

Castle of Terror

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*What strange dimension was this where giants, gangsters,
Lucretia Borgia, dwarfs and Rip Van Winkle lived at the same time?*

„Too bad, Griffin,“ Hale Jenkins said to the man alongside. „Now if you’d have just stuck to bank stick-ups, you’d have been all right.“

„Nah!“ Bud Griffin said, his mouth twisted in a wry grin. „I’d have been all right if you’d have just stuck to being a traffic cop. But you had to show the Commissioner you were on the ball, so he sent you after me. That’s all.“

The light suddenly flashed over the pilot’s compartment with its warning to fasten safety belts. A few seconds later, the stewardess came around with a smiling warning that they were coming over some bad pockets, and that there was no need to worry.

Both men fastened their belts, as did all the other passengers on the giant airliner, and after a while the elevator began its ride. Griffin reached up and pulled the air vent down, so that the cold air of the upper reaches at which they were flying could send its refreshing drafts of air down the vent. Jenkins had been airsick once and didn't want any more of the same. He followed Griffin's gaze, and looked into the grey fog of a huge cloud bank.

Jenkins, to get his mind off the possibility of getting sick again, took up where the other had left off: „Yeah. But like I say, you shoulda stuck to robbin' banks.“

His lean, strong face with the unusual bone structure which made it a face of highlights and plane surfaces, broke into a wide-angled grin. He threw the shock of black hair from his eyes, and continued: „Guys like you never learn. Gotta work with a heater.“

Griffin's opaque eyes shifted from the greyness which had encircled the plane, and met the dancing grey ones of the detective beside him. Griffin's lips mimicked the grin of the other. But his words were not so light-hearted: „Look, copper! You just got lucky. If it weren't for that dame... Aah! I shoulda been smart. I shoulda known she'd of sung. No dame can keep her yap shut! But get this. We ain't in yet! So be smart and don't think Bud Griffin's fryin'. Not yet he ain't.“

Jenkins was, for a detective, a rather amiable sort. In Griffin's case, however, he could not help but give an occasional needle. The hoodlum and murderer's bragging rasped on Jenkins' nerves.

„Now, don't blame the girl,“ Jenkins said. „She was just the last step in my trail. The guy who really talked was Bud Griffin. There's a character who'll never stop talkin'. If you hadn't talked to the bartender in that joint on the waterfront, I'd have never found out about Myrtle. But he knew Myrtle and the kind of girl she was; he knew she only went for the hoods who had dough, and no guy who drinks beer like you do and leaves no tips ought to have dough. So when Myrtle walks in with a platina fox jacket and says you bought it, he gets mighty suspicious.“

„It was a cinch then, Bud. All I had to do was tell the girl she was going to be named as an accessory after the fact, and she spilled her load.“

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Pin points of flame suddenly danced in Griffin's eyes. His hands, lying quiescent on his lap, curled into balls of bone and muscle. Griffin had many weaknesses; of them all, anger was his greatest. For in the heat of anger he would do anything, and not care about the consequences. It had proved his undoing many times. His last surge of anger had resulted in murder during a robbery. The victim had resisted Griffin and had been shot in cold blood. As always, that anger showed in visible signs: there came the pin points of flame to the eyes, the clenching of fists, and an odd curling of the mouth. But Jenkins, either because he did not know of these signs, or because he was so wrapped in his own glory, did not notice the other's shifting movement.

When Griffin struck, it was with electric speed. Certainly, he had nothing to gain by his attack on Jenkins. For had he thought it out logically, he would have realized there was no way of escape. Even a fool would have realized that there was no way of getting out of a plane which was flying at ten thousand feet, and

coming down alive, unless one had a chute. So it was sheer berserk anger which prompted the attack.

Griffin's right elbow shot up and sideways, and landed with telling force against Jenkins' jaw. At almost the same instant, he slipped loose of his safety belt, whirled on his companion and struck him two savage blows with his fists. Those blows stunned the detective. And like a snake in movement, Griffin's hand reached for the pistol in Jenkins' holster and drew it.

