

THE CLOSER

By MAX SALTSMARSH

The Characters

Hugo Stern, handsome author, living on the French Riviera.
Archie Lumsden, myself, Hugo's friend.
Ottile Wills, beautiful American heiress.

Yesterday: Venner warns me that I'm in danger and must leave France. When I refuse he has a heart attack. Later I spot a hotel servant as one of Geiss's killers.

Chapter 30

Murder At Night

HUGO, Dunning and Ada were waiting for me in the courtyard of the chalet. All three of them were an air of anxious expectancy, and as I sank gratefully into a chair Dunning said: "It has occurred to me that if we don't succeed in averting the trouble, Ottile and Mr. Wills would be mighty glad of some quiet place to retire to, until the fust blows over, or even—"

"He hesitated—"in a certain eventuality Ottile might come alone; and Miss Ada has kindly said she'll be prepared for them at any hour of the day and night."

His words were like cold water on my spirits. Until then, I don't think I had seriously envisaged the possibility of failure, but now, as I saw how gravely he viewed our chances, I knew for the first time what fear was.

"Look here, Dunning," I said. "Isn't it about time that we did what any ordinary person would have done in the first place and went to the police with what information we have?"

He sucked reflectively at his big cigar. "And just what," he asked mildly, "can we offer them, in the way of concrete facts?"

I was silent for a moment and the more I thought, the more fully did I realize that there was nothing, literally nothing, that we could produce as documented fact. I suppose that my chagrin showed on my face, for the big man leaned forward heavily and patted my shoulder.

"Son," said he, "don't you think I've been worrying over that diffidely since the first minute I got here? Mr. Wills is being guarded as well as the local police know how, against the average accidents that could befall an American citizen in a foreign country. But if we ask them to keep an eye on Geiss or Stahl or Venner, we can give no proof of what we believe."

He dropped back, like a man suddenly tired, and drained his glass, and as Hugo refilled it, he turned to me again. "There's another point that is doubtless in your mind—why have we not told Mr. Wills himself of our suspicions as well as the rest of the game that's going on. Well, that's a question that's given me a lot more sleepless nights, but I've the same answer for both queries. You've heard what Ottile says of her uncle; you could see the kind of man he is, and I tell you this. If once he knew what had happened to Melanie, he wouldn't rest until he had found her murderer. He'd remove any chance we have of helping him, and he wouldn't save himself."

I sighed. "You're damnably right," I said. "If I could only get my hands round Geiss's neck."
Dunning nodded grimly. "And I don't mind admitting that a quiet bit of assassination is a solution that has often presented itself to me, though it's not so easy as it sounds, but meantime what we want is the major evidence."
"And that is?"

"The gun," said he. "The second gun—the gun that killed poor Pat. If that could be found—on his premises—I'd have a good enough case to go to Paris with. Of course it's possible he's disposed of it long ago, but there's a factor in our favor—the man's colossal vanity. I firmly believe he doesn't credit there's a single living thing with the brains to see through him, and on that assumption there's just a chance he's still got the gun."

Rakovsky
THERE fell a heavy silence that Hugo finally broke. "And to think," said he, "that we were in that damned villa this afternoon! If we'd only tied up the fellow and searched the place!"

"And got into a nasty bit of trouble if you'd found nothing," commenced the American. "No, no, Mr. Stern, when it comes to those matters, Son," he turned to me—"I am anxious to hear your news, but first I'll recapitulate what I've been telling Miss Ada and her brother here. That was a useful bit of observation of yours, when you sighted that singularly unpleasant lady, Miss Adams, going off for her joy-ride. Mr. Stern passed on the intelligence to me, and I set my men on the trail of the car. It belongs, and I don't fancy you'll be surprised to hear it, to a gentleman named Vladimir Rakovsky, who inhabits a small villa in a hamlet named San Lorenzo. From now on it will be my pleasure and privilege to see that he does not stir a foot outside it without I know where he's heading."

"Precisely," agreed Mr. Dunning.

gravely. "And that means to say we have all the chief conspirators located, but if we had all their thoughts and plans similarly taped, I must confess I'd feel a lot easier. And now," said he, "what's your end of the tale?"

I told him, and I don't think a pin could have dropped unnoticed while I was speaking.
"You don't imagine," said Hugo, "that with this new development in the way of chassours in the hotel, I shall let you go back there for the night?"

"I imagine nothing," I told him. "But I certainly know I'd be a fool not to spend another night there and see what this new development means. Only, if you like, you can do something for me. Meet Jean-Francois down the lane and tell him from me to keep an eye skinned for the arrival of that yacht."

He agreed with extreme reluctance, and after supper, at a little before ten, I strolled back to the hotel. I had purposely timed my arrival to get in before the place closed, but though my watch still showed five minutes to the hour, the big gates were closed when I reached them.

