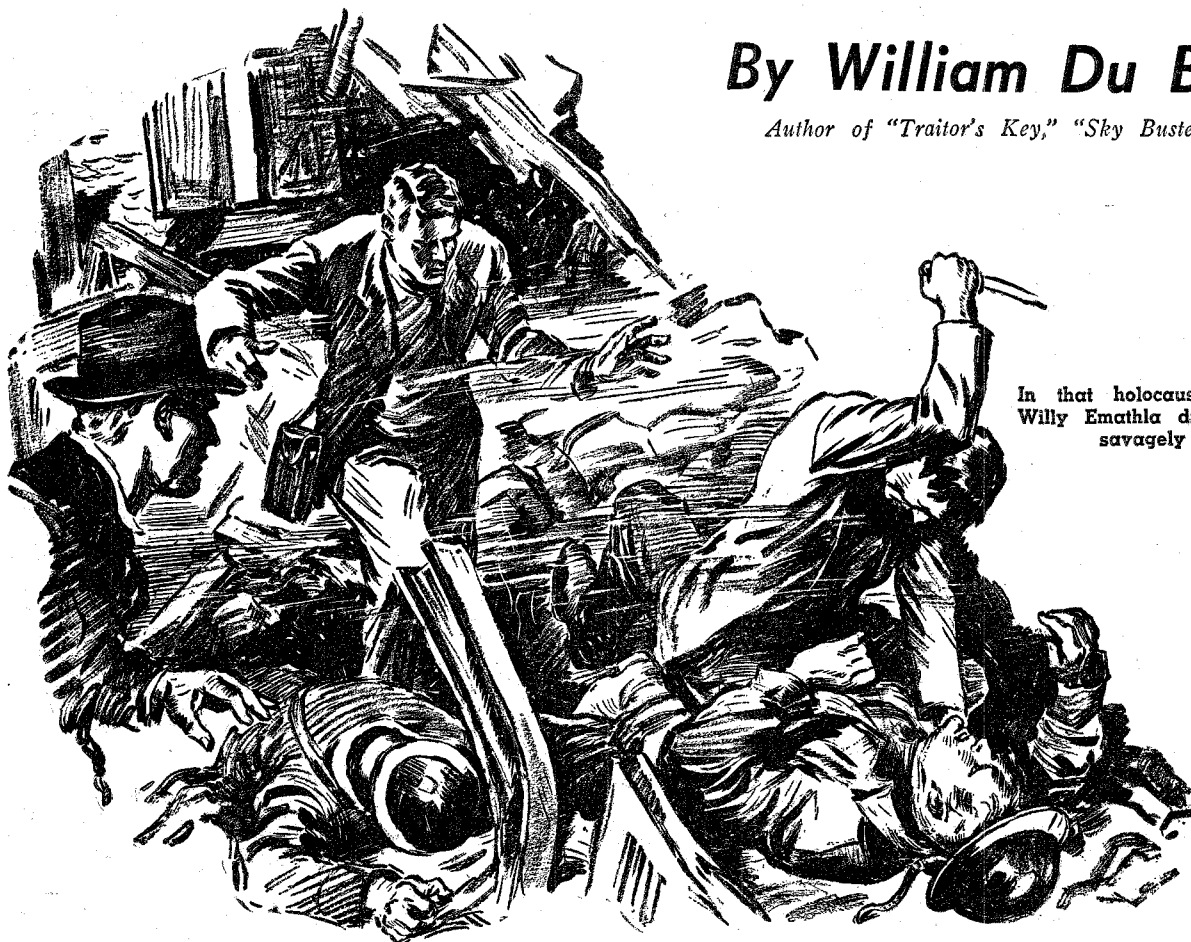


The Blackest Night

By William Du Bois

Author of "Traitor's Key," "Sky Buster," etc.



In that holocaust Ames saw
Willy Emathla drive his knife
savagely down

Above London the planes were screaming and the bombs were plummeting down. And deep below the city three Americans were juggling with dynamite and with the Empire's tomorrow . . . until a Seminole lifted his wild war-cry

I

THE gray roadster turned out of the Parkway and entered the drive that skirts the Hudson just north of New York's city line. The driver, a behemoth who bulked grotesquely over the wheel, glanced at his rear-vision mirror before he cut his motor and coasted to a stop at the parapet commanding a sweeping view of the river and the soot-blackened palisades on the Jersey side. The moonless night was not quite dark enough to hide the business coupe idling down a clover-leaf from the Parkway, to pause inconspicuously on the drive a scant hundred yards away.

Still followed, thought the man. Well, that's as it should be.

The behemoth shoulders heaved as he chuckled at a joke all his own; one Gargantuan arm dropped like an overstuffed python across his companion's shoulders, a peroxide lady from the back row of the Broadway Burlesque. A lady who looked her age, even in the crisp winter starlight, as she snuggled expertly into the pneumatic embrace.

"I was wondering why you brought me so far uptown, darling. Say, what is your name, anyhow?"

"Is that important?"

The man's English was flawless, with the faintest guttural overtones. He kissed the peroxide lady thoroughly

but casually—precisely as though he were performing the act for the benefit of an audience, without personal interest. His eyes had not left that rear-vision mirror for an instant. The lady sat up slowly, and straightened her hat, with a provocative sigh.

"I don't do this every day, you know—not without an introduction. After all, you know *my* name."

"Only because it is printed in the theatre program."

"You are a queer one. Sending that note backstage tonight, with a five spot inside. Suppose I'd just kept the money, and thumbed my nose?"

"You would not be so unkind. Did I not promise more, when the evening is over?"

"All right, mister. I'm here—in your car. Don't tell me we just go on admiring the view?"

"We will do just that, if you do not mind too much. Perhaps for ten minutes." The behemoth glanced precisely at his watch. "Then, with your permission, I will present you five dollars more, and drive you home." Again he chuckled, and hugged her closer, with his eyes on that mirror. "Billie, my love."

But Billie had already stiffened indignantly. "Come off it, mister. What's your game?"

"Will you not believe that I am just lonely?"

"Doesn't a fat man have friends?"

The behemoth laughed in earnest. "I have friends in every language. Only in New York do I find myself

at—how can I explain it? Well, say at loose ends.”

“And you wanted a nice girl to tell you your troubles to?” The lady’s voice was mocking.

“Believe it or not, yes.”

“Well, mister, I’ve been on some strange parties in my time, but—”

“Can you not relax, with your head on my shoulder? Look across the river—there in New Jersey. Is there not poetry in industry at full blast?” The man’s voice dropped to a taut whisper. “That factory on the palisades, pouring forth munitions day and night. Munitions for England—”

The lady yawned pointedly. “To hell with your poetry. I still say ten bucks is a lot to pay for a kiss.”

“It is still my privilege.” Once again, the man glanced at his watch. “Let me give you a cigarette before I drive you back.” He withdrew his arm from Billie’s shoulder, and bent toward the instrument board to press a cigarette into the mechanical lighter, which sprang to red life under his huge paw, like a snake in the dark.

Billie accepted the lighted cigarette, and took a deep drag, with her eyes on the river. Behemoth started his ignition, and eased down on the clutch.

“The poetry of a great city in the night, my dear. The humming wheels of industry—”

“Holy hell, mister—look!”

Across the Hudson, a great orange flare lighted the sky. The detonation followed, swift and unreal as a nightmare: a mighty explosion that seemed to shake those soot-blackened cliffs from crest to waterline. . . . Behemoth backed his car into the drive again, and started up the clover-leaf to the Parkway, watching the business coupe pick up his trail with a slow, contented smile.

“Apparently the Universal Powder Company has met with an accident. It is fortunate for us that we were across the river when it happened. . . . Thank you for a pleasant evening, my dear. What is your home address again?”

THE French windows of the penthouse living room opened to a terrace twenty stories above the roar of midtown Manhattan, muffled somewhat now in the snowfall of a bitter December morning. The cat-foot butler had already crossed from the dining room to shut out the storm when the man spoke softly from the big, littered desk in the corner.

