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JULY

# Weird Tales

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Vol. 30, No. 6

# The High Tower

BY EVERIL WORRELL

*New York's towers are grounded in granite—mighty crystal sets that  
can contact powers beyond our little earth!*

AS DUSK came on, the fog deepened. White-dark, it pressed against the windows. New York was a skeleton city wrapped in its shroud. Gaunt shadows were the buildings, ghost-lights the neon and electric signs, and the room in which Elin faced the old gentleman across a double mahogany desk was a lost tower in a mediaeval fortress which thrust against the sky in no real land. Life is beginning again, and I am favored and fortunate, Elin told herself; but she felt like one caught in a strange spell and moving toward some unhappy doom.

The old gentleman's eyes were pale and a little foggy too, and the heaviness of his eyeglasses gave them the effect of being very large and of pressing against the glasses as he looked at Elin, somewhat as the pale fog pressed against the windows of the room. Dr. Grunch—master of many sciences.

Trail-blazer in astronomy and radio and chemistry—an impossibly comprehensive combination. Elin had gotten the position of secretary to Dr. Grunch through high favor and influence. The doctor had gone into business some years back, had become a minor executive and then a more important one in the office of an airplane factory—and finally this position of great trust at the headquarters of the greatest airplane manufacturing company of America in war time. He was greatly trusted in Washington; greatly trusted by men high in the Department of Justice.

He looked across the mahogany desk benevolently.

"Elin is a lovely name," he said gently.

"Well— Here we are, cut off from the world—I and a lovely girl bearing a lovely old name—high above the city in a fog like the one that veils the Styx."

He fell silent. Somewhere a victrola played softly the Song of India. Elin knew the words: "Somewhere in our islands— Pearls and rubies laden—" More than ever she felt as though she were dreaming a strange dream in which she had passed beyond the limits of the world.

"My dear, I want to talk to you. An agent of the F.B.I. recommended you to me—a highly trusted man. With the United States at war, with our Fifth Column here, with the need of our planes across the ocean, our work is highly confidential. I believe you yourself have a strong motivation, an unusual patriotism and devotion to the cause of our defense. There was something, too, about suspicions which you held in regard to your husband's death, and some plan of investigation and vengeance on your part. In connection with this I may be able to help you; also it may be that our roads run parallel or even cross. I will recite to you my understanding of your case, and my dictograph will record my recital and your answers—for reference and convenience, as a correct record of a statement of fact. Is this agreeable to you?"

Elin's consent was eager.

"Richard had some strange theories about the underlying cause of world condi-



tions. Vampire-like aggression, sadism; bleak inhumanity—loss of human characteristics by sound psychological standards. Richard said the parallel developments on both sides of the wide oceans and under every sky had a reason that had been neither grasped nor guessed at by our statesmen, our investigators or defense agencies.

"Richard believed the earth—the *whole earth*—to have come under some ruthless coldly-cruel domination from afar. The Scriptures foretell an Anti-Christ. Richard believed some darkly evil Power from afar had established contact—and emprise over—a part of our world. Over the minds of certain groups of peoples in a sort of mass hypnosis; over the minds of

their leaders, most of all—using these leading minds as burning glasses through which rays of distilled evil focussed upon our planet."

There was a pause in the girl's recital. It had been impassioned; she was coming now to the blacker part of her own personal tragedy—to that which was harder to tell. And in the short time she took to gather courage, she heard the muted strains of majestic music which she knew well—Rubinstein's *Kaminow Ostroev*.

Her spoken story was being recorded, Dr. Grunch had said. A second victrola, then, was playing the music—or a radio. She was glad for the music; from such music as this she had always drawn strength. And now she was ready to go on.

"RICHARD and I had a summer cottage on the south shore of Long Island—the place was isolated, other campers few and not very near. I spent a week-end in town.

"Richard had been having strange annoyances. A very valuable ring was charged to him at an expensive jewellers' on Fifth Avenue. Someone had taken the ring 'on approval' in his name, having furnished some sort of forged identification. Richard would have been seriously embarrassed but for the fact that he could prove he hadn't been in New York on the day or during the week when the ring was taken from the store.

"Richard believed this was one of a series of attempts to discredit him because he was trying to interest the Department of Justice in certain lines of investigation he had been following alone. The jewellers' firm never recovered the stolen ring; but Richard obtained a copy of a letter the firm had from the man who took the ring. Richard's name was forged on the letter, which was partly in longhand, in handwriting which was a close imitation of his. I have the letter now, and I am going to

run down the writer—some day, somehow—"

Again Elin's voice trailed into silence. Again she listened for a moment to the music which underran her story like the sweeping grandeur of an operatic musical theme behind a story of stark tragedy.

"You said you wanted to question me. I am sure, though, you want my account of—what happened when Richard was alone at our cottage.

