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smashing feature novel
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THE LAST SECRET WEAPON

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Polton Cross.

Author of "The Ray from Mars," "When the Last Star Fell," etc.

First published *Marvel Stories*, April 1941.

WHAT GHASTLY SECRET WEAPON MUST AMERICA FINALLY FACE, AND CAN SUPER-SCIENCE TRIUMPH AT LAST OVER BRUTE FORCE?—MIND-JOLTING NOVEL!

"Too barbaric for modern warfare," the diabolic device had been branded, and only Val Turner knew that here was the simplest and yet the most brilliant invention of all time, the secret weapon to end all secret weapons—the fiendish instrument that foreign dictators would finally use to wipe out his beloved America!

The shabby old man with the shuffling walk and untidy gray hair moved slowly through the corridor of marble and gilt, carrying a small valise in his hand. His tired, wrinkled eyes seemed bewildered by the infinity of elevators and moving stairways he encountered. There were neon indicators everywhere, pointing the way. He looked his relief when a trim, uniformed girl took his arm and led him into the reception office.

"Dr. Mane? Of course!" She smiled and went through a black door marked "Private." In less than a moment she returned. "Go right in, doctor. Mr. Kronheim is expecting you."

"Thank you—so much."

The old man shambled in and stood blinking round an office of extraordinary size. He started nervously as the door closed behind him. He felt and looked insignificant amidst the leather chairs, desks, and cabinets.

"Hello there, Dr. Mane—come along in!" The voice that boomed across the expanse was powerful, but its cordiality sounded artificial.

Mane went onwards to the desk and grasped the fleshy paw held out to him. For a moment or two he stood studying the man whom nearly everybody knew and whom a good many feared. Rolf Kronheim was the square-headed, immaculately dressed master of the Kronheim Investment Trust—and the Trust did not limit itself to this vast Wall Street edifice either.

"Sit down, doctor. Have a cigar." Kronheim pushed the silver box across with fingers that sprouted diamonds.

"No—no, if you don't mind. I don't smoke." Mane sat down wearily to continue his survey. He was not deceived by the effusiveness. Rolf Kronheim was no philanthropist. His glacier blue eyes and merciless mouth were proof enough of that. These, added to an intelligent head from which the gray hair had nearly entirely departed all contrived to portray a man of strength and pitiless ambition.

For his part Kronheim decided his visitor was a fool, like the rest of the crackpot scientists who took up his time. But on this occasion there was just a *chance* . . . Physically weak: mentally powerful. That was Dr. Mane.

“You mentioned . . . bombs,” Kronheim said suddenly.

“Yes—a new type of bomb,” Mane nodded. “I’ve tried to interest various people, even the Government, but without success.”

“Unimaginative, I suppose?”

“On the contrary. They say my invention is too barbaric to use and refer me to the Protocol of Geneva . . . But I need money, Mr. Kronheim—desperately! My daughter and I are nearly destitute.”

Kronheim raised his eyebrows. “Too barbaric, eh?” he murmured. “The sentiment of our defense ministers and firms is astounding . . . Fortunately I am not a man of foolish emotions, doctor. If you have something good I can use it. If not . . . Suppose you demonstrate?”

He got to his feet and led the little scientist into the adjoining laboratory. A white clad expert with sharp gray eyes and fluffy brown hair came up expectantly.

“Dr. Mane, meet my scientific advisor Professor Standish. I rely on his judgment implicitly.”

Standish shook hands and smiled unemotionally. He said briefly, “I see some hundreds of so called scientific inventions in a month, not one of which is any use. Fortunately for you there is a war on in Europe so a new type of bomb may be marketable.”

“Possibly,” Mane agreed quietly. “My bombs sink through the ground as a stone sinks through water. They explode where you want and when you want. That, perhaps, is marketable?”

Standish started to proclaim his disbelief in such a bomb until Kronheim cut him short.

“Take no notice of him, doctor. I guess he’s soured with so many scientific disappointments . . . Now, the place is yours. Get busy.”

He sat down, fat legs crossed, and pulled at his cigar. Standish stood watching with an eyebrow raised in doubt.

With the methodical care of a man accustomed to handling dangerous articles Mane extracted a small metal ball from his valise. He looked around for a moment and finally saw an empty metal table supported on a single pillar bolted to the floor.

“Is that table pillar solid?” he inquired.

“Why . . . yes,” Kronheim admitted, gazing in wonder.

“Thank you. Now watch carefully, please. This may spoil your table but it is worth it for the demonstration . . .”

Mane pulled a small pin out of the metal ball and then put the ball on the table top. Immediately the metal sphere glowed slightly and began to sink rapidly out of sight. The hole it made closed up again with a slight suck of air and the tabletop was once more smooth. Three minutes or so passed, then there was a dull report. The pillar of the table exploded with moderate violence and toppled the structure to the floor.

Kronheim jumped to his feet and strode over with Standish to where Mane stood pondering.

“What the devil did you do?” Standish demanded.

“The model bomb sank through the solid metal and exploded at the predetermined point at the base of the pillar,” Mane said modestly. “Had I wished I could have sunk it right through this building.”

“A self-sinking bomb?” Standish hazarded, incredulous.

“Able to sink to any required depth by simply adjusting the mechanism.”

Kronheim took a deep breath and looked sharply at his advisor. Standish nodded quietly, but he looked puzzled. Had he not known the table pillar was solid steel he could have put the demonstration down to a clever conjuring trick.

“Just how do you explain it, doctor?” he asked, musing.

“It’s a simple idea,” Mane shrugged. “I’ll outline it to you, but of course I’m retaining the exact details until we see if we can come to terms . . . First of all, anything must move downwards towards to the earth’s center because of the law of gravitation. This particular idea began when I watched a stone sink in a lake one day. Suppose, I asked, something could be invented to sink through *solids*? Suppose a form of explosive able to blow up at any depth without previous drilling? I figured it would be immensely useful in laying foundations, opening up mines—”

“Quite, quite,” Kronheim said impatiently. “But the *explanation*?”

“Well, I devised a small mechanism.” Mane opened the hemispheres of an unused model bomb and pointed to the intricate internal workings. “You, Professor Standish, may follow the idea. Solids are composed of atoms, and atoms are miniature solar systems. In other words, if you picture them from a sideways angle, they are *flat*. But this flatness points in all directions. It is not organized. Because of this no solid can fall through another: no two solids can be said to occupy the same space at the same time . . .”

“Right so far,” Standish acknowledged briefly.

“Atoms have poles,” Mane resumed, “but they point in all directions. I figured that by magnetism I could make them all point in one direction! There are magnets in this bomb, as you see . . .”

Standish said slowly, “In which case you would make the atoms all flat—parallel—so that they would block only about fifteen percent of the space they occupied in the disordered form?”

“That’s it,” Mane nodded. “That slight resistance causes my bomb to sink slowly and not immediately. The force of gravity which of course operates under all conditions draws the bomb downwards and the bomb’s magnets straighten the atomic formations on the journey. Hence nothing can bar it and it just sinks. In short, it is a case of passing one solid through another and the moment the bomb has passed and the magnetism has gone the atoms disorder again leaving the ordinary solidity. That is why there was no bore left in the table stand where the bomb traveled: the steel atoms had reformed to cover all traces of its passage.”

“Amazing . . .” Kronheim whispered. “Positively amazing!”

He seemed inordinately fascinated by the idea. Suddenly seeming to make up his mind he caught Mane by the arm.

“Come into my office, doctor. There are details to talk over. Financial details,” he purred, now as friendly as a well-filled tiger.

Mane nodded his untidy gray head and scooped up his case.

“I—I thought you might like it, Mr. Kronheim—”

“Like it! Man alive, it’s colossal! Sit down, won’t you . . .? Now . . .” Kronheim flopped at his desk and pressed a button. Then he said, “I said you could name your own figure, doctor. Within reason, of course,” he added, grinning mirthlessly.

“I—I thought, perhaps—one million dollars for exclusive rights of the Mane Bomb.” Mane looked half scared at his own suggestion.

Kronheim did not even hesitate. "A million it is—and you shall have your check before you leave this office . . ." He looked up as Val Turner, his young personal secretary came into the room. He looked more like a champion wrestler than a secretary. He was blond-headed, massive shouldered, hazel-eyed. There had been moments when his secretarial work had been merged into that of bodyguard.

"Turner, make out a check for a million dollars and a contract," Kronheim said. "Usual thing—entire rights. Quick as you can and I'll sign both."

"Yes, sir." Val Turner glanced at the scientist, then went back into his own adjoining room.

"I suppose," Kronheim said, "you've got this bomb patented? The patent rights automatically become mine by our contract."

"I could never afford the patent," Mane answered quietly. "I have very little money, Mr. Kronheim. That—that won't upset things, will it?"

"On the contrary!" Kronheim gave a grim smile.

Mane began to fumble with his valise. "I have here all the details, the scientific prints, samples of the magnetic bars, everything. You can soon work out the details."

"Take them over, Standish . . ." Kronheim motioned to the scientist as he came in from the laboratory.

"You can probably see why other people thought the idea would be barbaric if used for warfare?" Mane murmured. "My bombs could be dropped anywhere and leave no trace until they blew up. I didn't invent them for that reason, though—"

Val Turner came back with papers and check in hand. In a moment Kronheim appended his signature to both and stood watching Mane's thin hand clutching the pen.

"It is not often I meet a *real* scientist, doctor," he said at last, handing over the check. "Drop in again—whenever you please. Turner, see the doctor safely out of the building."

Mane gathered up his empty case and hat. "Thank you, Mr. Kronheim, over again. You don't know what this money will mean to Gloria and me. We've been so poor and—"

"Of course—of course . . ." Kronheim beamed the old man and the secretary from the room, watched the door close. When he turned once more his smile had broadened into a taut line across his face.

"Well, Standish? It's genuine, of course?"

"The real thing. The simplest and yet the most brilliant invention of its kind I have ever seen. It was worth all of that million dollars."

Slowly Kronheim said, "Believe it or not, that old fool has no patent for the invention. . . ."

"No record of his ever having invented it, you mean?"

"That's just what I mean." Kronheim sat down and gazed at the material and plans Mane had left behind. "Like manna from heaven!" he breathed. "Bombs that leave no trace! The supreme means of finishing our campaign and tearing this blasted country wide open. We have the agents, from Maine to California: the European rings and societies are ready to go to work the moment I give the order . . . We can sow the country with these invisible death dealers! Thousands of them, manufactured in my own industrial works and with the infinite money supply of the Cause. We have fought hard to smash the neutrality of America, Standish—and at last an American brings the means of really doing it. I guess it's rather ironic."

"I'm afraid I don't concern myself with philosophies, Kronheim," Standish replied. "I'm a European scientist and am prepared to destroy democracy at any price. As a scientist I will

work to that end: as a man I rather deplore the vicious cunning of this invention. However, we have got to see something for a million dollars. . . .”

Kronheim smiled—but it was his eyes that Standish noted most. Their blueness was icy and did not match the lips. Standish had seen the danger signal oftentimes before.

It was close on seven in the evening and most of the Trust staff had left for home when Standish came out of his laboratory again with a satisfied smile.

“Got a moment, Kronheim?” he asked, advancing to where the big man was still working amidst a pile of memoranda.

“If it’s important, yes. If not, get out.”

“I sorted out this Mane invention.”

“What about it?” Kronheim lay back in his chair with the desk light full on his pitiless eyes.

“Just this. We can make bombs of any size and use any sort of explosive we want. Adjustment of the mechanism times the moment of the explosion and the duration of the magnetism. That means we could send the things down five feet or five miles. No limit. There have been plenty of weapons but none like this one! I want your orders. All we want now is manufacture—so what do I do?”

Kronheim pondered for a moment or two, then he said, “Guess we might as well use all our key factories in north, south, east and west. Consolidated Steels can handle it. The Kronheim Trust *is* Consolidated Steels, so we’re all set. You know more than I do about explosives and such-like, so work out a campaign. Pass the information on through the usual channels so the network can start operating. I’ll give you further instructions later.”

The scientist nodded, then he and Kronheim both looked up as the outer door opened to admit two massive individuals in soft hats and big overcoats. The taller one tossed a slip of paper on the desk.

“One million dollars, chief,” he announced cryptically.

Kronheim frowned, then he grinned. He picked the paper up and tore it slowly in pieces.

“You mean . . . Dr. Mane?” Standish asked quietly.

“Naturally.” Kronheim eyed the strong arm man. “What happened to the good doctor?”