“Never mind, Roberts. The fresh air helps me to think.”

The butler, whose knowledge of his master’s moods extended over the years since the First World War, withdrew as silently as he had come. Christopher Ames sat at the desk for a long time, staring after the perfect decorum of that retreating back.

Ames matched the setting perfectly. New York’s most successful playwright for the past decade, he had built this snug heaven out of the sheer brilliance of his own brain—with the able backing of Michael Towne, his playboy producer. Observing the rewritten manuscript on the polished Chippendale desk, the fine furrow on Ames’ brow, a visitor would have sworn that the dramatist was wrestling with no problem but a recalcitrant second act.

Of course, it would be unfair to dismiss Christopher Ames as a dramatist pure and simple. A slender man with a head fit to be stamped on a medal, Ames had come out of obscurity ten years ago to take Broadway by frontal assault. Since his success, he had gone his own way tranquilly, as though oblivious of the rewards success can bring.

Michael Towne had seen to it that Ames’ royalties were soundly invested during the long depression, to say nothing of the wild uncertainty that followed Germany’s mad plunge for power in ’39. It would be equally misleading to dismiss Mike Towne as a high-pressure dilettante, a hunter who has stalked adventure through the jungles of the world, and found the hunting good. Michael’s good works had extended to more than one continent—no less effective because the gesture was always anonymous.

At this moment, he was in Bermuda, presumably recovering from a broken shoulder at the Castle Harbor. Ames fingered a cablegram from his friend, now two days old; the furrow in his brow deepened as he read it through for perhaps the tenth time. In the last few days, Christopher Ames had missed his friend keenly. He glanced up as Roberts appeared in the foyer arch, impassive and soothing as ever.

“Washington on the wire, sir. Shall I put them through?”

Ames lifted the telephone at his elbow, and spoke briefly to a distinguished personage in a certain Federal Bureau. “Nothing new on that Jersey blast. I’m waiting for Mike before I make a move. . . . Certainly I’ll keep you informed if we jump off for parts unknown. . . . With all that coöperation, you deserve some return besides a pair of seats at my next opening. . . .” Ames was laughing when he replaced the receiver though his scowl had deepened further. “Perhaps you’d better close those windows after all, Roberts. No new reports from the air-field, I suppose?”

“All planes are grounded, sir. If Mr. Towne came up from Bermuda today, they’d discharge him with other passengers at Baltimore. Incidentally, sir, that dark person is waiting to see you in the foyer. I mean Mr. Towne’s bodyguard—”

“Willy? Why didn’t you say so? Send him in, Roberts.”

WILLY EMATHLA paused in the doorway before taking a deferential step into the room. A supreme example of a race that has been permitted to wither away on this continent, the Seminole carried his pride quietly, with a dignity that transcended loneliness. Michael Towne had rescued him years ago from a juke-joint in Miami; the course in recuperation that ensued had included four years at Carlisle, where Willy had learned the white man’s manners, along with his wisdom.

“Sit down, Willy,” said Christopher Ames. “I’m still waiting news from Michael. I hope you’re enjoying your vacation.”

“The fact is, Mr. Ames, I have been working at the Library.” The Seminole’s speech was exact, without mannerism; the clipped diction that went perfectly with the quiet dark clothes, the slow smile.

“I’ve been working *here*, as you can see,” said Ames. “So far, the lack of results has been startling.”

“Has it occurred to you that we may be approaching this problem backwards?”

“Frequently, Willy. Have you any suggestions?”

“If you will permit—” The Seminole leaned forward sharply. “This morning, at the Library, I have studied an interesting subject—radioactivity. The principle of wireless transmission—explosion by remote control—”

“Go on,” said Ames.

“We are tracing the origin of certain sabotage in various parts of America. Particularly at the Universal Powder Company’s plant in Cliffside, New Jersey.” Willy’s voice was unemotional as a statistician droning a weather report. “An explosion that caused the death of ninety-one workers on the night shift, and destroyed most of a huge munitions shipment destined for England. You

have attempted to explain that disaster, Mr. Ames—to track down its perpetrator, with the aid of the government's agents—”

Ames smiled. “Thanks for putting it so delicately, Willy.”

“You will forgive me for rehearsing the circumstances, sir, but I wish to make my point clear. From the beginning, you have believed these explosions were engineered by a man known as Captain Alfred Somers—attached to the British purchasing commission here, but in reality a foreign agent. Back of this Captain Somers stands the international saboteur Paul Derring—”

“The man who will do anything for a price,” said Ames.

“The man who has supplied Somers with money and detailed information from the start,” continued Willy. “At this moment, of course, we have no proof of Derring’s complicity, or knowledge of his whereabouts. At the time of the New Jersey blast, we even lacked sufficient data to dare arrest Somers.

“It was only *after* the disaster that we learned a considerable quantity of nitro-glycerine had been cached in various parts of the Universal plant; that a blueprint of the factory had been stolen, indicating the precise location of these stores.” Willy held up a soothing palm, as Ames stirred restlessly. “Forgive all these details, but they are quite necessary to my point.

“We know that Captain Somers was touring Broadway on leave, the night of the explosion. He entered the Broadway Burlesque, made the acquaintance of a—*a* lady of the chorus, and took her for a drive up the West Side Highway to a point beyond the toll-bridge, where he parked beside the river bank. I myself can testify to this, since I trailed him in another car, pursuant to your orders.

“I watched Captain Somers carefully on that dark side road; perhaps I did not observe carefully enough. It is obvious to me that he brought the girl to that lonely spot only as a blind; just as it is reasonable to assume that he chose to park on the river bank, so he could watch the results of his handiwork across the river.

“One thing has puzzled me from the start, however. Why did Captain Somers bend over the instrument board of his car at the precise moment the explosion occurred, a good two miles across the Hudson River? Was the captain really lighting a cigarette for his lady—or did he, perhaps, press a button to ignite that glycerine by remote control?”

Willy Emathla settled comfortably in his chair, his face an impassive copper mask again. “Of course, Mr. Ames, if that is too fantastic—”

“Would it surprise you to learn that I’ve been following the same line myself for a week now?” Ames smiled wanly again, and pushed aside his scrawled-over manuscript to show a dozen sheets of foolscap ditched with hieroglyphs. “Unfortunately, I am a dramatist, not an electrical wizard like the captain.”

Willy hitched his chair a bit nearer. “Study the blueprint of that factory carefully, sir. Assume that an electric cell were planted at a central point, equipped with a detonator. Assume the captain’s roadster is equipped with a portable, two-way radio, not too different from the kind used on every police car.”

HE CONTINUED in this vein for quite awhile. Christopher Ames listened in thoughtful silence, and added an occasional scrawl to his notes from time to time. “It’s possible, Willy. If you ask me personally, I’d say it was quite likely. But who else would buy the idea?”

The Seminole scowled. “If I had had your permission to apprehend Captain Somers that night—if I could have

persuaded him to explain the mystery of remote control in person. . . .”

Ames took a disconsolate turn of his living-room carpet, and stared out at the storm for a long, sullen moment. “Captain Somers happens to be an important member of a British purchasing commission—with a good British passport. We watched him like hawks when that airplane shipment smashed up on the Coast; again in Texas, when the oil line burst; yet again here in the East, when they were negotiating with Universal to speed up that munition delivery.

“The man weighs almost three hundred pounds, Willy: hardly the figure for a spy, or an agent provocateur. True, he has the lightest of accents, which a boyhood in the Dutch East Indies explains more than adequately. So far, we have only coincidence to back us, plus the fact that Somers was seen last month in an Havana cafe, with a man resembling Paul Derring. No, Willy: we can’t indulge in the luxury of a personal third degree, on those slender grounds. Captain Somers would have our badges in the twinkling of an eye—or should I say, the snap of a handcuff?

“Our problem would be the same, in essence, even if Captain Somers were an avowed member of the Nazi party. Remember, we are still a nation at peace; even though we are straining every nerve to prepare for war.”