"The cottage burned to the ground with Richard in it. I have always believed someone came in at night and killed him first. There was a man we had seen hanging around—but we thought he was a tramp. I—would know him again. It—Richard's death came too soon after the failure of the plot to involve him in the theft of the diamond ring. It was not coincidence—I would know that man again, though I saw him at dusk and with his face half concealed. I'd give my life to unravel the plot—which I believe concerns the country, our country; as much as it did Richard and me. I'd give my life."

The strains of *Kaminow Ostroev* were nearing their soaring climax. Dr. Grunch leaned forward across his mahogany desk, and spoke with unusual clearness and precision.

"You, Elin Kingsley, returned to your summer camp and found it burned to the ground, your husband dead in the embers?"

Shuddering, Elin answered as concisely, as though she were on a witness stand.

"That is right."

"And you state your willingness to bend your efforts to bring the murderer to justice?"

They seemed, both of them, to be speaking in a balanced rhythm; to be following the music.

"Yes, I do. With all my heart."

"This statement is given freely and of your own accord?"

Odd phrasing; but—

"Quite freely. Yes."

Soft—high—pure were the last notes as the music ended. Dr. Grunch pressed a button on his desk and spoke into the dictograph.

"Send me Donald Almaric."

During this next pause, Dr. Grunch whistled softly: something from "Martha". Most unwelcomely, Elin thought of men in high position and of great cruelty who had been strangely addicted to beauties of line and color and harmony: dilettante artists who meted out judgment and death in time to music—

Her imagination was feverish, she told herself; yet there was a brutal heaviness of jaw to Dr. Grunch that affected her oddly, and which she had not before noticed.

Quick steps entered and crossed the room—stopped, somehow jerkily, by the double mahogany desk, as a deep voice said quietly: "You wanted me?"

"As a witness, first. Listen to this recording."

Still without leaving his seat—he was a large, heavy man—Dr. Grunch pressed a button which started the hidden victrola again. Made, the record was to be played back at once. Super-equipment, Elin thought. Listened, then: with horror unutterable, which grew moment by moment until it reached the unendurable which still must be endured.

THE strains of Kaminow Ostroev were there, and against them, in narrative, a voice. The voice was that of Dr. Grunch. The words—a devil might have concocted them.

"You were camping with your husband in a cottage on the south shore, in a lonely, isolated place. Your husband devoted himself to investigations prompted by patriotic concern over the national emergency, and these investigations and his patriotism wearied you unspeakably. You put a sleeping potion in a highball which you then

induced him to drink, and, when he was unconscious, you set fire to the cottage, burning it to the ground. You had previously registered at a New York hotel, and you were not accused.

"You, Elin Kingsley, confess that you thus murdered your husband?"

Elin held her breath. That music— It had been playing just this part when he began to interrogate her a while ago! She listened, in an agony. And her own voice— unmistakably her voice—came back in nightmare horror to her ears:

"That is right."

"And in view of evidence which I hold against you, to persuade me for the present to silence—you testify the foregoing statement is true?"

"Yes, I do. With all my heart."

"This statement is given freely and of your own accord?"

Elin's heartbeats drummed in her ears. These were the words Dr. Grunch had really spoken to her, to which she had answered— And again she listened to her own voice:

"Quite freely. Yes."

She was sick, and the floor—was rising crookedly before her darkening eyes. From a distance she heard once more Dr. Grunch's voice, and now it was rather tired and very old, very gentle:

"Catch her, my boy!"

Arms held her, though she tried to rally, to struggle, as though they were the arms of an executioner—which, she knew as knowledge failed, they might well enough be. But they did not feel evil; only strong.

Then she gave up consciousness gladly, escaping from shock and hurt beyond endurance.

It seemed long afterward when Elin's senses returned to her, and perhaps it was, though outside the high window above New York the night was unchanged and the fog still pressed.

"She'll be all right. Take her home for me, Don."

She struggled to a sitting posture. She had been lain on a divan.

"What—are you going to do to me?" she pleaded with dry lips.

"Now— Now, don't excite yourself. Naturally, you were quite shocked. I might be forcing your resignation; I might have designs on your life, and wanted this record to make your death appear suicide. I might be motivated in many ways.

"Let it be left for now at this.

"You are my subordinate here. I have the policy of acquiring absolute control over those who work close to me. For various reasons, such is the case with you. You are, for the present, to go on as you expected to do. Forget your husband's work, however, and his theories, and your schemes for revenge. You will be busy with your work here, and we do not want you to endanger yourself—or to be otherwise active independent of your official duties. And that is all. Come tomorrow—but not early, if you are too tired. Now— Good night."

It was dismissal. Thank God for that. For the rest? Still nightmare and uncertainty. And this stranger Don Almaric was to take her home? She would have preferred to go alone, felt more reassured to go alone; but she dared not even speak. Silently she nodded a sort of mute acquiescence to Dr. Grunch's orders and went with the man to whom he had consigned her. He was tall and strong, and wore, she now saw, the clothes of an aviator, having on dark sun glasses as though he suffered some eye injury.

