

Considine Laughs

by **Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951**

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For sixteen long years these four men lived together in a fierce hate and distrust. Each was like a crouching vulture ready to spring. Only one thing held them together—greed.

STEVE DAGGETT thought it strange that no one had met him at the station. He waited until the train pulled out, leaving him alone in the gathering gloom. There was no one on duty at the station, not a soul around. It was one of those local stop-on-signal-only spots.

Steve waited a few moments, then shrugged and started up the road. Lanson had given him a fairly good idea of Doctor Mizenor's cabin. The night air was cool and crisp. He shivered slightly, and turned up the collar of his overcoat.

He had started from the office at a moment's notice and carried no baggage. Lanson, his boss, had said, „Take the call, Steve. If you make the two-ten, it'll bring you up there in the early evening. Mizenor promised to have some one meet the train, but you can't go by that; he seemed scared stiff on the phone and might not remember. Got an overcoat? Better take it—the Adirondacks are cold in October.“

That was all the notice he had had, and Steve hadn't squawked, because the motto of the Star Detective Service was, „Give 'em service—and charge them plenty!“

A hundred yards down, the road turned east. As he trudged along, Steve could see the lights of Chateaugay far away at his left, across the lake. It was one of those clear evenings that are so frequent in the Adirondacks, when one can see for miles in every direction, until the view is cut off by a towering mountain.

Just ahead of him he caught sight of the sign-post he had been looking for. It pointed off to the right, and said, „Brant Lake—1 Mile.“

He turned into the road indicated by the sign-post. This was a paved road, but narrower than the one he had just quit; and the hard pavement seemed cold and bleak, in keeping with the surly mood of the mountains on every side. The road sloped sharply uphill, and disappeared on the other side of the slope. Lanson had said that Doctor Mizenor's cabin would be just beyond the top of the hill, and Steve tried to estimate how much farther he would have to trudge.

Somehow the clearness of the night, instead of making him feel at ease, caused him a queer, prickly uneasiness, as if hidden eyes were closely watching: his progress. He had no idea why Mizenor had summoned a detective, knew very little about him, in fact.

But Lanson had said that the man seemed on the verge of hysterics on the phone, apparently in fear of something that he was afraid even to mention. Mizenor had wanted a detective at once; and he didn't quibble at the preposterous fee Lanson had asked. Lanson, of course, had taken the precaution of calling the bank that Mizenor had given as reference, and he had whistled when the credit man had mentioned the prospective client's balance.

Steve wondered what dread shadow of menace could possibly be hanging over that mountain cabin, what queer purposes caused a man like Mizenor to remain up there in the middle of October.

And suddenly he stopped short, caught his breath in a spasm of terror.

In spite of the cool night air, his face and hands became bathed in sweat as he realized what it was that he saw ahead of him on the path!

It was only fifty feet ahead, and he could see it clearly, unmistakably, every detail of it.

The man was dead, without doubt. He was tied to the tree, arms twisted behind him, head hanging to one side, and mouth horribly open and bloody where he had bit his lips in the sudden agony of death.

The thing that had killed him was a sharpened stake cut from the branch of a fir sapling. It had been driven into his heart with tremendous force!

Steve felt panicky for a minute, swung his head all around, but saw no one. He felt in his overcoat pocket where he had his gun, and approached the body. He wished it was pitch dark. It was still too light. He had the feeling that total darkness would be welcome, so he could lose himself in it. As it was, he could easily be seen, was a ready target for another one of those sharpened stakes. Shivery-chills crept up his unprotected back.

He came close and saw that the body was that of a big man, almost six feet, powerfully built. He had been in his fifties, iron-gray hair, clean-shaven face, with a stiff Hohenzollern moustache. The man had been killed only a short while ago, for the blood still dripped from the horrid wound, forming a vermilion pool on the ground. The man's body was sagging in the ropes, and the stake

stuck out at right angles; about four feet of it. It must have taken tremendous strength, Steve thought, to drive that stake into his heart. Whoever had done it was no puny one, must at least have been as big as the victim.