Ames kicked open a French window, and stepped out into the white swirl of the wind. “This storm will die down by evening, Willy. Perhaps we should book passage on the next clipper for Bermuda, in case Michael isn’t coming back after all. It must be dull work for him, watching Captain Somers alone. Apparently the overgrown elephant has done nothing but sun-bathe at Castle Harbor, since he registered there for his vacation—”

And then Ames broke his sentence in the middle, as Roberts came in from the foyer, bearing a radiogram on a silver tray. . . . Willy Emathla snapped to attention out of the deep leather armchair as Ames spread the blank on the desk-top.

LILY CROP UNSEASONABLE. ADVISE INVESTING BRITISH CONSOLS DESPITE ASSOCIATED PRESS REPORTS.

TOWNE

“Code,” said Ames. “Don’t tell me they’re cutting in on messages.” He had already reached eagerly for the cipher-book he had shared with Michael Towne these many years. Ten minutes later, the result was spread out on a second sheet, for Willy’s eyes:

SOMERS TAKING LISBON CLIPPER HERE TODAY. POSITIVE JOINING DERRING LONDON. TRAILING HIM FROM HERE. EXPLAINING YOU MAYFAIR HOUSE.

“So we’re to join Michael in *London*—not Bermuda.” “Why does Somers go back at this time?”

“Another question for Michael to answer. You’ve visited England before, Willy?”

“On several occasions,” said the Seminole calmly. “Mr. Towne’s Mayfair house has been closed since the war, however.”

“Apparently he’s planning to open it again, as wide as the air-raid wardens will allow.” Christopher Ames crossed to the windows, and shook his fist at the snow-storm. “London, Willy—the moment our plane has a ceiling, and let the bombs fall where they may. If our British cousins can laugh at them, so can we.”

The Seminole was on his feet now; his eyes were snapping with excitement. “Do we fly our own ship over?”

"Why not?"

"But the wartime regulations—"

"Any regulation can be waived, if the need is great enough. Remember, Michael is over the Atlantic at this moment; we must not arrive too far behind him. Now do you understand why we couldn't risk losing our badges too soon?"

Christopher Ames pounced on the telephone, and dialed the airport.

II

TWO days later, in a pock-marked apartment building in London's West End, a behemoth of a man stood at a leaded bow-window, staring down at the distant flash of the Thames in the clear winter sunlight. Perfect flying weather, and yet, the bombers had not come over today from their Channel airdromes. London enjoyed a brief breathing spell, after its autumn of torment. The behemoth glanced mechanically at his wristwatch, as Big Ben chimed the quarter-hour. At that moment, the bells in that tall, proud tower had a clarion note of defiance, undimmed by centuries.

"Well, Captain Somers? Is our position clear to you now?"

The man who stood at the far end of the stripped parlour with his back to the cheerful roar of the heater, was big-boned and lithe; from square shoulders to polished boots, he gave the impression of strength, immense and unpredictable as a coiled spring. Somers turned back uneasily from the view: there was mastery in that tone, in those slitted, faintly reptilian eyes.

Paul Derring could be theatrical when he chose, like a movie idol of silent days: when their paths first crossed, Somers had been struck by the man's uncanny resemblance to Jack Gilbert in *The Merry Widow*. This afternoon, Derring's voice was insistent. The Gargantuan Captain Somers cringed slightly as he answered—and cursed himself for cringing.

"I understand perfectly, Paul. And I still say it is most unwise to bring them buzzing about our ears. Especially at a time like this."

"How often must I explain that your job here is over, as well as mine? Good God, man, you can't lose your nerve now! Why, we're only waiting on the Cabinet; once it condescends to hold another secret meeting—"

Derring did not finish the sentence; but his eyes blazed with excitement as they met and held Somers'. The captain smiled wryly.

"Wouldn't it be slightly awkward if they tracked us down? Found this little hideaway, for instance?"

"On the contrary, I expect Ames, Towne, and that Indian Nemesis to follow you here, when I consider the time is ripe. Certainly you're too large a decoy to miss, even in the blackout."

"And see through our plan, from start to finish? Believe me, they've guessed enough of it now. That last job, on the Hudson—"

"Try to stick to the point, Somers. You happen to be an electrical genius, with a certain unpatented invention that is very useful to me. Perhaps your usefulness does not end there. If I decide to employ you as a decoy to lure three of my greatest enemies across a whole ocean to their destruction—well, that too is my affair. Will you continue to take your orders, without question, or—"

But Somers stood his ground now. "Only if I can see the point in advance."

"Very well. I'll explain a second time. You were sent to Bermuda on a rest-cure for one purpose—that Michael Towne would follow you. For the same reason, you left

that note of mine where Towne would be sure to find it, just before you took off for Europe again.

"Now Ames and Willy Emathla have joined Towne here in London, precisely as we hoped they would. Naturally, Ames is much too clever not to realize he is being baited; we must proceed with great caution from this point on. I still say it is worth the risk, if we can bag the three of them at the same time we finish our last job here." Derring smiled significantly. "A job that may make all risk unnecessary, Somers. A job that could conceivably end this war."

"The compliment is accepted," said Somers dryly.

"Your charge was planted for you, thanks to the efficiency of our friend at the Embassy, while you were busy in New York. All you've done since your arrival was to make sure the detonator is operating properly. . . . Why shouldn't I use you for a job of my own, while we're sitting here waiting? Your salary is large enough."

"Haven't I earned it, so far?"

"From your employers' point of view, yes. Those American jobs were admirably planned, and on schedule. As paymaster, I question the wisdom of that kind of sabotage—especially in America. You see, Somers, Americans are a queer people. You can't threaten a nation that has never lost a war, or started one unjustly. You can't dynamite them into submission, either. Blowing up their factories has a queer way of getting their dander up—that's all."

"How do you know so much of America, Paul?"

Derring met the sneer coolly. "I was an American myself, once—before I took up international piracy. . . . Now, to business. I'm reliably informed, via our friend at the Embassy, that the Cabinet will meet in secret session tomorrow. As a certain well-known Nazi orator would say, that will be our supreme moment."

"Our retreat can't be kept open forever; God only knows how we've managed to preserve that retreat to date. Naturally, I shall put a deadline on my own private plans for revenge, once I have verified that Cabinet meeting. If Ames and Company are not in my hands by tomorrow midnight, I must postpone their extermination. Could I be fairer?"

"Much," said Somers. "I'll still take orders—to a point."

"You will take orders to the end, Captain. Or would you prefer me to terminate your career now, with a simple phone-call to the Foreign Office?"

Derring's eyes were really reptilian, now. Somers—a traveled man, after all—was reminded forcibly of a king cobra he had once observed in a Bombay bazaar, in the act of charming a rabbit. The comparison was grotesque, of course; and yet, as those eyes drew nearer, the gallant captain quaked with all his three hundred odd pounds.

"Standing by for orders, Paul. Where do I start?"

THAT night a cold rain fell in the great hollow valley of the Thames; with morning, a colder fog swirled out of the north sea, blanketing the valley from Tilbury to Richmond. By mid-afternoon, the air over London had assumed its traditional peasoup hue, brown as the exhalation from Sherlock Holmes' mythical briar.

Picking his way down the shattered pavement of Oxford Street just this side of nightfall, Christopher Ames turned into Park Lane more by luck than instinct, and followed the railings of Hyde Park into Mayfair.

The brown swirling blanket was kind to the battered face of London that night; Ames passed by the gutted facades of the proud houses along the Park with his eyes straight ahead. In his bowler and shaggy Harris burberry, he might have passed for a not too prosperous City man at that moment; like the native, he had learned

to keep his eyes ahead during his two days in England, to ignore the damage on either side with their calm and unshakable courage.

Armed with a letter from the American Embassy in addition to his own imposing credentials, Ames was returning from a long afternoon divided fruitlessly between Scotland Yard and the Foreign Office. He had walked off his irritation in the Park, and stopped at the Cumberland for a fortifying whisky soda before returning to Michael Towne with the news of a complete stymie to their efforts to track Paul Derring down.