Dazed as Jenkins was, he tried to stop Griffin. The barrel of the gun slashed a furrow in his cheek for the try. The blow rocked the detective's head back, and allowed him to get out of his seat. In an instant he was in the aisle, leaping for the pilot's compartment. He had no plan; he wasn't even thinking. In the background of his mind he knew the panic he had created; he could see it reflected in the face of the woman in the front seat, in the wide, suddenly terror-stricken eyes of the man at her side. But what he was going to do when he reached the closed door that was his goal, he did not know.

There were screams and hoarse commands. From the rear, the stewardess shouted for him not to go beyond the door. Griffin reached it, whirled and faced the length of the plane, a snarl on his lips, and the .38 in his hand, a small-barreled threat of death to whoever was fool enough to attempt to stop him.

And there was one who was going to be a fool.

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Whether Jenkins was just dazed by the last blow, or whether he really thought he could stop the other, is a matter of conjecture. But he rose to his feet and started forward in a stumbling run.

„Come on, copper,“ Griffin grunted, a terrible smile of anticipation on his lips. „I been wantin' to knock you off.“

Everyone on the plane froze in horror as the gun muzzle came up. The finger on the trigger tightened in a sort of slow-motion action until it seemed as if the smallest pressure would set it off. And still Jenkins stumbled forward, until only a couple of feet separated the two. Then the grin became a snarl on Griffin's lips, and all knew the instant of death had arrived.

Jenkins must have felt it also, for he took the last few steps in a shambling, wide-armed leap, as if he were welcoming it. It was at that instant that the co-pilot decided to step through the door. The steel door slammed against the bent figure of the gunman just as he pulled the trigger. The gun went off with a roar, and Jenkins hit Griffin like a tackler slamming into a ball carrier.

But louder than the pistol's sound, was the sound from without the plane. It was as if all the fury of hell had exploded out there. The plane became a straw licked upward and outward, sucked downward and inward, in some vortex of sound and fury which was completely unrecognizable. It was as if some external force was venting its spleen on the craft. In the space of split seconds, in the time a picture forms in a mind, the plane and all its occupants lost their meaning.

There was a great rending sound and, following, the disintegration of the great ship into space.

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Hale Jenkins felt himself spinning, whirling, falling into a vast empty fog. There was peace and contentment in that fog, and a sort of forgetfulness. There was nothing above and nothing below, just the grey murk. For a last instant of awareness, Jenkins saw not far from him the body of Griffin describing the same gyrations as his own. Then there was a wrenching at his bowels, a tearing at his brain, and unconsciousness slipped over him like the noose over the hanged man.

Odd piping voices penetrated into Jenkins' brain. He stirred and rolled over, and after a few seconds got his hands under him and pushed himself erect. He felt rather than saw the tree close to him, and put one hand out to its friendly trunk, steadying himself against it. His head came up after a second and his eyes cleared of the fog before them. He stared in disbelief as he looked out over a great valley.

In the distance, made plain by the brilliant light of the sun, he saw a tremendous castle with many-turreted immense sides. It shimmered and danced in the brilliant light, like a mirage conjured by a fevered mind. Yet he knew, without being told, that it was real—as real as the three tiny men who regarded him with passionately intent though oddly frightened eyes from a few feet off.

But sight was not the only sense of which Jenkins had the full use. He was aware of an odd, rumbling sound in the distance, as of thunder, yet not quite thunder. He noticed that the gnomes had also heard the sound, for their eyes turned from their intent regard of him, to the castle perched on the mesa in the distance. He could not see their eyes now, yet he was aware that they held fear—cold, numbing fear—fright so great it binds the entrails, makes a stone statue of a man, even a dwarf.

They held their poses even after the dying sounds of the strange rumble had passed in the distance. When Jenkins spoke, it took several seconds for them to bring their attention to him:

„Where am I and who are you?“

Their answering voices were childish pipings, making even less sense of a confused situation:

„I am Loti...“ said the smallest, who wore a fringe of beard from his forehead all the way around a pointed, slat-like chin.

