

THE CLOUDED MOON

By MAX SALTMARSH

The Characters
Hugo Stern, handsome author, living on the French Riviera.
Archie Lumsden, myself, Hugo's friend.
René Gelsa, a singularly unpleasant cartoonist.

Yesterday: A big American named Dunning tries to pry information out of us.

Chapter 14

Shattering Experience

EARLY the next morning I was awakened by a tapping on the pane. I rolled out of bed and, as I turned to the window, saw a face staring at me through the green-weathered opening.

"Jean-Francois!" I said, startled, and then, with rising irritation: "And what the devil do you mean by spoiling the best night's sleep I've had in weeks?"

Jean-Francois slipped noiselessly into the room. He was a sorry sight, wan and disheveled. By the look of him, he hadn't seen a bed that night.

"Monsieur," he said, "I am desolated to disarrange you, but I have had a nerve-shattering experience."

"Go on," I said encouragingly. He shuddered slightly, as at a painful memory, and began his story. He had tried, he said, throughout the day to get a line on Gelsa's household and way of life, but beyond the fact that his staff consisted of a man and wife, a surly couple who kept themselves to themselves, he had found out nothing. And then suddenly chance favored him.

"I stood," he said, "on the corner of the rue de Dragon, waiting for an inspiration, when suddenly the gate of the villa opened and a man and woman came out. I followed!"

He had followed the couple to a small cafe in the fisher quarter, entering it on their heels. Jean-Francois found a strategic table half-way between them and the door and sat down to study them behind the cover of a newspaper. It was then that he received a shock, for he knew their faces.

There had been, he said, a peculiarly scandalous police-court case in Marseilles ten years before, in which a man and his wife had been accused of baby-farming on a large scale. Jean-Francois, despite his tender years, had followed the case, in all its ghastly details, with intense eagerness. The baby-farming had been proved, the neglect of the infants, resulting in many deaths; but the murder of a certain number, though suspected, could not be substantiated, and the couple received sentences of five years apiece.

It was not unnatural that Jean-Francois, finding himself opposite them in the cafe, should experience excitement, not unmixed with a shuddering apprehension. "For you will understand, monsieur," he explained naively, "that they were not nice people."

He made an expressive grimace. "Ah," said he, "but I was not dismayed. I waited my chance to scrape acquaintance!"

It came in a minute, with the loan of a newspaper and the offer of a drink. Polite exchange of compliments showed that the couple, though willing enough to be treated as long as their new acquaintance's cash held out, were chary of letting information slip; but the cognac, though it did not loosen their tongues, appreciably mellowed their tempers, and when Jean-Francois suggested the purchase of a couple of bottles and the adjournment of the sitting to their abode, they agreed readily enough, admitting that their patron was away for the night and they were free agents.

The sitting lasted until the small hours of the morning, and by that time his hosts were comfortably slumbering in their chairs. Jean-Francois took credit to himself that, by dint of spinning out his drinks, he was still in very fair condition, but he was filled at the same time with an immense disgust, for, beyond the news that there was a certain room into which they were never permitted to enter under pain of instant dismissal, he had learned nothing. It appeared to Jean-Francois that two good bottles of cognac had gone completely and irrevocably down the drain.

A Tour of Inspection

AND then a bright idea struck him. As his hosts were out of action for a considerable period, it was, he thought, a Heaven-sent opportunity to have a look at the rest of the house, and forthwith he set off on a tour of inspection.

It was a largeish place, richly furnished, with two great salons, a dining-room, and a big bare studio. But there was another door at the end of a short passage whose lock defied his amateur efforts at cracksmanship, and he felt, suddenly and unshakably, that here was the hidden room into which the servants might not enter, and that inside it lay the secret of the house.

A prospecting tour round the outside showed him a one-storied oblong, windowless but roofed with a glass dome, that he knew must be the locked room, and a tour round the upper story dis-

closed a small closet through whose window an agile man might climb and drop onto the lead parapet. It needed only an instant for him to put the thought into execution. There was a skylight in the dome, partly open, and he squeezed through it, dropping, bruised but triumphant, on the floor beneath.