The fog had made the blackout superfluous that night, Ames noted absently, while he followed the tortuous course of Curzon Street through the heart of Mayfair; and yet the air-raid wardens were enforcing the regulations with their customary thoroughness. One of them stepped down from the curb to salute Ames politely as he entered Marquis Square, where Michael Towne's London house had stood since his family emigrated to America in the days of the Restoration.

Marquis Square is a seventeenth-century jewel in the modern setting of Mayfair, as yet mercifully untouched by the bombers, save for a crater in the pavement before Michael's house, gaping in that sad *chiaroscuro* like a raw wound.

Ames stepped over the crumbling masonry of the Wren staircase that swept up to the great, fanlighted doorway—which still stood intact, though its face was scarred by bomb-splinters. The house echoed with musty loneliness when Ames admitted himself with a latchkey and traversed the formal hallway, muffled to the chandelier in cheese-cloth—a loneliness that shattered to bits as a voice boomed welcome from the drawing-room beyond.

MICHAEL TOWNE roamed the shining desert of parquet restlessly, with a scowl that matched a periwigged ancestor on the wall—the famous full-length Van Dyke portrait of George Towne, fourteenth earl of Forham and Knight of the Golden Fleece, who had died to stop Cromwell at Naseby three hundred years ago.

Not that there was anything really British about Michael Towne—an ash-blond giant cast in a mold that was American to the core. The super-playboy who had fallen heir to a Texas county bristling with oil-wells, and abandoned it to go hunting over the seven seas . . . just as he had forsaken the sport today, in favor of the more exciting business of hunting men.

"What news, Kit? Will the powers that be coöperate with us at last?"

"I'm afraid I've some bad news for you, Michael."

"News be damned. You and I have made our own news all these years. Just because a Foreign Office can't see eye to eye—" Michael Towne collapsed on an Empire love-seat that groaned beneath his bulk, and grinned boyishly at his friend. "Did they say no again, Kit—really?"

"They refuse to believe that Derring is in London, or that he could have any possible connection with Captain Somers. According to their own operatives, Derring is still lurking somewhere in the West Indies, running fuel for the U-boats."

"The Empire has caught up with the war," said Michael bitterly. "Too bad they can't catch up with their own enemies."

"Or recognize their friends," put in Ames.

"For two pins I'd take Willy with me and trip up Somers now. What more can they do than jail us?"

"Perhaps you'll be surprised at the efficiency of the Foreign Office where three crusading Americans are concerned."

"Do they understand clearly that we've kept tabs on

Somers for months now? That I followed him from Bermuda, when Derring ordered him to report to London?"

"Captain Somers has been promoted since our last meeting," said Ames drily. "In fact, he is now an all but indispensable cog in the Admiralty. Of course, they have checked carefully on my recommendation—in collaboration with Scotland Yard. I regret to state that Somers' reputation emerges untarnished by a doubt. You may storm all you like, but the corpulent captain *was* officially on vacation in Bermuda last month."

"What about that note from Derring?"

"That note has been dismissed as a clumsy forgery, Michael. It's unthinkable to them that Derring could be sending notes from London to Bermuda at a time like this—with a price on his head at every port in the Empire."

"At least they might put a watch on Somers—make some effort to keep track of his movements."

"I can quote the Office's spokesman directly there. 'Really, old boy,' he said, in perfect Oxonian, 'shadowing the captain at this late date would be a fantastic waste of time. Don't you agree, really?' At that point I took my hat and departed, Michael."

MICHAEL TOWNE studied his friend's face intently in the murky light. "Answer this frankly, Kit: D'you think I'm camping out in this stuffy bomb-trap because I enjoy the company of my ancestors?"

"No, Mike."

"Would I bring you across three thousand miles of winter ocean on a wild-goose chase? Derring is in London, Kit; Derring—and Somers—are up to their chins in some deadly business. I'd stake my eyesight on that."

Ames met the challenge levelly. "Scotland Yard to the contrary—so would I."

"Then let's take Willy tonight, and go after Somers in earnest—and to hell with consequences."

"Very well, Michael. Perhaps it is time we substituted force for diplomacy. By the way, where *is* Willy?"

"At Hammersmith. I sent him down this noon, to go over the motors on the plane. The War Office has been much more friendly to us, you know; they gave us permission to anchor across from the Embankment, if we felt safer there."

Ames smiled grimly. "Decent of them, I'm sure. After all, it'll be easier for us to load for our return journey from Central London."

"Say that again, will you?"

"I told you I'd brought bad news out of Whitehall this afternoon. Either we're flying that amphibian of ours across the Irish Channel tomorrow—under our own power—or we're risking internment for the duration."

"They wouldn't dare."

"England is at war, Michael. From their point of view, we're nothing but three crusading intruders with more courage than brains. The fact that we come from a potential ally is all that's saved our hides, so far. Naturally, it rubbed them the wrong way from the start—flying into the country from Newfoundland, cool as a comet from Mars."

Michael was pacing the parquet again, with frenetic concentration. "What about your military passport?"

"That was good for a limited time only. Believe me, it strained every wire I could pull in Washington—to the breaking point."

He paused, and stood frozen at the boarded windows giving to the square. A dull, thudding reverberation was shaking the horizon, far-off as yet, but insistent—the rumble of giants at bowls, unreal as summer thunder, with a sinister overtone all its own. . . .

"Archies, firing downriver," said Michael calmly. "From

Tilbury or West Ham, at least. Don't let it throw you, Kit. The sirens haven't even sounded off, so far."

"We can hardly hunt Somers down in an air-raid. Chances are he'll lay low through the night, in the Admiralty dugout."

Mike Towne crossed to the mantle, took down an army .45, and socked it into an armpit-holster. "I'll hunt down that fat rat tonight, if he's hiding in 10 Downing Street."

He continued his preparations methodically; Ames stayed at the boarded window, staring out at the brooding, dead emptiness of a city in blackout and fog. The devil's drums sounded again—nearer, this time. Which is worse, Ames wondered, the raid itself, or the endless strain of waiting? *TNT* in ton lots, wiping out a thousand years of history in one casual, screaming roar; neat chromium tickets to heaven, rained down from an uncomprehending sky.

And yet, these people, defiant of destiny, locked in a death struggle on sea and desert, could still shake their fists at heaven, and beat the raiders back. If there was ever a people worthier of survival; if ever a battle shone brightly from the soiled pages of history. . .

Ames broke his thought in the middle, and crossed the room to the fine Restoration mantle; standing beside his friend, he too began to gird himself for their man-hunt.

III

THE SIRENS had not yet sounded an hour later, when Ames and Michael stepped back from the mantle, their preparations complete. In battered tweeds and a slouch hat, a camera strapped to one shoulder, Michael could have passed for a newspaper man in a fog far less dense than now. Ames had discarded his burberry for a sweater and cap. Now he crossed to the windows one more time, to listen to the mounting roar of London's aircraft defenses, beyond the city's rim.

"Will they dare to come over in this weather?"

"It's still a nuisance value, Kit. They don't need targets, of course. All they do is come out on a diagram, and go back on their own radio beam. Goering's old game; dump the applecart at twenty thousand feet, and hope it'll hit something that can't hit back." He glanced up sharply, as a key turned in the outer door. "Here's Willy at last. I was beginning to worry."

The Seminole entered the room quietly and sat down outside the circle of light, a dark and nearly motionless silhouette awaiting orders. Neither Ames nor Michael Towne paused in their preparations to notice him: Willy's silences, in times of crisis, were only part of his efficiency.

"Is the plane berthed?"

"Hours ago, Mr. Towne. You can be aboard in twenty minutes, if need be."

"Where have you been since then, Willy?"

The Seminole answered quite calmly, though his voice seemed to come from an immense distance. "I was studying remote control, Mr. Towne."

"Remote control?"