„I am Gaino,“ said the second. He had a hooked nose so long it almost touched his chin.

„I am Mikas,“ said the third, who had a round face, a bulbous nose whose color was that of a ripe tomato, flapping pointed ears too large for his face, and a pair of perfectly round eyes.

„Yeah? But where am I?“ Jenkins persisted.

„In the land of Gnat,“ all three piped in unison.

Slowly the brain-fog was clearing for Jenkins. The miracle of his landing safely was still not quite clear, nor could he understand the presence of these odd beings. But as reason returned to Jenkins, it told him something had happened which would perhaps be unexplainable.

He pointed toward the castle and said: „Who lives there?“

„Lucretia...“ they answered again in unison.

Now there's a familiar name, Jenkins thought, while at the same time a horrifying idea occurred to him. If it were Lucretia Borgia, he thought, then he might be dead. Suddenly, there was a spine-chilling roar, a vast crashing in the

underbrush close by, and a tremendous boulder sailed by and disappeared over the lip of the chasm. Its crashing echoes could be heard for a long time afterward. When Jenkins recovered his balance, the gnomes had disappeared.

Jenkins' eyes narrowed in search of them, but after one look at the thick underbrush, he turned aside and began to search for a path leading either through the brush or down the steep sides of the cliff. There wasn't much choice, he discovered. In fact, there was no choice at all.

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„Ho-ho!“ a stentorian voice bellowed, seemingly from at his very heels. „Look what we have here!“

Once more Jenkins did a pirouette. Facing him were three men. They seemed to come in series of threes in this screwy place, he thought. But these were quite different than the gnomes he had first seen.

These were giants, all dressed in the same manner. Each wore the skin of a wild animal draped about him. Only their middles were covered, and their immensely broad and hairy chests and legs, which were like tree-trunks, stood out in naked and unpretty relief. They had not known the touch of a razor for a very long time. Their beards reached almost to their waists, while their heads were crowned with a tangled growth of wiry brush.

Each man was armed with a spiked club, on which he was resting as he regarded the stranger.

„He's mine,“ one said suddenly. „I saw him first.“

„No!“ the second said. „You're the youngest. I'm the oldest. I get him.“

„And I'm the strongest,“ said the third. „I'll take him.“ The last one didn't wait for a reply, but leaped for Jenkins in a clumsy jump.

Only Jenkins didn't wait for him. He stepped aside as the giant came on, and as he went past Jenkins tripped him by simply putting out his leg. The giant went sailing off into space and as he stumbled over the lip of the chasm, his scream of fear was drowned in the roars of rage which came from the other two. They came at him on splay feet, their clubs raised high, their mouths opened and their eyes slitted in rage. But they were slow and clumsy, and Jenkins danced out of range.

The giants recovered their balance, turned and came at him again, this time from opposite sides. Jenkins waited until they were almost upon him before moving. The two had their clubs raised as they ran, and just as Jenkins leaped, they swung their murderous weapons. If it weren't for the deadly seriousness of the situation, Jenkins would have found vast humor in it. For in the swinging, both missed him, but one, the youngest, caught his partner squarely on the skull with the spiked club. The stricken one fell like an ox at the slaughter.

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Slobbering sounds of rage came from the remaining giant. His beady eyes were red-rimmed, and his voice shook in passion as he charged again. And once more Jenkins danced away. But this time the smile was wiped from the Earthman's lips, as his moving steps struck against a protruding root, and he went sprawling backward.

Rage turned to triumph! The club came on high and began its descent. And Jenkins could only watch it in horror. The terrible club gained speed, size, terror in its immensity, as it descended. And Jenkins seemed chained to the earth by a power greater than his will. The club was inches away, and Jenkins closed his eyes to it and made a silent prayer.

There was a dull thud as the club dropped from the giant's hand to the ground. And another thud as the body of the giant landed with breath-taking force across that of the Earthman. Jenkins grunted in pain. He shoved at the inert figure sprawled across him and rolled it to one side. His breath whistled through his nostrils as he arose and brushed the dirt from him and he wondered dully how he had been saved.

