

LITERARY PAGE

The Oaken Door

(Ed. Note.—"The Oaken Door" won second prize in the recent Marshall - Case - Haycox short story contest. Norris Yates, the author, is now a private in the U.S. army. He was formerly a sophomore in journalism at the University.

By PRIVATE NORRIS YATES

SCHULTZ peered warily this way and that. His eyes penetrated the darkness with the sharpness of those of a lynx. The guard was headed toward the far end of the bridge. Schultz listened a moment to the pattering sound of his footsteps as they receded, then, satisfied that he was alone on that half of the bridge, he flung his legs over the rail and planted his feet upon the iron rungs of the ladder that led down to the docks below. Another quick glance around reassured him that his presence was unknown, and without further delay he swung nimbly down to the pier beneath.

The instant his feet landed on the planking he drew his revolver and darted sidewise in order to place himself under the bridge and render himself invisible from above. In spite of the murky gray fog that hovered over the waterfront he was not at all sure that he had not been seen. The wharves were crawling with guards these days, and nobody was going to jump on him in the dark and maybe take him alive.

Not that he wanted any shooting right now either, seeing as how he had this suitcase full of T.N.T. and caps. Half a dozen of these demolition jobs for the jerries had only increased his respect for the stuff. You had to plan your jobs carefully. The charges had to be set just so, and timed just right. If the timing was too slow, the layout might be discovered before it blew. If it was too fast and you happened to be working for the ting away—well, that might be just too bad.

For that matter, if you wanted to go on living while you were working for the jerries everything about a job had to be planned and carried out just so, from your first move to the last, which was not until after you had made your getaway. The guy who played it safe lived; the guy who took chances soon kissed himself goodbye.

The jerries must have the same idea about playing safe. He sure had to hand it to them. Apart from the guy who had first contacted him and got him interested he had never seen a single one of them. They sent his orders and directions to a P.O. box which he held under an assumed name in a strange town.

In fact they were so damned secret that at first he suspected them of trying to pull a double-cross. But his pay always came through within a few days after each job, and it was in good U.S. greenbacks too, no checks. And there was plenty of it. So much, in fact, that if the Germans told him to try blowing up the Norfolk navy yard itself he believed he'd go ahead and tackle the job without turning a hair. If he could only keep that kind of dough rolling in until the end of this war he would be rich enough to have almost anything he'd ever wanted. He would like to travel around awhile first. Maybe go on a world cruise. Then when he'd got some class he'd like to buy a big ranch mansion in South America and live like a king, with servants and greasers galore to wait on him.

As to who won the war, why he didn't give a hoot. Hover it came out, it couldn't affect him in the least. He would just as soon the U.S. won, he had no grudge against this country. He just happened to be working for the other side

At length he picked up the suitcase of explosive and proceeded cautiously along the dock until he espied the shadowy form of a warehouse looming up in front of him. He knew this to be the loading terminal of Weckert and Sons, the building he had been hired to destroy.

He circled noiselessly to the rear of the structure and entered a four-foot wide alley formed by the rear walls of Weckert's and another warehouse. If it had been dark in the open wharf, it was inky-black in this narrow well. Here he knew he was tolerably safe from detection.

He groped along the wall with his fingers. There was a door back here. He had located it last night when he scouted the job. Ah, there it was. Now to open it. His fingers found the knob, but they also encountered the corrugated steel sides of a padlock. He frowned irritably. The door had been open last night. This would delay him a good ten

minutes. Not that he didn't have the time, but in a deal like this every minute was precious. He wanted to keep his moves up to schedule.

Drawing a fine, hooked wire from his pocket, he fell to work picking at the tumblers of the lock. He worked steadily and with complete concentration. Sooner than he had hoped the tumblers yielded to his gentle but expert probing.

* * *

SCHULTZ snapped on a tiny flashlight and with his gun ready in his other hand, prowled through the black maw of the warehouse. He found to his surprise that the building was almost empty of goods. Only one corner was occupied by the crates of machine parts with which the place had supposedly been crammed. Everything seemed to be askew tonight, for some reason. Schultz concluded that the rest of the shipment must already have been loaded on the ships.

For the moment he hesitated, debating whether or not it was worthwhile to go ahead and blow the place up. Finally he decided that since he was being paid to do the job it didn't matter whether the joint were full or empty. The jerries could kick through in full in either case if they wanted more of his service in the future.

Being by now quite sure that he was alone in the building, he began the task of planting the charges of T.N.T. He opened his satchel, took out the first pair of sticks, and set them by the door of the manager's office. He affixed the detonators and connected them to a coil of wire which he also produced from the satchel. In each of the building's four corners he set other charges. Down the center of the warehouse he placed the remaining sticks in half a dozen deposits of two each. Every section of the place would be thoroughly blasted.

He connected the wire to each charge and carried both ends of the coil to the side entrance, where he fastened them to the poles of a small time clock that

These Things

Two things I know as calm and sweet as recollection.
The sharp virginity of daphne,
Crystal-bowled,
In a smoke filled room.
The fresh complacency of sidewalk puddles,
After rain,
Mirroring a brightening day.