Silently and together, the two of them went out into the night.

In the taxicab, Elin again felt faint. Dizzy and a little sick after the strain and shock of a while ago. Holding on to herself to combat the feeling of weakness and malaise, she was unaware when the cab left

its course toward her apartment. It stopped, after a while, before a brownstone house in the East Eighties, and she yielded herself to the guiding arm of her companion, who helped her out into the dark, murky air. And then she drew back, wearily resentful, nervously apprehensive.

"I gave you my address— You've brought me somewhere else!"

ANGER and weakness struggled for possession of her, and her voice trembled, further unnerving her. But the tall man at her side turned to her in a sudden eagerness that cut through her misgivings, taking his hand from her arm as though to leave her a free agent even while he commanded her presence with him.

"Mrs. Kingsley—Elin—You've got to listen to me. This is where I live, and you are quite safe with me. You must come in for a while—an hour—half an hour. There are things I must say to you. Things you must know."

Reassured, yet not entirely, Elin bent her head. After all she was going it blind. Caught in a net; playing a game of which she did not even know the name—if there was here a chance to learn, it must be taken. She had been near to death tonight, she had thought. The openness of Dr. Grunch's treachery told her he would stop at nothing. To be afraid would not help her. There was no escape from fear, which would walk beside her, work with her, accompany her home in the dark winter evenings. The only hope was to learn something that might help—if there was anything that could help—

The house was a private one remodeled into a rooming house. Donald Almaric's room was on the second floor, and at the back.

"This is quiet, and more or less my own place. I fixed it over a little. But I may not be here so very long—almost anything would have done."

The silence after this little speech seemed to speak. And the language it spoke was sinister. Service under Dr. Grunch might be short and perilous. Elin feared him, and he held her in a vise. She had thought she also feared Donald Almaric; but perhaps he was as innocently well meaning a person as she herself had been when she walked into Dr. Grunch's set-up. Two well-meaning flies, thoroughly enmeshed in a web from which release perhaps could come only through death. One false step in a maze where pitfalls waited for unwary feet that did not know where they were going—

She shuddered, and Almaric seated her in a chair before the fireplace, in which a fire was laid. He bent over it, striking a match; and Elin studied him—his tall, well set up body, and the shape of his head, and the way it was set on his shoulders. There was something about him that was very pleasing. Likable in a way in which one does not think of a stranger.

She felt herself blush, and it was rather a pleasant feeling. It had been long since she had done that. The strain, the shock of this evening, had made her come alive. It must have been that.

Then she shrank back into the depths of her chair. For Almaric had moved swiftly as the flames leaped up in the dark fireplace, so that now he knelt before her. He did not touch her—but she felt the power of his thought, of his will, as though they were tangible things.

"You and I must work together, and you must trust me. I don't know where to begin. There is much you have to learn, if you are to help me against such foes as you have not imaged in your wildest nightmares. Foes of ours, because they are foes of this land we love. Foes of God's world, that should be fair and peaceful."

Elin stared back in utter silence into the eyes searching hers. The dark glasses laid aside, those eyes were deep set and deeply burning, and they seemed to ask questions,

and to read the answers to those questions without need of words. They were dark; but there was something unusual about their darkness; a hint of clear gray depths that changed almost to black from an enlargement of the pupils. And, keen as the eyes were, there was in them a look of strain, almost of pain. The dark glasses were worn, then, for grave reason.

When Almaric spoke again, Elin's shrinking turned to trembling.

"There's no way to say what I must, but the shortest. I know where to begin, now; it must be with you and me; and you must trust me—beyond all possibility you must trust me. You see, there is no time; we are like two who might have met during the French revolution under the shadow of the guillotine. The need of haste sweeps away the need of censorship, of delay, of weighing this and measuring that.

"Life is a broken song, and love another, and I love you; and when we part tonight it may be forever, because I go on a journey that may take me out of your life—and out of life. Now there is no time for any more of this, any more than we would have time for the things people have time for to whom life is a long, slow, aimless softness. And I would not exchange with them, if tonight is my last night on earth. Only—Only I wish my going—if I must go—were not to accomplish what it must. I go on a mission which means, I think, that I shall locate something it is vital I must locate. But to return with that knowledge is another thing."

As his voice faltered at the beginning of the last sentence, it seemed close to breaking, and Elin was strangely touched. But then he went on strongly, and as he finished his eyes grew compelling and tender.

"I have only one more thing to say about you and me—or rather, about you," he resumed. "Something I want to hear—Elin—with your heart.

"Your eyes are two blue lakes, your



mouth a rose. In your eyes is the wisdom of a beautiful soul, and your lips are a promise that should be kept. But you are a creature of the spring rather than of summer, and you are a lovely moon that is always crescent, and it is so I carry your image with me and think of you.