"Mr. Ames will explain that, I think."

Ames came over swiftly. "Your cheek's cut, Willy—your coat-sleeve's ripped. Where have you been putting that hard head of yours?"

But the Seminole only smiled. "Science is a broad subject, gentlemen—especially for the Indian mind. It has taken me an afternoon to grasp this much of it."

Michael Towne was looming over Willy's chair. "You've hurt your head—how?"

"Please do not concern yourself, Mr. Towne. It is not serious."

"Answer my question."

Willy's smile was incandescent now; there was strength

in every syllable, as his breathing returned to normal. "My head struck an attic beam in Piccadilly, gentlemen. In a house occupied by Captain Somers. I have been watching that house for some time; especially those who came and went by the side door."

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner?"

"I wished to be sure of my facts, Mr. Towne. Nothing seemed more important than those facts, when I hastened back to you; with the exception of Captain Somers' arrest, of course—"

"Go on, Willy. You can breathe later."

"Captain Somers is outside now, sir. Watching this doorway, from a bench in the square. He has been seated there alone, for the past half-hour. I've watched him carefully."

The scream of a distant siren put a neat period to Willy's words: a blast of warning, sustained, and drawing nearer to Mayfair with each turn of the air-warden's wheels. Michael had Willy Emathla by both shoulders now, shaking him violently.

"Will you tell your story straight, you stubborn aborigine?"

"There is no more time, Mr. Towne. Captain Somers will not remain above ground indefinitely, now they have sounded the under-cover signal."

AND then another sound punctuated Willy's remarks: an explosion that was a deep-throated rumble, starting from a point directly outside the hall door, splintering glass from basement to attic, shaking the hold house to its foundation-stones.

Ames reeled under the impact of the blow, palpable as a giant's fist crashing into his chest. Bombs don't strike twice in the same crater, he thought dully, as he fumbled his way into the hallway on Michael's heels. Willy was at his elbow, completing the unspoken thought:

"That was no bomb, Mr. Ames. That was a grenade."

Michael stood in his shattered doorway, shaking his fist into the fog.

"Somers—"

"He wouldn't dare."

"If it's a challenge, I'm taking it."

They went down the stairs in a reckless group, running through the cloud of brick-dust into the square itself, ominously quiet now, and nakedly empty as the moon. No, not quite empty: at the far end, where the broad gaveled walk joined the asphalt of Curzon Street, a behemoth of a man loomed like an heroic statue of evil, one arm upraised in the Nazi salute. Then the figure vanished into the pea-soup fog, as Michael's .45 spat flame.

"Timed perfectly, wasn't it, Kit? Even those wardens will think it came from the sky."

A crash like the end of the world, followed with a red flare like the opening of a furnace door, lighted the sky to the west, throwing the trees of Hyde Park into gaunt relief, showing a behemoth in a rain-cape, running with shoulders hunched for the shelter of the trees beyond.

"We can use that barrage too, you know. D'you suppose I winged him?"

"No such luck, I'm afraid. Don't fire again, please. We can be picked up even now, you know."

"Not tonight we won't," said Michael grimly. "It'll take more than bombs—and the British—to stop this hunting expedition."

And he vaulted the splintered railings of the Park, plunging into the sere winter underbrush on Somers' trail.

FOR a man of his bulk, Somers' running was a thing to marvel at. Michael almost overtook him at Hyde Park Corner, where the Wellington Arch stood proud and serene against a blazing sky; and again in the shadow of

the Ritz arcade, just before a blinding detonation knocked the three pursuers flat on the Piccadilly pavement.

Somers was gone, when they staggered to their feet again, groping their way blindly to the shadows as the fire-fighters screamed up in their lorries to put down the blaze.

"Wait, Michael. We'll be stopped in our tracks if they see us now."

Mike breathed stormily at Ames' side, a smoke-blackened troglodyte in the dark. "We'll lose him if we wait."

"I think not. Something tells me that the Captain is anxious to be followed."

"So we're being led on, eh?"

"Why else would he wait for us outside the house? It's a trap, all right, Michael. We were fools to take the bait."

"Perhaps you're right, Kit—you generally are. I'm following through regardless."

He went down the fire-scorched arcade on the run—for all the world like an All-American half-back taking the ball into enemy territory. Ames suppressed an involuntary sigh of admiration before he got to his feet and followed. Willy Emathla was already coursing down the other side of Piccadilly—a mobile shadow of a runner, slinking through the night with unerring speed.

Somers was waiting for them in the curve of Half-Moon Street. True to Ames' prediction, he dodged them a second time in the mews beyond, and there was a half-hour of smashing, bulldog pursuit on Michael's part, lighted by incendiary flares on every side, orchestrated by an obbligate of man-made thunder.

The trees in the Palace gardens were burning like Christmas torches when they entered Piccadilly a second time. Once again, Somers waited mockingly under the empty arcade—a will-o'-the-wisp from Brobdingnag. This time, he darted west, swerving sharply into the street as a building collapsed just beyond in a buckling cascade of rubble and splintered beams. Willy Emathla, running low to the ground, risked everything in a flying tackle which missed their quarry's flying heels by inches.

The sirens were screaming in their ears now, a frantic warning to take cover. A bomber's motors droned overhead, epitome of the nightmare through which they had wandered so long. Ames could see the plane clearly now, a thunderbolt dark as the midnight from which it had come, rocketing earthward out of the fog.

For one breathless moment, it seemed certain that the dive-bomber would crash head-on into the Ritz arcade; then it leveled off, clearing the building cornice with inches to spare, to zoom back into the murk again. No bombs were dropped. Ames saw why, when the British Spitfire snored into view on the bomber's tail, rattling death from twin machine-guns as it drove the invader back.

Ames pulled himself together with a start. He was standing in the middle of Piccadilly, cheering the Spitfire on with bursting lungs: on either side of the blasted street, people were gathered in little groups, echoing that cheer to the roof-tops. A line of poetry came to his mind, unbidden:

For there'll always be an England. . .

In that flash, he saw why the song was written. Yes, there would always be an England, despite all the Derrings in the world—even if the visible substance of empire seemed to be going up in smoke at this moment . . . Christopher Ames dashed the tears from his eyes with the back of one grimy hand, and stumbled down the street in Michael's wake.

This time, he was conscious of a really ominous roar of motors overhead; conscious too of a slowly converging knot of running men in uniform—men with soot-streaked faces and battered helmets on which the white lettering of the air-raid warden's insignia showed but dimly.

Michael had been caught in the rush now, and so had Willy; Ames felt a gentle but persuasive hand at either elbow, as the storm of running feet pattered in unison down the ramp of the air-raid shelter.

"This way sir—if you please."

The rest was lost, as a triple crash of bombs on Piccadilly blotted out all other sound. In a twinkling, the ramp filled with acrid smoke, through which the good British voices cut calmly, passing on unhurried orders. Again the gentle hand closed on Ames' elbow, guiding him along the concrete slope.

The flash that lighted the facade of the house above them with a sudden, eerie brightness failed to penetrate to Ames' stunned senses: he did not see the pock-marked walls or the heavy leaded panes of the bow-window on the second story, from which an all-too-familiar face looked down. Willy Emathla saw, and turned back to shout, just as a dozen ruthless hands pinioned both his arms to his sides.

A steel door slammed over their heads, with a crisp air of finality. Ames stumbled on into a steel-ribbed cellar, rubbing his eyes in the sudden, hard glare of the bulbs overhead. A gun-barrel touched his back—light but insistent, though the good British voices still murmured soothingly all around him.

Utterly bewildered now, Ames stumbled on, under the big work-light in the cellar's midst—to find himself face to face with Captain Somers, coolly unruffled in a trench-coat and helmet, like a bill-poster for Britainia.

IV

THE VOICES were still now, as if by common consent, though no orders were spoken. Somers leaned back against the dugout wall as he fumbled for a cigarette, fixing Ames with a wordless smile.

