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taken from Ray Cummings' thrilling story, "The Mark of the Meteor" we see the gigantic meteor just after it has plunged through the bow of the doomed space ship. Shooting vertically upward in a vain effort to change the course of the ship, the rocket exhausts flame furiously. Mars in the background gleams green and gold.

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The Hour the Conqueror Came

by Edsel Newton



H. MARCHIONI '30

(Illustration by Marchioni)

Over the scream of the motors we heard the shrieks and screams, but they were of despair. The wobbling mass of stuff was conquering and obliterating the city below.

I WAS boarding the *Colondrina* of the International Lines.

She was the latest thing in transoceanic airplanes. From the end of her nose to the tip of her rudder she was built for speed. Her ten great motors of a thousand horsepower reflected each shining part under the glare of the sunlight. Her transparent wing, three hundred feet long, reached out as a challenge to the sky that she had conquered, the upper strata where she had broken all passenger records. In 1942 there were few records to be broken.

* * *

I boarded her at the Grand Central Terminal at Los Angeles fifteen minutes before she lifted off for Valparaiso, Chile. Two hours before that time when I had turned from the police station into the office of the *Daily Bulletin* where I was a reporter, I was suddenly conscious of the fact that all eyes were turned my way. That much I remembered as I entered the editorial room. Spencer, the city editor, was on his feet, suddenly, smiling as if elated at my arrival. The staff had followed him to surround me, firing questions faster than I could answer them.

"You knew Creel, didn't you?"

"You're a helluva reporter to hide a story like that!"

"Shut up!" bawled Spencer. "I've got to have all the facts about Holden's murder. Now out with it, Edwards!"

I recall having taken Spencer to the little conference room outside the realm of the editorial staff. Here I was forced by that self-possessed worthy to disclose what I knew of the murder of young Dale Holden whom, six months before, I had found dead in his chemical laboratory. For purely personal reasons I had kept what I knew as a secret, and consequently had lost my big chance of becoming star reporter on the *Bulletin*.

It had been in the fall of 1941—the fifteenth of September to be exact—that Dale Holden dis-

covered that strange chemical formula now known to the world as "multiple". Years of research and hard work were back of the discovery of this strange substance whose elements, when united with another, caused the resulting creation to grow at a rate faster than the eye could see—a spongy, jelly-like growth that filled test cylinders almost before the young chemist could seal them.

Holden had called me in to view his triumph, the advantages of which I could readily understand. A few drops of the strange stuff placed in a large room would grow until the room was filled! It could be used as a terrible agent of war!

I told Holden that I was going to make this the biggest story of the year. Smiling he asked me to wait until that afternoon when he could have Diane there—Diane who was his fiancée, who had hung around the shop until she became a fixture. That she had inspired him to finish his work I knew. I believe every tenth word of Dale's was in reference to Diane Nordham.

I suggested calling at the Nordham home on my return from luncheon and bringing Diane to the laboratory where I was to take some pictures of the two. Dale consented to this and I hurried through the noonday meal with visions of a banner line story. It was that decision of Holden to have Diane there that is the excuse for this story.

I drove to the Nordham mansion out in Beverly where Diane greeted me, in that sisterly way of her's and together we returned to Holden's laboratory. I opened the door and gently pushed Diane into the room ahead of me. But she stepped back with a terrifying scream that rent the air and brought dozens of people to the door. I looked inside. Dale lay upon the floor, face upward, with a small test tube in his mouth, held there securely with ordinary friction tape. When I reached his side I knew he was dead.



EDSEL NEWTON

THERE are many ways to kill a cat—and many ways for one to gain his end in this world of modern science. The recent mysterious death-dealing fogs that swept over Belgium, France and England will probably turn out to be only queer manifestations of natural forces—yet they could just as well have been caused by human agencies. Where people live closely together it becomes all too easy for some anti-social forces to spread death and destruction.

"Multiple" is something new in the category of chemistry; yet there is nothing about it that may not prove possible. If a chemical substance were invented that could absorb oxygen into itself, it could become almost like a miraculously growing organism—it could divide and subdivide and increase its dimensions enormously. This substance then could become a great menace to any locality in which it was placed. Mr. Newton gives us, as usual, one of his human and exciting stories of a scientific wonder.