“He was run over, I guess,” the man sighed. “Naturally we rushed to help the old boy—and I frisked your check from him in the process. We were too late. Hit and run driver got him, made off so fast there wasn’t even time to get his number.”

“In plain language, you had him murdered?” Standish snapped.

“A hit and run driver,” Kronheim corrected. “Didn’t you hear what Joe said? If they find the driver I’ll put the clamps down and stop things being traced back here. If they don’t . . . well, I guess Dr. Mane was a fool to let his invention go without a patent. Nobody can ever prove who owned it.”

“’Cept his daughter,” Joe commented sourly.

“Of course, the daughter! What about her?”

“I dunno. I haven’t seen her and—”

“Then find her, you dope!” Kronheim roared. “I want the whole Mane family tree chopped down. Not a trace must be left! Too dangerous. Do what you like, but get her. I’ll see you’re protected.”

The men went out and Standish said slowly, “I’m not altogether sure I like this indiscriminate elimination, Kronheim. If we get across the Federal Authorities it won’t be just

us that will be damaged. The whole Cause will be jeopardized—”

“Oh, shut up!” Kronheim snorted. “Mane was an American—and I don’t give a damn what happens to Americans. Same goes for his daughter—”

He broke off in surprise as a ray of light flooded from the wall opposite. Val Turner came quietly out of his office, hat and coat on. He switched off the light in his sanctum and closed the door.

“What the devil do you want?” Kronheim blazed.

“Nothing, sir,” Turner replied steadily. “Except to tell you that I have finished my reports. They’re on my desk. Will that be all for tonight?”

Kronheim sat gazing steadily in the young man’s unflinching eyes for a moment, then he slowly nodded.

“Yes . . . Yes, that’s all for tonight.”

“Good night, sir—Professor Standish.”

Turner went out quietly then Kronheim’s pale eyes flashed up to the open ventilator over Turner’s office door. Standish followed his master’s gaze.

“Good God, Kronheim, do you think he heard about—?”

“Possibly. I thought he’d gone home. If his door had had glass in it we’d have seen the light shining.” Kronheim shrugged. “Let him try proving something and I’ll smack him down so hard he’ll stay put for the rest of his life. Now get out of here, Standish. I’ve work to finish.”

CHAPTER II

THE POWER OF KRONHEIM

Val Turner walked through the quiet expanses of the Trust building with grim thoughts in his brain. He had heard every word of Kronheim's through his office ventilator—albeit unintentionally.

“Guess it confirms all Rita said,” he muttered, letting himself down the heights in the personal elevator. Rita was his wife. “Said he was a no-good anti-democrat. Wouldn't believe her. He's a murderer, hundred percent, and I just didn't believe it. Hell, was I dumb!”

He left the elevator and nodded good night to the watchman, passed out into the brightly lit street. It was only a short way to his apartment through the next side street. Lost in his thoughts he marched along, until when he was half way along the side street something prodded him in the back.

“Keep going—and don't turn around!”

He was surprised to hear a woman's voice—low and merciless.

“Just what's the big idea?” he asked briefly, walking mechanically.

“Shut up and let me do the talking. I'm Gloria Mane, daughter of Dr. Mane, inventor of the Mane bomb. That mean anything to you?”

Val remained silent, frowning. The girl's cutting voice went on.

“Just three hours ago I saw my dad run down—brutally slain! I was only across the road from where it happened. We'd promised to meet at the Grecian Cafe. It looked like a hit and run driver—but it wasn't. It was planned—planned by that vicious barbarian Rolf Kronheim. I warned dad what would happen if he made a deal with Kronheim, and I was right. Dead right!”

“But I didn't have anything to do with it,” Val said. “Why pick on me?”

“You're connected with Kronheim, otherwise you would not be leaving the Trust Building at this hour in the evening. You're all I need. Two other guys left just before you but I couldn't tackle them. So I waited, hoping to get Kronheim himself. You came out alone, easy to handle —”

“Yeah? What makes you think so?”

Val swung round abruptly. He fully expected the savage blaze of a revolver in his ribs, but instead his surprise action knocked a small hand torch into the gutter. The girl, shabbily dressed, perhaps thirty years old, faced him. He could see her face was white and trembling with both anger and grief.

“This—this was the gun?” Val asked, picking the torch up.

“Yes,” she admitted in a low voice. She stared at him through gray eyes moist with tears. “—I don't know what I'm doing, I guess. Honest I don't! I use the torch for seeing my way up that rotten hole of a staircase back home. I—” She broke off and shrugged, calming. “Well, hand me over for attempted assault. You win.”

“You've got me all wrong, Miss Mane,” Val answered seriously, giving her back her torch. “It happens that I know your father was murdered, but I had nothing to do with it. It was Kronheim's own doing . . . You say you saw your father run down? Naturally you let the police on the spot know your identity?”

“No. I didn’t tell anybody. I think I went crazy.” Gloria Mane’s voice came in jerks. “I just thought out this idiotic plan to catch somebody belonging to Kronheim’s organization and make him confess the truth to the police . . . If only you knew what this all means!” she cried hoarsely. “I warned dad, over and over. I know he planned to sell his sinking bomb—nothing more than that.”

“He sold it all right—for a million dollars,” Val said grimly. “I made out the contract myself—but Kronheim took the million back by force during the accident to your father. Your dad had no patent right on his invention, therefore there’s no evidence of his creation of the idea.”

“But he *was* the inventor of it—”

“I know it, and so do you, Miss Mane. You and I are the only two people who can prove that Kronheim both stole and murdered—”

“Yeah? Don’t be too sure, wise guy!”

Val and the girl turned together. The figures of two men in soft hats and big overcoats were dimly visible in the shadows of a nearby doorway. Without a vestige of warning a gun blazed suddenly. Gloria Mane’s lips parted in a half cry, then with both hands at her breast she toppled forward and crashed motionless on the sidewalk.

“Figure that out, Mr. Val Turner,” came a sneering voice, and the still smoking gun was flipped towards him from the gloom to clatter at his feet.

Before Val had the chance to collect his wits doors and windows seemed to sprout open all around him from the tenements. Men and women appeared, drawn by the shot. They stared at him as he picked up the revolver and gazed at the sprawling woman at his feet. It seemed only a matter of seconds before a squad car screamed to a halt at the curb.

Confused, bewildered, Val heard pronouncements from the general jabber of voices.

“This woman is dead. Shot through the heart.”

“Come on, you!” Val found himself seized. Grim-jawed officers seemed to be all around him.

Rolf Kronheim was just leaving his office for the night when the private wire buzzed.

“Well?” he asked briefly, and it was strong arm Joe’s voice that greeted him.

“We got on the track of the Mane daughter as you told us, chief. Spotted her outside the Trust building. At least we figured it was her from the way she was behavin’. We followed her—and in case you don’t know it Turner knows all about the killing of Mane. He told the dame that much.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you—”

“We did, chief. We shot the dame through the heart and left Turner to take the rap. It’s up to you now. You can stick a murder rap on him if you want. If you want me I’m at Toni’s Cafe.”

Kronheim smiled. “Remind me to give you a bonus, Joe. Good night.”

The machinations of Kronheim thereafter were far-reaching. Val, for reasons best known to himself, refused to say anything in his own defense. His lawyer talked himself hoarse, using what evidence he could find. Most of it had been supplied by Val’s wife—and the extraordinary thing was that Rita Turner was partly successful in her fight against the

colossus. At least she found enough to make portions of the charge against Val seem doubtful. He escaped the chair and was commuted to life sentence.

It seemed to him that the world had crashed in ruins. He remembered his wife's brave, tear-streaked face in the courtroom, then he found it replaced by the inflexible visages of warders. Alcatraz, gray and inexorable, filled the future.

To Kronheim the verdict caused some irritation, nor was he backward at saying so.

"Turner is out of the way behind prison walls, yes, where he can't prove anything," he said bitterly. "But he isn't dead! And as long as he lives there is always the slender chance that he may escape. And if he does . . ."

"He'll give you what you deserve, eh?" Standish asked dryly.

"He'll be vindictive," Kronheim corrected, glaring. "His wife is no sap, either. She got enough evidence to make it second degree murder instead of first, anyway. She's free—and I don't quite like it."

Standish said, "If you're figuring on wiping her out too, count me out. That killing of Gloria Mane was too close to the hairline for my liking. Next time you may not be so lucky. I value my neck, Kronheim, even if you don't."

Kronheim's next words seemed to indicate he had dropped the subject.

"About those bombs? How much longer will you be?"

"I'm all set. I followed out your orders and got thousands of them manufactured. They're being distributed now through the usual undercover channels to our agents."

"And the airplane factories? We're ready there?"

"Completely. When you give the word the underground factories are ready to disgorge. Our agents, by the use of the Mane bombs, can sabotage every defense unit in the country. We can have America under the heel now any time we want. Our air armada when released will crush all opposition by terror bombing alone."

"Hmm . . ." Kronheim pondered. "How far down do you plan to sink the Mane bombs under industrial and defense centers?"

"About quarter of a mile. That should be sufficient."

"I don't think so. I don't just want an ordinary explosion to wreck vital centers—I want the entire centers to drop down a mine from which they can never be retrieved—"

"It can't be done," Standish said quietly. "We have to remember that the earth has inner forces. If we drop the bombs too low they might split a volcanic seam. Anything could happen then!"

"As long as we have the Cause ruling the country at the finish of the campaign I don't care if we release hell itself!" Kronheim retorted. "Sink those bombs down five miles. When they blow I want mines into which men and units and buildings will drop. Understand?"

"It's too big a risk, man!" Standish cried.

"I'm not going to argue, Standish," Kronheim said slowly. "I have instructed our European headquarters to sink the bombs down five miles and we'll do the same here!"

Standish's face was anxious. He had a sudden mental picture of agents of the Cause scattered in their sneaking thousands about the globe dropping the silent, self-sinking bombs in all manner of places. He was a scientist: Kronheim was not. Therein lay the tragedy.

"Finished?" Kronheim asked coldly.

Standish said, "I was just thinking that if one of those bombs rips a volcanic seam it might conceivably blow the lid right off a whole continent! We're fighting for the domination of a

world, not the total destruction of everything it contains! You've *got* to stop at a quarter-mile depth for safety's sake. Explosions are O.K., but wholesale subsidences are another thing altogether."

The big man smiled slowly. But Standish was looking at the eyes.

"Now wait a minute, Kronheim! I know what I'm talking about—"

"Of course," Kronheim purred. "Of course. I'll do just as you say. Now, get out!" he roared. "The Cause has no use for men who turn yellow! *Get out!*"

Standish left, perspiration dewing his face. The eyes of Kronheim seemed to be in the corridor before him. Too many times had the chief smiled only with his lips.

And the evening papers carried a column headed:

KRONHEIM TRUST SCIENTIST DROWNED

Nobody attempted to offer an explanation, beyond suicide. For that matter nobody could—except Rita Turner.

Stanley Wade of the Federal Department was surprised when Rita Turner was shown into his office. In a moment he knew from her sober dark eyes and taut mouth that something was wrong.

"You heard of the death of Professor Standish, the scientist at the Kronheim Trust?" she asked quietly, sitting down.

Wade nodded slowly. "Yes, Mrs. Turner, I heard. You mean his suicide?"

"That wasn't suicide, Inspector—it was deliberate, cold-blooded murder. Standish was slain, just the same as were Dr. Mane and his daughter Gloria. Yes, I know my husband was accused of murdering Gloria Mane, but that was a frame-up."

"After all, the rights and wrongs of that case were decided by the grand jury," Wade replied. "There's nothing I can do about it."

"I'm not asking you to. Val is safer in jail than out of it. What I am suggesting is that the authorities open their eyes a bit! Three deaths in succession and all of them connected with the Kronheim Trust. The facts at my husband's trial showed some totally false love affair to be the cause of Val's shooting Gloria Mane. Corruption and wangling in lawyer's circles, backed by Kronheim—and Val's own silence—stopped the real truth getting out. Gloria Mane was murdered by Kronheim's strong arm men, just as her father was murdered by a hit and run driver in Kronheim's employ. Kronheim destroyed Dr. Mane for one good reason. He feared his scientific knowledge—and the other reason was that Kronheim didn't want a million dollars to go out of his bank. There was no proof that Mane had ever invented a scientific device because he never patented it. Everybody knowing anything about it was rubbed out, and so would Val have been too but for my efforts at weakening Kronheim's lawyer's evidence."