As he stared around the semicircle of uniformed men, Ames felt a slow, prickling chill spread along the base of his brain. Where were those good British faces now? In that revealing light, there was an identical hostile gleam in every eye. A fantastic picture crossed Ames' mind, for no good reason: the picture of three hunting cats, cornered at the back of a kitchen drain by a swarm of rodents.

Somers spoke pleasantly. "I'm expecting Mr. Derring in a moment now. If you gentlemen will surrender your arms in the meantime—"

Mike Towne's fist flailed out, catching an unwary warden flush on the jaw; Mike's knee rose unerringly to smash another warden in the pit of the stomach, as the man tried to trip him in a swarming rush. Then a gun-butt descended with a sickening thud, just behind the ash-blond giant's ear.

Mike fell forward, without a sound. A dozen other wardens had already downed Willy's writhing protest, while expert hands relieved him of his automatic; Ames, struggling across the damp concrete floor in an effort to reach his friend, felt other hands frisking him, with the same cool efficiency.

Somers continued, quite as though there had been no interruption:

"May I take this opportunity to unburden my conscience, Mr. Ames? As you may have guessed, I've not stirred from this shelter since the air-raid started. Prudence is often the better part of valor; I happen to know the efficiency of high explosives far too well to expose myself to them without cause.

"The saboteur you pursued so trustingly from Mayfair to the Ritz was one of our most trusted lieutenants here—a man who won his blue at Cambridge not too long ago, in the era when fascist-minded people still had a

place in the English sun. The disguise was simple enough, thanks to the fog: Two pillows under an ulster do not impede one's fleetness, as your Seminole hunter here can testify."

Ames cut in hoarsely. "Who are these men?"

"Why not ask who I am, Mr. Ames? Perhaps my answer will do for all of us. A British subject born in Malaya, I have served two masters for years: the government that has paid me a good salary in various capacities, and my own self-interest. These men about me are British subjects, too; none of us can be dismissed with a label.

"You may believe this or not, but some are real air-raided wardens: at least two of us have been decorated for bravery by royal hands. Others are government officials, of varying importance; all are distinguished by a common hatred for a government that must pass with German victory.

"Please do not think that we have a monopoly on treachery here in London: one of our most valued liaisons is in your own American Embassy—in the person of the attaché who approved your entry permits a few days ago . . . Perhaps this will make my position crystal clear, Ames. Of course, if you would like further examples—"

"Stealing my thunder, Captain?"

THE COOL voice of the newcomer stopped Somers' flow of insolence dead. Heels clicked in unison all over the crowded dugout as Paul Derring descended the spiral of staircase from the house above them—crisply contained, in a trench-coat and helmet to match Somers' own display.

Twin Hitlers in a crumbling world, thought Ames. Perhaps the trench-coat is the symbol of today's nightmare, to match the Napoleonic greatcoat of another century. He spoke easily, as he met Derring eye-to-eye; but his fists were clenched, inside the pockets of his shabby sweater.

"So we meet again, Derring. May I compliment you on your appearance? Very soldierly—if a trifle theatrical. Each day, you grow more like your master's image."

Derring ignored the thrust, not too pointedly. "All here, I see, including our Indian Nemesis. Too bad Mr. Towne had to be subdued. I should like him to hear what I have to say, but I'm afraid we can't wait for his recovery."

The voice was cold as tempered steel, with the same ruthless knife-edge. Ames kept both fists carefully in his pockets as he answered.

"I'd be glad to take notes, if it'll save you time."

"That will hardly be necessary. The fact is, Mr. Ames, you are here now for one reason only: I am an incurable sentimentalist, who cannot resist the temptation to underline his success in this too-imperfect world. Does that sound like bombast? Permit me to correct the misconception as I introduce Captain Alfred Somers, probably the greatest explosives expert the world has ever known. No less great, because his exploits are still unsung."

"I have a large acquaintance with the captain's exploits."

"Only from the outside, Mr. Ames—in common with your stupid detective friends here and abroad. For example, you were clever enough to guess that Somers was the guiding genius behind certain spectacular acts of sabotage in the defense program of the United States—culminating in that holocaust at the Universal Powder plant in New Jersey last month. Perhaps you also guessed that he was returning to England to plot a still more daring exploit? At least, I assumed as much when you took such pains to follow him here in force. Too bad you arrived in England after the parade has ended. I'm afraid we have nothing to show you now but a—a somewhat spectacular finale.

"Yes, Ames, you were quite right to think that I summoned Captain Somers here to engineer a coup for me. The groundwork was laid months before his arrival. As I've

just hinted, one of the captain's cleverest assistants was working for me, on the inside. But I won't confuse you with details.

"Sufficient to state that the Inner Cabinet, so-called, is meeting tonight, at Sydney House. Perhaps a half-dozen outsiders know of that secret meeting—including the American Embassy. You see, they are planning the all-important discussion of increased aid from the States: it is quite possible that the ambassador will be present, though I've been unable to verify that."

DERRING stretched out his hand; a uniformed aide was already at his side, holding a box gingerly on upraised palms. A cheap, japanned case, feebly camouflaged to resemble an overnight bag . . . Looks like the sort of portable radio you take on picnics, thought Ames. Wonder what heavens would fall, if I straight-armed him now, and smashed it?

But Derring was continuing smoothly, almost as if he had anticipated the unspoken thought.

"Stay where you are, Ames. A wrong move at this moment would be most disastrous. That really sounded melodramatic, did it not? So be it. Nothing less than melodrama would suit the occasion. You see, this little box *does* contain the doom of Empire; one flick of this innocent radio dial will send those ministers to join history, *in toto*.

"Shall I elaborate on that incredible statement just enough to whet your interest? We've done nothing so banal as plant a time-bomb in Sydney House. Only an innocent water-cooler in the cloakroom, containing forty pounds of glycerine, in a transparent capsule. Only a magnetized cell in the ceiling above, which produces an electrical vibration when energized by the radio-active beam released from this box."

Ames' eyes met those of Willy Emathla, in agonized scrutiny. The Seminole returned the look with a queer, twisted smile.

"Remote control—"

"In one of its more successful aspects, Ames. The captain could explain the mechanization in detail, if he would. It is really a most boring subject for a man who has no head for science.

"Just a detail, and I'm on my way. It might interest you to know that the assistant I just mentioned, who secured a blueprint of Sydney House for us, and planted both capsule and detonator, is one Thomas Cairns, attached to the American Embassy here."

Ames got to his feet with a strangled gasp, but Derring's voice was like a whiplash, now. "A trusted wheel-horse, much closer to the sanctum than you'd think possible. In fact, I believe it was he who checked your entry permits after your spectacular arrival, and took the necessary steps to insure your plane against internment.

"Fantastic? No more so than your meteoric raids into my private enterprises. Too bad that our last encounter should take place in the heart of a gallant democracy that has won the respect even of its enemies. Poor brave England, like its well-wisher across the Atlantic—it is *still* soft where it should be hard, temperate where only ruthlessness will prevail.

"I have learned to be ruthless in my time, Ames; tonight, I am a sentimentalist—"

"You're repeating yourself."

"The victor's privilege, I believe." Derring crossed casually over to the now feebly moaning Michael, and slapped him hard across one bleeding cheek. "Yes, I want you all awake and listening, when Sydney House comes crashing down. As you know, it is scarcely three blocks from here, so you're sure to hear the explosion clearly. Quixotic of me, I suppose, insisting that that sound should echo in your dying ears."

He prodded Michael's ribs with one heavy soled boot, not at all gently. "Captain Somers has his orders, of course. One moment after that explosion, the three of you will be shot, out of hand."

He went out without looking back, swinging up the ramp with one last theatrical flirt of his trench-coat. All but two of the uniformed spies followed him quickly, with the precision of soldiers entering a trench in zero hour.

Christopher Ames faced back to Captain Somers, still coiled in his corner like a slowly digesting python. The Luger automatic in his belt loomed large as Big Bertha now.

V

THE minutes dropped quietly away into the darkness.