"Now that is a prose poem about you, Elin, and perhaps I've read too many poets, from Omar Khayyam to Tagore. Anyway, it fits, and those words have been said to you—almost like that—by another, whom you trusted. Elin—Elin—"

FOR the second time in her life, and for the second time in one night, Elin fainted. For the words, or words very like them, that Almaric had used, had been spoken to her twice before—by two men she had loved. Derek first—he had loved her very deeply, and he had written them into a sort of poem, half in prose. Richard had seen that poem, after her parting in anger with Derek—a senseless anger over nothing of importance; Richard had made her forget the pain of it. Richard had loved her so much he had loved that poem Derek had written to her, had said it fitted her, had said the words over sometimes, a little whimsically—

And tonight, to hear them from a stranger—

There was the taste of brandy on her lips, and Almaric stood at a little distance from her as she opened her eyes.

"You must be—have been—a friend of Richard's—or of Derek Lance, to have heard those words. I suppose men do share their dreams sometimes, as women do; though it seems unlike either of them. To hear those words this way, after so long—"

Almaric's smile was quizzical, a little remote.

"There's humor in all things; even love; even death," he said. "I said we have no more time for personal conversation, and it is true. I think you trust me now, and I

need that, for I need your help in a cause that is both yours and mine. And yet I wish—I could have uttered that little bit of descriptive blank verse as though it were my thought only—not mentioning any other man. People love once, and seldom twice, and you have the advantage of me, for I've never loved until I saw your face. And I ask you to love a third time, even while I say there is no time for love. If by a happy chance there *should* be time for love, we'll speak of this again. But now—

"I am familiar with Dr. Grunch's method of superimposing one recording upon another where blank spaces have been left, which is the method he used for forging your spoken confession. The music furnished the timing. He does those things sometimes with a deadly object; sometimes merely for practice. He is a mechanical wizard—and, unfortunately, a great scientist. And the purposes and ends he serves—

"I have another record of the doctor's making, and I want you to listen to it. You'll find it beyond belief, beyond explanation. Any explanation should come after you heard it, and after hearing it you will be able to believe what I shall tell you."

In the corner of the room stood a radio-victrola, and Almaric crossed over to it. Elin leaned back in her chair again, not in weakness, now, but with a feeling of ease that was both new and unreasonable. Peace in the face of peril, and a feeling of having reached home after a long journey, just at the outset of monstrous and terrifying adventure. Strange alchemy. But no need to fight it. People weren't blamed for their thoughts or feelings if they stood on the deck of a sinking ship—or if they were cast away on an island inhabited by headhunters. Elin thought of Dr. Grunch and shivered; headhunters who were frankly savages would be so infinitely preferable to smooth old gentlemen of impeccable

manners who plotted to destroy you and all you thought worth living for. But that, of course, was the Fifth Column they had talked and written about at the beginning of the Great War; before they had come to calling it the black cancer, because of the way it ate at the heart of a nation, and then the nation died—or functioned, Zombie-like, an animated corpse.

There came the little sound a record makes when it begins to play. Then words, in a voice that brought Dr. Grunch uncomfortably near, since it was his:

"Conditions are as good as I can bring about. Will you come in? Will you speak?"

Another pause. And Elin knew that Dr. Grunch's voice had held one quality, at least, which she had not heard in it before. Was that quality fear, or was it—awe?

Now another voice. And this was the voice of the person the doctor was afraid of.

The voice of a person who spoke strangely, indistinctly. There was a distortion that suggested distance and transmutation through more than one medium of conductance. There was a suggestion of something *organically* strange—as though a deformed, or strangely formed throat accomplished with difficulty sounds which necessitated painful effort. A phrasing that was foreign—but *that* was a secondary effect. *Slow* syllables that at first meant little, because it was hard for the ear to assimilate them. Slow syllables:

"I COME in. Conditions well. You accomplish much, and it goes fast onward. We will see the race of men go mad, and the resisters utterly destroyed. They quarrel; when a nation takes up brutal arms of aggression, those who love peace most accuse the victims—not the aggressors. That is because they fear to raise the curtains of their windows and look out on the horror that waits; so because of their fear they blame the sufferers. For dare they

blame the aggressors, and haste the evil day to them in their turn?

"In cowardice they cringe before the whip. But the whip is a whip of scorpions, and those who dare not stand together shall be scourged in separateness until all their blood is shed. And brother shall turn against brother, arguing and blaming, as in no other civil war ever. They shall blame each other for any warlike word, and yet for lack of preparing weapons at the same time, and in their confusion their minds shall grow dark as night.

"And the aggressor nations, those whose hearts we have won to us, shall conquer; till afterward, WE come. We, from space. We who kill more coldly than any; more insatiably; more utterly. And who reward such as you.