MY first thought was for Diane. I sent her home in a taxi and then I telephoned the police. While they were on their way, I took a chance on removing the test tube from Dale's lips. It was then I discovered that "multiple" had not been the cause of his death, for the tube had been filled with a strange acid.

A strange horror filled me—not at the realization of death alone, but a possible murder. Cold sweat stood out all over me. I wanted to run, to get as far away from the scene as possible. But I took the tube, wrapped it in tissue, and placed it in my pocket. Then I looked about the room.

Upon first glance I saw nothing unusual. All the instruments and apparatus were left as they had been two hours before when Dale had told me of his victory. The rear door was still locked securely, the anteroom and office had not been disturbed. I glanced at the cylinders—

Where two hours before they had been filled with that strange substance, now they held only a colorless liquid!

I removed the seal from one of them and smelled the contents. It was the same acid-smell that came from the test tube between Dale's lips! It began to grow. I closed the lid. The absence of oxygen had returned the spongy growth into its original elements.

A police ambulance always hurries the body of a dead man away from the scene of his death. I was so upset that I could not have written the story at the time, even though I was the only reporter in the city who knew the truth about the chemicals. That Dale had been murdered I was not sure, although suicide was hardly within reason. I wrote the story tersely as a "mystery death" and left it for the police until I could see Dale's father and find if anything had suddenly transpired that could have caused Dale to end his life.

The old man was pretty badly shaken by the news. I told him as quickly as possible how I had found his son in the laboratory, my experience with "multiple", and of Diane having gone there with me to make pictures of herself and Dale for the *Bulletin*.

Mr. Holden was speechless for several minutes. When he did regain his voice he spoke between sobs and his houlders shook convulsively.

"It's the woman—Diane Nordham," he said. "After all these years of waiting to see my son successful she has killed him."

"Why, that can't be!" I almost shouted. "Diane loved Dale. She meant everything to him."

"Everything," he agreed," but Creel—Creel—" his voice stopped suddenly. His body went limp. He collapsed before I could reach him.

I tried to bring him around with cold applications, but it was useless. He lay cold and lifeless and by the time the police ambulance came I knew there would be two inquests held the next morning.

I'll never forget Diane, stunned and horrified, as she told the coroner's jury of how we found Dale's body in the laboratory. None of us knew any possible reason for murder, save a far-fetched clue that lingered on my own mind. So

the jury rendered a verdict of suicide, and sus-
picious eyes were turned upon Diane.

On the Trail of "Multiple"

I TOOK her home and left her, wondering why the jury had been so ready to turn accusing fingers upon Diane. As she was in no condition to talk, I went back to the office of the *Bulletin* and wrote a half column about the findings of the coroner's jury and covered the past few years during which Dale had made so many experiments. Though I had seen this man Creel only once, I could hardly connect him with Dale's death. I never knew his business, nor his nationality. He was a man of the world and a good mixer, often included, so I heard, in Diane's parties.

Two days later I called at the Nordham home to find Diane looking much better and ready to receive me. It was then that I brought up the subject of Creel's entry into Beverly society, not implying of course that he might have had something to do with the death of young Holden. Diane had met him on a plane coming up from Tokyo.

I continued to refer to him throughout our conversation, wondering if my hints would lead Diane to connect him with Dale's death. At last she caught my meaning. She sat there in her chair as if frozen for several minutes. Then she told me calmly.

"I remember he was always curious about Dale's experiments. I think that is how we met—when I told the pilot-captain of the *Oceanica* of his idea for 'multiple'. I suppose I was a blabbing fool. Creel and I were introduced an hour later, and during the remainder of the flight he kept at my side, always talking science. When we landed the next morning he insisted on coming to see us. He came, and I introduced him to Dale.

"Dale wasn't friendly with him, but Creel didn't seem to resent it. He was here that morning when Dale telephoned and told me of his success. In my excitement I must have said something to Creel. He left an hour before you came. None of us have seen him since."

That was all Diane knew.

