THE CLOUDED MOON

By MAX SALTMARSH

The Characters

Hugo Stern, *handsome author, living on the French Riviera*

Archie Lumsden, *myself, Hugo's friend.*

René Geiss, *a cartoonist with a distorted mind.*

Yesterday: *Geiss tells the magistrate that I am the murderer, and will probably commit suicide or another murder shortly.*

Chapter 23

The Club Of Down-And-Outs

AS Hugo's big car swung out along the coast road, I told him the events of the past few hours since I had moved to the Château la Vague. When I came to the interview with Jean-François and his transcript of Geiss's conversations with the *juge* Hugo grew serious.

"Archie, I don't like it—not a bit. Whatever dangers the Château la Vague may hold for you, I'll swear they're nothing to what Geiss is preparing for you outside. Here's the way I read it. He'll have a shot at bumping you off, in such a way as will suggest suicide, and there will be a letter confessing to Eve Monet's murder waiting to be placed conveniently near your corpse. If that effort doesn't come off, he'll exterminate some innocent and inoffensive person and contrive to throw the blame on you."

"But he'd have to prove motive for that," I suggested mildly, "and the only person I have a motive for killing is himself. I can't somehow see him offering himself as the victim of the perfect crime."

"Don't joke!" he retorted irritably. "What's your next move?"

"No idea, I answered, "except to keep my eyes skinned, but I want you to pass on the number of that car the housekeeper went off in to Dunning. It's too risky for me to communicate with him direct and he's the man to trace it."

He was silent for r moment, as the big car raced on through the summer night. "We're getting near our goal, anc I fancy it's time to make a few inquiries. That gasoline station looks a likely spot." And forthwith he pulled in to the roadside and gave a hail.

An old fellow in soiled overalls answered the call, and Hugo put a casual-sounding question. "The Caves des Muettes?" he said. "But certainly I know it! It lies, perhaps, three kilometers farther on. But it is not a very chic locality! Dirty, ill kept, and the wine is bad. Why do the gentlemen not continue a little farther to Nice?"

We thanked him and drove on through a sleeping countryside, until after, as he had said, a bare three kilometers, we sighted a long low shape away to the left. There were dusky patches that might have been fig trees on either side of an open door through which light gleamed, and between the building itself and the road lay a stretch of rough grass that seemed once to have been a garden.

Hugo pulled up a hundred yards down the road. "You know," said he, "my first thought was to walk boldly in and see what we could see. But there's something dashed sinister about the look of the place. I've a good mind to do a bit of reconnoitering first."

We took a diagonal course across the grass warily avoiding the beam of light from the open door. I could see the interior now, a shabby, dirty place with an indescribable air of squalor.

No living creature showed, but as we drew nearer, a woman's shrill laugh rang out, followed by a rumble of men's voices.

Hugo signed to me to stay where I was, and himself crept softly to a window beside the door. It was shuttered, but the wood must have been old and warped, for a long crack showed between the shutters, and to this he set his eye. A couple of minutes he stood there, then stole back to me.

"Half a dozen fishermen and a couple of women," he whispered. "Nothing to interest us, but it's a big place and there may be rooms to the back. Let's take a cast round it."

'At Home'

CAUTIOUSLY and holding our breath, we crossed the lighted pathway anc circled the house. Neatly parked along the yard, were three cars, and one of them, a big, black limousine, bore number-plates that I had seen once before that evening.

"Hugo!" I said, very low, "that's the car the housekeeper went off in."

"So-ho!" said he. "Then the damsel's somewhere within. This becomes interesting!" But even as he spoke, something happened that set every nerve in my body tingling. Across that brooding silence a thin, clear sound had cut, as sharply as a knife. It was the sound of a man whistling a tune that I knew well: "And you'll hear no more of poor Noah More, for poor Noah More's no more!"

Next instant caine the sound of shambling footsteps on the rough earth, and the dim silhouette of the whistler himself showed against the angle of the house. He crossed the yard, a tall, gangling shadow, halted beside a big barn to our left, and rapped three times, sharply on the door. The door opened cautiously. For a moment I saw two faces, the face of the man who opened, and the face of the man waiting admission.