„They are as children,“ a voice replied to his unspoken question. „And like children, they can't reason...“

The whistle came from his lips this time, as he did a double-take at the figure which confronted him. She was standing not three feet from him, a tall, lissome figure, dressed in a sheer costume which hid her figure, yet left enough to be seen to entrance the eye. Midnight black hair, a beautifully carved throat, perfection for nose and lips, and eyes haughty as a queen's, made up the rest of her. He could only stare, open-mouthed in admiration, lost in her beauty.

A faint smile touched her lips as she advanced toward him. He caught the movement of others, also, and from the corners of his eyes saw that she had not come alone. Attending her were mailed bodyguards wearing sixteenth century armor.

„I thought the other came alone,“ Lucretia said, „but now I see I was wrong. He is up there. You will be there, too.“

„Up there?“ Jenkins asked somewhat foolishly, pointing to the castle in the distance.

„Yes. Up there. Come along, now.“ She turned and moved away from him, and the mailed men took her place.

This time Jenkins made no move of protest. The long swords and small knives these men carried in their belts made foolish any attempt to fight them.

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It took a great deal less time to reach the castle than Jenkins would have thought possible. Yet, there were no means of transportation other than walking. The castle was much like one Jenkins remembered in a movie he had seen. A huge drawbridge swung down over the wide and deep moat before the perpendicular walls of the castle, trumpets sounded and mailed guards ran to appointed places at the castle's entrance. The beautiful creature nodded in acknowledgment of their salute as she stepped past them, Jenkins at her side and the eight bodyguards, two abreast, walking behind. Thus they proceeded up the long and narrow courtyard through another entrance, and into an inner courtyard which preceded the entrance hall proper to the castle.

Things happened at a greater pace from then on. At her signal men came forward, took Jenkins with them and, from then until his return to the woman, he was bathed, shaved, and dressed in a wondrously brocaded gown. When he returned, it was to find her in the immense banquet hall.

She motioned him forward and bade him sit at her right. His eyes went wide when he saw who was at her left—Griffin. And dressed in a gown similar to his own.

„Hi, chum,“ Griffin said. „Nice layout, huh?“

„I like him,“ Lucretia said, as she signalled for the food to be brought in. „He has such ill manners and such a boorish way of expressing himself.“

Jenkins swallowed in haste as his eyes took in the rest of the company around the table. Never in all his days of police work had he seen such a collection of cutthroats. Yet they, as he, were dressed in finery that was worth a fortune. They saw his stare and answered him with wide grins, which somehow had the power to make his blood run cold.

„Aah!“ she continued. „They like you, I see. Ah, well. It’s company fit for a Borgia.“

Borgia—Lucretia Borgia—the infamous poisoner—the most hated woman of her time. He turned for another quick look and wondered how a woman with such beauty could... He shook his head violently. And again she seemed to read his mind.

„My beauty is something I had nothing to do with. Perhaps you may come to hate it.“

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Suddenly a vast anger filled Jenkins’ breast. His nostrils dilated in passion, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse with it: „Look! I don’t know what’s going on. But whatever it is, I don’t like it. Now get this! I’m a cop, and the character sitting alongside of you is my prisoner. And I’m going to take him come hell or high water!“

A ripple of laughter began which swelled to a roar as he finished. And the one who laughed the loudest was Lucretia.

„Now tell me, my valorous warder,“ she said in dulcet tones, „how will you do this?“

„I don’t know,“ Jenkins answered darkly and somewhat foolishly. „But I’ll manage. And another thing,“ he went on after a few seconds, „what’s with this rigmarole you’re playing?“

„Rigmarole?“ Her voice broke into tinkling laughter. „Oh, come now! We don’t play games here. I’m really Borgia. So let us sup. Talk will come later.“

A servant had placed a dish before Jenkins from which the most appetizing odors arose. Saliva formed in his mouth, and his empty belly reminded him he hadn’t eaten for a long time. He raised his fork and started to dig in, but the gesture was never completed. For suddenly he became aware that every eye was on him and that every mouth was twisted in a grin, that laughter hung silently on the air ready to explode at the right second. They were but waiting for him to taste the food.