I turned the key in a lock that felt freshly oiled, entered the darkened house, and tiptoed my way upstairs. Everything was still; I could almost hear the house breathing in its sleep.

I opened my room, switched on the light, and made a hasty inspection, but everything seemed to be in order. Even the lock of the door still worked, a fact that surprised me mildly, for ever since I had identified the new chasseur, I had had a vague suspicion that things were going to move that night.

I fastened the door, wedged a chair under the handle, and closed the stout outer shutters of the windows; then, with the comfortable feeling that if I was to wake up in paradise it wouldn't be for want of taking precautions, I went to bed.

But the long hours wore on and I slept and woke and slept again until suddenly, somewhere before the dawn, I woke with a start. What had aroused me I couldn't tell. I was panting as if I had dropped out of a race, and in my ears I still seemed to hear the echo of a muffled cry.

Dripping Red
I CREEPT to the door, listened intently, and then, with immense precaution, turned the key in the lock. As I opened the door silently, I saw that the passage outside was filled with the gray half-light of dawn, but it was completely empty; and then, a little way to the right, with a stealthy quiet that made a pulse leap in my throat, a door began to open.

Inch by inch it moved and I stood watching it, holding my breath. I could not think what it was, for it seemed to lead into the corridor beyond was in shadow and I could not count the doors; but this door was clearly lit, and as I watched something appeared round the edge, pushing it wider—something that sent a cold shiver of horror along my spine. It was the fingers of a man's hand, heavy-knuckled, white-skinned, but they were not all white, for the nails dripped red on the marble floor below.

In one swift stride I was back inside my own room, with the door shut and locked and my ear to the crack. For a moment all was still, and then I heard a small ominous sound that I knew to be the broken tile in the passage outside, giving under a stealthy tread. There was no more sleep for me that night. Something horrible had happened but I dared not try to discover the truth, for my own life, and Hugo's and Dunning's, were all that stood between the old man Virgoe Wills and a similar fate.

Just as my watch showed seven, I heard footsteps outside, and peering cautiously through the window, saw the housekeeper crossing the gravel sweep with long, nervous strides towards the gate. A minute later a thin figure in a dark dress and a loose white jacket followed after her; I recognized the mop of waving, tow-colored hair and shuddered involuntarily. It seemed a reasonable hour to make my appearance, but before starting any investigations I had an uncontrollable longing to take a header into the sea, so I pulled on my bathing-trunks, flung a towel round my neck, and ran down, through a deserted house and garden, to the white beach and the sparkling water.

After a gorgeous half-hour of swimming, floating and lolling, I made my way back. The hall and lounge were still deserted, but as I came up the stairs to the corridor I saw at the far end, outside Mr. Venner's door, the stout, blue-overalled figure of Amédée, armed with a breakfast tray.

He turned as he heard my step, showing a troubled face. "Bon jour, monsieur!" he called, and then set the tray carefully on the floor and came at a lumbering trot towards me. "Monsieur will excuse," he said, fumbling nervously at his apron. "It is unsuitable that I approach him, but I know that he is a friend of the patron."

"Well, what is it?" I asked curiously.
He hesitated. "I am a little slower," he admitted. For a few minutes I have knocked at the door of the patron—and there is no reply."

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Monday: A gruesome sight.

DR. BAXTER TALKS TO CHEST LUNCH

"The measure of every citizen's responsibility is his neighbor's need" was the message brought to Medford by Dr. Bruce Baxter, president of Willamette University, who addressed a Community Chest luncheon at the Hotel Medford Monday.

In his inspiring address, Dr. Baxter stressed the value of the chest plan of organized relief and character building activities over "hit or miss" methods. The distinguished educator lauded the record of the local Community Chest in which 3200 people participated last year. Government relief cannot meet all relief needs, he pointed out, and relief agencies affiliated with the chest here must have financial support.

TOWNSEND CLUBS BALK AT HOLMAN

PORTLAND, Oct. 4.—(AP)—Advisors that four Townsend pension plan clubs have lost their charters through refusal to accept the instruction of Dr. Francis E. Townsend to support the candidacy of Rufus Holman, Republican nominee for U. S. senator, was made today by state headquarters of the pensioners.

Laura Ball, of state Townsend offices, said the clubs were two in Portland, one at Idmont and a fourth at Deer Island. She did not include the St. Helena club, which announced that it had surrendered its charter on a similar issue.

The Townsend official said the clubs she named "voted to support Willis Mahoney, the Democratic nominee for U. S. senator" and thereby did not obey the by-laws because they discussed politics. She said, "Dr. Townsend decided Mr. Holman should be the Townsend candidate."

Home Loan Closures Costing \$100,000 Day

WASHINGTON, Oct. 4.—(AP)—The Home Owners' Loan corporation is spending approximately \$100,000 a day to improve properties it has acquired through foreclosure.