Steve didn't touch the body. There was no use doing that, no use searching around on the cement road. The answer to this gruesome scarecrow of death posted on the highway must lie in Doctor Mizenor's cabin.

Steve suddenly gasped at the thought that this might be Doctor Mizenor, that the doom that threatened his client had caught up with him before help could come. And was that doom lurking somewhere around, waiting for another victim?

Steve's grip tightened on the gun as he made his way up the road, leaving the horrid marker of murder there behind him. There'd be plenty of time to come back and investigate after he found what awaited him at the cabin. He could call the local police from there, too.

HE topped the knoll and saw the cabin, fifty feet off the road, standing alone and secluded.

The place was strangely quiet, apparently lifeless, dark. But as he approached, a light went on in the room opening on the veranda. Figures moved inside that room, before the drawn shades—figures that seemed strangely ominous in the surroundings.

Steve clutched his gun firmly, climbed the porch. A man's voice came through the door, thin, high-pitched, querulous, containing an overtone of hysterical fear. The words were unintelligible, for they were uttered in a foreign tongue. Another voice, deep-toned, replied in the same language. Then Steve's tread caused the boards of the porch to squeak, and the voices were suddenly hushed, as if a large blade had swept through the air and cut off the words in mid-sentence.

Steve kept his right hand on the gun and knocked at the door with his left. There was absolute silence while Steve's chest heaved with the accelerated pumping of his heart. Then the thin voice uttered a short impatient word of command, and light steps approached the door, undid one lock, then another. The door opened a crack, held by a chain. The one who looked through that crack was short—his eyes were no higher than the level of the top button of Steve's vest. The eyes were black, sharp, intelligent. The face was that of a youth, downy, untouched yet by a razor. It was a remarkably thin face, appearing almost gnomelike, with hair cropped close to the skull in eastern European fashion.

A low voice asked in fairly good English, „Who are you?“ The words came with a slight tremor and were accompanied by a glance, half appraising, half fearful.

„The name is Daggett,“ Steve said, meeting those dark eyes steadily. „Doctor Mizenor live here?“

The man inside nodded shortly, saying nothing, waiting tautly.

„I'm from the Star Detective Service. The doctor sent for me.“

The little man said, „Wait,“ and almost before the word was out, he closed the door. Steve waited uncertainly, while a low-voiced colloquy went on inside. Once more the door was opened, this time wide, without use of the chain.

The little man stood aside and said, „Come in, please.“

Steve walked in. He held the automatic in his pocket and slipped off the safety catch. He didn't know, yet, what he was walking into. The door closed behind him, and he found himself facing three men in the brightly lighted living room. The little servant stood beside him and indicating one of the men, said, „Herr Doktor Mizenor, this is the detective.“

Herr Doktor Mizenor was taller than Steve, who was himself a good five foot ten and a half. But he was so thin that he seemed on the point of caving in. He wore a blue business suit, and the vest was literally concave where his stomach should have been. He was so attenuated that he seemed to have no stomach at all. His starched collar was at least an inch too big for the long, scrawny neck that supported a head with hollow cheeks and deep-sunk eyes. A thin moustache with the points unturned was a futile gesture of bravado, for beads of sweat glistened on the man's cheek-bones. He was quite evidently in a complete state of funk. Without preamble, he asked, „Where is Colonel Walczek? Did you not meet him at the station?“

Steve let his eyes wander to the two other men in the room. They were both standing, and he appraised them, almost unconsciously, with an eye to their strength, to their capacity for driving a sharpened stake into a man's heart! Either of those two could have done it. They were both powerful-looking men, broad shouldered, well-muscled. One was blond, of medium height, with the tapered hips of an athlete. His expression was sullen. He stood silent, hands at his sides, eyes steadily fixed on Steve. Those hands were wide, hairy, dangerous.

The other man was squat, brutish, probably the stronger of the two. There was a queer expression on his face, as if he were communing with some inner spirit. Constantly, nervously, he hitched up his right shoulder. It was an irritating trick, especially to one who was on edge, like Steve at that moment.