The man within was short, dark, and swarthy. I had seen fellows like him, hanging about the alleys of the sailor quarter in Marseille: but it was the sight of the other, the man who had whistled "Noah More," that made me catch my breath. It was a long face, dust-colored, with pendulous lips and flabby chin, but it was a face with the remains of extraordinary beauty. The man was a wreck of something splendid, and so seemed infinitely more horrible in his squalor.

It was only for a second that I saw him then, with a muttered word, he pushed past the other, and the door closed behind him.

"The Club des Sans Clubs at home!" I whispered.

Hugo grunted: "And the last arrival, I take it, was the gentleman who so kindly planted the gun on you this morning. Come on, let's have a look-see."

We circled round the barn, only to find it an ancient but solid structure, with no window of any shape. When I knelt by the door, all that came to my ear was a far-away murmur of voices.

It was unthinkable to have come so far and learn so little, but here Providence was suddenly kind, for the building adjacent to the barn proved to be an empty stable, and here we established ourselves and settled down to wait.

An hour had passed when suddenly Hugo gripped me by the arm. "The party's breaking up," he whispered. "Shift yourself!"

We crept to the entrance. As I watched, the figure of the housekeeper appeared in the lighted square of the doorway and swiftly crossed to the big, black car, followed by two men, one of whom I had no difficulty in identifying as the chauffeur.

Villainous Faces

THE black car purred gently round the angle of the house and disappeared, even as a more familiar shape, short, paunchy, consequential, emerged. In spite of the heat of the night, Baron Stahl was wrapped in a dark overcoat, with the collar turned up round his ears and a soft felt hat pulled low over his eyes, but it would have taken more than that to disguise him. He paused in the doorway to speak to a thin, shabby youth at his elbow, whose mop of frizzled fair hair caught the glow of the lantern like a halo; then both of them made off, Stahl to take possession of the second car, and the lad to vanish on foot into the shadows.

There was a moment's delay and then suddenly, through the lighted doorway, filed the queerest procession I had ever seen. Five slouching, down-at-heel men, shambled out, followed closely by a couple of painted drabs. If I searched the vilest slums of Paris I could not have made a better collection of villainous faces. The last to come out was the man who had whistled "Noah More."

He halted for a moment, whispering something to the doorkeeper, and laughed as he turned away, shambling off into the night; and the laugh turned my blood cold, for it was mad and bad, both crazy and cruel.

The doorkeeper locked the door from the outside, pocketed the key, and carefully dimmed his lantern before strolling over to the remaining car. He drove carefully around the house and for a moment we listened to the long-drawn roar of his engine, slowly fading into the drowsy silence of the countryside. Another ten minutes we waited then we, too, made our cautious way back to the road.

We took our way back to Cannes, and it wasn't until we were humming along the home stretch that Hugo spoke.

"The Club des Sans Clubs!" he said slowly. "The club of men without a club, without a home or country or a conscience or a moral code: the club of the down-and-outs. Men with a grudge against civilization. Men who would stop at no villainy to get a fleeting sense of power or a still more fleeting revenge against the order that has discarded them. Archie, it's a fearsome thought, the power that such an organization would be in the hands of unscrupulous men!"

"At least," I said, "we can spot quite a few of its members again when we see them."

He shook his head. "Of the local ones, yes; but I've a feeling that the club itself has a much wider scope. I wouldn't wonder if its members are scattered broadcast over Europe—if some of them were at the bottom of each of the killings Dunning spoke of. Those fellows tonight were called together for a special purpose—to get instructions, perhaps, for whatever drama is to be staged on Sunday week: and as you say, it's as well we've got a sight of them."

He broke off suddenly and jammed on his brakes, for round the bend of the slope a big black limousine swept towards us, holding the crown of the road with a fine disregard for approaching traffic.

A moment only I saw it as it whizzed past. "The housekeeper," said I. "has been returned to cold storage. I wonder who the fellow was with her?"

"Time will show," said Hugo philosophically, and pulled up at the head of the lane that led to the château. "Good night, old son. I'll be waiting here at midday tomorrow and meantime don't let yourself be persuaded into committing suicide, no matter how great the inducement!"

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Tomorrow: Suicide pact.