"Keep the way open to *me*, night and day, for the time is near. Increase the mighty arsenal under the wings of the desert mirage. Make sure it is enough to account for your country which boasts so greatly. Guard that arsenal and the hidden place thereof. And fear always the danger of the encroachment of that rare telepathy which is the only threat to our secret plans. If there is one capable of utter heights of pure devotion impersonal and selfless—yet pointed by personal love and loyalty—guided on the hidden path by light from more than one world—rarely is there man or woman like that, and such a one must be destroyed. And now—"

The strange words turned into gibberish.

After it was over, after a little silence, Elin asked:

"A doctrine of utter terror—spread by whom, or—what? Is there a clue?"

Almaric's right hand moved slightly.

"This is a reproduction of a record I borrowed—stole—from Dr. Grunch's files. I turned it off, but there is more. Listen to the end."

The guttural gibberish recommenced. Assumed, slowly, again resemblance to

human words in a tongue unknown, or little known, to Elin. Put on the cloak again of difficulty spoken English, at the end—which was in few words. These were:

"Now I sign off. Sending from Saturn, I, the Lord of Chaos, spoke to Earth."

Lightly, Almaric crossed the room to the deep chair where Elin sat like one lost in nightmare. Lightly he lifted her and carried her to the divan.

"I won't take you home tonight. You are so tired. And if you are safe anywhere, it is here. We are together, I'd live for you—die for you. That means something, even in this darkened world.

"Sleep. I'll lie down in the next room. In the morning we'll talk again, but briefly, for I leave very early."

When the electric lights were snapped off, the room was soft in firelight and shadow. Elin felt encompassed by a white magic that would turn away the evil that lurked—so heavily.

"Sending from Saturn—I, the Lord of Chaos." Some madman. Madness was chaos, and the world was mad, and its madness was spreading. What if—

**L**IKE tender, soothing fingers the soft lights and shadows slipped across Elin's white lids, closed now in utter weariness. Elin slept.

Somewhere, with great insistence, a bell rang. Footsteps then, that hurried; and an insistent knocking at the door.

Dressed in the clothes he had worn last night, which he undoubtedly had slept in as had Elin in hers, Almaric strode across the room where Elin lay. The dark glasses were before his eyes, and he seemed alert and ready to be gone.

"Those who serve as we serve earn a night's deviation at the price of upsetting the spy system, and must pay for it in one way or another," he muttered as he threw open the door.

Outside a man stood who seemed to Elin vaguely familiar. Something she could not place—but something remembered—

"Mrs. Kingsley? Excuse my following you here—but I have so little time. I found you had been employed in Dr. Grunch's office, and that you had left there last night with Donald Almaric. Not finding you at home, I came here— But what does that matter? Though I think you were told to go to your home.

"I have a message for you, Mrs. Kingsley, from a former friend of yours—and of your husband's. I come from Derek Lance. He went as a volunteer, you doubtless knew, in foreign service against the 'Aggressor Gebund'. I happen to be a foreign correspondent of a newspaper here.

"I was allowed a few words with Derek Lance in hospital—just before his death. He had— Ah, I regret—"

Elin, who had risen, felt herself sway against Almaric's arm. She heard Almaric's deep, bitter curse, and that, more than the touch of his arm, seemed strangely strengthening.

"Derek was a dear, dear friend—of mine and Richard," she heard herself say.

"Go on. I am ready to hear any message he sent, of course."

"He had won spectacular fame as an aviator, in the defense of Britain, and so I sought him out. He spoke of you just before he died. He said: 'Tell her, and all of them, to lay down their arms. The aggressor nations cannot be defeated. Once submission is complete, the world will be reborn. Tell Elin Kingsley to unite herself with those who come to conquer her country, for her country is weak and divided—decadent. She may find safety thus. I've heard she and Kingsley were carrying on inquiries of a dangerous nature. Tell Elin, convince the destroyers of her loyalty to them, before too late. Tell her I died in torture—let her live in safety. Safety is

better than loyalty, and those who fight the irresistible conqueror are fools.'"

Elin stared at the man who had spoken. Nothing outstanding in feature or bearing; a very average man in appearance. Bold eyes that met her own—it was not the eyes that she almost remembered. Something in the set of the shoulders? Not the eyes, but they were so bold, so china-blue that anyone who knew this man should remember them, and she did not.

That awful message from Derek. Message of utter defeat. Of a brave spirit broken. Message of twofold death, that of the body and of the high heart she had known well.

She must thank this man who bore the message. Her dry lips parted and she heard no sound. And then they spoke—of their own volition, for she had not intended the words they uttered.

"You lie. Derek Lance may have died. He never sent that message. They could kill his body, but not his soul. He'd fight what is devilish and vile and cruel till he died—and after he died. As I will."

She was never to forget the look of hatred that came into those bold, china-blue eyes then. But Almaric swung her around by the arms so that they faced each other. She could not see his eyes behind the dark glasses; but something passed between them that was deeper than a look, something for which there were no words.

The china-blue eyes were on Almaric when a sharp word from their owner recalled Elin's attention.