Mizenor's impatient voice interrupted his observations. „I say—did you meet Colonel Walczek at the train?“

Steve turned his eyes to the doctor. „I don't know; what does he look like?“

Mizenor turned to the blond man, fists clenched, nails biting into the palms of his hands. „You see, Considine? I told you Walczek was a traitor. He was sold out to our—Nemesis. He has left us to our fate. He will not return.“

The blond man who had been addressed as Considine shrugged. „What of it? There will be one less to divide—“

The squat one, who had said nothing up to now, hitched up his shoulder and broke in hurriedly; he spoke in the slurred fashion common to eastern Europeans. „Yes, yes, Considine. We understand. No need to mention—“ he glanced significantly at Steve.

Considine showed even white teeth in a grin. „It matters little. If we are to use him at all, he must know the whole story.“ He turned to Mizenor. „My dear Doktor. You have neglected to introduce us to this gentleman.“

Mizenor said absently, „Of course.“

Steve said, „My name is Daggett.“

The blond man said, „I am Count Anatole Considine. This,“ indicating the short, squat man, „is Herr Flecknitz.“

Steve acknowledged the surly nod of Herr Flecknitz.

„And this,“ Considine went on, indicating the little servant who had opened the door, „is Petrus. Petrus is invaluable. He can mix the most delightful

cocktails. Go now, Petrus—“ his voice took on an edge of scornful authority, „and make drinks.“

PETRUS bowed meekly and left the room. His eyes were veiled, but Steve had been startled by the momentary flash of hatred that he saw in the little servant's eyes before he allowed his long lashes to hide it.

Considine laughed carelessly. „Sometimes I think, my dear Mizenor, that if this Nemesis of ours that you speak of so much does not destroy us, your precious Petrus will accomplish the task for him. I would insist that you discharge him, except that I enjoy the added hazard of being stabbed in the back some dark night by a disgruntled servant. These are the things, Mister Detective, that make life—bearable!“

He flung himself into an easy chair near the window, extracted a straw-tipped cigarette from a silver case and offered one to Steve, who accepted. „My friends do not smoke,“ Considine went on, as he held a light to Steve's cigarette. „In fact, they do nothing for the last two days, but cower in fear of this Nemesis.“ He seemed to take a malicious pleasure in baiting the others. His eyes flicked up to the doctor, who was striding up and down, hands sunk in trousers pockets. „Not so, my dear Mizenor?“

Flecknitz, the squat man, turned and looked moodily into the glowing open fireplace. He said over his shoulder, „Let us get through with this, Considine. We must find what has happened to Walczek. I am sure he did not drop us—the loss to him would be too great.“

„This Colonel Walczek,“ Steve asked, „is he a big man, closely shaven, with an imperial moustache?“

Flecknitz swung away from the fireplace, faced him tensely. „You met him?“

Mizenor stopped in midstride across the room, turned his head slightly, awaiting Steve's reply. Steve watched them all carefully. He had saved the announcement for a moment when he could note each man's reaction to the news he was going to break. That one of them had driven the stake into the man's heart, he was almost sure. Would he betray himself now?

Considine's eyes suddenly narrowed. He held his cigarette poised, half way to his lips. „You have described Walczek,“ he said softly. „Where did you see him?“

Steve braced himself. „He's down the road—tied to a tree. Dead. Killed by a sharpened stake driven through his heart!“

They had expected it. The announcement was almost like an anti-climax. Their attitude reminded Steve subconsciously of the story of the dog biting the man, it was no news. They had all been sure Walczek was dead. It would have been news to them if he had stated that Walczek was still alive.

Considine was the coolest of the three. His face betrayed nothing. Slowly, as if he were continuing an action that had never been interrupted, he brought the cigarette to his lips, inhaled deeply, and allowed the milky-colored smoke to seep gently from his nostrils. His eyes were narrow, inscrutable.

Mizenor's face was very pale, and he allowed a wheezing breath to emanate from his throat.

Flecknitz said, almost triumphantly, „I told you that Walczek would not walk out on us. He had to be killed to keep him away from his share!“ He came close to Considine's chair, leaned over a little, face thrust out, and said slowly, „Was it not you, Considine, who said yesterday that if this Nemesis destroys only

three of us, the fourth would be fabulously wealthy if he survived, for he would not have to share the booty?”