Wade leaned forward on his desk. "Just who gave you all this information about Kronheim, may I ask?"

"Val himself," the girl replied briefly. "I saw him at the jail on visitors' day. He told me to tell you."

"Why didn't he tell all this at the trial?"

"Can't you *see*?" Rita cried. "He *dared* not! To have gained his liberty by indicting Kronheim would have made him the target for killers all over the city—killers under Kronheim's control. Anyway Kronheim would have wriggled free and Val's life would have

been jeopardized from that moment onwards. He preferred to give just enough evidence to avoid first degree murder and afterwards work from comparative safety to prove his innocence—through me . . .

“You see, Val was Kronheim’s personal secretary. He made out the contract and check for a million dollars to Mane. The contract was for a new type of bomb—a bomb that sinks by itself through the ground. Now, in a neutral country, isn’t that a queer occurrence?”

“Sinks through the ground?” Wade cried. “I don’t understand.”

Rita gave a tired smile. “Inspector, you like the rest of America think Kronheim and his Trust is limited to a financial edifice in Wall Street. That isn’t so, as Val well knows. A whole network of steelworks and industries are controlled by Kronheim, and they in turn are cover ups for other more sinister activities . . . There is a European war on, even though we in America feel geographically isolated from it. That may have dulled our alertness—but the things Kronheim’s doing threaten to menace our peace at any moment! Investigate the man and his activities! Do it in the interests of general safety, not to clear Val particularly. That will logically follow and he’s safe enough at present.”

Wade sat thinking, then finally he said. “Well, it all sounds very fantastic, Mrs. Turner, and I can’t help thinking that if there were anything mysterious going on our Intelligence Department would know all about it. And the War Department, too . . .”

“Even if Kronheim agents happened to be in both departments?”

“Good Lord, you’re not suggesting—”

“Definitely!” the girl retorted. “Rolf Kronheim is an organizing genius, an utterly ruthless agent for European power. He is even a European by birth: I checked up on that for myself. Once in my husband’s hearing he said he did not care how many Americans he killed . . . That is the kind of man he is.”

“I’ll get a line on him, anyway,” Wade said grimly.

“In the meantime,” Rita finished, “I want protective custody. Now I’ve told you all this I’m not risking going into the outer world again. I know what I’m up against—and so will you, shortly.”

Angorstine, Kronheim Agent No. 1, cesspool for orders and instructions of intense secrecy between Europe and the big man himself, was one of the first to learn of Federal activity. Instantly he headed for Wall Street, deserting the complex post he filled somewhere in the European Embassy.

“What’s the idea of risking coming here?” Kronheim snapped.

The brute-headed, thick-lipped Angorstine gave a calm answer.

“I thought it better to take the risk and come personally than use the telephone. The Federal Authorities are out to clean up our entire organization.”

“Huh? *What?*” Kronheim stared amazedly. “But they don’t know a thing, man—”

“Yes, they do. I’ve been told that Turner told his wife plenty on her visit to the prison. She told Wade—and what’s more she convinced him. She has a way of convincing people has that woman. The machinery is moving, Kronheim—and moving fast!”

Kronheim’s fist slammed on the desk. “I’ll get that damned nosy woman if it’s the last thing I do! I knew it wasn’t safe as long as Turner didn’t fry! I’ll see that she’s—”

“You can’t. She asked for—and—got—protective custody.”

Kronheim's lips twitched at the sudden setback. Angorstine went on talking with sudden urgency.

"Either we act now or never! You're in charge of the American campaign and Standish left everything ready. Our agents are everywhere, ready to set those bombs going down five miles just as you ordered. All key points are covered. In other parts of the world everything is ready too. The Cause can blast the neutrals wide open. The war can end in a few months, Kronheim, and the Cause can be victorious!"

"It's forcing my hand," Kronheim muttered, gazing at the man's square, brutal face.

"If the authorities force it you're done. Act! Give me the word and in three days we will be well away. Give me an appointed time for the planes to move, for the bombs to explode, for the defense units to be immobilized. Too late America will realize that in neutrality she has found destruction. The Mane bomb will bring democracy and all the idiocy it stands for smashing into the dust!"

Kronheim's jaws squared suddenly. "Very well, Angorstine—get busy! Time the bombs for explosion six hours after sinking below ground surface. Time the entire movement of forces for midnight, three days hence. I'll move to the underground headquarters. In the meantime I will contact Europe and make sure they give our move their blessing at headquarters. That's all."

"That day for which we have fought and struggled and bled is very near," Angorstine mused, smiling twistedly. "So very near."

CHAPTER III

DOMINATION

As Stanley Wade began to get the reports of his men operating the Federal dragnet cast across the United States he began to discover things that completely backed up Rita Turner's vehement assertions. It seemed quite unbelievable, and yet—

"Agents of European power everywhere," Wade breathed, looking through the papers on his desk. "The whole country's infested with them! Spies! Spies who believe the force they worship can rule the world." He looked up at the worried faces of the men of the Intelligence Department, the police, the Customs, and other departments of public security.

"We have only ourselves to blame, gentlemen," Wade went on in a low voice. "It is as Mrs. Turner said: we have taken too much for granted. We allowed Kronheim to continue his work, all unsuspecting. We never realized that the Consolidated Steel Corporation, the Blue Oil Combine, the International Federation, and God knows how many other big enterprises, were connected with and controlled by Kronheim himself. He spreads his devilish tentacles all over the country."

"Just what do we do?" one of the representatives asked anxiously.

"Do? We've got to round up all these agents and the rings they control. In the meantime I'm referring the matter to the President himself. This is too big for one man to handle. I've got to have a parole for Turner, too. He knows plenty and can probably help us. The rest is up to you to work on as you see fit. Go to it."

Thereafter wires began to buzz. Federal experts took fast planes in various directions: some went to Washington. The whole law machine of the United States went to work in grim earnest. In spite of an elastic censorship clamping the press some of the news seeped through to a wondering public.

The *Clarion* wanted to know—CAN WAR STRIKE HERE? But it could not definitely answer its own question because of lack of facts, and since the radio networks were forced to use hush-hush methods also there was no explanation from that end either.

Rolf Kronheim, fully alive to the situation, worked ceaselessly. Hour by hour there came through the multiple strands of his web a series of reports collected by Angorstine. Vital centers were already in hand. Bombs, accurately timed, were ready for midnight and in the desired positions. Along every coast, in every public utility, in armament works, depots, Government offices themselves: throughout the length and breadth of the continent the ruthless undercover power of a warring regime was at work to smash this, the greatest of all democratic States.

On that third day the hours, fateful indeed for still puzzled Americans, crept onwards and the shadow deepened over peace. Inevitably news leaked out. There were hints of lightning war, invasion by long distance bombers, submarine attack—probably everything was thought of except destruction from within.

Certainly nobody thought of self-sinking bombs—except Val Turner. His parole granted by extraordinary Board meeting, he thought of the Mane bombs as he sat in the Government plane whirling him from Alcatraz island across the continent to New York.

"Say, it's dark down there," he observed, and his guard nodded grimly.

"Yeah. Black out in force. Just a precaution. Something blowing up, I guess."

“I suppose,” Val said, “you don’t know what the Federal Authorities paroled me for?”

“Even if I did know it’s not my job to say anything. I was ordered to collect and deliver. The rest is up to Inspector Wade. You’ll find out everything when we hit New York.”

Val became silent. He pretty well guessed why he was wanted. He knew that nothing short of national necessity and his knowledge of Kronheim could have gotten him parole so soon. He sat turning the matter over in his mind, gazing on the darkness outside.

Even New York itself was partially blacked out. The public in general, baffled by the sudden serious turn in events and lack of decisive news, seemed to be thronging the gloomy streets. The police car had to siren its way through seething crowds to Federal headquarters.

Inside the building Wade’s office was brilliantly lighted. He looked tired and worried, had his coat off to his task. In the office were officials and, in the far corner, Rita Turner herself. She sprang to her feet as Val entered.

Wade allowed them their brief, earnest greeting, then he said curtly.

“Turner, it looks as though your story to your wife here told us plenty we didn’t know about. I sent for you to give us more details. Granting there is time to act on them, that is.”

“Sure. How much do you want to know? Kronheim is an enemy agent, a master organizer —”

“Yes, yes, I know all about that. Do you know the names of any of his agents?”

Val shook his head. “Afraid not. Every man and woman working for him secretly had a number. I used to think they were contract numbers until I got to thinking things over in prison. Then it dawned on me that they must be agents—”

“How many?”

“The numbers went up to ninety-two thousand.”

Wade threw up his hands and gazed around. “There we are, gentlemen! From these reports here I calculated around ninety thousand men and women in the pay of foreign power. Some of them—most of them—are supposed to be good living American citizens. At any rate they seek shelter under our flag. They are employees of Kronheim—his trusted workers. Saboteurs, spies—rats!” he shouted savagely. “For months—for two years in fact, since the war began in Europe, Kronheim has been at work arranging for the total destruction of America. Through a slip up Turner here got a clue. In a few days we have tried to catch up on the greatest organized effort to destroy a country ever yet made. I don’t see how we’re to do it. We can’t rope in ninety thousand suspects in a few hours or days.”

“Get Kronheim himself—he’s the chief,” Turner urged.

“Knowing Kronheim is guilty is one thing: proving it is another,” Wade retorted. “He is fenced in by a wall of legal network which would require weeks of intensified effort to break down. We’re working on it, never fear. We’ve collected some of the agents and pinned them down to confessions. We’ve got *something*, but not by any means enough. That’s where you come in, Turner. You’ve got to recall every detail of your employment with Kronheim. You must—”

Wade swung around as the phone buzzed. His face assumed various expressions as he listened. He kept nodding dazedly, then with a faint grunt of acknowledgment he put the instrument back.

“Intelligence Department,” he announced. “A report has just been received that two hundred heavy bombing planes have been seen massed on an airfield near Dayton in Ohio.”

“But—but we’ve no plane concentrations there!” cried the Air Ministry expert.

“That’s the point,” Wade said slowly. “This news has been despatched to all defense points and the next orders will come from the Ministry of War. *Those planes are not ours!* That speaks for itself. They have been brought from some secret factory, probably underground, near Dayton. It is not coincidence that the Ropa Engineering Works is situated in Dayton, particularly since the Ropa works is owned by the Kronheim Trust. There are twenty Kronheim interests scattered in all parts of America. If one factory secretly produces two hundred planes the rest is simple arithmetic. Twenty factories—two hundred bombers each—four thousand planes! And not one of them ours!”

“You mean,” Turner said slowly, “that we’re too late?”

“Yes.” Wade thumped his desk helplessly. “This thing has been going on too long. We got wind of it too late. Tonight America finds the war right on her own doorstep.”

“And of course our defense units will be asleep?” demanded the Air Ministry expert. “Our army will be paralyzed? We’ll let this attack be a walkover?”

Wade walked wearily to the window and gazed outside on the dark bulk of the metropolis. “I don’t know,” he replied slowly. “I have no real idea yet how far the Kronheim virus has penetrated into our national system.”

He shrugged, glanced at his watch. It was exactly midnight.

“We’d better—” he started to say, then suddenly the office light went out. Coupled with the blackness outside the dark was pitchy.

“What the devil—?” exploded one of the men. “What is it? Blackout regulation from the powerhouse? May be a fused lamp.”

He had hardly finished speaking before a tremendous concussion, deep-seated and heavy, rolled through the night. Far away towards the harbors flames split the ebony darkness as masonry and steel went skywards in a ragged column. Not a moment later there was a second explosion of like force—and then two more. In the space of as many minutes no less than six fires were blazing in different directions, crimsoning the metropolis in lurid brilliance.

“Sabotage!” shouted the air official hoarsely, staring out. “A given signal for sabotage! Explosives!”

“Mane bombs,” snapped Turner, holding his wife tightly. “Mane bombs at a tremendous depth filled with super-powerful explosive.”

“Any way of dealing with ’em?” Wade demanded.

“Not that I know of. They’re a scientific product and the only two men who might have controlled them—Standish and Mane himself—are dead.”

There was a sudden stir in the office. The officials left hurriedly for their various departments. Outside, pandemonium was rising. People were running and shouting, sirens were wailing. Out in the harbor ships hooted stridently.

“Listen!” Rita Turner exclaimed suddenly. “Listen!”

Above the rattle and din from below there came a dull beating, droning sound, growing increasingly louder—then in the center of the city, right in the middle of the ring of fires, a bomb exploded with appalling violence.