Michael sat up with a groan, and rocked his head between his hands, before he stared about him wildly. Ames dropped a detaining arm about his shoulder as he strove to rise and charge the nearer of the two guards, who had ranged on either side of Somers, with identical basilisk stares. Willy Emathla rocked to his feet groggily, and took a hesitant step toward the spiral of staircase, before their jailors stepped forward.

Now that Derring had swept on to other fields, Ames was able to take stock of their death-trap much more rationally. The cellar had evidently been used for a storehouse once, though the bins along either wall had been stripped bare long ago. Above, in the dripping ceiling, Ames could see house-beams mingled with the stout reinforcement of those steel girders, a snaking welter of steam-pipes and plumbing.

Willy spoke out of the too-oppressive silence, putting an unspoken question into cryptic speech.

"How long, Captain?"

Somers glanced sleepily at his wristwatch. "Ten minutes, perhaps. Depends entirely on how long it takes Paul to reach his hangar."

Ames cut in, despite himself. "So Mr. Derring flies a plane in wartime England?"

"Why not? It is no drain on the Empire. Gas and oil are furnished cheerfully by a certain airdrome in Germany not too far from here."

"But how does he take off from English soil?"

Somers smiled. "There are a few facts I think it advisable to withhold from you, Mr. Ames, even now."

"At least, explain the timing of this explosion at Sydney House."

"He'll press the dial just before his take-off." Somers consulted his watch again. "Seven minutes now, at the outside."

Michael Towne entered the conversation snarling. "What's your game? If we've got to die, can't you get it over with?"

Once more, Ames silenced his friend with a gesture. "Derring left precise orders on that point, Michael. Whether we like it or not, we must spend all seven minutes more in this gentleman's company." He faced Somers again, with the faintest, most irritating of smiles. "Might I ask at what radius that radio-active beam is effective?"

"Within five miles, at the most."

"Why not from Berlin itself?"

Somers spoke evenly, quite as if he were discussing a laboratory problem with a fellow professor between lectures. "Unfortunately, my invention is not perfected to that point, as yet. I expect to work on it at my leisure this winter, once I am safe in Berlin again. Unless I am assigned to service in the East—"

"Then you are a German?"

"No more than Derring. We are both citizens of the world, working at the best wages . . . This time tomorrow,

of course, he will be in Germany, along with the men who departed with him. By then, the police and army will have begun one of the greatest spy hunts in history, as usual a bit too late—with the brains of the government crushed out in Sydney House."

Somers paused reflectively. "I wonder if your American ambassador really plans to attend that meeting. His death *might* have repercussions. Not that that need concern us now."

Willy Emathla spoke darkly, with his eyes on the floor. "How long, Captain?"

"Three minutes. I'll stop talking, if you like. Perhaps you gentlemen would care to pray—or review your childhood?"

"Put down that automatic," said Michael, levelly, "and I'll illustrate *my* dying wish."

Somers drew his Luger, sprang the safety catch, and sighted down the barrel. "As head of a clean-up squad of three, Mr. Towne, I must decline the challenge. I'm afraid I'll need all my strength for our getaway."

WILLY EMATHLA lifted his eyes. "Do you plan to clean out the storeroom overhead, Captain?"

"Who told you about that storeroom?"

"Three minutes is little enough time." Willy's eyes were shining now. He took a fearless step forward, meeting Somers eye to eye. "Of course, these steel beams are solid. I suppose we'll have an even chance to come out alive, when it happens—"

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Hardly, Captain. I know you've enough nitro-glycerine capsules upstairs to blow this house sky-high. Surely, with Mr. Derring beyond call, and ready to press that dial at any moment now—"

"What are you saying?"

"Only that Britain will carry on tonight, despite the careful plans you've made to the contrary. The detonator in the cloakroom ceiling will not explode Sydney House, because *I removed it at six this evening*. With the reluctant assistance of Thomas Cairns, who was a clerk at the Embassy, once."

Willy was unshakable now, a heroic figure in bronze. "I say *was*, Captain, because Cairns is floating in the Thames at this moment, with a hole in his head. You see, I had no further need of him, thanks to my reading on the subject of remote control. Once that detonator was in my hand—"

Willy Emathla turned his back pointedly on Somers, and glaced up at the steel-girded ceiling. "But I'm wasting your time with details. It was really quite stupid of you, neglecting to guard this explosive-dump more carefully. Remember, I'd been watching that side-door for days now; I'd noticed a dozen ways to slip in without being noticed, even without the fog. Once Cairns had explained the location of your principal cache of nitro-glycerine capsules, it was absurdly easy to plant that detonator *a second time*—precisely where it would do the most damage—"

He broke off there in earnest, as Ames gave a sudden, wild shout. Somers had whipped up his automatic to fire—and dropped his hand again, when one of the aids scrambled up the stairway with an animal bellow of fear.

Things happened fast after that—too swiftly, in fact, for conscious memory to tabulate. First there was a red flare of light, spreading downward from that stairway opening like a monstrous red fan—a blast of such awful nearness and intensity that the hell over London that night seemed remote as a child's nightmare.

Ames had a clear picture of the doomed aide, hanging for a split-second in midair, transfixed on a splintered steel beam, like a huge, brown moth. Then Ames whirled to find the second guard, and found himself knee-deep in an

avalanche of rubble, as one demonic scream echoed through the sudden, rushing darkness. . . .

Ames groped his way back to sanity through a spinning eternity; deafened as he was by the imminence of the detonation, he knew that only seconds had elapsed since he had gone under. He was dimly conscious of Michael now, already on his feet in the swirl of the settling cloud of mortar-dust; of a bloody, bubbling gasp somewhere beyond. And then the darkness was split anew by a familiar sound—the long, clear keen of an Indian war-whoop.

Christopher Ames groped forward blindly to restrain Willy Emathla, astride the behemoth chest of Captain Somers; but Michael stepped between them with a grim, set smile.

"After all, Kit, he's earned it."

The knife descended in one slashing arc; Somers gasped again, before he collapsed like a spent Zeppelin. The two white men watched in silence as Willy Emathla slowly rose to his feet, and lifted the dead sack that had been a man across his shoulders. For a moment, the Seminole seemed to stagger under the load; and then he walked out into the great, jagged crater that had once been a house on Piccadilly, bearing his burden proudly, as he vanished into the night.

Once more, Ames made a vague move to head him off, only to be restrained by Michael.

"This way, Kit—quickly! We've a little job of our own to do at Sydney House."

THE Lockheed amphibian roared out of Southampton that sleety afternoon, dropping a grateful British escort down the horizon as its twin propellers stepped up to maximum. The three heads visible behind the cockpit glass were immovable as patterns in an unchanging pano-

rama—and they were united in a purpose all their own.

Fog and sleet and winter's rain had claimed England now. Alone with the empty sky to witness, the amphibian banked sharply, roared out of its course, and bore down boldly on the east.

A bulky bundle in the bombing compartment underfoot rolled groggily in that sudden maneuver; Christopher Ames reached down instinctively to steady it with his hand.