Considine lounged back in his seat, apparently careless; but Steve could see that the count's powerful body was like a coiled spring, ready to leap into instant, destructive action. „Flecknitz, Flecknitz,“ he said reprovingly. „You will talk yourself into your death one of these days. I did say that. But it was only an expression of the secret thoughts that you yourself have been too timid to utter. Do not deny that you have been considering the same contingency—as has also, without doubt, my dear friend, Herr Doktor Mizenor! Who wouldn't with a million dollars in the scales?“ He blew smoke straight up from his mouth into the face of Flecknitz.

Steve saw Flecknitz's body become taut, saw muscles bulge under his coat sleeves. There was dynamite in that room, and it was due to be ignited at any moment.

But Flecknitz restrained himself. A shadow, almost of fear, crossed his countenance, and he straightened, moved away.

Considine laughed the same arrogant, careless laugh that he had uttered a few moments ago when he sent the servant out. „Always cautious, Flecknitz, eh? Is it that you are too well acquainted with my reputation? Or is it that you plan the same fate for me that Walczek received?“

He was deliberately goading the other, probably with a definite purpose. Steve wondered that these men could have lived together here for any time at all with the cross purposes of hatred and greed that seemed to fill the house. He felt out of place here, wondered why he had been brought there, what the booty was that amounted to a million dollars. A million dollars! A sum that could drive many men to murder and worse. These men could hardly be criminals, or they would never have summoned a private detective from an agency with the reputation of the Star. If they were fleeing from some ancient vengeance, it could not be far from them, as evidenced by the bloody body of Colonel Walczek in the road.

He watched Flecknitz closely now. The man's eyes were rimmed with red. He was working himself up to the point of courage where he could attack Considine. Steve knew that there would be only one outcome of such an encounter. Considine was the cooler of the two, the more dangerous.

But Doctor Mizenor came between them. „Let us not quarrel among ourselves now! A hideous danger threatens us all and must not find us disunited—or else we will all die with stakes in our hearts!“

Flecknitz shrugged. He seemed to relax. „Let him not drive me then. I am not a man to bear insult.“

Mizenor, anxious to change the subject, raised his voice. „Petrus!“ he shouted. „Where are those drinks?“

The little servant came through the door, bearing a tray. He said nothing, but his face was pale. They drank silently, while Petrus waited with the tray.

Considine drank quickly and bent his gaze on the servant. Steve could see that the count's vicious nature was bent on torturing someone. The servant was handy. „Petrus,“ said the count, „do you know what has happened to Colonel Walczek?“

„I—I do, sir.“ The servant's face was white and drawn. „I—I was listening at the door.“ He shuddered, and the tall glass that Considine had replaced almost slid from the tray.

Mizenor shouted angrily, „Get out! If I catch you listening again, I'll kill you!“ Petrus fled before his wrath.

Steve said, „Any time you're ready to tell me what it's all about, doctor—“

Considine laughed. „Certainly, Herr Doktor, you should tell the detective. You brought him here for that purpose. Go on. Tell him about the coronet; tell him about Walther von Surtep; tell him about that night in Prague!“

Mizenor nodded. His drink was only half finished. He put it down with a gesture of distaste, looked for a long time at Steve, then came up close to him. He said very low, „My friends here laugh at me; but they have the same fear in their hearts that I have; what you just told us about Colonel Walczek has affected them more than you think—and me, too. For another man once died in the same way—with a stake driven through his body. On a night in the spring of 1918 he died, in our own country of Hungary. It was we four who killed him, though it was Walczek's arm that thrust the stake into him.“

Mizenor's whole frame seemed to shudder, and he closed his eyes violently. Considine still seemed to be at ease, but Flecknitz's hand suddenly contracted about his glass and the stem snapped off. The glass fell to the floor, broke tinklingly, and the red liquor stained the pine boards.