He found himself, he said, in the strangest room he had ever seen. The outside was an oblong, but the chamber within was hexagonal. There was a black pile carpet on the floor, and the walls were hung with black velvet curtains. In the center of the room was something like a prie-dieu, also in black, with a small, table-covered table before it, and opposite the door, behind a longer, narrow table also draped in black, was a dais, with the statue of a goat in white marble.

He had searched the room, he continued, and found nothing else of interest—no papers, no indication of the purpose for which it was used, and on that conclusion he began to think of making a retreat. It was then that he realized that there were certain difficulties to be overcome, for it was one thing to drop from the dome and quite another to climb up to it again.

He sat down to think matters out. There was nothing to be done, it seemed, but to wait until such time as Gelsa or his unpleasant retainers should open the door of the room, and the thought of what would happen after that caused a gentle sweat to break out on his body.

He sat there perhaps for one hour, perhaps two; he had no watch, and the minutes dragged by on leaden feet—when suddenly there came an interruption. He heard a faint scratching at the door of the room and realized that someone was inserting a key in the lock. He had barely time to dart behind a curtain when the door opened and someone entered the room. He heard footsteps moving to and fro, a muffled thumping, and on that, plucking up his courage, he drew the curtain aside and peered round it.

Escape

A DIM figure stood before the prie-dieu, engaged in shaking out and replacing the cushions that covered it, and as his eyes focused themselves, he saw that it was a woman. She wore a sort of apron, and her head was tied up in a checked duster, but her face he could not see. It was evident, however, from her actions, that she had come to clean the room.

Finally he saw her turn and pass out through the door, which, to his unspeakable relief, she left ajar. In a flash he was across the room, peering down the corridor, but though he could hear her footsteps crossing the hall, there was no other sound of life. Holding his breath, for he knew he had no time to lose, he crept along the passage and found himself in the empty hall.

The front door was opposite him, and with a dart he was beside it, had turned the well-oiled handle, and was sprinting down the glass-roofed path. In another instant he found himself in the golden light of sunrise, standing alone in the deserted road.

He was tired, he was hungry, and his nerve was not a little shaken, but insatiable curiosity had him in its grip. If, he reasoned, it was true that the malodorous couple were the only servants in the house, then this woman, whoever she was, would leave the house, once her strange task was done, and he wanted to see where she went.

It must have been a quarter of an hour that he waited, but finally there came the click of the gate and he saw her emerge. The print overall had gone, and she wore in its place a faded cotton dress, topped with a short, blue flannel coat. She might, he thought, have been anything between thirty-five and fifty. But what startled him most was the realization—and this he was certain about—that she was an Englishwoman.

She made off down the street, and he followed, using all the precaution he could; but he need not have bothered, for she never turned her head.

He stuck to the trail nobly, until he saw her insert a gigantic key into the lock of an imposing gateway, cross a gravel sweep, and vanish round the angle of a large house.

"And the building—what was it?" I demanded. He spread out his hands apologetically. "Monsieur, what an anti-climax! It was only a private hotel—the Chateau la Vierge. I regret much," he added, looking like a small boy whose sum has come out wrong, "that I could do no better."

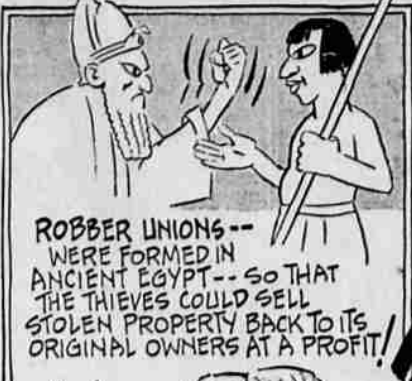
It took me a full minute to assimilate this surprising information. "Son," I said at last, patting him on the shoulder, "you've done better than you know. Here are your marching orders. Go back to your grandmother and have a good day's sleep. When you've rested, see what you can discover about an American gentleman by the name of Dunning, who says he's a correspondent for the Chicago Express. Find out where he's staying, what he's doing, and whom he's meeting. You can report to me tonight."

