

Blue Murder

BY EDMUND SHELL

(Continued)

"I do this to you, too, Von Roeschen," said Ahlborg coldly. "I have a debt to settle with your people—and I have told you too much!"

There came a sound like the bursting of a steam-pipe. For a matter of seconds a brilliant blue light rendered every crevice in the wall visible. It died down presently, leaving only reeking fumes and a strange, huddled heap that had once been Von Roeschen.

Ahlborg pocketed his gun and walked toward the sea. For some moments he stood stock-still, gazing down at the swirling waters. Suddenly he threw both arms aloft and laughed horribly.

"This is the beginning," he cried to the stars. "The time for talking is past. I shall destroy the world!" The moon passed behind a cloud, taking the silver from the sea until it resembled a vast expanse of molten tar with bands of foam showing ghostly white. A cold, desolate wind rustled the grasses where Marney lay and he shuddered from head to foot.

Marney had gone. He was mounting the flight with queer, jerky strides, the glow from his cigar denoting his progress to the top. Presently it vanished altogether.

He spoke to the stars, too, but his remark was in the nature of a query to which he expected no answer. "Say!" he muttered, conscious all the while of the grim heap below; "what do you know about that?"

On the way back to the house in the Via Emilia, Marney dropped in at the Caffè Liguria.

It was the restaurant he most usually frequented, a comfortable, well-ordered place, with a patent coffee-machine, an array of bottles forming an immense pyramid behind the polished counter, and the prettiest barmaid in Rapallo.

Beyond a group of four soberly clad tradesmen engaged in a game of cards, he had the room to himself. He sat down at his accustomed table by the radiator and pressed his numbed fingers against the pipes.

Pina, creeping from behind the bar, watched him with an amused smile. "The Signor Americano is cold!" Marney looked up sharply.

"I am," he admitted. "I'm as cold as charity. Get me a coffee and some cognac, per piacere, and I'll love you for ever and ever!"

The flirt flushed, then burst into a peal of merriment. "Perhaps I don't want you to love me!"

Marney's face puckered up into a myriad of tiny wrinkles. "You don't, eh, Pina? Well, I can't say that I blame you. They tell me folks with cold hands have warm hearts. If there's any truth in that—my heart must be boiling over!"

She favored him with a quick glance that Marney was unable to interpret. A second later she was hidden behind the coffee-machine and water was bubbling, piping hot, into a cup.

The hot drink thawed his brain into working order. Before that he had been too cold to think. What a difference that hour had made! He had gone to the Casino turning vague theories over in his mind—and had come back stuffed so full of solid facts that he wanted the rest of the night to digest them!

Ahlborg was mad! He had suspected it before, and now he was sure of it. A madman in the possession of a secret like the *Eine Death* was not overpleasant to contemplate.

"The time for talking is past!" he had shouted when he had believed there was no one around to overhear. There was no madness in that, Marney told himself. It was probably the sanest sentence he had uttered that evening. No Government was going to discuss terms with a lunatic!

He picked up a newspaper from the adjoining table and held it in front of him as a screen against Pina's restless eyes. He could see she was bored, and wanted to talk to him, but Marney was in no mood for conversation. He had to sort all these facts into their proper pigeon-holes before meeting Taverner at the Porto Principe in the morning.

He remembered something in the train: "If the Lizard's the crook we imagine him to be," he had said, "he may be putting his services at anybody's disposal—providing the price is big enough." In which case Ahlborg may be paying him to get it back.

Querier that now that the truth was out! Ahlborg, the Lizard and Mafalda formed a sort of triple alliance, of which the girl, apparently, was the least reliable. It was her mad infatuation for Dighton that had saved him from the Lizard on the night when they had first met. Ahlborg, unobservant as he had contrived to appear, had not been blind to this. He had inveigled Greta to Rapallo with two definite objects in view; to disillusion Mafalda and to kidnap her as soon as this end was accomplished.

In all probability, Greta was at the Villa Sabino now. Marney shook his head.