“It’s an air raid!” Rita screamed. “Bombing planes!”

Wade and Val stared out of the window just in time to see a black fleet moving slowly across the starlit heaven. . . . Another whine—and another tremendous explosion. A building in the distance belched outward and vanished in the smother.

“Why don’t the defense units do something?” Rita shouted. “Why don’t they? There are no searchlights—no antiaircraft! Where is everybody? Are we to stand here and be shot at?”

“Down!” Val snapped suddenly, and he pulled his wife and Wade to the floor violently. A second later a bomb exploded on the building opposite, rocked the Federal building and sent a cascade of glass hurtling across the office floor. Crackling flames roared to heaven from across the street and added their glare to the tumult.

The bombing planes were clearly visible now, painted dark gray, with the European Ensign on wings and body. They were circling, intent on bombing New York and nothing else. And still there was no sign of antiaircraft fire or interceptor fighting planes.

“Why?” Rita groaned, shuddering.

“Obvious, isn’t it?” Val asked her. “Kronheim has obviously used Mane bombs to blow up the industrial and defense points of the country. The destruction of the power houses put out the lights. The air bases, the soldiers’ barracks, the mobile headquarters—all the lot mined and destroyed. Possibly he may have men of his own to take over the antiaircraft units and they won’t fire on their own planes. The whole scheme is a masterpiece of devilry.”

“That’s how I figure it,” Wade breathed. “I knew tonight when I got that last phone call that we were beaten. Those planes spelt the end. Beaten by a continent three thousand miles across the ocean. Maybe we deserve it.”

“A few of the American defense units will be bound to get busy,” Val mused. “Not every defense sector and soldier in the United States can be incapacitated. That isn’t feasible. And the ships round the coasts—they’ll do plenty.”

“Yeah? What? They can only shell towns, and that way they’ll kill more Americans than enemy.”

“But terror bombing of civilians doesn’t decide a war! It demands land forces to seize a country.”

“I rather think Kronheim will have thought of that,” Wade grunted. “First, terror bombing to smash morale—then his agents to hold key-centers which control light, water, electricity, phone communication, radio, air service, food. Huh! Get rid of the idea that you have to conquer a country with infantry, Turner. It can be done by clever planning when you’ve a brain like Kronheim’s.”

Wade got slowly to his feet and glanced up at the planes as they droned to the east of the fire-racked city.

“They’ve headed away for the moment,” he said. “Now’s our chance to get moving. Safest place is down the subway at the corner. Come on.”

He wrenched open the door and the two fled after him through the deserted smoke-filled building. In two minutes they had reached the street, found it packed with struggling, shouting people, some of them with blood streaming down their faces, others searching frantically amidst fallen debris.

“Down here!” Wade snapped—and the three of them joined the mad, jostling throng crushing down the subway entrance.

The spirit of Dr. Mane must have viewed the results of his self-sinking bomb with bitter condemnation. Timed to perfection and released at the vast depth specified by Kronheim, they performed their appalling work with crushing thoroughness.

In dozens of key points the industrial and defensive centers of the United States crashed inwards into raging mines of smoke and flame. In other parts whole army training grounds and national militia headquarters vanished into the earth. There were cases where spouting jets of lava hurled from below killed and maimed far more people than the actual bomb disaster. As Kronheim had planned, none of his agents was caught. Once they had started their particular lot of bombs sinking they vanished to take their place somewhere else in the merciless machine of domination now fully under way. In the main the agents scattered to antiaircraft units to force the Americans in charge to hold their fire. Kronheim was counting on air power and destruction of defenses for his first move, and the power of agents for the second and decisive blow.

Through Canadian radio the world heard of the sudden onslaught on the United States in stunned amazement or Satanic delight, depending on who was the listener. In England, still holding its own with a rigid defense system and inexorable control of aliens, there was literal peace and quiet compared to what was happening in America.

But London voiced its horror through Parliament as the American destruction went on unabated. An R.A.F. air fleet would leave at once to lend assistance.

Kronheim had waited for the move. Through his network the word was passed on. England had depleted itself to aid America: now was the time to strike them a crushing blow. Agents began to move secretly through the ports despite the inexorable attention of the Customs. . . .

The United States, assisted after the first few hours by all the strength of Canada, who poured her air force over the borders, fought madly to regain balance from the sledgehammer blow—but, relying on the theory that lightning attack is the key to victory, Kronheim pressed on. His planes continued their onslaught. Destruction rained from the sky on every big city. Still exploding Mane bombs took charges of all points of opposition. Canada, her attention diverted, failed to detect agents at work with further bombs within her own borders.

The United States' antiaircraft units came into action at last—but agents controlled them. Not European but Canadian planes were shot down. Here and there a Kronheim bomber was destroyed by surviving antiaircraft crews: here and there death or victory fighters, both American and Canadian, plunged to the attack. Futilely.

By day, by night, through hours that seemed hewn out of Hell itself, the battle raged, Kronheim directing operations by radio from his specially devised underground shelter far under the now demolished Trust edifice.

Little by little the remaining fighters for democracy realized they were struggling against an all-powerful enemy. Depleted in airplane supplies by reason of the European conflict draining their resources they had not the reserves necessary to keep up with Kronheim and his hidden factories. As fast as a Kronheim plane was destroyed two appeared to take its place.

Of the French and British planes sent over the Atlantic only half the number arrived. The rest were intercepted by European long distance fighters and enemy warships placed in the Atlantic for such an offensive.

Two weeks passed. The intensity of the battle began to cool off. Dead and wounded thousands lay in the smoky skeleton ruins of the American cities. Those who were still alive crept about helplessly in blank fear of what was coming next. There seemed to be men marching everywhere now: death from the sky seemed to have ceased. Just men, armed, with grimly determined faces.

Many of them were Americans obeying new orders. They sent the wounded to makeshift hospitals and had the dead loaded into trucks. But everything they did seemed to be at the point of the gun, and the dazed civilians obeyed because there was nothing else for it. What did seem significant was that all the men wore armlets—the armlet of European power.

CHAPTER IV

CAMP 4

Val Turner and Rita, hungry and exhausted, were wandering with the rest of the survivors through the bomb-shattered metropolis when armed officials at last caught up with them. What had happened to Stanley Wade was problematical. Probably he was dead. The destruction of the subway had sent Val and Rita pelting for safety through a crumbling inferno of bricks and steel. They had a confused memory of living through a nightmare of explosions, of missing death or serious injury by inches, then finally of a gradual abatement in the onslaught. By the time they were captured they were too weary, physically and mentally, to speak.

With hundreds of others they were thrust into a ruthlessly ransacked store doing service as a prison. Perhaps it was days, perhaps weeks, during which they were fed on dry bread and water. Then one by one their dispirited colleagues were drafted off by the armed men to parts unknown. Finally it came to their turn.

"Names?" the official inquired briefly.

Val gave them coldly and the man consulted his list. His eyes seemed to brighten a little.

"Our Commander must see you immediately."

"Kronheim, eh?" Val's smile was cynical in his blond beard.

"Naturally. Get moving!"

"And you call yourself an American!" Val whispered, clenching his fists. "By God, if ever there was a traitor—"

"Not every man in America is a democrat," the official retorted. "Policies change, and with them—people. Now move!"

"Come on," Rita urged. "You can't argue with a gun, Val. . . ."

He hesitated and then shrugged his heavy shoulders. The official piloted them through files of wearily standing men and women to a part of the city that had been Wall Street. Entering by an inlet of steel and concrete they passed through a narrow passage and so finally to a wide underground room with its own little power house for light and radio.

Kronheim sat at his desk. It was littered with maps and papers. At the rear stood the scrub-headed Angorstine, his lips pouting cushions. The electric clock on the wall made an ungodly halo for his skull.

"The Turners," announced the guard briefly, then with a salute he turned and went out.

Kronheim looked up with his icy blue eyes. His lips smiled.

"So you did not die after all," he murmured. "Well, how truly remarkable! And, in a way, most providential."

"You can skip the build-up, Kronheim," Val snapped.

Kronheim still smiled. "I gave special orders that if you were found alive you were to be brought to me. Your—er—honesty in giving your own names has saved you from a firing squad, probably. Practically all enemies of the new regime are being lined up and shot."

"What's different about us?" Val blazed. "Neither of us have anything in common with you and your bunch of cut-throats. I speak for my wife, of course, as well as myself."

The girl nodded her head slowly.

“Shooting,” Kronheim said, “is the quick way out. It is due to you, Turner, because you escaped prison regime by reason of the recent change in American affairs. I am a just man, however. I have decided you shall return to prison, but certain new regulations will be enforced upon you. Your wife, because of her complicity with you in getting your rightful sentence of death commuted to life sentence, will also go to prison. . . . I don’t want to kill you because I think it a fitting punishment that you should live long enough to see the changes that are going to come to America. . . .”

“All over this country labor camps are being set up. Those capable of work will be drafted to them. The new European America will be built . . . and you two will help to build it! Every time you stumble the lash will remind you that there can be only one master and one mind. You will realize that you are one of the masses—you will even remember perhaps that you both tried once to cross me! You were both prepared to die for democracy. Perhaps that chance will still be yours.”

Both Val and Rita kept silent. They were appalled by the vision that had risen before them—the scene of a free America trampled underfoot by merciless oppression.

“So you have nothing to say?” Kronheim asked in surprise. He got to his feet and pointed to a vast world-map on the wall. “See how we are progressing?” he inquired, his eyes glinting. “Through war we have gained half of Europe. France and Spain are being broken down by the Mane bombs. Other bombs are at work in Southern Europe and in Russia. America we have already mastered: Canada will be next. Great Britain is cracking. Once it was said that world conquest was impossible. . . . Maybe it was right at the time: it was the Mane bomb that made such a cause possible. One scientist gave us the world—the world of power, the control of Mankind to certain tasks, which is as it should be. Free thinking is a dangerous weapon for the masses. They do not know how to use it.”

If Kronheim expected a furious outburst from Val he was disappointed. Instead Val said, “And you think we’re going to lie down under it? You’re idiot enough to believe you can rule everything and meet with no opposition? O. K.—try it! Dr. Mane gave you bombs . . . but perhaps that wasn’t all he gave you.”

“Meaning?” Kronheim snapped, a memory of Standish flashing across his brain.

Val only smiled through his beard. Kronheim snapped his fingers.

“Take them out. Labor duty. Camp 4.”

He watched them go, in the grip of soldiers, then Angorstine said.

“You’re not letting that fool Turner upset you, surely? If we have been allowed to get this far by whatever is supposed to hold the world in its fist it is sufficient assurance that we are right. Might *is* right! We have proved it. Look here . . .?”

With a satisfied smile he handed over a typewritten sheet.

“The Mane bombs are working everywhere,” he breathed. “Naples is undermined, so are most parts of London. The capitals of the Orient, of the Far North and South. India. The Day is very near, Kronheim.”

“What’s this?” Kronheim asked curtly. He did not seem to have heard a word of his aide’s lustful vaporings. He was looking at a totally different report.

“That?” Angorstine looked surprised. “Why, nothing. Just the details of a lava flow from near San Francisco. One of the Mane bomb pits started it.”

“Did, eh?” Kronheim’s eyes narrowed. “We hit a volcanic seam?”

“Possibly. One runs right under America near Frisco. Had a lot to do with the 1906 earthquake, I understand. But what of it—?”

“I want a geologist,” Kronheim said slowly. “I don’t care what term he’s serving, who he is, but get one. There are some things I want to know right away. Give the order to the camps, too. Find somebody with a good physiography knowledge.

“But—”

“*Get one!*” Kronheim yelled.

Angorstone frowned and went out scratching his head. An echo of the murdered Standish was ringing through Kronheim’s barbaric brain.

A week went by in Labor Camp 4 before Val and Rita fully realized what they were up against. Though separated during working hours they found ways and means, as did the others, of getting together in the off hours. The guard made no attempt to stop the union. There was no way of escape from within the railed inclosure anyway. Electrification of all barriers was possible at a moment’s notice.

Day work meant ten hours of incessant hard labor in building up the ruins Kronheim’s air fleet had created. The former American style of skyscrapers was, it appeared, to be excluded now in favor of long squat edifices of a new principle.