I found Creel's former address and tried to compare the fingerprints on the test tube with those on the furniture about the room. But as it was a hotel room and had been occupied again, my efforts were useless.

I went to the city chemist who had analysed the liquid substance found in Dale's lungs. It was not "multiple", or it would have grown again. I had decided the day before that the stuff which killed the young chemist had either been decomposed or deprived of its growing properties.

Here was a big story, but I was powerless to "break" it to the world. Diane's only living relative was her mother, old and delicate. To have brought her daughter into this terrible mess would have killed the dear old lady.

Disliking "dead" reporters as I do, I was powerless. As far as I was concerned the incident

was closed. I told Diane as much, and gratefully she agreed with me.

During the ensuing weeks I saw her often at her home where she remained unhappy and miserable, but bearing up because of her mother. Then ten days before Spencer called me into the office and demanded all the facts, Mrs. Nordham died.

I had been to the funeral and had called to see Diane several times during the next five days. On the sixth she had disappeared.

SPENCER told me the rest of the story a few minutes before he ordered me to board the big new plane for Valparaiso. He had a wireless from Diane in his hand, and I read it:

REPORTER EDWARDS FREE TO
TELL ENTIRE STORY STOP HAVE
LOCATED CREEL WHO KILLED
DALE HOLDEN

"Why didn't you send the message to me?" I demanded.

Spencer stamped a cigaret into the floor.

"I figured she knew something more than had been disclosed. Upon the death of her mother I sent one of the boys out to interview her. He got nothing. She would talk to no one but you, and you were chasing down that story about a conquest of the world by the Black Legion. Before you returned she left for Valparaiso. I can't understand why she went so far away before coming through with the story. I answered her radiogram this morning."

"Perhaps she wasn't sure of herself," I suggested. "It's all a mystery to me."

Spencer scoffed. "Mystery, Hell! Creel stole that formula! No one has been able to tell what came of it."

"No one knew," I answered. "Even you did not know of it until this minute. The laboratory has been locked since his death, and I buried those cylinders which were filled with 'multiple.'"

"Why?" he demanded hotly.

"The stuff's dangerous," I replied. "No one knows what would come of it if some greenhorn broke the seal. It might grow to enormous proportions—fill the entire city."

"Holy cats!" he gasped.

"I acted upon an impulse," I nodded, "but it was the only thing I could do. Now that I am free to talk I'll give you the cylinders and—"

"Just tell me where they are and I'll send for them and protect them. You're off for Valparaiso on the next plane—You have thirty minutes to get ready." He pushed the latest edition of the *Bulletin* into my hands. "Read this on your way to Chile."

* * *

Thus I found myself aboard the new liner at the Grand Central Terminal dressed in a one-piece linen suit, unshaven and hungry, with only a portable electro-typewriter to keep me company in the cabin which had been hurriedly reserved for me. I sought the seclusion of the cabin to think over the situation, and the more it turned over in my mind the more convinced was I was Creel had stolen the formula for the making of "multiple".

Anyone might have stolen it, but this man had killed Dale Holden in order to gain possession of it. Dale's father had been ready to disclose facts which might have jailed Creel, but he had died with the story on his lips. And now, in far away Chile, Diane was on the trail of the mystery.

The big airliner, the latest thing in transoceanic planes, lifted from the airport and pointed her nose to the southeast. I looked through the port-hole down upon the city, already ten thousand feet below. We were off for Valparaiso, two hundred miles per hour, with a possible tail wind pushing us onward across the western side of Mexico and into the tropics.

CHAPTER II

Vandalism

DURING the three hours that passed before dusk fell upon the earth below and an enveloping haze became our path through the sky, I remained in the cabin reading an account of how the crew of a small yacht had been driven ashore in Valparaiso harbor by a strange spongy growth which had stopped only when it had begun to roll over the side of the tiny vessel.

It was an "A.P." story, well written and to the point; but, because the writer had been unfamiliar with chemistry, he had not brought that element into the possible solution of the mystery. Instead he had concluded that the growth was of a strange marine phenomenon. It had been left for Spencer to connect the story with my own—half an hour before I boarded the plane.