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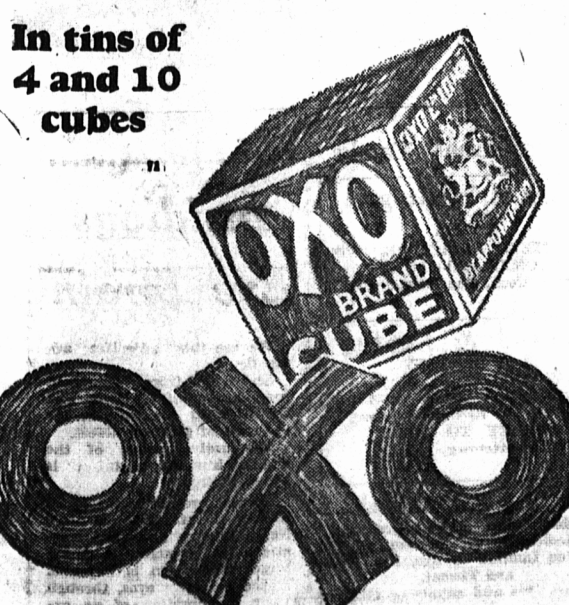
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He believed he had located her, but there was a vast difference between that and getting her out. He wondered if Ahlborg had foreseen what difficulties the holding of Miss Hays at the villa would bring. In a way, he supposed, it was a tribute to the activity of the Bureau Secret Service men. It showed that now that there was no question of the invention being bought, he only feared attack from one quarter.

The more he thought of it, the more the devilish cunning of his move appealed to Marney. In the simplest manner possible, Ahlborg had tied Taverner's hands. With the knowledge that his niece was within the four walls of the Villa Sabino he was unlikely the Chief would contemplate desperate measures.

And yet, he remembered, Taverner was not supposed to know. Mad as he was, Ahlborg would not have been so outspoken if he had known Marney was within hearing. There was something else behind this up. "Did I not always tell you there were rats in this cellar? Come down and see what our trap has caught!"

A tap came at the window at his back, a sharp succession of sounds as if some one were drumming on the glass with his finger-nails. Marney turned.

Through the misted pane, he saw a white face pressed against the outer surface and the shadow outline of a woman's head and shoulders.

He dropped a note on the table, nodded to Pina and went out.

The figure had vanished from the vicinity of the restaurant by the time he reached the street. He stood for a moment, hesitant, gazing to right and to left. Presently, at the corner of the Via Emilia, he saw a form wrapped in a black shawl and a white hand beckoning.

The Signorina Fontanelli! He recognized her now. He father had sent for him. She had been to the Casino gardens, as he had said, and traced him here. It could only mean one thing.

The girl had vanished into the darkness. Marney broke into a gasping hole in the kitchen floor, the cellar-door standing open and the cellar below flooded with light. Peering down before making the descent, he made out Fontanelli himself, squatting on a keg, with his hands on his knees.

"Is that you, signore?" he called up. "Did I not always tell you there were rats in this cellar? Come down and see what our trap has caught!"

Marney went down.

He had seen the man already, a queer, white-faced creature, erect against a well of the subterranean vault. One hand pawed at his throat and his face and half were bathed in perspiration. Moving closer, Marney saw the reason.

Fontanelli's knife, hung by the uttering hand of an ex-Ardito, had entered the side of his neck and held him pinned there!

"Santa Madonna!" moaned the Signor Americano; "I shall die!"

Marney halted between Fontanelli and his victim, eying him curiously. The little American was in his element now; his hands were on his hips, his legs set wide apart and his eyes glinted like two pin-points of fire.

"If you don't want to stay that way all night," he hissed, "tell me who you are."

The other, writhed.

"Take out this knife and I will tell you."

"Tell me," retorted Marney, "and I may take out that knife!"

"I am the Lizard!" jerked out the other suddenly.

Marney started as if he had been struck.

"You?" he ejaculated fiercely. "You?"

"I am the Lizard!" insisted the victim again—and Marney pulled out the knife.

He knew before he had asked that the man who dropped fainting into his arms was the night porter at Dighton's hotel.

(To Be Continued.)

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