Mizenor cried, „God! It's like his blood!“ He gripped the lapels of Steve's coat in frantic fingers. „Tell me, Mr. Daggett, before I go mad—do you believe it possible that a man can live with a stake driven through his heart? Live for sixteen long years, and then come to wreak vengeance on those who tortured him? My friends say no. My own medical knowledge tells me no. I want to believe that it cannot be. Yet Walczek has been killed in the same way. And the words that are carved on the door—you didn't see them when you came in because it was too dark. But they are there: ‚Walther von Surtep,‘ they say, ‚has come for his pay!‘ That is why I sent for you. None of us here can look at this thing dispassionately. We need a man whose business is to deal with strange things. You must help us.“

„Who was this Walther von Surtep?“ Steve asked.

Mizenor picked up his drink and downed it. Flecknitz did not move. He stood before the fireplace, eyes fixed moodily on the tall, thin doctor. Considine looked on sardonically, swinging his left leg which was crossed over the right knee.

Mizenor put down the empty glass and went on. "In 1918 there was a revolution in Hungary. Charles, the seventh emperor of Austria, and fourth king of Hungary of that name, abdicated. The coronet of state, which he wore at ceremonies, when he appeared in his capacity of king of Hungary, was given into the safe keeping of Baron Walther von Surtep. He tried to make his way out of the country with it, accompanied only by his little sister, a girl of ten."

The doctor stopped, his throat working spasmodically. He was in the throes of emotion as he recalled the incident, it seemed to Steve.

Considine said, „Go on, Herr Doktor. You are doing very well. Quite dramatic.“

Mizenor appeared not to have heard. He continued, waving his arm to include the count and Flecknitz. „We three, and Colonel Walczek, found ourselves penniless after the revolution, forced to flee. We met Walther von Surtep at the border. We had provided ourselves with rude weapons—branches of saplings, which we had sharpened to points. We knew that von Surtep had the coronet, and we killed him for it; killed him in the presence of his sister, and I will never forget the scream of pure horror that she uttered when she saw

her brother die, transfixed by the thrust of Walczek's stake—while Considine and Flecknitz held him down on the ground.“

STEVE had listened with rapt attention to the recital. Now he felt an involuntary revulsion for these men which he did not trouble to hide. He caught Considine regarding him quizzically. The man was a devil. He must have no human emotions whatever.

Mizenor went on with an effort. „We got the coronet out of the traveling bag and clustered about it, estimating its value, figuring the worth of the stones if sold separately in Amsterdam. The girl fled into the forest, but we didn't bother with her. We had the coronet.“

The doctor stopped, waited while Considine coolly lit another cigarette. The room seemed to be getting hot and stuffy. The story that Steve was hearing was a brutal, revolting one of greed and ruthlessness. Somehow, it made him feel full of anger, almost made him dizzy. The heat from the wood fire was growing uncomfortable. Steve backed up to the wall, leaned against it. The thin spirals of smoke from Considine's cigarette seemed to weave fantastic figures before his eyes. Things were getting spotty, indistinct.

Mechanically he listened to Mizenor.

„We didn't take the coronet to Amsterdam. To break it up would have destroyed its value. We decided to find a private purchaser in America, and came here—all together.“

Count Considine's hateful voice interjected, „You see, though we are all gentlemen, we could not bring ourselves to trust any one of us with the coronet alone. So we have been faithful companions for sixteen years!“

Steve couldn't tell whether Considine's voice was coming in uneven jerks, or if something was the matter with his own hearing. Anyway, there was something wrong. The room began to tilt a little. Flecknitz's thick-set form seemed to broaden and shorten. Mizenor's grew thinner and taller as he went on.

„The time was inauspicious to sell such a valuable object. We waited, selling a few stones from the coronet at intervals when we were short of money. Last week we found a purchaser. He communicated with us by letter. We are to meet him here; this cabin is rented by him. He did not give us his name. It seems he is a great figure in national life, an ardent collector. He is to pay a million dollars for the coronet. We recognized that it might be some sort of trap—what you Americans call ‚hijacking.‘ But we were four, and as you can imagine, we felt well able to take care of ourselves. We had no inkling of this ‚Nemesis‘ on our trail, had, in fact, managed to erase the memory of Walther von Surtep from our minds.“

Mizenor's voice, too, was coming jerkily. Something was radically wrong. Steve felt his whole body bathed in a cold sweat. It was like some sort of fever. He gathered his nerves together, held himself tight, and succeeded in clearing the fog before his eyes.