—Mildred Wilson.

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Mildred Wilson

he took from his coat pocket. This little mechanism was a truly marvelous creation. Schultz never handled one without feeling a genuine admiration for the nameless nazi genius who had first devised it. All you had to do was twiddle a little knob, and the instrument would blow up any electrically wired charge or system of charges at any time you wanted.

He set the mechanism to go off at two thirty-one. It was now twelve thirty-one. That gave him two hours. He synchronized his pocket watch with the timeclock.

Two hours gave him plenty of time in which to get away. When the blast went off he would be drinking beer in Charlie's place, being seen by plenty of people who knew him well and would vouch for him.

He was through at last. He cast a final glance around the silent building. Everything was jake. He picked up the satchel and started for the door. Suddenly he stopped. It came to his mind that he had not given the manager's office the usual once-over. He cursed. The jerries liked to have papers proving their acts of sabotage. They got sore if he didn't get them some. Scowling, he laid down the satchel and ran swiftly back across the floor until he came to the office.

Schultz found the manager's door to be locked. Moreover, it appeared to be of very heavy construction. He whipped out his handkerchief and folded it about his gun several times. Placing the muzzle against the lock, he fired three shots. Then he pushed on the door, found that it swung open, and entered.

Hastily he searched the manager's desk, scooping several important looking packets of papers into his pocket. He finished his duty and was turning to leave when he espied a door directly

behind the desk that looked as if it might be the entrance to a vault.

For a moment he gazed at it, then curiosity got the better of him. He stepped behind the desk to investigate. He found the door to be constructed of very solid hardwood panels and secured by a spring lock on the outside. Unsnapping this, he pulled the door open and walked into what seemed to be a filing room.

By the sickly beam from his small flashlight he beheld a windowless cubicle about fifteen feet square lined with a dozen or more steel filing cabinets. As he stood surveying the chamber, the door behind him swung shut with a click. The sound temporarily startled him. Then he saw that the portal had merely closed because of its automatic stop. Flashing his light once more around the room, he decided that he sure didn't have time to search through all those cases. Not with the time clock already ticking off the minutes. He swung round and took hold of the door knob. For some reason or other the door would not open. He rattled it vigorously, but it held fast. Stepping backward, he scanned it in puzzlement. Had he forgotten to fasten that springlock? He grasped the knob again and jerked the door back and forth. Ten to one that was what he'd done. If he wasn't a saphead! Well, he didn't have time to moon about it. He drew his gun and held it about at the place where he judged the spring lock to be on the outside of the door. Then he fired. Nothing happened. Humph! This shot would have to be pretty good, as it was his last one. Schultz placed his ear to the crack between door and jamb and carefully joggled the door in its moorings, strained to catch the faint noise

(Please turn to page seven)

A Ratonitz Raises Again

THE YOUNG MATRIARCH By G. B. Stern. MacMillan. \$3.

"It was Anastasia's voice, merry, confident, eternally impenitent, rising in shrill good fellowship with Francis Power's butler outside in the hall, the voice that always preceded her like a flourish of trumpets. All the family clattered their knives and forks, flung down their table napkins, turned towards the door in a chorus of laughter and scoldings.

"No, no, it is not at all necessary that you apologize, Walters; if it is that they have begun already, I will make no bones out of that; I blame me my curling-tongs!—you who have a wife in the kitchen, you will understand how we suffer from the back hair. . . ."

This, then, the zenith of G. B. Stern's latest addition to the Rakonitz saga, "The Young Matriarch." In a magnificent retrospect passage, Miss Stern creates a wondrous dinner-party, which is the wedding feast for Dietrich, and Annette, for many

years an unacknowledged member of the family, and now at last his wife, Anastasia Rakonitz, the old matriarch, is there, and under her protective wing, a miserable slatternly fortune-teller, hauled from the paws of justice. Toni, the fifteen-year old, is there on sufferance. Really too young for the party, she drinks in every luscious detail of the farcical feast. The full spirit of the whole tribe is brought out with more skill in this passage than anywhere else in the book.

For those who already have seen the rich tapestry of the Rakonitz family, woven with such humor and imagination by G. B. Stern, the publication of "The Young Matriarch" will be very welcome. In response to public demand, Miss Stern, with her salt and savor, created a new matriarch, which, phoenix-like, arose from the ashes of the old. The Phoenix, indeed, is the symbol chosen to represent Toni's successor, and Miss Stern went the whole way in open the book at the cremation of Toni, and placing

the spot light on the child Baba, Toni's daughter, who was to take her place.

But this is enough to tell the reader that this book carries on the same brilliant theme of the other Rakonitz books. For those who have never been introduced to the Jewish family, this new book is a good starting place, for there is enough retrospect as well as a very complete family tree so that one may sort out the characters and their background without too much confusion.—C.G.

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