In one week Val found out plenty. Most of the camp guards were Europeans with a good knowledge of English. Not all of them were brutal at heart, though they obviously had to obey orders. The laxest man of the lot was the Captain of the Guard, rather too old for his job. Val was surprised to find that whip and gun seemed spared quite a lot, even though the ten hours labor was enforced on all men and women from 14 to 60. To exchange views on the regulations was to ask for death, but deep in Val’s mind was a growing fury for the slavery, a fury fanned every time he saw his wife’s drawn, weary face through the barbed wire at a quiet end of the two camps.

“Where is it all going to end, Val?” she asked him hopelessly, one night. “The whole country—and probably the whole world before long—mowed down and sacrificed to power? It isn’t sane! It just can’t obtain. So many against so few.”

“That isn’t it,” he said gravely. “The few have the power and the many have not . . .”

They were both mute for a moment or two, looking at each other in the glare of the floodlights. Around them roared the eternal propaganda from the loudspeakers. As usual they spouted tales of conquest; some of it true, and the rest of it at variance with the facts Val had heard by word of mouth. It was these little items drifting from the lips of oppressed prisoners that interested him most.

“May be revolt yet,” he whispered presently. “The Captain is pretty stupid. There’s probably a way around him. There is another thing, too. You remember me telling Kronheim that Mane probably gave him something more than bombs?”

Rita nodded quickly. Val’s face, shaven clean like his head, was grinning bitterly.

“It wasn’t just talk,” he breathed. “The further Kronheim and his European masters and agents sink the world into destruction by the indiscriminate use of Mane bombs, the nearer comes the end of the whole damned control.”

“Why? How?”

Val glanced hurriedly round, leaned closer through the wire.

“Those bombs, as we know, have been sunk five miles down. Reports have come through from different sources that they have done more than just blast a mine in the earth. They have released volcanic matter—even in America here which is not definitely in the volcanic zone . . . I figured such a thing would happen because when I was in Alcatraz I spent my off time reading geology books from the prison library. One of them said volcanic seams start at three miles down or less. Read the books specially as a matter of fact thinking I might do something about it if I got out of jail. I figured using Mane bombs for the very purposes Kronheim accidentally found. Only I figured it out to bring us victory. He’s sowing world destruction—only the mug doesn’t know it yet.”

“But how do a few volcanic seams upset this regime?” Rita asked breathlessly.

“It’s not just that: it’s how long they continue that counts. Once you start breaking the seals on the earth’s inner forces you’re letting out Trouble. Kronheim’s started a juggernaut rolling over the world—”

“Move on there!”

The girl was suddenly swung aside by 200 pounds of female granite. At the same moment Val found himself pushed away by one of his own guards. He wandered off, hands in pockets, and presently found himself facing the undersized figure of Bilworthy.

Bilworthy’s eyes had the bright little gleam of a rat’s. He gave a slow smile as he hoarded the smoke of a prized cigarette end in his throat.

“Tellin’ your wife plenty, weren’t you?” he asked dryly.

“So what?” Val eyed him bitterly. “What the hell were you doing listening?”

“Why not? Don’t we all pick up news?” Bilworthy grinned the wider and smoke escaped from his stained teeth. He went away scratching his whiskery, receding skin.

Val looked after him through narrowed eyes. Three times he had encountered the slimy little prisoner poking his nose where it was not wanted. There was something about him that got thoroughly up Val’s back.

With an involuntary shudder he turned away to listen to the propaganda and cull from it what facts he could. In between the lines he learned plenty. Vesuvius was in violent eruption, for one thing, and hindering war activity. The Bay of Naples was in the midst of the greatest lava discharge in history. In England an extinct volcano in the Cumberland mountains had returned to life and was belching fire and destruction for nearly fifty miles over the war-racked island. China was suffering from earthquakes. In America the stubborn lava flow from the Frisco crater was if anything getting worse.

The facts were all treated lightly in the broadcast, but for Val they registered right on the button. He lounged in a corner of the camp ground and grinned to himself, and the guard who moved him on wondered vaguely what the hell there was to be amused about.

Whatever plans were afoot for a revolt received an untimely check the following morning when it was found Camp 4 had a new Captain of the Guard.

Val and his fellow prisoners saw the man for the first time at the line-up for building detail. Unlike his lax predecessor this individual insisted on preliminary inspection of his charges first. He walked slowly down the line with his hands on his hips.

He was big, possibly six feet three, with the shoulders and neck of a prize bullock. His uniform was smart, his boots polished like mirrors. His cap he wore at an angle on his shaven head. His face had square jaws and high cheekbones. His mouth slanted perpetually as he

talked to reveal a line of magnificent teeth. His eyes were blue—a cold hard blue with more than a hint of the devil in them.

“There’s been too much sentiment around here,” he shouted, walking along slowly. “Too much!” He looked at the passive faces keenly and his short whip swung at his hip. “But it’s going to change from now on! I’ve been a soldier all my life. See? I know what men need to make ’em work, and that’s discipline! *Discipline!* And you’ll get it from me! We’re building an Empire here and you dogs will work your ten hours a day to the full while I’m in charge. Ten hours—no more, no less. I know my duty, and I do it! I am Abel Granvort, your new Captain of the Guard, better known as ‘Ox.’ Later on you’ll find out why! All right, Sergeant Mead, take over . . . On your way! March!”

The file fell into line with the guards around them. But as Val went past Ox shot out his hand and whirled him to one side.

“Not you,” he said briefly. “I want a word with you, Turner.”

Val waited, eyeing the man steadily.

“So you think Leader Kronheim is digging his own grave, do you?” Ox asked slowly.

Val’s eyes traveled to the undersized back of Bilworthy as he tramped away with the others.

“I spoke!” Ox bellowed.

“I heard you,” Val said calmly, turning back to him. “I guess Bilworthy’s been shooting off his mouth again, eh? Amazing what some people will do to try and get others into trouble . . . To answer your question, I do think Kronheim and his whole corrupt bunch are heading for trouble. Want to make something of it?”

Ox said briefly. “Come with me! March—one, two . . .” His shiny boots set the pace through the dust.

Val found himself taken to camp headquarters. Ox left him and stood aside at pokerlike attention. Kronheim was present with the inevitable thick-lipped Angorstine.

Kronheim came straight to the point. “Last night, Turner, I understand that you had a conversation with your wife amounting pretty close to treason. That was why I had the guard tightened up and put Captain Granvort in charge . . . You had the impudence to tell your wife that we are destroying our regime by our own hand. What have you to say?”

“Nothing,” Val answered coldly.

“You realize I could have you flogged and then shot? And your wife, too?”

At that Ox stepped forward stiffly. “I submit, sir, that the woman had nothing to do with it,” he said briefly. “She was the recipient of information, involuntarily, and not the giver. Therefore, according to military regulations she—”

“Damn you, man, shut up!” Kronheim roared. “Get back to your place and don’t speak until you’re told. . . . Now you!” He swung back to Val. “I could kill both you and your wife, but instead if you will give me some information I will spare you both and see that you have lighter duties.”

“We don’t want any favors, Kronheim . . .” Val paused and shook his head. “At least I don’t: but I have my wife to think of. What do you want to know?”

“Geologists and scientists are hard to find,” Kronheim said grimly. “Many of them have been disposed of—but you seem to know something. It is common knowledge that severe volcanic eruptions are taking place everywhere, and my European masters have demanded to know how these troubles can be stopped. They blame me because I instituted the Mane bomb.

Earthquakes and landslides are seriously impeding army operations. Heavy fogs are beginning to cover the seas from the intense heat at the ocean floor. That hinders air work. Rivers, filled with flowing lava are drying up . . . You told your wife you read of the possibility of all this while you were in prison. In that case you may know how to stop it?"

"In other words, you're in a spot?"

"Answer my question!"

"O.K.—there's no way to stop it. If there was I would tell you—not because I've any regard for you but in the interests of all human beings. You sank the Mane bombs too deep, that's all. Later on, seams will open in the ocean beds and the fun will start in real earnest. Sea will pour into the gaps. Immense steam pressure will gather underground and blow chasms in the earth . . ." Val paused and smiled bitterly. "What you and your blasted butchers actually started was the end of the world! You're getting the world, sure, just as you wanted—and you'll perish in it, horribly, like the rest of us. But for the rest of us it doesn't matter much because death is preferable to being ruled by you and yours."

If Kronheim was disturbed he did not show it. His voice was hard as steel when he spoke again. "You mean you *won't* help us?"

"I've told you the truth. Take it or leave it."

"I don't believe you," he said. He turned back to Ox. "Return him to camp and deliver twenty-five lashes to the prisoner each day for a week. Do it yourself. At the end of that time he may choose to speak more freely. For the moment his wife will escape the lash: later I may not be so lenient. It's up to you, Turner . . ."

"You damnable, blasted—" Val started to say, then Ox whirled him outside.

"Wait a minute!" Val shouted, tearing himself free. "I've got things to tell that granite-faced hyena! I—"

"Move!" Ox commanded inexorably, whipping out his gun. "Quick march—one, two!"

Helplessly Val turned and marched back to the workers on the building job. Once there he waited for the shirt to be ripped from his back and the flogging to commence.

"Well, what in blazes are you waiting for?" Ox roared.

Val turned in amazement. "But Kronheim said—"

"To work!" Ox commanded. "Kronheim ordered *me* to flog you. Regulation 19 of a soldier's duty says a Captain can give orders but shall not execute them personally. That is for lesser ratings to do. Kronheim gave me an order I could not carry out . . . I know my duty and I do it! But that won't save you doing your ten hours," he finished with a sneer. "Ten hours—no more, no less! Get busy!"

Val turned, astounded at the rigid adherence of the man to laws and regulations. He seemed to be a brute by nature with Clauses A to Z blazoned on his rugged being. Yet somehow he made Val smile. As he worked he studied him, standing motionless with feet apart and hands on hips, a twisted grin on his square face.

Then Val looked at somebody else . . . Bilworthy.

CHAPTER V

THE ARK

Not even the strangleholds of censorship or cooked news could entirely disguise the news leaking in in the days ensuing. A foggy steam settled over America and pallid the Labor Camps completely. The guard was doubled to make escape impossible. Heat, too, smote the country like a white-hot bar. Reports came in of Etna, Vesuvius, Stromboli, Fujiyama, and other famous volcanoes going full blast. Smoke and scorching dust from their vigorous craters was penetrating into the atmosphere and producing the most extraordinary sunlight whenever it was glimpsed. The sky seemed to be mixed with blue and magenta colorings through high dust film.

From Italy came the news of the total destruction of Sardinia and Corsica through volcanic eruption. Molten lava pouring into the sea had turned the Bay of Naples into a death caldron, paralyzing shipping, giving up dead and bloated fish and driving poisonous fumes across the Italian and south European lands. The whole southern end of the Italian peninsula indeed seemed to be sinking under the scalding sea.

In two places in the Atlantic fissures had occurred across the ocean floor creating incredible havoc. Swollen with steam pressure, whole masses of ocean bed had blown up and driven a wilderness of raging steam and water before them. Earthquakes in mid-Europe and Asia, lava floods in parts of the Himalayas which menaced India and vast parts of Mongolia, had started an exodus of refugees greater than that produced by the war itself.

The already filled Labor Camps in the conquered countries began to swell to overflowing with unending streams of survivors from all manner of climes. In Camp 4 alone the course of one day saw the addition of a thousand prisoners, some of them dark-skinned men and women of the East who had caught the last surviving boats from their doomed lands and sought the apparent safety of the former United States, only to drop into the hands of human foes instead. . . .

“We have got to revolt!” shouted one of the men in Val’s camp one night, when they were gathered in the narrow dormitory preparatory to “lights out” order. “You told us what caused it, Val—those damned Mane bombs! The whole world is cracking up—rivers and seas evaporating—and we sit here and take it! We’ve got to smash this regime to save our own lives.”

Val looked at the angry worker thoughtfully, then he said:

“To revolt is the sure way to lose our lives, not save them, Hoyle.”

“Then what *do* we do?” Hoyle spat out. “Sit here until we fry? The heat gets worse every day. We sweat and build and sweat some more, and that grinning swine of an Ox looks on and enjoys every minute of it! It can’t go on—”

“Now listen, boys.” Val got to his feet, set-faced. “Listen to me a minute. I’ve told you the truth every time so far, haven’t I? I predicted this would happen though you doubted it at the time? Right?”

“Yeah, sure,” admitted another. “But I agree with Hoyle that it’s time we got action against Kronheim. The war is finished now by this upheaval of Nature and Kronheim and his

European big shots are left as the masters of the world quicker than they had figured. . . . Are we going to sit down to *that*?”