Charles A. Jones, general manager of the H.O.L.C., reported today that August expenditures of \$2,800,000 marked a new high for repair and reconditioning.

Use Mail Tribune Want Ads

PLAN EARLY END OF SPANISH WAR

WASHINGTON, Oct. 4.—(AP)—An end to Spain's bloody civil war, usually well-informed persons said today, may be the next goal of the quartet of European powers which worked out a solution for the Czech-German crisis.

In responsible quarters there was some expectation that the powers—England, Germany, France and Italy—would seek to impose a peace in Spain in somewhat the same manner that they dictated terms to Czechoslovakia.

Swept to Sea

NEWPORT, Oct. 4.—(AP)—Swept from a rock in Depoe bay while fishing with his wife and three others, Chan Eastham, 25, Portland, was drowned Saturday. Two companions close to him said his body was swept into the sea so suddenly they had no chance to aid him.

MORNING BEDFELLOW

By GLUYAS WILLIAMS

IS ALLOWED TO GET INTO BED WITH FATHER ON CONDITION HE DOESN'T TALK BECAUSE FATHER WANTS TO SNOOZE

TUCKS HIMSELF IN AND LIES QUIETLY, FATHER BEGINNING TO DROZE OFF

SITS UP AND PEERS AT FATHER, WHO, WHAT WITH THE BREATHING IN HIS EAR AND ALL, STIRS UNEASILY

THROWS FEET UP IN AIR TO MAKE A TENT OF BED CLOTHES, UNCOVERING FATHER'S FEET

WALKS BACK ALONG BED, MISSES HIS FOOTING AND SITS DOWN SUDDENLY ON FATHER'S STOMACH

WONDERS WHY FATHER DECIDED SO ABRUPTLY THAT IT IS TIME TO GET UP

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TAILSPIN TOMMY—Jerry Reports!

By HAL FORREST

WHILE TOMMY IS POURING THE REVS INTO THE MERCURY ROOM, HE'S HOLDING HIS LEAD OVER THE COMET, AS BOTH PLANES FLASH THROUGH THE AIR ON THE FINAL LAP OF THE BIG AIR RACE. LET'S FOLLOW THE TWO MEN, WHOM JERRY TRAILED FROM THE AIRPORT, TO AN EMPTY HOUSE NEARBY...

GET THAT GUN TRAINED ON THE ANNOUNCER'S STAND WHILE I TUNE IN THE RADIO!

OKAY MONK!

NOT NOW, JERRY! I'M BUSY!

SKEETER, I TRAILED THE MAN WHO GAVE ME THAT NOTE FOR TAILSPIN!

YOU UH, WHERE'D HE GO?

By EDWIN ALGER

By SOL HESS

PROMISE

YA WON'T TELL POP I DIDN'T?

I PROMISE!

H-M-M! SOMEONE BUSTED MY PUTTER ANY THEN DID A REPAIR JOB

DID YOU DO IT?

NO, THIR, BUT YOU ARE GETTING WARM

H-M-M-M!

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PORTLAND PLANS BILLY GOAT BAN

PORTLAND, Oct. 4.—(AP)—Nanny goats are O. K., but billy goats will have to go—beyond the city limits—if an ordinance favored by Mayor Joseph C. Carson is adopted by the city council Thursday. His honor was informed the male goats only were responsible for the odor.

FAIR BOARD JOB SHUNNED BY WEST

SALEM, Oct. 4.—(AP)—Oswald West, once governor of Oregon, has sent his regrets to Gov. Martin about serving on the Oregon world's fair commission. "I read the minutes of the commission and that was enough for me," said West.

SENSATIONAL GLIDING MODEL AIRPLANES!

FREE!
OF EXTRA CHARGE

ONE PLANE WITH EVERY PACKAGE OF ALLSWEET MARGARINE

BOEING Flying Fortress

WINGSPAN 13 IN.

Set up in a jiffy! Turn!

THEY'RE THE SWELLEST PLANES YOU EVER SAW!

WHERE'D YOU GET THEM, YOU LUCKY STIFF?

THEY GIVE YOU ONE PLANE WITHOUT EXTRA CHARGE ALONG WITH EVERY PACKAGE OF ALLSWEET MARGARINE

GOSH! I'LL GET ONE TODAY!

And here's how you can get a whole set of four... Just ask your mother to buy ALLSWEET extra-delicious margarine. With every package of Allsweet, one model plane is GIVEN YOU without extra charge.

Mother! At last... a real "GUEST-QUALITY" Margarine!

"We simply can't tell any difference between money-saving Allsweet and spreads that cost more!" That's what many food experts have said. Yes, Allsweet has superb flavor goodness on bread, toast, biscuits, hot vegetables—and in cooking! It's pure and wholesome, too! Get some today!

SWIFT'S Allsweet MARGARINE