

THE CLOUDS MOON

By MAX SALTMARSH

Chapter 45 The Hostage

The smoke filled my eyes, smarting, stinging, blinding, so that I marveled how Hugo could hold the car on the road, but on we hurtled, right into the red heat of the inferno, and suddenly, as the whole world around seemed filled with a sin of screaming, searing flame, I saw him wrench at the wheel and swing it round; as we swerved violently to the right, I felt that we were climbing again, and at the same moment a giant flaming pine fell crashing across the road we had just left.

I saw that Noah More was leaning forward, gripping Hugo's shoulder and pointing ahead with a bony finger. He was screaming out curses, urging us to go faster still, shrill threats of what he would do to Geiss when we found him. The uncanny voice poured forth in a crazed monotone, and I shuddered involuntarily, for it seemed that it needed only this, the realization that a lunatic sat beside me, to add the final touch of horror.

The unseen track grew steadily rougher, and the Hispano was bumping wildly from side to side; but I had a faint, growing suspicion that the smoke was thinning, I could see the scorched and blackened hillsides on either hand, with only a fiery thread here and there to show that devastation still lingered, holding its hand.

I glanced up, saw the night sky above us flecked with stars and the moon riding clear, and ripped the coverings from my face.

"We're through!" I yelled, and as I spoke, Hugo pulled up abruptly.

We had come to another set of cross-roads. The madman at my side pointed to the right-hand, steeper path. Up and up we climbed, bumping and skidding, through a darkness of trees; and then we came out on the crest of the ridge, and before us lay a narrow, wedge-shaped valley, with the track running down, like a thin black ribbon through rough fields, to a dark huddle at the bottom that I guessed to be a building.

But now we were back in the track of the fire. The valley was still untouched, but there was a scarlet light at the head of it, the hot wind struck once more against my cheek, and I heard again the horrid roaring noise. The glow strengthened as I watched, and Fleuriot realized it at the same instant. Hugo gave a wild huzza. "We're in time!" he yelled, but the other, his anxious eyes fixed on that red horizon, muttered under his breath:

"Only just, my friend, only just!"

Down into the valley we shot, rocketing and ricocheting from unseen boulders, while the lunatic at my side screamed and chattered, and Dunning, beside Hugo, took something from his pocket, that I guessed to be a flashlight, and carefully looked it over. The inn was a big shadowy place, and as we pulled up at the entrance, where rotting gates hung open from the massive pillars, I had a sudden cold fear that once again we were too late and our quarry had gone.

The Knife

We climbed out painfully, and as we stood for a moment hesitating, Fleuriot laid a hand on Dunning's arm. "You have a gun?" he asked sharply. "Wait here, then, and keep an eye on this poor creature. It is your business to see that no one breaks away through this gate." He turned to Hugo. "You, my friend, will similarly guard the door of the main building, while you and I, Monsieur Archee, will encircle it, making contact at the farther side." He added on a warning note: "But no noise, you understand! No calling to Mademoiselle Otille, even if you should see her. When we have made our inspection, we will return here, all three, to arrange our campaign."

He turned away, and Hugo and I padded softly at his heels across the great yard, to the lowering walls of the farmstead itself. Here Hugo halted obediently at the door under its overhanging lintel, and Fleuriot turned noiselessly right and I left, feeling my way along the rough stonework to the angle of the building.

As I rounded it, the red glow from the west struck my face, and I saw that the wall ahead of me was cut by a couple of windows, both heavily shuttered; but though I tried them gingerly, one after the other, they were so firmly fastened from the inside, and no gleam of light showed, I crept on, feeling my way, round the second corner to the rear of the house and halted abruptly, holding my breath, for Fleuriot was there before me, crouched with his eye to the ledge of another window.

He signed sharply to me to be careful, as I tiptoed forward and knelt beside him.

I looked, setting my eye to the crack between the bottom of the shutter and the crumbling stonework and bit back an exclamation.

It was a big room that I stared into, the farmhouse kitchen by the look of it, but it was bare and unfurnished now, indescribably

dirty, and lit only by a single candle. Otille sat there propped against the wall, deathly pale, eyes closed, a crimson handkerchief bound across her mouth. She was still wearing the dark blue pajamas in which I had last seen her, but now they were torn and dusty, and her wrists and ankles were bound with heavy rope. For an instant I thought that she was dead, and a wild rush of fury seized me, so that I would have torn the shutters apart to reach the wild beast who had done it, but Fleuriot seemed to sense my impulse, for he caught my arm with a steely grip. At the same moment I saw her open her eyes suddenly, and look at me before her, and I knew that she was very much alive, for never have I seen such a look of defiant rage on any human face.

Geiss was perched on an up-turned packing-case staring at her in his turn, with his blank opaque eyes, while slowly, between his long fingers, he turned something flat and shining that I realized with an uncontrollable shudder to be a razor-sharp palette knife. It was a dreadful sight, made all the more ghastly by the complete silence that enveloped it.

I saw the girl's eyes shift from his face to the knife and back to his face again, but she never flinched, and I took off my hat to her for the bravest creature I had ever known. And then suddenly Geiss spoke, and his voice seemed suddenly to break the spell that held us.