"Mr. Almaric, I stopped by Dr. Grunch's office, as you will have gathered. Beside the message to Mrs. Kingsley, I bear his sealed orders to you. You leave at once."

Only for a moment more his hands touched her, his eyes held her, though she could not see them. Then he spoke quickly:

"I told you I was under orders and they have come. I was waiting for them—

"I leave on Dr. Grunch's mission. Elin, good-by until I come again."

The two men left together. She hoped their ways lay apart; but that was a detail. This mission was one from which there might be no return, and Almaric had spoken casually of returning because of the hateful presence of the messenger.

She must go to the office today, fearful or brave; then better go as bravely as possible. Besides, she couldn't rest. There might be clues—a clue—to the nature of Almaric's journey. He might have told her more. Perhaps he would have done so, but for the arrival of China-Blue Eyes. She must try to find out something more for herself, at the risk of her life—which was no great risk since it was already forfeit as price of knowing too much.

But as she turned in the street, a taxicab swerved close to her, so close that she winced away from it. The door opened, and she felt as though a cavern yawned before her.

"Get in, my dear!" Ah, it was Dr. Grunch. She would not even be allowed the respite of a return to the office and its fears—

"We are also going on the journey Almaric and the man you saw are taking," said Dr. Grunch.

"This is a crisis of international affairs—of affairs reaching beyond this planet, did you but know. They are on their way to the air field. Almaric will fly our plane, but we go as passengers—we others. What is to be done must be well done—and thoroughly!"

**N**IGHTMARE. Waiting, delay, the commonplace, the unbelievable. The taxi crawling through traffic; and Elin wondered if she could have escaped. She would not try. She longed to be with Almaric. This deck of cards from which they were playing with the issues of more than life and death was stacked against them—but

they would be together. Her heart hastened ahead, to be with him. And there must be a chance; some chance, any chance. She and Almaric trusted each other, were true. This meant, then, more than doubling forces; there was a charm for good in the allegiance of two who were honest and brave.

They reached the airport, found the waiting plane and took off. Elin saw the glint of steel at the edge of Dr. Grunch's coat pocket, in which he hid his right hand; the other man, still nameless to her, likewise kept his right hand in his pocket, which showed no gleam of metal, but which bulged. And so they enplaned and left the earth. No one interfered with Almaric in the handling of the plane. He had his orders; he would certainly have to carry them out.

Dr. Grunch was preoccupied, much of the time, after the first few moments. He took from a huge briefcase which he carried two boxes with sliding covers, and into these he frequently peered.

And the plane's course was westward, its speed beyond any Elin had known to be possible. Still, there were those new bombers from California, that disappeared from sight before their sound reached watchers on the earth, and this plane was not more powerfully motored than that. But it hurled itself, through the air—ever westward, and the topography over which they passed in the far upper distance changed—the Eastern mountains were crossed, the Midwestern farmlands, the broad Mississippi a thin ribbon—then the Western prairies and the mesa country.

And here the plane shot downward.

"Lower, Almaric. Pretty low. And when you see something, glide lower and slower, and drop the parachuted parcel—and rest easy about damaging what is beneath its fall. Its damage is not intended for our own center of armament, our arsenal."

Silently, then, the four of them stared earthward. The plane sloped downward.

The mesa-land looked like desert pictures, bare, rocky, shining with shimmering dawn-colors although the sun had passed the zenith now.

Then—

Elin caught her breath, half unbelieving. Down there ahead a red light flashed a signal. Its beam was pencil-shaped, and it glared against the full noonday radiance of sunlight on barren ground, sand and rock. The power of light which could show itself distinctly to an airplane against that reflected sunglare was beyond belief.

But something stranger still:

Around the spot from which that red pencil of light proceeded was empty desert. Yes, but was it empty desert? A ghostly, mirage-like picture seemed to shimmer through the light—Elin's eyeballs ached as she stared down. They drew nearer. It was like one picture superimposed upon another. Nearer and lower: and the desert was no longer there. Instead, a walled city, not small, grimly significant, appeared.

It had factories, many of them. A huge field full of bombing planes, row on row of them; another field, like a fantastic giant's parking lot, was full of tanks. Nearby, cannons and anti-aircraft guns. And all of this was an arsenal-city under glass. From a reasonable distance a flier saw only the continued reflection-picture of desert that surrounded those glass walls, because of the slant and thickness of them. No painting made with opaque paints could have been safe from detection as this was safe; the light would play tricks with such a painting, it could be detected. But this shimmery, mirror effect—it had the verisimilitude of mirage, which is detectable only because it is seen in an unexpected place. The mirage-like picture of continued desert would never be suspected in a million years by a flier at ordinary cross-country flight altitudes; because he would see, of course, only what he expected to see—must see: the desert country.

The parachute was launched, went fluttering down. Dr. Grunch went to speak to Almaric. The plane changed the direction of its flight, and continued away for perhaps a quarter of an hour. Then it slanted down and glided to a landing. Dr. Grunch took Elin's arm to lead her from the plane, holding it possessively. She stepped out and looked about her.