He saw that Mizenor was wobbling, supporting himself with a hand on the table. Steve swung his eyes to Considine, noted that the count's cigarette was dropping from nerveless fingers, watched it fall to the floor and smolder on the boards. There was an expression of utter amazement on Considine's face, mingled with a dawning terror. For once, the self-possessed count was losing

his poise, his attitude of cold mockery. They were all in the grip of some hideous influence.

All? Steve forced his swirling mind to function, glanced at Flecknitz. The stocky man was in complete control of his faculties. He stood tense, watching the three of them with a sort of speculative interest. There was a cunning light in his eyes, a glimmer of greedy hope...

Mizenor suddenly tottered, put both hands to his head. „God! What—“ and then he crumpled to the floor, lay there gasping for a moment, and then his body relaxed, eyes closed.

Dead?

Steve looked down at him through a swirling mist that clouded his vision. No. He was breathing stertorously. He was unconscious.

Steve quickly turned to Considine. The count lay sprawled on the sofa.

„The drinks!“ Steve exclaimed. „Doped!“ And he saw confirmation in Flecknitz’s eyes, saw the blood-red stain on the floor where Flecknitz’s drink had fallen when he broke the glass. Flecknitz had not drunk!

Steve stumbled away from the support of the wall, saw the little servant, Petrus, standing in the doorway, gazing wide-eyed at Flecknitz. Then he stumbled; there was a beating pain in his head, and he felt himself pitching forward into oblivion...

COOL, crisp, night air awoke him. A slight breeze was whipping into his face. He knew he was outdoors. He opened his eyes, but it hurt his head, so he closed them again. He tried to move his hands, but couldn’t. They were tied. Then he realized that he was standing—or, rather, tied in a standing position.

In spite of the ache in his head, he opened his eyes again. It was much darker than when he had come, but the night was clear and he could see everything around him. He was tied to a tree along the sloping road. He turned his eyes to the left and shuddered involuntarily. The tree a few feet away was the one to which Colonel Walczek was tied. His body still sagged there, with the stake projecting. He had stopped bleeding.

A deep groan drew Steve’s eyes to the right. The two trees next to his also held men tied to them. Considine and Mizenor. Mizenor was the nearest. They were both unconscious yet. It was Mizenor who had groaned. He was stirring slightly.

Down the road from the knoll came two struggling figures. As they approached, Steve recognized the stocky form of Flecknitz, dragging with him the futilely struggling figure of the little servant, Petrus.

Flecknitz dragged the servant close up to Steve’s tree. On the ground near by lay several lengths of rope, and three sharpened stakes similar to the one in Walczek’s body.

Petrus, slight and frail, was squirming in the stocky man’s grip, resisting bitterly, silently, but ineffectually. Suddenly Petrus stopped struggling, bent his head, and bit viciously into Flecknitz’s hand. The stocky man uttered a gasp of pain, then cursed violently and struck Petrus a wicked blow on the side of the head. The little servant slumped, and Flecknitz seized the front of his coat and shirt in a big paw, set himself to deliver another blow. The coat and shirt ripped under the weight of the little man’s body, and he fell to the ground at Steve’s feet, moaned, and lay still, face up.