Nerveless fingers dropped the fork, and Jenkins’ gulp was audible. He knew why the grins and stares. The food was poisoned! Yet the others were eating, loudly, gaspingly, tearing at the food with fingers and jaws, eating as though it was the last meal they were ever to have.

„Come, man! Eat!“ the woman said between mouthfuls. She, like the rest, held little regard for manners.

„I—I'm not hungry,“ Jenkins said lamely.

„Too bad. It's so good!“ Lucretia remarked. Her eyes were daring him.

There seemed to be dozens of courses, and Jenkins' hunger grew with each serving. More than hunger seethed in his breast, however. Anger also gnawed at him. Anger got the better at last. He shoved his chair from the table, and it clattered backward on stumbling legs. All eyes turned to him as he stood, his hands on his hips, his head shoved forward, chin jutting out like a rock.

„I've had just about enough of this!“ Jenkins announced loudly. „I'm going. And you, Griffin, are coming with me.“

Gone now were the smiles; gone the laughter. The eyes were cold and oddly expectant. Jenkins grew aware of the tense silence. He grinned, and began to withdraw slowly.

„Okay,“ he said softly, „so I'll go alone.“

„Not even that way,“ Lucretia said. „My guests leave only at my bidding.“

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As though her words were a command, two of the men at opposite ends of the table rose and started for Jenkins. Their hands were wrapped about the hilts of the short swords stuck in their belts. Jenkins continued to retreat slowly, though, until his foot struck against the chair which he'd shoved back. Then he moved like greased lightning.

His right hand swept around, gathered up the chair and flung it skidding across the floor, so that it wound up among the folds of the robe worn by one of the men. At the same time Jenkins leaped toward his other would-be attacker and chopped a right hook to his whiskered chin.

It was the signal for a general rush in Jenkins' direction, but Jenkins wasn't waiting. He hadn't even waited to see the effect of his hook. The instant the blow was delivered, he had turned and leaped for the wide entrance. He ran with all speed, his mind busy trying to remember the turns and danger points which might lie before him.

There was no need of that, he discovered. The shouting voices which bayed the alarm brought other guards to the chase. Jenkins came to a sliding halt as he made a turn in the corridor. The grin was still wide on his lips when his capturers brought him back to face Lucretia.

„I find it unseemly,“ she said as the guards forced him into a chair, „that a guest should feel so strongly about not wanting my hospitality. Surely, I have not been amiss in my attentions? If so, I must remedy that.“

A roar of laughter went up at the words.

„Therefore,“ she went on, „we will do more than we have. Take him below and make him feel as welcome as he should have felt from the beginning.“

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Sweat streamed from the dank walls. Feeble light came from a pair of torches set into wall brackets, light which was offset by the heavy smoke the resinous torches gave forth. A dozen cloaked figures stood around the almost naked figure

of a man chained wrists, ankles, and neck to the wall. Standing directly in front of the chained man, and facing him, was another man, with a look of cunning cruelty on his face. The one chained to the wall was Jenkins; and the man facing him was Griffin.

Illustration

„Look, my friend,“ Lucretia Borgia said to Griffin, „all about you are the implements of the trade. Here,“ she pointed with daintily gesturing fingers to a many-thonged whip, „is a tickler to make this fool dance. And when he tires, why here,“ she pointed to something which looked like a coal scuttle, „we have a bucket in which he can rest his wearied feet. Of course you may have to heat it a trifle, but I’m sure he won’t mind.“

The others shouted in glee at the humor they found in her remark.

Jenkins listened in bitter silence. The only visible sign of his desperate feelings was a tiny trickle of blood which seeped from one corner of his mouth and ran down to the side of his chin. He had given up straining against the steel chains which bound him. They had been set too strongly into the wall. He prayed that he could take the physical tortures to be inflicted on him without weakening.