I took a turn through the saloon, before ordering dinner, and looked over the passengers. They were a mixed lot—English, Spanish and French; the population of the world has now become so mixed that the most patriotic citizen of one land may spend his life in another, which is possible only because war has been outlawed. The people of different nationalities constitute "orders" so to speak. That is to say the French are clan-ish among themselves, as are the English and the Nordics, although assimilation is quickly blending them into one magnificent race.

Having so much to think about, I went back to my cabin and sat in the wicker chair by the port hole, my eyes fixed on the tips of the great wings as they cut through the slight mist fifteen thousand feet up.

The motors and the wind gave forth a weird scream not unlike the siren of a police patrol. Together with the fantastic array of clouds below us, this was an experience of which no one could tire. It was ecstatic, thrilling, to be a part of the great things which had come—the radio-vision motion pictures now showing in the saloon, the telephone at my side which would connect me with any point in the world, infallible compressed-gas motors on the wings of this great mogul of the air which bore us on to Valparaiso without a stop.

All these wonderful steps to an ideal civilization had come only through the creative efforts of man as opposed to the destructive. The intelligence which built these machines and discovered the laws governing their use, the timely

grasp of the great principles to daily life, had wrought this new era, this civilization which was so secure that it could not die. War only a horrid thought—efficiency the watchword of the people—Self-conquest the creed of the learned. Life indeed was wonderful!

* * *

I was about to doze as I sat there in the cool draught from the port hole when I suddenly thought of the telephone. I decided that it would be proper to get into communication with Diane and arrange for a meeting as soon as I landed. The operator-navigator connected me with Valparaiso, and then the hotel where Diane was staying. Then minutes after I called she was telling me of her reason for going to Chile.

"I learned through a small package which I received in the mail that he was here," she explained. "It contained a small bottle which I opened in the bathroom at my home. The bottle was filled with 'multiple'. I threw it into the bath tub. It began to grow. I swept it into the outlet and it filled the pipe, stopping it up. Then I covered it with water which stopped the oxygen supply, and I suppose it's still there. I had to hurry here—I'm the only one who really knows Creel. But I'm glad you're on your way. I'll meet you at the airport at Viña Del Mar. You may—"

That was the end of our conversation. It ended with an abrupt click. I knew not why. Frantic, I called the operator aboard the plane and he tried to renew the connection, but to no avail. He came to the cabin greatly annoyed; he could not explain his failure to make the connection. He had inspected the entire apparatus and found it in perfect order. I suggested the aerial.

"It's a counterpoise aerial—on top of the cabin," he explained. "It is secured by several connections. Nothing could happen to it, surely."

"Suppose we take a look," I said significantly.

He nodded and I followed him out through the control room, past the silent pilot-mate who had a contemplative eye on his instruments before him. We climbed the ladder and up behind the wind deflector on top. One glance told us what had happened—the aerial had been cut away in its entirety!

THE operator was as shocked as I. "Vandalism!" he shouted over the scream of the wind and motors.

Discussion could not help the situation. We hurried down the ladder into the control room. I asked the pilot-mate if any one had passed through and gone up the ladder, the only way of reaching the top side from the saloon. He shook his head, too busy to talk, and continued with his task of setting the stabilizer down. The operator motioned me away, and I followed him down into the saloon where pilot-captain Benton and several passengers were wondering at the abrupt cessation of the radio-vision motion picture.

"The aerial we use for the instruments is inside the fuselage," the operator explained. "If I made your connection through it we would disturb the pilot."

"The connection isn't so important," I said. "You want to know why the aerial disappeared?"

The pleasant pilot-captain followed us into the operator's room where we told him of what had happened. Needless to say he was much disturbed. He asked us not to mention the incident to the passengers, and he started investigating. But nothing came of his two-hour search of the great plane.

The captain then ordered all passengers to their respective cabins. Then he sat down before me and started asking question about my conversation with Diane. I told him the entire story, much as I hated to. He was more disturbed than ever, and we talked of the possibilities until early in the morning hours, when I finally sought my berth.

I do not know how long I slept. In spite of all that had happened I dozed off under the lullaby of the screaming wind and motors, unthinking of safety—my own and that of my two hundred fellow passengers.