Steve looked down, and his body stiffened at what he saw. He hoped Flecknitz hadn't noticed, and was relieved when the stocky man said, disregarding Petrus's body, „I see you have revived, my good detective. Your constitution must be strong. It would be better for you if you were not so hardy; it is easier to die with a stake through your heart when you are unconscious—like these two.“

Steve's voice was steady with a great effort. „You're going to kill us all—with those stakes?“

Flecknitz nodded. In the gloom he loomed squat, almost deformed. „The same as I killed Walczek. Then I will take the coronet. I will not be suspected. It will be thought that they were killed by this ›Nemesis‹ that Mizenor feared.“

„You doped our drinks?“

„No. Petrus did that. It must have been he who wrote that message on the door. He, too, must have had designs on the coronet.“

Flecknitz picked up one of the stakes. "I will dispose of you three now. Then I will throw Petrus in the lake, weighted down. They will never find him.“ He lifted the stake, stepped over to the tree that held Mizenor. „Would you like to see your client die? Watch!“ He had the stake gripped by the thick part, whittled point toward the doctor's body. He drew his arm back, set himself for the blow.

Steve could do nothing. He struggled against his ropes—uselessly. At the last moment he closed his eyes and turned his head away. He heard the impact of the stake in Mizenor's flesh, heard Flecknitz grunt as he delivered the death blow. He was still a little giddy from the doped cocktail and found it difficult to open his eyes again. As in a daze he heard Flecknitz pick up another stake, heard another horrid impact, a scream, and a grunt. That would be Considine. His turn was next.

HE opened his eyes after what seemed an age of frightful expectancy of death. In reality it had only been a moment. He saw the two bodies to his left—Mizenor and Considine. Mizenor was dead, but Considine took his time about dying. He was thrashing about in his ropes, the stake that had pierced his body doing a strange macabre jig in the air as he jerked. A moment more and he stiffened and was quiet. Steve felt strangely detached, uncomprehending. Even when Flecknitz picked up the third stake and stood poised before him, stake raised in the air, eyes a little wild. Steve felt nothing but a queer sort of numbness. The region of his body around the heart tingled queerly, as if preparing to receive the point of the stake driven by the muscled arm of the stocky man. He couldn't close his eyes now, could only stare fascinated at Flecknitz, waiting helplessly for death.

And then, from the top of the knoll there came a deep glow, followed by a gush of fire that rose into the night air. The cabin, invisible to them from that spot, was on fire. It burned fast; flames shot to the sky.

Flecknitz glanced in that direction, suddenly became like a madman. „The cabin!“ he exclaimed.

Steve said hoarsely, more to himself than to the other, „Considine's cigarette! It started the blaze!“

But Flecknitz had forgotten him. „The coronet!“ he shouted wildly, thickly. „It's in there!“ He had forgotten Steve, forgotten everything but that bauble of diamonds for which he was murdering men hideously.

He dropped the stake, raced up the knoll, cursing madly.

Steve was fully awake now, aware of his danger. The three bodies bound to the trees were mute if horrid evidence of the death he had so narrowly missed.

Somberly he gazed down at the slowly stirring form of Petrus, close to his feet. He saw again that which Flecknitz had failed to see. Petrus' body was bared at the throat where the coat and shirt had been ripped, revealing a creamy white skin, the soft contours of a woman's form. Petrus was a woman!

Steve reached out with his foot. It just touched Petrus's knee, and he poked. „Petrus!“ he shouted. „Petrus!“

The woman stirred, moaned, raised to her elbow. Steve could see, now that he knew, that the small slim shape, the delicately formed head, could be none other than feminine. The voice had been husky, passed well for a man.

The woman gazed about her dazedly for a moment, let her eyes rest on Steve in a sort of dull query, then flicked them toward the bodies hanging gruesomely in their bonds. She uttered a scream, buried her face in her arms.

Steve said, „Never mind the hysterics. Flecknitz has gone to get the coronet out of the cabin—see the fire? He'll be back soon and go on with the operations. He intends to throw you in the lake and blame our murders on you. Get up, will you! Don't lie there and wait for him to come back. Untie these ropes for me!“

Half dazedly she got to her feet, fumbled with the knots behind Steve's tree. She kept her eyes on the knots, studiously avoiding the horrible corpses that lined the road on either side of them.