This was still unbroken desert. But on the other side of the plane from which she stood now, there was a poor sort of road leading up to an unpainted, dingy desert habitation; a farm house where there was nothing to farm. Elin shuddered a little.

They had landed here, at a place that showed no reason for its existence. Why? Almaric had set the plane down because of those two automatic revolvers which the other men carried. But why had he been ordered to do so?

SHE felt her heart grow sick, and the fainting of her faculties against which she had fought and lost yesterday in Dr. Grunch's office. But now she was harder, she would not faint. Besides, so long as one was conscious, there might be more of a chance. This place resembled a kidnaping hideout, as much as anything. Here where no farm was or could ever be, it might have been used for just that purpose. Well, in that was a little hope, not much. But men and women and children have been kidnaped and never seen alive, and also they have been kidnaped and returned to their own homes and lives. Only—this was hardly a case of holding for ransom.

She knew too much. Almaric knew too much. It was perhaps some protection that no one would believe them if they told what they knew. Yet—

"Tonight we rest here and sleep," Dr. Grunch said in a very oily tone.

"That parcel we dropped contained germs. They are making up some new poison-bombs for our total war against ex-

isting governments of the democracies. We who war from within have great advantages, indeed. Why dissemble longer? All of us know the situation. Well—tonight we sleep. Soundly, I hope. I myself can do with a few hours of sound slumber; last night I was busy with the germ-container. Tomorrow—you will know all you wonder about—and will have forgotten all that you know— Will have forgotten.

He looked at Elin, and sighed a little. And the sigh seemed like a seal set on her doom, and Almaric's. He knew what would be done to make them sleep soundly enough to forget—

She felt a scream rising in her throat, and choked it down vehemently. Hysterics would be worse than fainting, because they would hurt Almaric now. She'd walk bravely to meet what came so stealthily—

She walked, in fact, across the road and toward the dingy little house with no prompting. And, his step sounding springy and firm beside her, Almaric overtook and walked with her.

The door sagged open, and they entered the dark, ill-smelling room beyond it. And behind them, following, came the footsteps of the other two. And brief words, muttered low in Dr. Grunch's suave tones:

"Almaric never learned that the explosion that almost blinded him was an attempt at my order, to get him out of the way. This girl—I have a recording in her voice which will impute her disappearance to suicide. We can make good time on this trip and be back in New York tomorrow. One move from either of them—each of us knows what to do with his revolver, my lad!"

The westering sun slipped behind the mesa rim, and when that door closed behind the three men and Elin, it was as though night entered the dirty room with them. A night that would know murder, but not another dawn for her and Almaric.

Dr. Grunch looked significantly at his

assistant and nodded; and the latter went into an adjoining room and lit a lamp there. It cast a dingy yellow light, which streamed out through the doorway, lessening the darkness in the room where Elin and Almaric stood with Dr. Grunch. It threw the shadow of that man in the next room who still was nameless on the wall opposite the doorway.

Elin's heart seemed to burst outward and upward, almost to stop her breathing; checking the scream upon her lips because she was suffocating with an unexpected, twisting terror. For she knew that shadow, that silhouette. She had seen it near the camp where Richard was killed. She had felt there was some ugly association connected with China-Blue Eyes—now she knew. This was one of the killers of the international organization that would destroy humanity, as the earth had known humanity. Every one of the vulture-nations had boasted numbers of these professional killers, as they had boasted of their infiltration of professional trouble makers. And she and Almaric were to meet their end at the hand of this man to whom killing was a job.

"Ready, Doctor!"

She moved close to Almaric. For this was the voice of that other, the killer in the adjoining room. But Dr. Grunch turned heavily toward the doorway and passed through it. There was to be a respite—at least of moments.

**D**R. GRUNCH'S footsteps sounded heavy and ponderous in the next room. Then he spoke—in a tone low, but not low enough to make his words inaudible to the two who listened. And Elin thought—the unspeakable cruelty of letting them hear!

"You will have to subdue Almaric. One shot from either of our guns if he shows fight or makes a move to escape. The door and window locks will hold well enough to

give us any warning we need while we are in here.

"If Almaric stays quiet, then a blow on the head when we are ready. In the unlikely event these ruins are ever searched, a bullet hole sometimes shows on the charred skeleton. Take the girl after Almaric. I myself will give her an injection before we fire the house. I am a little sorry for the girl.

"Then fire the shack and we leave. But first I will report progress, that we are here, that we are about to eliminate these two who understand too much of things others would laugh at, and so never believe till all is over. The space-radio—"

Into a short silence broke the crackling sound of heavy static Elin had listened to on the record Almaric had run for her in his room in New York. She shrank inwardly again, her heart and stomach seeming to leave their positions in her body, as the onset of an acute seasickness sometimes makes them seem to do. For she expected now, in this horrible place and in the face of certain and sordid death, to listen to the obscene croakings of whatever monstrosity she had listened to back in the comparative safety of Almaric's room.