I remember having left the port hole open, much because we would soon pass through the hot tropical current even though at our altitude.

I was suddenly awakened by the crash of glass against the door of the cabin, opposite the port hole. I switched on the light even before I was fully awake and looked about me. The sight that met my eyes sent terror to my soul, left me cold and lifeless. A thin-glass vial of liquid had been thrown through the port. It had burst against the door and the spongy growth of "multiple" was already filling the room!

It grew from the tiny splash to a puddle the size of my head even while I looked on. I sprang from my berth toward the door, first closing the port above me, not realizing that I possessed the power to move thus. The opening of the door swept the stuff farther into the cabin. I hurried outside and closed the door, stuffing the vent at the bottom with my bathrobe, and stood there waiting for whatever might happen, clad only in pajamas and trembling in the realization of what I had escaped.

Pilot-captain Benton came along and stood watching me as I finished the work of making the room air tight. I tried to tell him as quickly as possible just what had happened. Only with much persuasion did I prevent his entry into the room.

"The stuff's poison!" I insisted. "It will fill the entire ship if it is once released from that airtight room. An outside agency put in there—to kill me."

"I'm afraid you're the jinx!" he exclaimed, "But there's no time to talk. What can be done?"

"Lack of air will decompose 'multiple'," I explained. "When we reach Valparaiso you'll have to submerge half of this ship in water and clean out that room."

The captain was angry beyond words. He called the navigator-operator in and snapped an order. "You two men stand watch over that door. Soak that bathrobe that you stuffed into

the vent with water. I'm going to sleep. If anything happens call me."

Diane

WE stood watch over that door throughout the morning hours, with never a word uttered between us, the operator regarding me with suspicion; myself confused and nervous.

I tried to account for the bottle of "multiple". I knew with a certainty that it was designed to end my life. Whoever threw it must have landed on the top of the liner, reached down and tossed it in, and made his get-away without being seen. I could picture myself being smothered by that spongy substance, eaten by its acids—destroyed in silence! That I was among the first to know this terror that struck in the night was doubly interesting, from the standpoint of a newspaperman.

I held the key to the mystery, perhaps, and consequently was the original target of whoever had stolen the formula. I was again suddenly startled by a thought that flashed into my mind. What of Diane—had she too met with this terrible danger? Had she overcome it—was she secure?

Strangely I was doubly terrified by the thought. It would be ten hours before we reached Valparaiso—somewhere between sundown and darkness. Until then we could not establish communication. The ethics of the air prevented any suggestion to the pilot-captain that we make a landing at some port on the way. I was helpless—I had only a pair of pajamas to wear until the captain brought me an extra one-piece linen suit.

Nothing was said to the passengers who came into the saloon as the sun came up and the fog lifted from the coast below us. My eyes were constantly upon the door. Once or twice when the passengers were sufficiently distracted from the after end of the plane I re-soaked the bathrobe which I had stuffed into the vent. I knew the air-tight port had taken care of the other side. My only objective was Valparaiso. Nothing else mattered.

All that day, as we shot like a meteor through the upper air, the captain, the mate and the third pilot-mate remained awake to discuss the situation. The second pilot-mate was at the controls, the motors full out, the ship screaming off the two hundred and forty miles per hour until the noise became a monotonous din, instead of a fascinating experience.

Four o'clock found us at Antofagasta, five-fifteen looking down upon Huasco. A short time later we saw the tower near the end of Avenida, Brazil, and then the busy harbor of Valparaiso, with Viña Del Mar airport just below us.

THE pilot put the great mogul on her ear and brought her around into the wind. Quickly he sat us down there on the water, gave the motors the gas full out, and pulled us upon the beach. Passengers clambered out, some tired and weary of the long flight, others elated at reaching this strange land.

I was in a hurry to land and find Diane, but first I had to thank Captain Benton for the loan of the suit and to do what I could to help him obliterate the "multiple" in that cabin. He did not detain me.

"When you have found your party you may return here," he said. "I think we had better stick together—we may need each other! In the meantime I shall remove that stuff from the cabin with a suction hose."