“For the time being, yes,” Val retorted. “In a while these vast volcanic upheavals will cease—they are bound to find a new level. But in that time something will happen. Seas and rivers are evaporating at top speed—but did you stop to think where the steam is going? Not all of it is included in the world-mist. . . .”

“What’s that got to do with our revolt?” Hoyle shouted.

“Plenty! The conditions which existed at the beginning of the world are being repeated through a blunder of Kronheim’s making! In the early days of the Earth vast heat drove colossal clouds of steam and vapor way out beyond the atmospheric limits. It formed into a ring round the Earth, drawn into that position by centrifugal force. A vast, vapor girdle wrapped the Earth about as today the rings of Saturn girdle that giant planet. . . . Today, the driven steam from rivers and seas and lakes will do the same thing. The outer part of the ring will be frozen by space, the inner part still vapor by reason of the Earth’s heat. But after a while the girdle will be inevitably drawn back to Earth and will condense. . . .”

“Then what?” asked Hoyle in a quieter voice.

“The Deluge,” said Val gravely. “A world swept clean with only a few survivors. That is where this insane drive for domination is going to end. . . . But there will be a few who can perhaps build anew on better lines.”

The men looked at one another with blank faces, then they started talking all at once. They quieted again at the voice of a little, leathery-faced Mongolian who had been sitting passively listening. He spoke perfect English.

“You are right, my young friend, but you put it badly,” he commented. “My name is Kang, by the way. I was driven here from Mongolia by disasters beyond the memory of man being again repeated. I foresaw long ago that the present happenings would repeat themselves in a Deluge. . . .”

He looked round on his listeners, smiled from his wizened visage.

“It is a matter of geologic history that the vapors ascended while the earth was hot and cooled into the Deluge when the Earth cooled—just as they will do now. In Jupiter we behold today a water canopy round the planet in the form of cloud belts. So must Earth have looked once. Proof of the original Deluge is imprinted forever in the legends and histories of nations. . . .”

“For instance?” Hoyle asked dryly.

The Mongolian shrugged. “The Japanese Bible—the *Kojiki*—refers to a ‘floating bridge in heaven where live the Gods.’ On the other hand, Veruna—which as all Sanskrit scholars know was the primitive Indian heaven of the Vedas—means when translated ‘watery Heaven.’ Again, Scandinavian history refers to a ‘bridge of heaven which broke through’—and does not your own orthodox Bible refer frequently to ‘the waters above and the waters below?’ Yes, there *was* a Deluge.”

“Yeah,” Hoyle admitted blankly. “Guess you’re right at that.”

There was a silence for a while. The words of the gnomelike intellectual had rather stunned them. Val was the first to recover.

“From the rate at which evaporation has gone on,” he resumed, “it is possible that the return of the waters to Earth when the cooling off begins may produce a flood which will cover the world! Even a rainfall of fifteen feet in the space of forty days and nights, like the

early Deluge, would produce a flood transcending our imagination. And this one threatens to be even worse. . . .”

“I do bring a Flood of waters on the Earth”—Genesis, sixth chapter, seventeenth verse,” murmured the Mongolian, closing his eyes.

“Yeah, and what do *we* do?” Hoyle shouted.

“We sit in this blasted hole and get trapped!” cried somebody else.

“No,” Val said slowly. “We do what Noah did—and build an Ark!”

He was conscious of a passing surprise at his own declaration. He had not even thought of the notion a moment before; now it seemed so logical and obvious.

“This ain’t the time to get funny, Val!” Hoyle yelled.

“I mean it,” Val cried earnestly. “We’re building edifices, aren’t we? What’s to prevent us building an edifice as an Ark instead of a building? That’s it!” he went on keenly. “The buildings are all long, beetling ones, able to hold about five hundred people when empty. We’ll go on building, sure—but we’ll make the edifice movable and able to float when the water comes. Nobody—not even Ox—will notice the difference. Outwardly there won’t *be* a difference!”

“Say, he’s got something there. . . .”

“It can’t miss. . . .”

“You have a wise friend among you,” Kang observed calmly, opening his eyes again. “Heed him. He has the spirit and the energy of a leader. . . .”

The grim-faced men nodded resolutely. Val looked at them earnestly in turn, read loyalty to him—until he came to the face of Bilworthy. As Val’s keen eyed gaze fell upon him Bilworthy turned and shambled off towards his crude bed. Val’s hand dropped on his shoulder.

“Just a minute, Bilworthy!” Val swung the man round. “You squealed on me last time to Ox. I let it pass that time. But if you repeat one word of what’s gone on in here tonight I’ll get you. Understand?”

“Now why should I—” Bilworthy began to bluster.

“Understand?” Val repeated ominously.

“Yes—yes, I understand.” Bilworthy turned away, scowling. Then the door opened and the guard came in vigorously.

“Lights out, you scum! Step on it, there! Line up for search!”

When, some weeks later, the world-wrapping mists began to rise and there came reports of abating volcanic eruption, Kronheim began to breathe a little more freely . . . but not for long.

With Angorstine he decided to investigate for himself the lack of fresh orders from European headquarters. And it was the airplane trip that rammed home the appalling truth into his brain.

The Atlantic Ocean had dropped tremendously in its level. Here and there ships were nosing through channels foreign to maritime knowledge. In other places vessels had broken their backs or lay beached and forlorn with their sides rusting. The British Isles, still filled with hurrying, desperate people in the war-cracked cities, were perched up like mountain tops a thousand feet or so above sea level. Cliffs never seen before had come to light.

Europe provided its own explanation for lack of orders from G.H.Q. One half of the great European plain from mid-Russia to mid-Germany was nothing but a lava field, hardened now, from which poked the shattered remnants of buildings. People, in little bunches, were gathered

around crude camps before smoky fires. It was a glimpse of a primitive age. Civilization in Europe was ended.

Dazed, too stunned to understand the portent of it all, Kronheim had the plane pilot continue the trip. By degrees the whole globe was circumnavigated and the tale of tragedy unreeled. Everywhere there seemed to be either lava-fields, dried up rivers, or depleted oceans. Shipping was obviously doomed. Parts of the air were thick with either battering tempests or poisonous volcanic fumes. And occasionally through the driving reek there was a vision of a gray belt girdling the heavens.

Very much sobered Kronheim returned to his American headquarters, still the same brick building atop the small hill overlooking the New York labor camps.

“Angorstine,” he said slowly, “there is only one leader left in the Cause—and that is me. The others are dead. Obviously it is necessary to plan the world afresh with you and me at the head of it. We can master the few survivors with ease. We can make the scum in these American labor camps build as they never built before. That is what we will do! Fate has destroyed my superiors and made me the master of the world.”

Angorstine did not answer. He was looking out of the window onto the gray band across the heaven.

“Wonder what that is?” he mused.

Kronheim gave an impatient retort. “Stop wasting time on trifles and summon the guard. I’ve new regulations to put into force. Buildings must be hurried in construction. Several lots of workers must be drafted overseas to begin work there. We must make arrangements to conserve water. It’s becoming a problem.”

“Maybe Turner could explain that gray band,” Angorstine said. “You never summoned him again after ordering that flogging.”

“No use. He’s too stubborn. Besides there are more important matters. . . . Get a move on, man!”

That Kronheim had become undisputed master of the world made little impression on the prisoners in the camps. Things could not get much worse, anyway. Water was rationed, and precious little there was of it. Food was usually dry bread interspersed with vegetable concoctions from the fast dying fields of the Americas. Whatever worthwhile there was left in the eating line found its way to Kronheim and Angorstine.

Despite the privations, Val and his colleagues worked on steadily, keeping their eyes on that gray band that daily became larger in the sky. Otherwise the sky was rainless, blue, and sunny. Only that gray arc of slowly returning vapor revealed what was coming. Val wondered if Rita was watching it too. Communication with her was difficult these days. At least she was still alive; he knew that much. She knew, too, that an Ark was intended.

Carrying out the plan they had arranged Val and his co-workers constructed one of the new buildings to their own plan, providing it with a keel and watertight floor, and apparently nobody was any the wiser. The guards had no reason to suspect anything phony. . . . The hardest thing of all to bear was the lack of water.

Working ten hours a day in grueling sunshine and dust with lips cracked and muscles aching told on the strongest constitution. But Ox allowed no let-up. He had permitted himself only the same ration as his prisoners, regarding the camp in the light of a beleaguered fortress. He was always at his post, legs apart and hands on hips, intent on every aspect of his duty.

A grinding, merciless month slipped by. In that time the gray band in the sky had crept nearer and nearer, drawn by the cooling Earth. . . . Landscapes, lava caked and hard now, were wilted with sunshine. Underneath them lay buried fields and pastureland, gone probably forever. . . . Even Kronheim was wondering if he could ever establish a new empire out of this cracked, battered wilderness of his own making, from which rain seemed to have eternally departed. . . . The dispatchments of prisoners he had sent overseas were dying, said reports—dying of thirst or else starvation. Others had been preyed upon by the cannabilistic survivors of the eruptions in Mid-Europe.

Only those in Camp 4 knew what was really coming and it gave them cause enough to smile through their flaked lips. Water! There'd be more than enough before they were through! Water aplenty, and Building No. 7 all ready to float. All it needed now was a thorough examination for being watertight, and provisioning. These two were big problems.

At intervals, when opportunity looked favorable, Val slipped out to pass on the news to his wife. On one of the nights he was followed by the shadowy figure of Bilworthy. But Bilworthy went in the opposite direction, licking his parched lips as he went.

At length he reached the door of Ox's guard room and knocked softly.

"Well, what in hell do you want?" Ox stood glaring down, his great figure silhouetted by the oil light behind him. Power, relying on water, had ended long since.

"I've—I've something more to tell you, Ox. It's worth a can of water. That's all I ask." Bilworthy stood sliming his paws down his overalls.

"You get your ration," Ox replied brutally. "We all get half a pint a day—no more, no less. . . ." He seemed to ponder then suddenly shooting out his arm he yanked the scrawny little prisoner up the steps and hurled him into the guard room.

"Go on," he invited calmly, his blue eyes slitting.

"It's—it's about that prisoner Turner," Bilworthy panted, fingering his lips nervously. "He's—he's plotting treason again. This time he's building an—an Ark."

"A what?" Ox cried.

"An Ark—like the one in the Bible. There's a Deluge coming. The seas are going to cause a flood. That gray band in the sky . . ."

"Go on," Ox said ominously. "Every detail. . . ."

By degrees, his voice hoarse with dryness, Bilworthy got out every part of the story, including the scientific implications. At the end of it Ox calmly put on his coat, drew on his shiny boots, then pointed to the door.

"Outside! Show me this Ark— Go on, damn you!"

Bilworthy looked longingly at the water tank. "A-about my water, Captain—"

"That you'll get later. I want to be sure first. Now move!"

Ox kept a grip on Bilworthy's collar as he marched him across the camp grounds and out to the building site. When they came to building No. 7 Ox marched inside and flashed on his torch. Twenty minutes of minute examination convinced him. He came out and stood thinking.

"I—I was right, wasn't I?" Bilworthy urged, clutching him. "Room enough in there for nearly five hundred people. It'll float—"

"I've got eyes of my own," Ox broke in. He turned and blew his whistle violently. After a while hastily dressed guards came running up in the starlight.

"Summon every prisoner here!" Ox roared. "Hurry up!"

There was an immediate scurrying and blowing of whistles. Ox stood waiting with his feet apart as the men in their coarse night shirts came stumbling along in bare feet, finally formed into a rough column. Val, his lips set into a taut line, stood gazing at Bilworthy's cringing form.

"Men," Ox said slowly, unfastening his whip from his belt and flexing it in his strong hands, "I pride myself I have treated you with the justice of a soldier while I've been here. Right?"

Heads nodded promptly.

"I'm a hard man . . ." Ox walked slowly along the line. "But that is because I obey orders to the letter. There is a code of honor among true soldiers, even as there is among prisoners and workers. Right here is a man who tries to sell all of you for a can of water!"

Ox spat in the dust at Bilworthy's feet. Bilworthy stared for a moment, then his face was suddenly sweating.

"But Captain, you promised me—"

"Yes, I promised you water. You'll get it—but it won't be any good to you! You're a rat, Bilworthy! You squealed once. You have squealed again to try and get more than your share! To try and get more than the prisoners and more than the guards!"

"So he told you about the Ark, eh?" Val asked grimly.

"About the Ark and about the Deluge. I'll deal with that later." Ox moved forward slowly. "As for you, Bilworthy, I've one punishment for swine who try to get more than they're entitled to."