STRANGE AS IT SEEMS—By JOHN HIX

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

Writer on a Bet . . .

Strange as it seems, but for a bet, the world might never have enjoyed reading James Fenimore Cooper's famous "Leatherstocking Tales," nor any other of his delightful novels.

Cooper's father, Judge William Cooper, bought a tract of land on the shore of Otsego Lake, in central New York state, and there founded the village of Cooperstown. Here young James Fenimore spent his youth and learned to love the ways of the wilderness about which he wrote in later years.

Cooper entered Yale at the age of 13, but he neglected his studies to such an extent that he was expelled in his third year. For the next three years Cooper served in the navy, in 1811 resigning to marry.

Cooper turned to the management of his farms for the next few years, and no indication of his latent abilities as an author showed until, one day, he chanced to read an English novel, which he disliked.

He threw down the book, exclaiming, "I'll bet I could write a better book than that, myself!"

His wife and friends, who were present, half jocularly held him to his word, and Cooper set out to write "Precaution," a novel which was published in 1820. Although unsuccessful, the work was praised by his friends.

There ensued in 1821 "The Spy," which proved successful; "The Pioneers," first of the Leatherstocking series (1823); "The Pilot," in which Cooper made use of his knowledge of the sea (1823); and countless other novels of colonial and sea life, including the immensely popular "Last of the Mohicans."

Tomorrow: What horsepower does a 16-inch gun generate on being fired?

at a meeting of Willamette valley and costal members yesterday. He succeeded Kenneth Lee of Salem.

Seattle Youth President.

CORVALLIS, Sept. 26.—(AP)—The largest freshman class in Oregon State College history named John Leovich, Seattle, president. He defeated Harry Johnston, Klamath Falls, by seven votes.

Closing time for 1oo Late to Classify Ads is 1:30 p m.

Use Mail Tribune Want Ads.

Hess Favored

PORTLAND, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Henry Hess, Democratic nominee for governor, received the support of the Office Employes' Union, local 16,821, today. A resolution criticized the parent State Federation of Labor for ignoring a "clear mandate" by declining to choose between Hess and his Republican opponent, Charles A. Sprague of Salem.

Marines Win Easily

SAN DIEGO, Cal., Sept. 26.—(AP)—The San Diego Marines had an easy time swamping St. Mary's of Texas football team, 25 to 0 yesterday. The victory avenged two defeats handed the Marines by the St. Mary's squad on previous visits.

Saves Two Pals

TOLEDO, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Frank Lane prevented a double tragedy when he roused two sleeping companions from a burning truck. The men, Jay Lane, 21, and Charles Holdaway, 30, both of Redmond, were recovering in a hospital here.

Use Mail Tribune Want Ads

Autoist Dies.

SALEM, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Lawrence Orwig, 22, received fatal injuries yesterday when his automobile plunged off the Pacific highway south of here. The accident occurred as Orwig attempted to pass an oil truck.

Wool Sale Off.

SYDNEY, Australia, Sept. 26.—(AP)—The Sydney wool sales were postponed today because of a disagreement between brokers and buyers over war risk insurance rates.

Pioneer Drops Dead.

JOHN DAY, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Dell Officer, 71, a pioneer Grant county stockman, dropped dead Saturday night while attending a boxing program at the county fair.

Plan Relief Vote.

PORTLAND, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Multnomah county prepared today to place a $732,490 special levy measure on the November ballot for general assistance and the relief of dependent children, the blind and the aged.

Oregon Adventurers.