I thanked him and hurried away. A taxi cab took me to the customs house and on to the Divilla, a little hotel perched high up near the old prison. I ran up the steps and into the lobby in breathless excitement. Diane was seated there calmly, half-smiling at my excitement.

"Something cut us off last night, Don, and the owners of that new plane have been frantic."

"If they had *only* cut us off!" I said. Whereupon I told her the story.

She listened in silence until I had finished.

"But how did this agency know of your presence on that ship?" she demanded.

I was stumped. I told her of the cabin being filled with "multiple" and how I had escaped.

"They may have learned that you were board through the telegraphic passenger list. I knew you were coming thirty minutes before you went aboard the plane at the terminal."

"Creel has something to do with this!" I said. "He is the only possible man on earth who could connect me with a search for the murderer of Dale Holden and the thief of that formula. I met him only twice—once at your home and once in the laboratory where he was questioning Dale about the possibilities of 'multiple'."

"I'm sorry I ever met him," she confessed. "Of course one doesn't think of such a distinguished man as a potential murderer, though."

"You can't be blamed for it, Diane," I assured her. Then I told her of my plans to visit the plane again that evening.

"I'm going with you," she said at once. "On the way, I'll tell you what I learned."

We settled in the cab. "As I told you," she began. "I received a package from here via air mail. I compared the handwriting with Creel's, and then I knew the truth. He had murdered Dale to get possession of that formula. How or why he did it I don't know. One would suppose he overpowered Dale and placed that bottle—"

She broke off shortly and was silent a minute before going on.

"I boarded the first plane for Valparaiso—incognito. Arriving here I went to the hotel and called in the national police. I gave them my version of the story and Creel's description. They found him in an office on Avenida Brazil, ostensibly operating an airline communication bureau. I think it is known as the Internacional Comunicacion Compañia, or some name of that kind. I can point it out on our way to the plane. Anyway, two days ago a small yacht which is known to be a laboratory was anchored in the harbor, with one of Creel's henchmen as captain. You probably read the story—"

"I did—go on," I said, anxiously.

"Something happened aboard. They lost con-

trol of a quantity of 'multiple' and were driven from the yacht. The men swam ashore, and the stuff filled the boat and sank it—grew up onto the decks and became a huge mass of that spongy substance. It overflowed into the water, hiding the boat from view. Then the entire mass sank upon the water. Only a fire boat saved the harbor. By the time the police had connected Creel with the yacht the latter disappeared. He used one of those tiny *Spitzbern*—*Bullet* planes to make his get-away, carrying a man with him."

"Then he flew out and met us and tried to kill me," I said. "Why?"

"Why?" she demanded, "Why to be rid of you, of course!"

"But common sense, Diane. What can he do by such attacks?" I objected.

"I'm stumped," Diane shook her head. "One can catch a criminal easier when he knows the motive back of the crime."

CHAPTER III.

Creel in Command

WE were at the airport—the combination land and sea port of Viña Del Mar. The plane was out in the harbor, silent, unanchored, as far as I could see. We went to it in a small boat.

As we neared her I could see that she was drifting, but I supposed she was well in the hands of Captain Benton and his crew. We slid up to the starboard door and climbed into the saloon. The owner of the boat moved quickly away. We started toward the captain's room, forward in the great plane. Before we had taken ten steps, two men rushed from a cabin on our right and stood before us, automatics in hand.

A low wail escaped Diane's lips. My own heart stood still.

"Get into that cabin—quick!" snapped one of them. He indicated the one from which they came. We went inside. Then we saw their purpose. The entire crew, including Captain Benton, were lined up against the wall and Creel, coldly calculating the situation, stood at the wall opposite.

One could not have placed himself in our immediate circumstances and fathomed Creel's purpose. One could guess, but man wastes too much time in guessing. So far as I could see, his purpose at the moment was to obtain possession of the *Golondrina*, the largest and finest high-altitude plane in the service of the great International Airlines.

"You may line up with the others, Edwards—the lady can remain here with us," he said.

"What's your game?" I demanded.

"Reporters should listen—and never talk," he shot back at me. "Anyway, Edwards, in my hands you are helpless to molest me. So far you have constituted my greatest fear, but I suppose you kept quiet for Miss Nordham's sake."