Pressing her handkerchief against her mouth, forcing a semi-control of her nerve reactions, she crept close to Almaric, pressed silently against him. His arms closed around her—drew her close—closer.

And in the horrible little room a miracle happened.

What had Almaric told her, back in the comparative haven of New York?

"No time for delay, for play at love—"  
Something like that!

There was time only for the real, the true, he had said.

He was right. The past was very far away, and death was very near, and here in the room in which she would shortly be murdered, Elin knew again and most unexpectedly the lost rapture of love. Almaric

a stranger? Not that, since both of them had given their lives to one gallant cause, and for it were losing them. Rather, two late met, but bearing each in the inmost hidden place of heart and soul a secret code or signal—an open sesame by which they must recognize each other. Late met, but not too late, since before death they knew—

The world with its imminent horror seemed for a moment utterly to vanish. Because it did not matter.

It was surprise that brought them back to the world around them, made them listen again as they had never listened before. Surprise—and the dawn of an utterly impossible thing. A hint that here, at the end of the road, instead—

"I warned you, fool! Against bringing into contact with the earth-space radio vibrations, fatal things. We found our empire on hate and darkness. Love is a mystery, but we know it radiates something—destructive—"

It was the ugly, awe-inducing voice of the space monster. But it was broken—fading, and swelling, seeming to choke damply and to restore itself to a semblance of coherency by the most impossible and painful efforts.

"You opened the circuit between me and earth *before* those two were killed, in the next room. And they have fused suddenly their beings into a thing rare on earth or any planet—into that kind of love which kills things built on hate and darkness—and that can disintegrate—*me*—"

"No— Do not kill them *now*! The circuit is made— They are too near to me— Would find me out and direct the forces on which the universe has been upheld, against me— I, the indestructible, would be destroyed!

"Into dark, cold recesses of lost parts of unused space I—go— You have lost your emperor from space—and your empire on earth— Fool! Fool!— Ah!—"

Into no intelligible syllables the great voice died. If it had been a voice?

Something horrible that had pressed very near was going away. The noise was fading as into distances illimitable, and now it was not like the sound any voice could ever have made. It was a sound like the rushing of something formless going far through emptiness, and sucking and moaning as it went—reaching out for nothing into nothingness—

It was perhaps half an hour before anything more happened after merciful silence fell. Then Dr. Grunch came in.

"The man in there has lived by murder and would hire himself to someone else, and go on living by murder," he said. His voice was very old and very tired.

"He was not expecting me to turn against him. I slipped a hypodermic into his arm, and he will not wake again.

"In New York there is a high tower—the highest of all the skyscrapers. You know the one I mean. We used it to establish a space-radio system beyond the wildest dreams. Something of this you know. The towers of New York grounded in granite were like a mighty crystal set—always potentially the means of contacting powers beyond our little earth. They might have been used for good, perhaps—

"You know how I used them. The high tower must be inspected and our apparatus removed and destroyed. You, Almaric, will see to it. Without the New York station to draw down to earth the farthest radio waves, no other station can receive or send.

"There is, it seems, a higher tower that overtopped the one we used so successfully—the impregnable fortress of an unquenchable soul. When two like that meet a spark is kindled— Well, you heard. It is a spark of the divine fire that built the universe and gave it life, perhaps. It has been fatal to the one I served—has driven him out, away—beyond returning? Well, you heard.

"Without a leader from outside, the evil



in men's hearts will no longer reach to heights of madness. The world can be restored, policed—

"The arsenal in the desert can be used for that. Almaric, you will know what to do—to whom to report—

"I shall stay here. If you send for me, you will not find me. Take the plane, Almaric. Get it into the air with Elin—and leave this place. Elin is very tired.

"Take her home for me, my boy!"

THE plane loomed black against the soft diffusion of starlight on desert, and against the night sky with its brilliant desert stars. Just beyond hand-reach seemed the stars. Elin realized that for a long time she had not looked into the sky with any feeling of uplift. Now, even had she stood alone under the starry spaces, she would have known a joyful serenity.

But Almaric drew her close, as he had

drawn her in the dark hut a while ago.

"Those words I quoted about your mouth and eyes and—you—

"They were given me by Lance Derek, as he was dying. He knew that you and Richard, he and I, all served a common cause. He did not guess of course—unless with the strange prescience of the dying—that you could love me ever—though he might have felt, knowing you, that I must love you. Besides, then there was Richard.

"But he gave me those words to repeat to you if time was pressing and danger near, and I must compel your trust. If I must work with you and help you.

"When I first said them to you, they made you listen and believe me. Even then I meant them— And till I die—"

They climbed into the plane, that lifted to the skyway. The stars were nearer then—much nearer; and all around them, as they flew toward the dawn.

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