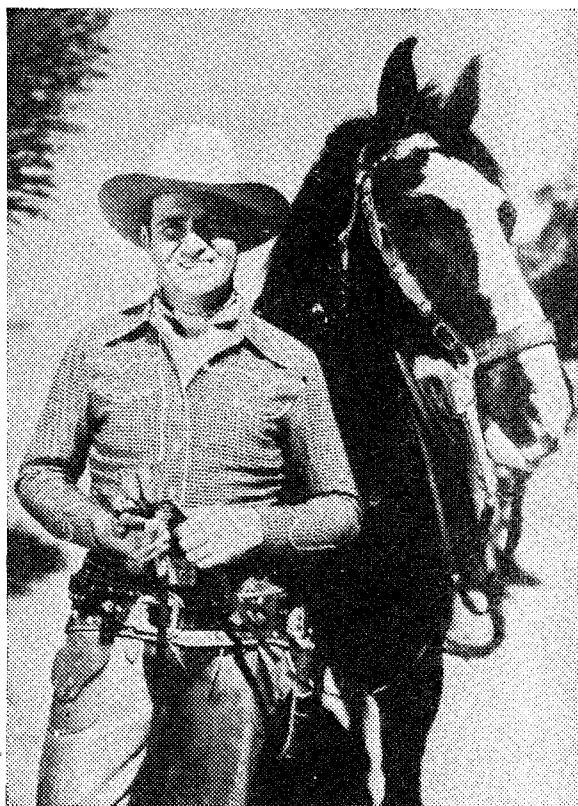
They were flying at twenty thousand, and Ames had already reach for the oxygen mask, when Willy put the plane into a power-dive. Ames watched the orange flash of the anti-aircraft on the horizon, as a man harkens to the roar of invisible dynamos in the night. The sight of the German landing field, the dun-colored hangar roofs and the planes parked on the blasted concrete runways, was equally unreal: a sudden glimpse between scudding flurries of sleet, a kaleidoscope without form or substance.

Willy Emathla leaned forward, and opened the bomb-rack wide.

The plane bounced skyward as it released its monstrous burden. As they zoomed into the mist again, there was hardly time to watch Captain Somers' body catapult toward the ground two miles below—until the chute ripped open, and the body floated gracefully down, grotesque no longer in the clean sweep of the winter wind.

Someone must have shouted orders then, for the firing ceased from all sides in unison. Now the plane had leveled off at five thousand feet, and was boring west again, into the heart of the storm. For the first time, the watchers on the ground could see the American flags, twin-painted on the amphibian's sides. They were still staring after it when the behemoth body crashed at their feet, rolled briefly as the wind sucked the chute away, and then lay still at the airdrome entrance, for good and all.

GENE AUTRY



AND CHAMPION

WATCH

FOR HIS PICTURE ON THE COVER

LOOK

FOR HIS SONG INSIDE

READ

THRILLERS OF THE RANGELAND

IN THE

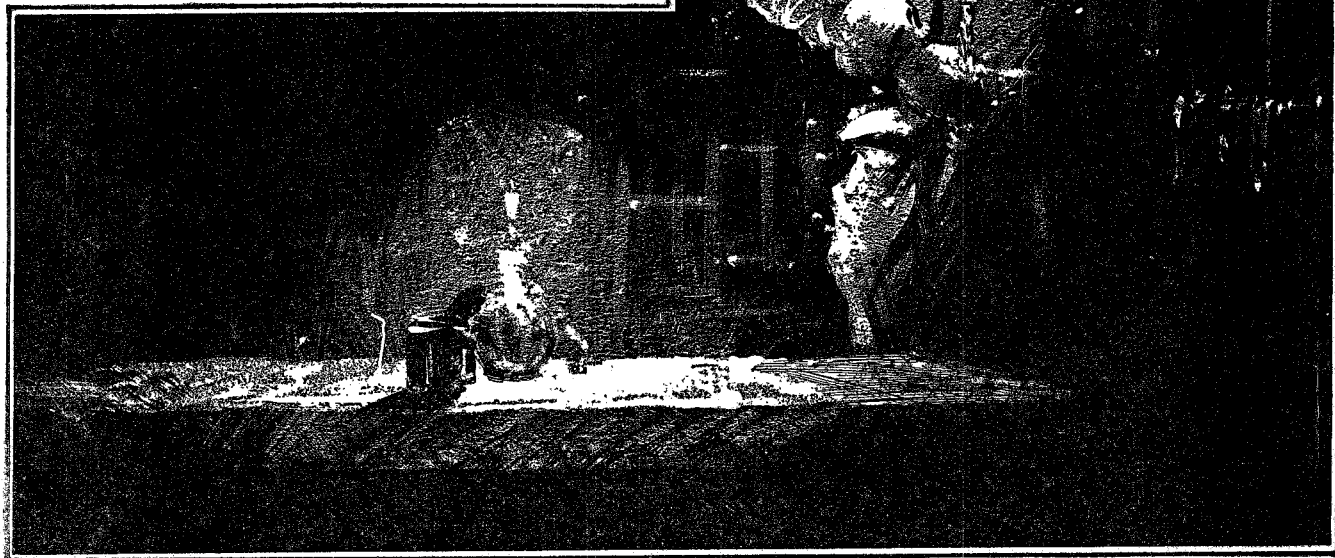
SEPTEMBER ISSUE OF



NOW ON THE STANDS.....10c

Swords in Exile

By Murray R.
Montgomery



Cleve stared out through the bars of his cell

SUCH a grave situation exists in the Duchy of Montferrat that CARDINAL RICHELIEU is seriously disturbed. But even the Cardinal does not know the whole truth. BARON VON ERLA, an Austrian agent, is plotting with DUKE CHARLES OF SAVOY to wrest Montferrat from the control of France. To accomplish this, Von Erla plans that one MAZO GARDIER, a hired bravo, shall assassinate DUKE VINCENT OF MONTFERRAT. The duke's heir, COUNT HENRI, is a dissipated weakling, completely in the power of an adventuress named CATHERINE CORDOBA, who is Von Erla's ally. So very soon the duchy will flame with treachery.

Then into the center of Von Erla's careful plans come those two rake-hellies, RICHARD CLEVE and GUY D'ENTREVILLE. They arrive separately in Montferrat, for Cleve's aim is simply to overtake the Englishman SIR HARRY WINTHROP and obtain from him the pardon that the King of England has finally granted to the exiled Cleve. As for d'Entreville, he has two missions: He has been ordered by Richelieu to arrest and bring back his comrade Cleve, for the Cardinal can ill afford to lose the services of that daring Guardsman; and d'Entreville has also been commanded to investigate the whispers of treason in Montferrat.

IT IS more or less an accident that plunges Cleve into Von Erla's intrigue. During his journey to Montferrat he fell into a quarrel with the assassin Mazo Gardier and killed him, and now Cleve wears Gardier's jewel-hilted rapier. This distinctive weapon leads several interested persons to believe Cleve is Gardier. Catherine Cordoba thinks so, and her outlaw henchman, ANTONE THE ARCHER.

Then Cleve is frustrated in his chief purpose—to obtain his pardon from Sir Harry Winthrop. Sir Harry is staying at the palace of Duke Vincent of Montferrat, laid up there with a leg injury; and Cleve discovers that

the English nobleman has been robbed of certain vital state papers. With them was Cleve's pardon. Immediately Cleve suspects DOCTOR DESPARTES, the palace physician who has been attending Sir Harry; the doctor, Cleve thinks, will sell the documents to some one of the foreign agents infesting Montferrat.

So now, in order to retrieve his pardon and serve England as well, Richard Cleve must stir his blade into the treacherous whirlpool of Montferrat. Accordingly, he seeks out Catherine Cordoba, who believes him to be Mazo Gardier; but at her house Cleve finds tragedy. Catherine Cordoba has been murdered, stabbed with a poniard belonging to Count Henri, who was found lying in a drunken stupor beside the woman's dead body. Cleve is told this by COLONEL DE BOUSSEY, the *commandant*, a huge, shrewd man whom Cleve does not quite trust.

BACK at the duke's palace, Guy d'Entreville has picked up some interesting crumbs of information. The grand-daughter Margaret of Duke Charles of Savoy is staying at the palace, sent there to attract the interest of young Count Henri. D'Entreville overhears her in conversation with her attendant ENRICO, and during the talk Enrico hints that he has had a hand in the killing of Catherine Cordoba.

Duke Vincent of Montferrat gives an audience to d'Entreville, but the old duke is so deeply distressed over his son's part in the sordid death of Catherine Cordoba that he finds it impossible to concentrate on the mysterious intrigues existing in Montferrat. At the end of the interview a guardsman appears to announce that the celebrated killer Mazo Gardier has been captured at the palace. Realizing that this is Cleve, d'Entreville obtains permission from the duke to handle the case of "Mazo Gardier". . . .

This story began in the Argosy for July 26