"He did," said Diane.

Creel sat down in a wicker chair and studied us. I could see now that he was the cold gambler type, desperate and dangerous. Dressed in his one-piece suit of velvet with silver buckles

and patent shoes he was a picturesque character.

"Well, none of you are in danger—at least as long as you obey orders. I have only four lieutenants. In a conquest of the world one cannot trust too many."

"Are you entering upon a conquest of the world?" asked Captain Benton, speaking for the first time since Diane and I entered the room.

Creel sighed. "Only of certain cities, my good man," he said slowly. He glanced at his two men in the doorway. "One of you hurry over to the dock and tell the others to bring that boat load of 'multiple' along." The man hurried away.

"The thing for which you killed Dale Holden!" said Diane furiously.

"The one sin of my life," he answered coldly. "You are not to mention that again—never!"

I turned to Captain Benton and by way of apology said, "I'm afraid I've pulled you into a terrible situation."

Creel overheard. "For the sake of morale I'd better say that we would have taken this ship if you'd never been in existence, Edwards. That goes for all of you. We wanted the ship. We have it. Nice of you, Captain, to have filled the tanks with bluegas before taking to the water again."

"You're not at all welcome to the favor," said Benton bitterly.

"But I suppose I can induce you to navigate the *Golondrina* for me?" he asked.

"Hardly," Benton snapped.

"Not even under pain of being thrown into a stateroom with a half-pint of multiple for company?" asked Creel.

"What's your purpose—I have a right to know that much," returned the captain, unwavering by the threat.

At that moment a boat slumped against the side of the plane. Creel looked through a port hole, and then turned to the captain.

"We'll discuss that later. My men are coming aboard with ten cylinders of 'multiple'—two hundred gallons!"

WE stood there for several minutes while Creel went outside and joined his men, leaving a single guard at the door.

There were six of us held prisoners—Captain Benton, his two pilot-mates and the third mate, myself and Diane.

"Where's the radio-navigator?" I asked of the captain.

"I sent him ashore to make a report to our agent here—the aerial and that stuff in your cabin last night," Benton whispered.

"Just what I wish to do—that'll warn the government air service of Chile to run us down."

Already a turn to extricate ourselves from Creel's hands! But I wasn't satisfied with that. We were all uncomfortable.

I'll never forget the next half hour as we stood there looking into each other's faces, all wondering what would become of us. Diane was silent and gloomy and, as I looked at her, fine and young and beautiful, I was determined that

Creel should not last long. Ten minutes later it seemed my vows were in vain.

Creel's men finished loading the cylinders of "multiple" into the plane. They stowed it aft in the tall compartment. The four of them came forward and gathered about the door.

"We're lifting off right away," Creel announced. "We are forced to hurry because of suspicious characters who are watching us from shore."

"I and my men shall remain with the ship," said Benton firmly.

"In that case you shall help navigate the plane," said Creel. "How about you, Edwards?"

"Send Miss Nordham ashore, and I'll remain," I answered.

Creel laughed.

"You may speak for yourself, Diane," he said, "but it will be dangerous—in Valparaiso. The city will be smothered tonight—everyone there will die—except our friends who have been warned. Thus it will be for all the cities of the world."

No one could imagine the horror that filled us at that moment, of the stark realization that we were not only in the hands of a cold blooded thief but a murderer of thousands. I think we were all stunned beyond words. I recall having crossed the room and held Diane close to me as she reeled from the shock. Then the door was being closed. We were left alone, locked in, to think of the horrible thing which must happen, perhaps within the next hour.

Perhaps I can make it more vivid to you by recording my own thoughts of the next few minutes.

Here, for the first time, I knew the purpose of this man Creel. It must be that he belonged to the Black Legion, an organization which had slowly grown to become world-wide. It wanted to possess the world. If it destroyed cities, those who fled could not return to take possession of them.

Thus the use of "multiple". Perhaps that which he had in the plane at that moment would doom a million innocent people. If he had the formula for a nullifier he could recover those cities for the Legion within a few hours. It was a horrible thought. It was beyond the understanding of all the scientists whom I knew. None save Dale Holden could have concocted the formula for "multiple". The dear fellow would turn in his grave if he could know of the horrible use to which it was being put by Creel who had murdered him.