He stopped playing with his whip abruptly and whirled it round. The biting thongs flayed the torn nightshirt from Bilworthy's back. He fell in the dust, howling.

"Water!" he screeched. "That's all I wanted! Water!"

"A can full," Ox agreed, and his whip split the silence again. "Salty, stinking water—the sweat of your own filthy hide as you crawl from this lash. Go on, crawl, blast you! *Crawl!*"

Time and again the lash came round with pistol shot force. The prisoners stood motionless, sweating themselves, wincing at each swing of that mighty arm. Groaning, dragging himself in the dust, Bilworthy crawled into a corner by the Ark building. Ox stopped at that, ground the moistured drops of Bilworthy under the heel of his jackboot.

"Would anybody like to say something?" he asked dryly, breathing hard.

"Yes, Ox," Val replied briefly. "You're a damned sadist—but you're a man of discipline. I'll say that for you."

The starlight caught the gleam of Ox's teeth. Then his jaws clamped shut again and he motioned to the Ark building.

"I'm not reporting this because it is the only thing you could think up to save us from the coming Deluge," he announced curtly. "I am not reporting it—yet. You're going to finish it properly first, make a thorough job of it. You're going to fit steering, provision it, give it paddle power which you mugs can provide by physical labor. Because you decided to build it you will be allowed to travel in it—at a price, and it's to the credit of your damnable souls that you'll save the Master of us all from the Flood when it comes."

"You mean Kronheim comes in it, too?" Val shouted.

"He is the master, and he comes—with Angorstine," Ox snapped. "He is still the ruler. You found the way out and we'll sail under Kronheim when the skies open. You'll finish this Ark under my control. Ten hours a day—no more, no less. Now dismiss!"

Val hesitated, his fists clenched—then the small hand of Kang caught his arm. He whispered.

“Do as he says, my friend. He is only obeying his highest sense of duty. No man, whatever his beliefs, can do more.”

“But *Kronheim*—!” Val was aghast.

“Move!” Ox bellowed. “You, too!” He caught up the blood-spattered Bilworthy and hurled him into the line. “One, two, quick march! Never mind the pebbles. Think yourselves lucky you’ve feet at all. One, two . . .” His polished boots flashed out smartly.

CHAPTER VI

DELUGE

The next day the sun was obscured for the first time and the whole of the sky looked like a great inverted bowl of gray lowering down to earth.

Eased a little by the lack of sunshine but still physically weary to the breaking point Val and the others went to work exclusively on the Ark. Most of the men were bitter, loathe to accept the counsel of the little Mongolian who seemed to see some sort of virtue in the straddle-legged giant in the shiny boots who tirelessly watched over them.

Obedying his orders, a system of paddles was devised and seats were fixed inside the Ark building for the hapless ones who were to wield the oars. Somehow, the arrangement savored galley-slaving. Rough beds were made too, and chairs. There were movable stands for oil lamps, so they would stand upright under all circumstances. Floodlights, to act as searchlights, operating on batteries, were installed. Among a multitude of other things, the interior of the Ark was partitioned: it was evident Ox had possible women survivors in his mind.

Four days passed, in which Kronheim tried to figure out ways and means of saving his crumbling Empire. Unofficial reports had reached him from long distance fliers that Europe was experiencing rain. It made him smile and feel more comfortable. Once the problem of water was overcome he could soon tighten his grip again.

Over America the clouds lowered all through the intervening days and at every camp the prisoners were working in twilight gloom. Then as they knocked off in the evening of the fourth day little spots of moisture started dropping on their barely covered backs and splattered in the dust.

“Rain!” one of the men shrieked. “*Rain!*” He stood with his face upturned to the black sky, mouth open to catch the drops. Then Ox’s mighty fist hurled him back into the line.

“Keep marching, you! You’ll get your bellyful later! March!”

Spots of wet mud marred Ox’s immaculate boots as he herded the line back to camp. Once there he stood with arms akimbo appraising the blackness overhead. Turning presently he saw Val gazing up, too.

“Looks like you were right, Turner,” he said cryptically. “Get inside.”

Within the long building Val was immediately met with a barrage of questions. The presence of the guards was ignored. For that matter they were as interested as the prisoners in impending events.

“Is it coming, Val?” shouted Hoyle. “Is it the Deluge?”

“Yes, my friends, the Deluge,” observed Kang quietly from his corner stool. “The last hours of a phase of brutal power domination are here. Be assured that we shall find safety.”

“Wish I could be sure of that bit, Kang,” Val said anxiously, as the pattering rain increased to a sudden fierce drumming on the tin roof. “This has been gathering for weeks. Seas and rivers are returning . . .”

“Hey, you men!” Ox stood in the doorway again with water trickling down his chin. “Outside and drink your fill, the whole perishing lot of you! Some of the holes have filled up . . . Step on it!”

He cracked his whip to hurry the scramble outside. As Bilworthy came scurrying past he delivered a terrific kick that sent the little man crashing on his face in the mud outside. He got

up, elbowed an elderly prisoner out of the way from the nearest hole and drove his face into the pool.

Something blazed through the dark—the explosion of Ox’s gun. Bilworthy relaxed, his head sunk in the water.

For a moment there was silence. Ox came slowly down the dripping steps, lifted Bilworthy’s corpse out of the pool and threw it on one side as though it were a wet sack. He motioned to the trembling old man.

“Go on, you—drink—” Ox looked up and bawled, “I’ll have every man here drink his fill—no more, no less. And hurry it up!” he added urgently as the rain increased in force and drummed a hazy margin onto his hat and massive shoulders.

At last the men were satisfied and came stumbling through the blinding torrent back into the camp. Ox followed them, surveyed their dripping forms for a moment, then said curtly.

“No man moves out of here to that Ark until I give the order. Understand?” He went out and slammed the door.

Though the guards gave the usual “lights out” order the men were all out of their beds again immediately, gathering together in a circle and listening to the savage beating of the rain upon the roof. With every passing minute it seemed to increase its force. A slight wind had risen too, driving the blinding sheets against the windows. Outside it was swilling along the ground, dimly illumined by the battery driven lamps at various points.

“Why the devil do we have to wait for Ox’s orders?” shouted Hoyle. “I say let’s get to the Ark and done with it!”

“He’s right, Val.”

“What are we waitin’ for?”

“Now just a minute, boys—” Val started to say, then he paused and looked up sharply as a new sound came above the rain. It was a roar like the coming of a mighty wind. The ground under the camp began to tremble: the downpour increased its drumming to a sudden shattering rattle.

“The Deluge! It’s coming!” screamed somebody.

“Cloudburst somewhere,” Val acknowledged quickly. “Come on—Outside!”

The men nearest the door tore it open and raced down the wooden steps. Out in the open air the roaring din sounded like a tempest-driven ocean smashing against distant cliffs . . . Then suddenly it was upon them. It came out of the moaning dark, a vast roaring tide of water vomited from the crumbling vapor heavens. Instantly a Niagara smashed into the midst of the camp, hurling the men over, tearing down fences, crushing in the tin huts like empty meat cans.

Val, caught in the raging tide, was slammed back into the crumbling camp. Water, cold and scum-laden, surged over his head. He came up gasping to find himself struggling amidst fallen timbers and wreckage.

“Help—please!” came a gasp from nearby. “Help!”

He struck out just in time to yank up a frantically struggling figure from under a heavy beam. It was Kang. The voice alone revealed it: to see anything was almost impossible.

“Th-thank you, my friend,” the Mongolian gasped. “You—you don’t know what you have done by saving me.”

“Saved your life, I guess,” Val panted back. He looked anxiously in the raging dark. Above the noise of bubbling water and whistle of descending rain was another sound—yelling

voices of men and women. Rita! He had forgotten her.

“My wife!” he shouted frantically. “I’ve got to find her! Here, Kang, hang onto this.”

“The Ark!” Kang interrupted him. “Look—the lights of the Ark. Accept my suggestion and head for the Ark before looking for your wife. It will be simpler. It has searchlights, remember.”

“Yes.” Val frowned momentarily. “Yes, maybe you’re right.”

He began to swim strongly towards the bobbing lights of the monster as it floated on the tumbling water. Kang he dragged along beside him. It seemed obvious to Val that some of the men must have reached the Ark at a remarkable speed to get it under way so quickly. Its searchlights were blazing across the water now, picking out survivors. Everywhere there seemed to be bobbing heads and flailing arms. Men and women alike were battling desperately to reach the floating sanctuary.

It drew nearer, and the searchlights reflecting back from the water revealed a surprising sight. A giant figure stood in the main doorway, legs apart and revolver in hand, water pouring down his bristly head.

“Women first, I said!” he roared, crashing his fist into the jaw of a man as he strove to reach the doorway. “Get back and help the women, you damned skunk! Drag ’em aboard! Lively now!”

He kept his feet with difficulty and watched like an eagle as the men in the water worked desperately to lift up the women prisoners as they floated near enough.

“Ox,” Val panted. “He got there first. I never could figure if he was man or monster: now I know he’s got a spark of humanity somewhere under the armor-plate. Hey, Ox!”

Ox swung round at the shout. “Come in here before the women at your own peril!” he roared.

“Not me. What about Kang, here? He’s sinking . . .”

“O.K.—up with him!” Ox reached down and yanked the little Mongolian upwards. He stumbled into the Ark’s lighted interior.

“That doesn’t go for you, Turner,” Ox shouted. “You’ve got plenty of muscle. Lend a hand with the women.”

“You seem to have gotten yourself into a safe position, Ox!” one of the swimming men shouted sarcastically.

“One more crack from you and I’ll drill you!” Ox retorted. “I got here first to insure discipline! That was my duty. I saw the Flood coming and got things ready while you mugs were wondering what to do. Now it’s the women first. No time to lose!” he finished with a bellow as another vast rolling wave of water came thundering down on top of the first.

Val came up again gasping for air. This time all trace of the camp had gone. The world was a battering, roaring hell of rain, wind, and struggling bodies. The Ark still bobbed up and down, its portholes like watching eyes.

Time and again Val caught a struggling woman prisoner and lifted her to the door where Ox seized her quickly. Until at last Val grabbed the one woman he wanted most in the world—Rita, nearly at the point of exhaustion. With more care than before he raised her limp body.

“Easy with her,” he called up anxiously.

Ox dropped her inside. “What’s one more more than another?” he asked sourly. “Because she’s your wife doesn’t make her extra special. Keep working!”

Val smiled twistedly. He toiled on again, until at last it seemed that all the women who had survived the Flood were aboard.

“O. K., you men,” Ox shouted, and stood aside without lending a hand’s turn as the men floundered up onto the steel flooring into the light and warmth. Val was the last. He stood up, dripping water and breathing hard.

Ox, his soaked uniform plastered to his mighty body, flipped his gun across to the silent Kang.

“Kang, I nominate you as my deputy for the time being,” he said briefly. “Guess you’ve got more sense than all these other boneheads put together. See to it that nobody starts the Ark moving until I get back . . .” He paused and glared around, hands on hips. “I want a man with strong muscles and no fear to come with me,” he snapped out. “I want a volunteer.”

“What for?” Val inquired.

For answer Ox pointed through the driving rain. “See that solitary light over there? Well, that’s headquarters on the rising ground overlooking the camp. Kronheim and Angorstine, my superiors, are there. It is my duty to get them and the Ark cannot get that close. It will take me and another strong man.” Ox paused, a sneering grin on his face. “I know only one strong man here,” he said significantly.

Val said coldly, “Kronheim and Angorstine caused all this between them. They can perish in it.”

“Whatever the causes I’ve my duty to do,” Ox retorted. “I swore allegiance to a regime until the end. . . . I want a man,” he finished bitterly. “Maybe I got it wrong, Val Turner, but I always figured you were a man.”

Val hesitated, then he caught a glimpse of the slowly nodding head of Kang.

“All right,” Val said briefly, and tearing off what remained of his shirt he dived into the boiling scum outside. In another moment, likewise stripped to the waist, Ox followed him. They swam powerfully, neither of them speaking, covering the mile of roaring waters and blinding rain in fairly good time, stumbling at last up the sloping sides of the slowly vanishing island on which the headquarters building was situated.

Hardly had they both floundered through the doorway before Kronheim came rushing to meet them with Angorstine beside him. Both of them were white and shaken.

“The Deluge,” Kronheim panted. “It’s the Deluge, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir!” Ox saluted smartly. “If you can swim, there is safety a mile away. If you cannot swim I’ll help you.”