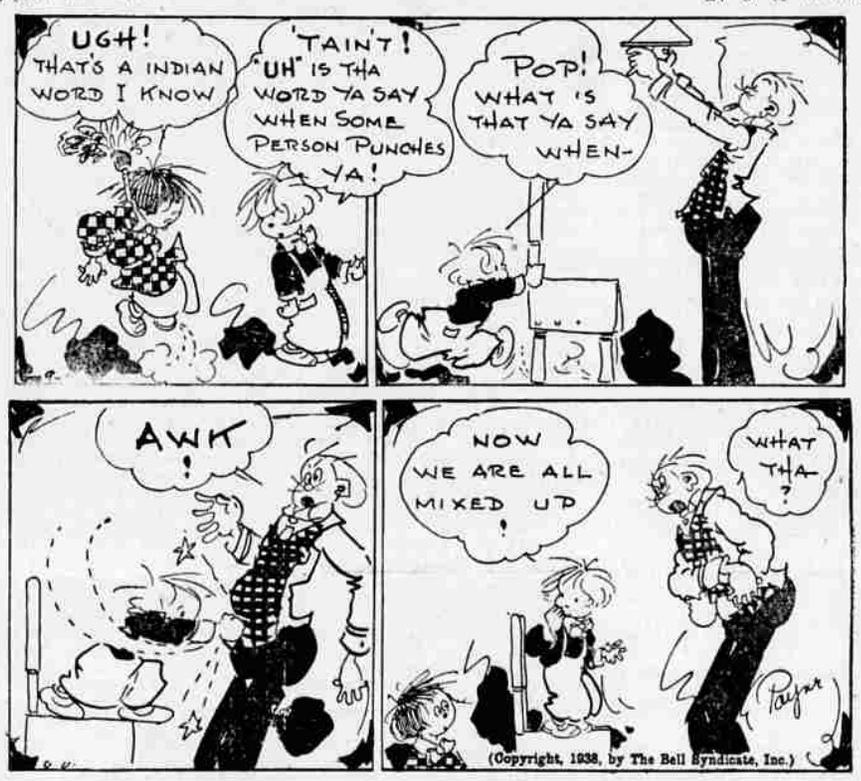
GREEN RIVER, Utah, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Two Oregon adventurers continued their 1,200 mile journey down the Green and Colorado rivers yesterday after completing an uneventful 182-mile run from Jensen, Utah.

20-30 Officers Named.

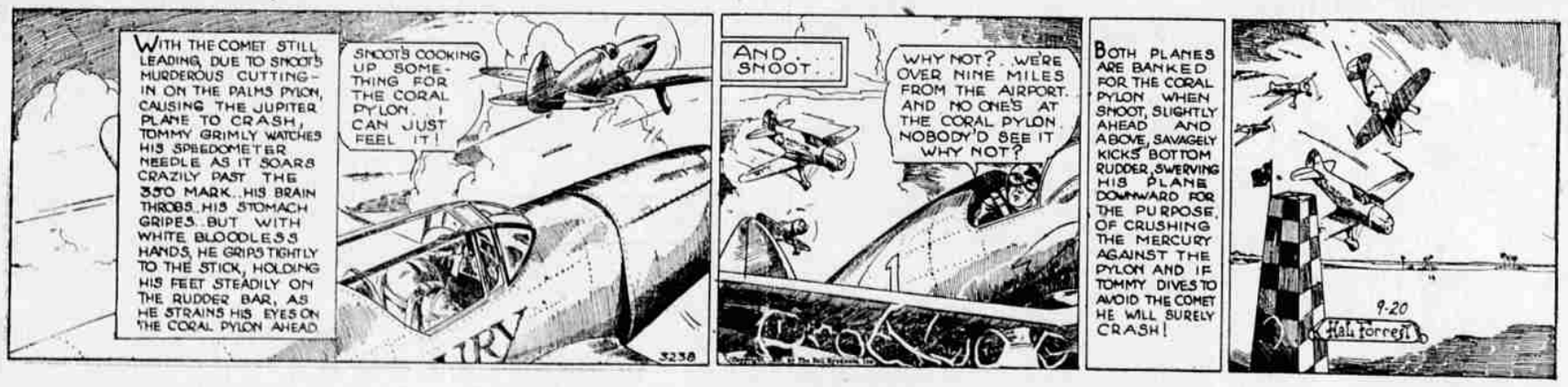
TOLEDO, Sept. 26.—(AP)—Weston Hayden of Toledo was elected subdistrict president of the 20-30 club

THE WORLD AT ITS WORST BY GLUYAS WILLIAMS

S MATTER POP? By C. M. PAYNE



TAILSPIN TOMMY—Murderous Side-Slip! By HAL FORREST



BEN WEBSTER'S CAREER—No Answer! By EDWIN ALGER

THE NEBBS—The Map of Misery By SOL HESS