While she worked, Steve said, „Why did you dope the drinks? Are you von Surtep's sister?“

„Yes,“ she said, in a low voice. „That day in the forest when these four beasts killed my brother and I fled screaming, I vowed that I would follow them around the world if necessary and make them pay. Also, I swore to get back the coronet which had been entrusted to Walther and return it to its rightful owners. When the revolution in Hungary was crushed, the family estates reverted to me, so that I had all the money I needed to accomplish my purpose.“

She had one of the knots open, unwound a length of rope. Steve could now move his shoulders. She set to work on the rope that held his wrists behind the tree. From behind the knoll the flames licked up toward the sky, burning hungrily.

„I found them here in New York,“ she went on, „and got a job with Mizenor. I reversed the spelling of my name, called myself Petrus instead of Surtep: I shaved my hair and passed for a man. When they came up here, I knew they would bring the coronet along. I am the mysterious buyer they were expecting. I wrote the message on the door. I didn't know where the coronet was hidden, and I wanted to frighten them into bringing it out.“

She got the last knot free and Steve stepped away from the tree, flexed his muscles. She held her coat together at the throat, looked up at him helplessly. „Flecknitz must have got the inspiration from that message I left. He killed Walczek, planned to kill the others. Then, when he failed to drink the cocktail I had prepared, he saw his chance; you were all helpless. When he saw me, he realized that I was the obvious one to be accused of the murders.“

Steve seized her shoulder. „Here comes Flecknitz!“

THE stocky man was coming down the road; in one hand was the stake, while under the other arm there rested an oak box almost a foot square. When

his saw them, he dropped the box and ran toward them, poising the stake in the air to thrust.

Steve's hand slid to his pocket, and he went cold. The gun had been taken from him! Flecknitz was only a half dozen feet away now, and literally launched himself through the air at Steve. Steve dropped to the ground just as the point of the stake swished past his head. The stake missed him, but Flecknitz's solid body struck his shoulder and he was bowled over. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the woman running up the path toward the box that Flecknitz had dropped. The sheet of fire from beyond the knoll formed a fitting background for the scene of murder.

That was all the impression he was allowed to gather, for Flecknitz's heavy weight smothered him, and he felt Flecknitz's bulky hands meet around his throat.

The breath was forced back into his lungs; there was a queer constriction about his heart.

Desperately, he heaved, and they rolled over and over toward the trees, Flecknitz's grip never relaxing. He pounded weakly at the other's face, but the stocky man took the blows stolidly. His face was set in a grim mask as he slowly rose to his feet, dragging Steve up by the grip on his throat.

Steve's fists had cut his lip open, blackened one of his eyes, but he continued that throttling hold relentlessly.

And then they heard the awful scream from the woman. Steve's eyes were blurred, but Flecknitz turned his head, looked up the knoll, and uttered a quick gasp. He stepped back a pace, right into the pool of blood before Considine's body. His foot slipped in the coagulating liquid and his body shot backward, landed with an ugly thud on the concrete road, with Steve on top of him.

Flecknitz didn't stir. Steve breathed in deep, painful lungfuls of air, then rose clumsily to his feet. Flecknitz was dead. His skull had cracked open on the concrete.

Steve made his way unsteadily up the road to where the woman knelt in the road over the open wooden box. She seemed stunned. Steve bent to look, and saw that the box, plush-lined, was empty save for a folded sheet of paper.

The woman was babbling incoherently now. Steve picked the paper out of the box, unfolded and read it by the lurid light of the flames from the burning cabin:

My dear friends:

For sixteen years I have laughed at you as well as at myself; four once honorable gentlemen, turned murderers for a bauble of jewelry. For sixteen years I have been seeing van Surtep dead on the ground, with the stake in his heart. And now that we have a buyer, I cannot go on with it. I have thrown the coronet into Brant Lake where it can never be recovered. I am staying on with you to the end of this filthy farce, because I must have my last laugh at you. My life is worth nothing, so perhaps you will kill me for this, and I will pay for my part in the murder of von Surtep.

I am one of you, but I thank the Devil that I can still laugh at you.

Yours,

Anatole, Count Considine.

Steve looked up from the paper, down the road, with a new sort of respect, at the body of Considine, whose face, strangely illuminated by the reflection of the flames, seemed to be still laughing at the other corpses, even in death. Laughing with a sort of queer, sardonic humor, much as he had laughed in life.