“Why the devil didn’t you bring a boat?” Kronheim shouted.

“Impossible, sir—sorry. Prisoner Turner and I will help you.”

“*You?*” Kronheim turned slowly to face the grim-faced Val. “All you want is an excuse to drown me, I guess. . . .”

“I leave it to others to kill in cold blood, Kronheim,” Val said coldly.

Ox became suddenly urgent. “We’ve got to hurry, sir—”

“I’ll start right now,” Angorstine interrupted, tearing off his coat. “I can swim. . . .” He leapt for the door and prepared to dive, but Ox swung around and caught his arm. With a terrific uppercut he sent Angorstine reeling. He lost his balance, pitched into the roaring tide, and vanished.

“That was murder!” Kronheim screamed. “You drowned him!”

“Not murder, sir,” Ox corrected briefly. “He tried to seek safety before his superior. That was treason. Treason is punishable by death. I simply did my duty.”

Kronheim stared blankly for a moment and swallowed something. Val remained silent, inwardly admiring Ox’s notions on discipline. Then Kronheim seemed to make up his mind. He tore off his coat and lowered himself nervously into the water. Immediately Ox was on one side of him and Val on the other. Between them they got the shouting, raving dictator of a ruined world across that mile of thundering tempest, pushed him up at last into the Ark where he lay gasping heavily on the floor.

Ox turned and slammed the doors, snatched the gun from Kang and whirled around to face the grim faced people.

“Remember this!” he barked. “You too, Turner. Kronheim is still our master. I am his *aide* now and will follow out his orders to the letter. When the waters subside the regime will continue and as long as Kronheim lives we obey him. Understand?”

“With him shut up in here with us?” roared Hoyle. “Like hell! He’ll never live to see the waters subside, Ox. Somehow we’ll get him—and you!”

Ox’s eyes narrowed. “The slightest attempt on the master or on myself, by man or woman, will be answered with death,” he said slowly. “Let that sink into all your skulls. . . . Now you men get to those oars and start rowing. You, Benson, get to the steering gear. You others pull the partitions over. Men in one end, women in the other. Step on it! Get yourselves dried! You keep them quiet, Turner—I hold you responsible.”

Val nodded slowly. “I’ll do my best, Ox. I’ll take orders from a man anytime. . . .” He looked sourly at Kronheim’s big, dripping form, then turned away to get things to order.

Thanks to the prescience of Ox in forcing the prisoners to equip the Ark beforehand as fully as possible, there was no shortage of necessities, but just the same he rationed everything and for the first time in his life Kronheim was obliged to accept the rations with good grace. He was changed too. He was in danger of his life every hour and knew it, despite the relentless guard Ox maintained.

Val for his part was pretty sure after a while that the people would leave Kronheim unmolested as long as he kept quiet. But that they would ever again consent to his rulership was a debatable point. In fact not even that. There was only one answer to the idea. . . . Refusal.

Much of his spare time Val spent with Rita. Through the portholes of the Ark as it was rowed onwards day by day by relays of men, visible in the dim daylight which filtered through lowering clouds, there was nothing but a waste of water. It would have required a world trip to grasp the full extent of the catastrophe. The heavens in their disgorge of waters had refilled the seas and hammered their unimaginable weight and volume into the land as well. Coasts had eroded, hills slipped down, ravines burst asunder under mighty cataracts. And not even yet was the Deluge finished with. The clouds were so low they nearly touched the surface of the water. There was wind too, an incessant moaning gale which howled dismally over the gray waste.

“I wonder,” Rita said thoughtfully, towards the close of the fifth day, “where we are going to end this drifting?”

It was Kronheim who answered her. “Where we started,” he said curtly. “I gave orders for us to move constantly in a circle so we might still be in America when the waters go down.”

He glared across at the helmsman and steadily rowing oarsmen on their seats. “That’s what you have done, isn’t it?”

The helmsman in particular looked uncomfortable.

“Answer, damn you!” roared Ox.

To everybody’s surprise it was Kang who spoke next, in his quiet modulated voice.

“Perhaps I can answer for him. He is obeying *my* orders for a course—not yours, Leader Kronheim.”

There was an astounded silence.

“*What?*” Ox rumbled. “You *dared!* You dared to give orders above Kronheim, the leader? By God Kang, that’s treason, and I—”

“It is not treason when I was concerned for the safety of everybody in this Ark, my well-disciplined friend,” Kang said. He turned and looked around on the others, then resumed, “Perhaps this is as good a time as any to explain one or two things. . . .”

“What things?” Ox demanded.

“Patience, Captain, while I tell you. . . . In the first place, I did not arrive in Camp 4 by accident. I was—or rather am—one of a hundred representatives sent from Tibet to gather together the few survivors of the Deluge. We of Tibet have led a sheltered life of scientific achievement for many generations. We knew of but were not concerned by the wars of the outer world. Until we realized that war had resulted in the domination by force of the whole earth. That might ultimately present a danger to us. . . . But far more than that were we aware that from the action of the Mane bombs and consequent evaporation of Earth’s moisture, that a Deluge was imminent. Our geographical prognosticators showed that all Tibet, and our sheltered kingdom included, would be inundated completely by the Deluge to come. . . .

“It was clear to us that nearly the whole of the world’s inhabitants would be destroyed in the approaching cataclysm, but it might be possible to save a few—a few who could at least rebuild a better civilization with our assistance. We had no wish to live in the world alone: indeed such an occurrence would be detrimental since the human race might thus die out completely. *Some* had got to be saved and brought to safety until the floods should subside. So one hundred of us were chosen and sent out into the countries of the world to save those whom we considered worthy.”

Kang gave his wise old smile. “You, Turner, thought your idea of an Ark was spontaneous. It was not. I willed the idea to you by telepathy. Remarkably simple art once mastered. You found a means of making an Ark so easily it astonished you. In other parts of the world my fellows would give the same order for Arks and they, too, would be built—perhaps not in the same way, but they would be built just the same.”

“You—you mean there are other Arks drifting about the world somewhere?” Val asked in amazement.

“Another ninety-nine, I hope—all drifting to one spot. A hundred Arks all told containing the nucleus of a new civilization.”

“And yet Tibet is under water?” Kronheim sneered. “Not very effectual, my friend, is it?”

Kang turned to him. “Tibet is under water, yes, but not our civilization and scientific secrets. Tibet is within easy reach of Everest, the highest point in the world. We have complete knowledge of how to scale that mountain, know every inch of its surface. Once we knew the Deluge was coming we removed everything to a high point of Everest and utilized its natural caves as a temporary habitat. In there, shut out from the winds and waters, lies the oldest and

the newest science in the world—Tibetan science! Upon it you can build a better empire once the waters have receded, an empire the better for knowing that the rule of force has vanished forever from the Earth.”

“Then you have been instructing this helmsman to drive towards Everest all the time?” Ox demanded. “To India?”

“To the second Ararat,” Kang conceded quietly.

“You shan’t do it!” Kronheim shouted, leaping to his feet. “I am still the master! There can be no new regime so long as I rule—and rule I shall, until the end! I’ll break you, Kang, and your science—just as I have broken everything else that stood in my way.”

“Except your neck,” growled Val.

The Mongolian was undisturbed. “The fly does not hurt the elephant no matter how hard it kicks,” he murmured. “You are the last of a regime that will soon lie rotting under the waters.”

“You forget me,” Ox said grimly. “I swore allegiance, and I have been—and still am—true to it!”

“For that all praise is due, my friend,” Kang smiled. “For the regime you worship you are to be pitied—deeply pitied. What is left of it beyond this warped, blustering specimen of useless vanity? You, Kronheim, will not stand one second against the might of Tibetan science. A man who could not even foresee the tragedy of the Mane bombs is foresworn to destruction.”

Kronheim sat down again slowly. There was a certain unshakeable calm about Kang, a conviction of infinite power. Without haste, without even a raised word, he had given an extraordinary promise.

“In other words,” Kronheim said at last, “I am being considered as ruler while we are on this Ark—only to be destroyed by your science when we reach this Everest Ararat?”

Kang said, “We do not take life, Kronheim. We are not murderers. We are not even avengers. You will enter with us to live your life quietly as long as your conscience will permit you. But you will no longer rule: be assured of that!”

Ox opened his mouth to speak, then he closed it again. Kronheim was staring in front of him as the full weight of Kang’s words sank in. By slow degrees the assembled people, Kronheim included, began to see what Kang proposed for the destroyer of a world. He proposed freedom—freedom in which to grapple with his own mind, freedom to remember but with power no longer in his grasp. A snake without its sting. It was calm, sober retribution—but it had the flavor of Eastern inhumanity.

For five more days the Ark traveled onwards under the power of the oars, carried too by tremendous wind force. The rain continued. Hardly anybody slept during the period. They were mainly at the ports staring out over the watery waste or else talking among themselves. Now and again they caught glimpses of distant lights bobbing on the waves—lights that could only belong to other Arks all moving to a common goal.

Until at last, days later, something loomed out of the drab, rainlashed grayness perhaps three miles ahead. It was a titanic rocky spire, a mountain pushing up into the girdling clouds. There was an immediate rush to the window to study it.

“Everest!” shouted somebody.

“No!” Kang said quietly. “A mountain of the lower Himalayas. Everest is . . . *there!*”

At that moment the Ark turned slightly and the astounding vision burst full upon the sight. For a moment the raging rain thinned a little and the awe inspiring mass of Mount Everest itself loomed on the sight, rearing to infinity with waters plowing and churning round its invincible mass. Here and there were the bobbing lights of other Arks.

"You shan't do it!" Kronheim shouted suddenly. "You shan't take me there, Kang! You shan't take me to be looked at, to be pointed to as a specimen. I am still the master! I will continue . . ."

He broke off and picked up a chair, whirled it around in an arc towards the little scientist. But half way in its journey the chair dropped as Kang's calm eyes met the inflamed ones of Kronheim. Kronheim fell slowly back towards the wall, pulling at his lips. That calm, inexorable stare followed him.

"Not there . . ." Kronheim whispered, drooling. "Not there . . ."

"Leader! What is the matter?" Ox caught him fiercely, forced him to stand up straight. "Leader, what's wrong? Command me! I am still here to obey! I will force these scum . . ."

Kronheim looked at Ox stupidly. "Bombs . . . Send in Dr. Mane. We'll sink 'em deep down, Standish. Deep down! Standish! Where the hell's Standish? *Stan-dish!*"

"Easy, leader . . . easy," Ox panted, staring fixedly at the trickle of saliva running from Kronheim's undisciplined lips.

Rita turned away, sickened. Val caught her head on his shoulder, watched in fascinated interest. He turned suddenly to Kang.

"Kang, did you . . .?" he whispered, amazed.

The Mongolian only smiled . . . but it was a calm, cruel smile. It seemed to verify Val's belief that the scientist had used his superior mind to snap once and for all the reason of the dictator.

"Where's Standish?" Kronheim repeated presently, gazing unseeingly at Ox. "Where—where is he? It's—it's so dark in here . . ."

"For God's sake somebody, knock him out!" screamed Hoyle. "He's gone nuts."

Ox shook himself as though ridding himself of a vast unbelief. Very quietly he tugged out his gun, leveled it, then fired. He stood watching as Kronheim's gross body sank slowly to the floor and lay still.

The silence on the assembly was complete. Only the howling wind made any noise at all. Everybody watched, motionless, as Ox lifted the dead dictator on his broad shoulder and carried it to the rear window. He forced the frame open, eased the corpse outside, and dropped it onto the waste of waters. Then he turned back, clicked his heels together, and gave a final salute. He fired one shot of his gun into the air, then laid the weapon carefully on a side table.

He turned, his face like granite. "The regime I obeyed is ended," he announced cryptically. "I swore my allegiance until death. The good soldier knows when it is his duty to surrender."

Then before anybody could grasp his intention he turned back to the window, wriggled through it, and was gone. The glass slammed shut, but by the time everybody had rushed to it the waste of water outside was dark and empty.

"He—he killed himself," Val whispered. "The poor, duty-crazed fool!"

"No—a good soldier," Kang said quietly. He stood thinking for a moment, then with a shrug he turned and pointed to the gleaming mountain ramparts coming ever nearer.

"There is the foundation of a new world," he said slowly. "The foundation of a world in which all men, as one of your great American statesmen once said, shall be free and equal."

THE END

[The end of *The Last Secret Weapon* by John Russell Fearn (as Polton Cross)]