Then Griffin was reaching for the steel-tipped whip, and Jenkins braced himself for the pain.

„Make him dance!“ Lucretia commanded. „Pride needs music...“ She stopped suddenly and her head came up. The others also froze into listening attitudes.

Jenkins had been aware of the odd sound for several minutes. He had presumed that the others were too interested in what was going on down in the cold, dank dungeon to be disturbed by sounds from the upper world. The sound had a rumbling vibration, the rumble grew louder and louder, and suddenly there was an ear-splitting crash. Dust and chips flew from the walls.

„The giants!“ Lucretia screamed in wild terror. „They are bowling again.“

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As one, everybody turned and began a pell-mell race for the stairs, until there was only the chained man left. And hard at their heels came another of the ear-splitting crashes. More chips flew, and now tiny streamers of water leaped from cracks which appeared in the stone. Again there was the roar, another crash, and Jenkins moaned in pain as a large chunk of rock struck his side and tore the flesh.

He strained against the steel chains which bound him until he thought his blood would burst the bounds of his veins. He pulled again and again and until he could strain no more, until he could only fall limply against his prison-links.

His mind was fevered and his thoughts jumbled. He had to escape somehow. Again there was heard that terrorizing crash. He gasped, and turned his head aside, as a torrent of water poured from a fissure in the rock close to his head and shot into his face.

He turned his head and felt the metal tear from the wall. His head was free. Like a madman, Jenkins tried again to loose himself. This time he succeeded. And where the chains pulled free, water dribbled from that spot.

With a desperate intensity, Jenkins made a superhuman effort and pulled at the chains binding his wrists. The chains came apart, tearing the flesh and leaving raw wounds. Wincing at the pain, he placed his fingers behind his neck and felt of the steel. After a few seconds of probing, he twisted at the nut, which separated from the bolt with a single easy twist. He did the same with the chain binding his ankles—and Jenkins was free!

The last length of chain fell into the water, which by now had formed a foot-deep puddle on the floor, and splashed loudly, as Jenkins raced against a new danger. Whatever was causing those crashing sounds was also weakening the foundations of the castle. Water was beginning to pour in a perfect torrent from many cracks. The stairs to the floor above was but twenty feet from where he had been chained, but even in that short distance the water rose another foot.

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Jenkins took the wide stone steps three at a time, and raced like wild around the short curves. He had oriented himself as they brought him down, and he knew exactly where he was going. Danger lay at the very top of the stairs, for here they were heavily guarded. Yet, when he reached the head of the stairs, not a soul was to be seen.

He became cautious, then. Being weaponless, Jenkins knew he would have to rely on stealth. Slowly he advanced, until he was at the very threshold of the large banquet hall. Now he heard voices, voices raised in anger.

The loudest, most shrill of these voices, the one who commanded attention, was that of Lucretia Borgia: „You fools! Dolt heads! When this is over I shall have you all flayed alive. Did not any of you recognize the king of the giants as the one who was fighting the stranger? Now they are bowling against us. And who among us can challenge them?“

„I can, baby.“ Jenkins recognized that voice. It belonged to Griffin. „Duck pins, ten pins or any other kind. I'll match my hook with the best of them.“

There was a short interval of silence. When Lucretia broke it, she spoke in more natural tones: „It isn't the giants I'm worried about. I have seen them bowl. They rely on strength only. The dwarfs are the ones I'm worried about. We beat them the last time because they used the man from Earth and we got him drunk. They are cunning little men. Are you sure, my friend, that you have the skill?“

But Jenkins didn't wait to hear the answer. He knew Griffin had the skill. For Griffin, in his varied and checkered career, had once won an A.B.C. tournament. It was the clue by which he had been able to trace Griffin in his chase across the continent.

Jenkins peered into the hall. The men were all clustered around the woman, listening intently to her words. Silently, he fled from the banquet hall, and in a single leap crossed the open courtyard. From there on he threw caution to the winds. Oddly enough he could have walked, for not a single guard was to be seen even at the gate to the drawbridge. Although the bridge was up, Jenkins didn't hesitate for an instant. He dived in, and the waters of the moat closed over him.

