can't kill a top kick with a brick."

The next question was a difficult one for Lee to ask. "But—but they're goin' to shoot me for a traitor?"

"Well, no, I don't think so." The old doctor tried hard not to smile. "An' they've got that little matter of Tom Mathers straightened out." His lined face softened. "Why you lantern-jawed, death-ridin' fool, don't you know you're a hero?"

Lee shook his head. "I've been a fool. I've just begun to grow up, Doc." His voice grew stronger. "I've got a lot of man-sized chores to get caught up on. I want to telegraph Jane."

The old surgeon looked disappointed. "To ask her to marry you, Lee?"

"No, sir." The boy on the bed shook his head. "To ask her to wait for me. I—I want to get in on what's coming, sir."

His eyes turned towards the window, and he stared out at the drill ground. Doc Seibling turned with him.

Proud, defiant, the Stars and Stripes floated free in the wind. It had the right to. It had flown over the fertile land of a nation of free men for one hundred and sixty-four years. And both men knew with a swelling pride that it would continue to do so—forever.

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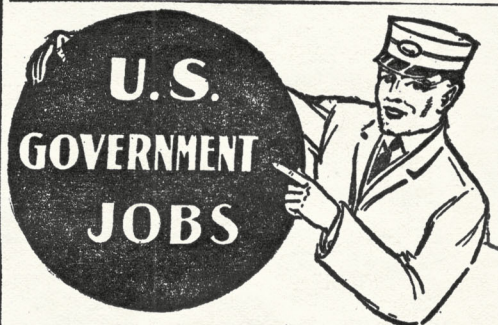
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ACE G-MAN STORIES

(Continued from page 83)

—stolen dough—stashed all over the country, Towne. I was willin' to do my bit and come out and dig up that dough and the hell with it. I couldn't kill no copper.

"But these rats! They planned murder. They ain't bank robbers! They're sneakin' killers—using Mike Gard's m.o.! I couldn't stand for that, Phil!"

"Water!" moaned the little man. Phil examined the wound. It was through the lung, but Storm would live to stand trial.

Mike Gard said, "Will he burn?"

Phil said, "I'll see that he burns."

"That's good," Mike said. "I—feel all right, now." He looked about at the dead men. "You get Collins and Cole?"

"Yes," Phil told him. "There's a phone. I'll call a doctor for you, Mike."

The bank robber smiled. "It's too late. I'm about gone. I—just—hadda—make sure . . . they was all done for . . ."

His head dropped, even as Phil carried a glass of water to him, ignoring the whine of the man called John Storm.

Mike whispered, "Imagine that lil rat! A clerk! He turns tough and gets this mob and tries to play Mike Gard! Imagine, kin ya?"

Phil said, "No."

Mike's eyes lit up. He raised his head and looked triumphantly at the piled

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dead. "I wasn't no killer. But I learned them smart cookies what a guy kin do when he's mad, didn't I?"

"You sure did," said Phil.

"That's . . . good . . . enough!"

He died, sitting there, the smile still on his face. Phil stared thoughtfully down at the greatest bank robber who ever lived.

The whining of John Storm in the chair was suddenly very distasteful. Phil would not enjoy writing his report of this case. He would not enjoy telling that Mike Gard had died against a wall, smoking a cigarette, proud that lesser men would no longer imitate his style of robbing banks.

Phil had a strong feeling about it all. He had liked Mike Gard, at the end. He had a strong suspicion that Mike Gard had been the best man in the entire affair.

THE END

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28x4.50-20	1.85 .85	30x6.50-20	3.35 1.95
30x4.50-21	1.95 .85	7.00-20	4.60 2.95
28x4.75-19	1.85 .95	7.50-20	5.15 3.75
28x4.75-20	2.10 .95	8.25-20	6.75 4.95
28x5.00-19	2.75 1.05		
30x5.00-20	2.40 1.05		
5.25-17	2.45 1.15		
28x5.25-18	2.45 1.15		
28x5.25-19	2.45 1.15		
30x5.25-20	2.50 1.15		
31x5.25-21	2.80 1.15		
5.50-17	2.75 1.15		
28x5.50-18	2.75 1.15		
28x5.50-19	2.75 1.15		
6.00-16	3.15 1.45		
6.00-17	2.85 1.15		
30x6.00-18	2.85 1.15		
31x6.00-19	2.85 1.15		
32x6.00-20	2.95 1.25		
33x6.00-21	3.10 1.25		
32x6.50-20	3.20 1.35		

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Size	Tires
6.00-20	\$3.10 \$1.65		
6.50-20	3.35 1.95		
7.00-20	4.60 2.95		
7.50-20	5.15 3.75		
8.25-20	6.75 4.95		

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pipe
shown
4/5
actual
size

1 OOM PAUL PIPE VAL. 2.50
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RUM & MAPLE TOBACCO
1 SAMPLE PKG. THREE SQUIRES

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It's a sturdy, fine friendly pipe—looks good—smokes good—and keeps sweet. Hand-carved, of finest root briar—stays cool to the touch. The deep bowl holds lots of tobacco—lasts through a long radio program or a novel. Great when you sit and chat—and don't want to refill.

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FORGET this incredible low price—for a while. Think only of superior quality . . . visualize the proudest pipes in any man's collection . . . the type of pipes you might have bought but for the fact they were priced beyond your reach. That's the kind of an opportunity we're offering you NOW . . . and at NO RISK at all.

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Pipe
shown
3/4
actual
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SQUIRES TOBACCO 15
TOTAL VALUE \$2.30

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15¢
was 40c



15¢

FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT



PAY NOTHING TILL RELIEVED *SEND COUPON*

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get relief from this disease as quickly as possible, because it is both contagious and infectious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or notch of the legs.

WHY TAKE CHANCES?

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to destroy the germ, whereas, upon contact, laboratory tests show that H. F. will kill the germ Tinea Trichophyton within 15 seconds.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of relieving Athlete's foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. H. F. gently peels the skin, which enables it to get to parasites which exist under the outer cuticle.

ITCHING OFTEN RELIEVED QUICKLY

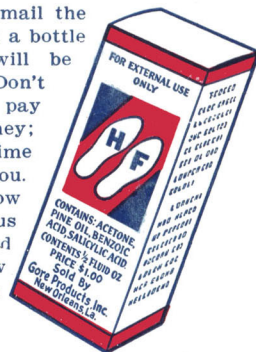
As soon as you apply H. F. you may find that the itching is relieved. You should paint the infected part with H. F. each night until your feet are better. Usually this takes from three to ten days.

H. F. should leave the skin soft and smooth. You may marvel at the quick way it brings you relief. It costs you nothing to try, so if you are troubled with Athlete's Foot why wait a day longer.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be

mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us \$1 for the bottle at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.



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Please send me immediately a bottle of H. F. for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you \$1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

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