(Copyright, 1938, Max Saltmarsh)

Dunning helps us out of a jam, tomorrow.

STRANGE AS IT SEEMS—By JOHN HIX

For further proof address the author, inclosing a stamped envelope for reply. Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.



ROBBER UNIONS-- WERE FORMED IN ANCIENT EGYPT-- SO THAT THE THIEVES COULD SELL STOLEN PROPERTY BACK TO ITS ORIGINAL OWNERS AT A PROFIT!



THE BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS GETS SEA-SICK ON SHIPBOARD!

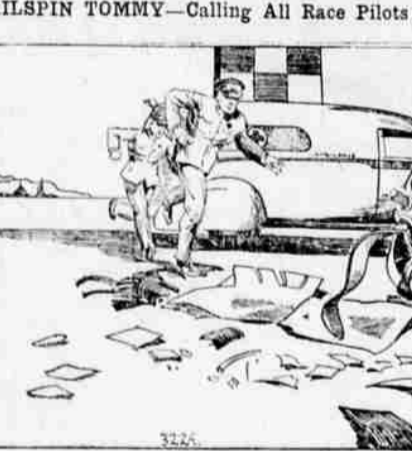


WAITING IN A PRISON CELL TO BE EXECUTED ON THE GUILLOTINE, CHARLOTTE CORDAY, FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY HEROINE, SAT FOR THIS PORTRAIT, COMPLETED IN 2 HOURS BY JEAN-JACQUES HAUER! -1793-

JOCKEY EUGENE JAMES-- of Louisville, Ky., AT 17 RODE 72 WINNERS IN THE FIRST 3 MONTHS OF HIS CAREER! (July-Oct., 1930)

Portrait of Death
Originator of the dread revolutionary tribunal which ordered the guillotining of hundreds of victims of the Reign of Terror in France was Jean Paul Marat, president of the Jacobin club.

Denies She Provoked Rufus Holman Attack
PORTLAND, Sept. 15.—(AP)—Mrs. Jewell Bruce Fearing of Portland denied yesterday she had provoked the alleged attack at the state fair which is the basis for the warrant she obtained against Rufus C. Holman,



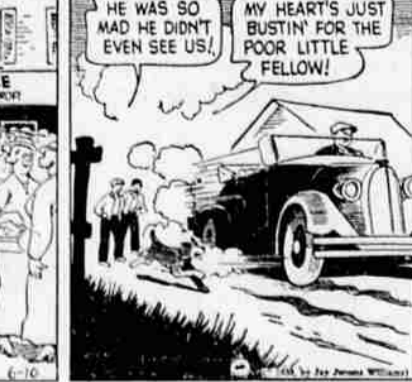
TAILSPIN TOMMY—Calling All Race Pilots!



BEN WEBSTER'S CAREER—Fresh Supply!



THE NEBBS—Poor Butterfly



HEADGEAR
By GLUYAS WILLIAMS



S MATTER POI
By G M PAYNE



By HAL FORREST



By EDWIN ALGER



By SOL HESS

JAPAN READY TO FIGHT COMMUNISM
TOKYO, Sept. 15.—(AP)—Japan's readiness "to fight, in every way, with arms if necessary" against communism was revealed today in a statement by the foreign office spokesman.

WINDOW GLASS—We sell window glass and will replace your broken windows (reasonably) Truworths Canadian Works.

WELL, KEEP ON THINKING IT AND STOP MOPING—RIGHT NOW YOU'RE A PICTURE OF MORE GRIEF THAN I'VE EVER SEEN AND I'VE BEEN TO A HUNDRED FUNERALS

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