But the moat was not wide, nor was it too deep. Ten strokes and he was across. The moon flooded the night with light, and his path was clear before him. After

reaching the opposite bank, Jenkins started for the depths of the forest. But just as he reached it an odd procession marched out.

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At the head were the three dwarfs Jenkins had first met upon recovering consciousness. Behind them streamed a host of other dwarfs. And from what was evidently another path into the forest came another procession. Although this group was not as large in number, in size the men were gigantic. The two processions saw Jenkins at the same time, and both groups started toward him. Had it not been for the three little men, Jenkins couldn't imagine what fate might have befallen him.

„Ho!“ shouted the dwarf called Loti. „It is the one who was taken to the castle. Come, my friend, we go to the castle. To bowl. For the good woman who rules there has made the mistake which might free us of her rule.

„She permitted one of our giant brethren to be killed by one of her men. And now we go to bowl against her champions. See, Mikas carries our ball.“

Jenkins looked at the one to whom Loti had gestured, and saw that in truth the little man was carrying a bowling ball, a ball which was in no way different from those Jenkins had himself used in his world.

„Aye,“ Loti continued. „Now we have again the chance to rid ourselves of her shackles.“

The leaders of the giants had joined them while they were talking. One of them interrupted: „Aye. Loti is right. We sent the boulders down against them from the heights. Now we go to bowl.“

Jenkins grinned as he started back for that castle of terror which he'd just quitted. He blinked in surprise when he saw that the drawbridge had been lowered. The dwarfs and the giants were apparently expected, but they would certainly be amazed to see him.

„You!“ Lucretia exclaimed when she saw him. „How did you escape?“

He shrugged his shoulders and stared coldly into her beautiful eyes. She frowned back at him, then turned and motioned for her men to follow. Their way was lit by torchbearers, and led up a winding path which ended on a level bit of highland directly behind the castle. Here was grass land smooth as velvet; here were the grounds of combat, bloodless but just as decisive.

There was a single alley, at the far end of which stood ten pins. Jenkins measured the alley with his eyes and figured it to be just about the length of a conventional bowling alley. The backstop was built up of earth and was soft enough so that the pins would not splinter on striking it.

„We all know the rules,“ Lucretia said. „To the victor goes the rule of our land. To the loser, slavery. Therefore, let us begin. Since I hold title, I choose to have my champion bowl last.“

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The giant's man bowled first against Loti. Just as Lucretia had said, he had speed but that was all. Loti had a much slower ball, but one that knocked down more pins on his hits. The giant got too many splits and railroads to be able to beat the little man.

Then, after a short wait, Griffin took the alley against Loti. And from the first ball, Jenkins saw that the little man stood no chance. Griffin's hook worked beautifully on the velvet grass lawn. He literally swamped Loti, whose shoulders slumped in weariness and discouragement as Griffin struck out.

„And so we remain slaves once more,“ Loti said, as the pin setter set up the last rack. „Once, when the man called Rip Van Winkle bowled, I thought we had a chance. But she got him drunk and we lost that match. Now this.“

Lucretia was elated. As the last strike scattered the pins, she ran up to Griffin and planted a kiss on his lips.

„My champion!“ she crowed. „Now we will take care of these big and little creatures once and for all. Once I was generous. Now I will be otherwise.“

„Maybe!“ Jenkins suddenly spoke. „But we're not through bowling. I am now of the people here, and I challenge the winner of the two matches.“

Loti caught up the other's words:

„He speaks true. He has the right to challenge.“

„Is it true,“ Jenkins asked, „that the winner has the right to give terms?“

„Aye,“ Loti said.

„Then let's bowl,“ Jenkins said.