"My Life For Yours"

"You know," he said, "it was a very clever idea of mine to bring you with me, for I do not think they will find us here for a long time, and when they do, with this sharp blade across your throat, they will think a long time before they shoot, and during that time I shall be able to make terms with them—my life for yours."

Fleuriot touched my shoulder softly. "It is time!" he whispered. "We must move quickly." But the words died on his lips and he sprang to his feet with something like a groan again, starting for that instant, from the night shadows that ringed us, came the sound of a cracked, shrill voice raised in song. "Noah More was a funny chap, for he lived until he died.... The man inside the room heard it too, and like a flash he was on his feet, glaring round him like a wild beast. With one swift spring he was beside the prostrate girl, slashing with his knife at the cords that bound her ankles to the cords that bound her wrists. "They are here!" he muttered. "So soon they are here!" and he dragged her, helpless, to her feet, and thrust her in front of him, facing the door in the opposite wall.

The singing voice had seemed to come from the other side of the house, but as I waited, suddenly there came a pause, and next instant it echoed again, starting nearer, from somewhere just round the corner of the building. "And you'll hear no more of poor Noah More," it sang, "for poor Noah More's no more!" For he swung round swiftly, facing the window, dragging the girl after him, and holding her once more against his breast, the cruel blade across her throat. I leaped to my feet, thrust my fingers between the slit in the heavy shutters, and pulled with all my strength.

"Be quick!" I heard Fleuriot's anxious voice behind me.

As I tugged and strained, my head seemed beating, and I could feel the muscles in my back cracking under the effort; but suddenly the shutters gave, with a rending crack of breaking wood, and as they swung open I saw Geiss staring at me motionless, a bare two yards away from me, peering out over the girl's shoulder with eyes that looked blind and yet were filled with a dreadful expectancy.

"You!" he said, and gave a sudden shrill cackle. "It is always you—but this time, I think, I have the better of it. Her life against mine, my young friend! I go free and you take her back to our poor Hugo—is it a bargain?"

I hesitated, my gaze fixed, shuddering, on the thin, sharp steel that lay across Otille's golden throat. Fleuriot had vanished, and I guessed that he was afraid the sight of him might startle the creature into some hasty action. Everything, I thought hopelessly, hung on me and on the next words I spoke—and then, as I waited, tongue-tied, I knew that I was wrong and that everything hung on something very different, for the door behind Geiss was slowly opening, and as I looked, I saw Hugo's face, hard and dangerous, peer cautiously round it.

Hugo leaped forward, hurling the whole weight of his hundred and ninety-six pounds full on the same time one sinewy hand caught at the wrist that held the knife.

Otille, suddenly freed, staggered sideways, as the two wrestling bodies crashed together to the floor. A sudden wind blew the candle out and left the room in darkness.

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Concluded tomorrow.

JOSEPHINE REGISTRY SHOWS GAIN OF 475

GRANTS PASS, Oct. 21.—(AP)—Josephine county registration increased 475 voters since the 1936

election. County Clerk F. L. Coon's report released today showed. The 1938 total is 8,727. Republicans gained 153 for a total of 4,904. Democrats increased 366 for a total of 3,626. Miscellaneous parties dropped from 241 to 197.

Radium Gift
PORTLAND, Oct. 21.—(AP)—Trustees of the Eleanor Peake estate announced a \$100 cash gift to the University of Oregon medical school today for the purchase of radium to treat charity patients.

S'MATTER POT

By C M PAYNE



TAILSPIN TOMMY—Is that a Threat?



BEN WEBSTER'S CAREER—Meeting Adjourned!



THE NEBBS—Well Now, What's It All About?



ADVERTISEMENT—

UNMENTIONED ITALIANS WELCOMED AS HEROES

NAPLES, Oct. 21.—(AP)—Italy proudly welcomed today 10,000 returning Italian legionnaires who joined the insurgents in the Spanish civil war in secrecy a year and a half ago.

King Vittorio Emanuele, Crown Prince Umberto, Foreign Minister Count Ciano and cheering throngs greeted the veterans.

Crowds waited for hours along the avenues marked out for a parade before the king and other dignitaries. Black-shirted militiamen and workers' battalions turned out to march with the returning legionnaires, whose presence in Spain went unmentioned by high fascists for many weeks after they had joined insurgent forces.

Closing time for Too Late to Clarity Ads is 1:30 p. m.

Loans On Prunes Due In Few Days

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 21.—(AP)—R. P. Baker, general manager of the Prune Credit Corp., said today he expected release of the federal \$8,745,000 loan to the prune industry in a few days.

The loan was arranged through the Commodity Credit Corp. some time ago, to finance storage of the big 1936 crop and prevent the glut of the market.

As soon as a few remaining details are cleared, Baker said, the Prune Credit Corp. will begin receiving prunes from growers and making loans on the delivered fruit.

Guns Stolen
SALEM, Oct. 21.—(AP)—Several guns were stolen in a burglary of a Month-mouth hardware store last night, Sheriff T. B. Hooker of Polk county said today. Cigarettes and candy were stolen from the supply kept at the Oak Knoll golf course in Polk county.

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