He tried the grip of the ball Loti passed to him. It was a two-fingered grip, and just a little small. As the challenger, Jenkins had to bowl first. He measured the distance carefully, tried to figure the angle into the pocket, took a three-step run and let his ball go in a medium swing. The ball hooked in neatly, and left a four-seven split. A laugh arose from Lucretia's followers. But silence fell among them as Jenkins made the pickup.

„Nice shot, copper,“ Griffin said, as he stepped up to bowl, and made a strike. From then on, they matched strikes to the eighth frame when Griffin hit the head pin directly and got a seven-ten railroad. He picked up the ten-pin. Jenkins had gotten a nine count and made the spare.

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In the ninth frame, Jenkins struck. Griffin stepped up, wiped his right hand carefully against the trousers he had donned, took aim with great care, and sent the ball down the side of the alley. It hooked in nicely and again hit the head pin directly, only this time the six, ten, four and seven pins were left standing. So badly shot was he by the bad break, that he fumbled the ball as he started for his second shot. But he recovered quickly and neatly made the spare, the four pin barely grazing the ten.

The score as they started the tenth frame was 206 for Griffin and 209 for Jenkins.

Jenkins knew he had to mark at the least to win, and a double to make it close if Griffin got a double. Minutes went by while Jenkins made his last sight. Then he took three quick steps and let the ball go. But just as he reached the foul line, Jenkins slipped. The grass had become slick with all the running being done on its surface. And the ball, instead of hooking, went straight in, and left a very bad railroad, the four-ten.

Griffin's sigh of relief was the only sound to break the silence, as Jenkins stepped up for his second shot. He knew there was but one chance to make it, one chance alone.

If he could but get the ball over just right, it could make the four slide over against the ten.

Thunderous roars rent the air, and piping screams of delight, as the giants and the dwarfs saw the dreaded four-ten split made! The strike Jenkins hit for his last shot was an anti-climax. The score stood at 249 for Jenkins.

„Nice shot,“ Griffin said as he stepped up. „But all I need is a double.“ He threw, and the ten pins fell. His second ball was also a strike.

„And just to show you how good I am,“ Griffin declared, as he held the ball for the last throw, „I'm going to make just four pins so you won't feel too bad.“

Only he didn't! For what had happened to Jenkins, happened to him. His foot also slipped on the grass, and this time he got three pins. The score was tied.

Suddenly Jenkins sat down, removed his shoes and stood erect. He wasn't going to take a chance on his last ball, for that was the rule on a tie. One ball until the tie was broken, and a strike was just a strike. There was no question of what Jenkins threw the instant he released the ball. Right in the pocket!

Griffin's ball left the hard one, the ten pin. Griffin was still stooped, his hands on his hips and his face forlorn, when Jenkins' hand fell on his shoulder.

„I said I was taking you in, Griffin,“ Jenkins said. „And come hell or high water, I'm going to.“

Griffin shrugged the hand off as he whirled on the other. „Don't be a fool!“ he spat. „Do you think we're alive?“

„Rip Van Winkle was,“ Jenkins said, cryptically. „And I think we are, too.“

„He is quite right, my friend,“ Loti said, as he stepped up to them. „I can send you back, both of you, back to the time and place of your leavetaking. This instant...“

* * * * *

Jenkins felt a wave of blackness wash over him, a terrible wrenching at his innards, and a sudden thrust. He opened his eyes and looked about. There was a pain in his left shoulder, and he could feel a sticky wetness running down his arm. Griffin stood before him, and in Griffin's eyes was a dazed look. Behind Griffin, the door to the pilot's cabin swung crazily. Before Griffin knew what hit him, Jenkins had leaped upon him. It took one blow, a terrific hook to the man's jaw, and Griffin slumped to the floor.

„What happened?“ Jenkins asked as the stewardess bandaged his shoulder where Griffin's shot had caught him.

„Why,“ she said, „he shot, you went backward. Then, and it's the only way I can describe it, you both seemed to freeze up for an instant. The next thing I knew, you had recovered and the fight was over.“

But Jenkins knew better. He knew that in those few seconds, space and time had changed for himself and Griffin, and it was a lucky bowling match which had brought them back.