I THOUGHT of the radio-navigator as a possible savior of the situation. I hoped and prayed that something would happen before that great plane shot across the water and lifted into the air to become a menace to the world. But there was no hope. Men who could board an airplane going at a speed of over two hundred miles per hour and leave it again without being seen were not to be considered lightly. They had probably taken care of the radio-navigator. I believed we were lost. I could never trust

Creel to have enough mercy to spare the few lives aboard the *Golondrina*.

The men were in the control room now, starting the motors. They were quickly familiarizing themselves with the plane before taking off. The mere turn of a switch started a modern motor. A child could operate them. But it required skill to handle the *Golondrina*.

Apparently one of the men possessed enough experience with the controls of a large plane to operate this one, for no sooner had the motors attained the appropriate speed than the *Golondrina* taxied across the water. Faster and faster she went, gathering speed toward the open sea. Then we felt our weight against the deck. She had cleared the waves and was climbing higher and higher as night came upon us.

Locked in that cabin, we could only wait. There was no use for speech, no comfort in speculation. We knew not what was going on inside the saloon.

The *Golondrina* sped out to sea until she gained altitude, and then circled back toward Valparaiso. She went on slowly, as if feeling her way. We looked through the open port hole to see the lights of the city spread out there on the side of the hills, a city of happy Latin people who would soon die.

The plane flew onward toward Viña Del Mar again. We then saw long lines of people marching into the country. These were the Legionnaires—the people who had been warned, who would return as soon as the others had been killed and the great heap of "multiple" nullified. Stragglers were in the rear, hurrying to overtake the first procession.

SEVERAL times the ship circled the city, each time losing altitude, until she crept almost noiseless within a distance of a few hundred feet of the streets, avoiding the hillside by a short distance. At last, when there were no more stragglers marching from the outskirts of the city, I saw a phosphorescent stream of liquid fall from our wing compartment and into the city below. Creel had taken the stuff forward and placed it where he could easily drop it into the streets.

Again and again, as the great plane hovered over Valparaiso, streams of "multiple" were sent forth, until at last I saw seething masses of it taking shape in the streets. Then Creel tried another method. He dropped gallon after gallon of the chemical onto the side of the mountain where it grew to become an enormous heap of destruction and roll down into the city and fill the streets. This continued before our horrified faces until we could see nothing but a huge mountain of that spongy growth, with hardly a building standing above it.

Over the scream of the motors we heard shrieks and screams, but they were only of despair. Nothing could now save Valparaiso.

The wobbling mass of stuff was conquering and obliterating the city below.

The plane was standing out to sea again. She hovered near the water several miles out, came

around into the northern breeze, and settled down in silence.

Diane had fainted in my arms. Captain Benton and his men were tragically still, staring into each other's faces, helpless to stop this wholesale murder of good people. As I revived Diane and sat down in the wicker chair to hold her in comfort, she sobbed like a child until she became hysterical and difficult to handle.

Over the lapping of the waves against the side of the plane I heard Creel and his men talking.

"I suppose our prisoners will have a change of heart now," said Creel. "I've worked on that formula long enough to know what it can do. Two hundred gallons covered Valparaiso. After eight hours it loses its properties and vaporizes into the air. Nothing like it!"

Then the five cut throats sang their verses of rebellion and destruction and triumph for their allies who would return to take full possession of Valparaiso at dawn.

CHAPTER IV

THE six of us in the cabin waited and wondered. Captain Benton and his men were silent for the most part of the time, although now and then one of them would speculate upon the possibilities of "multiple," and why Creel had used it.

"Why not gas?" asked the second pilot-mate. "Ordinary poison gas would answer the same purpose." I tried to explain.

"But the people—everywhere—have gas masks since that dreadful invasion of the western hemisphere by the first wave of the Legion who came two years ago. Look at Philadelphia with its ten thousand dead within a few minutes—and part of them Legionnaires. No, by this way no one can escape, not because of the comparatively negligible acidic properties, but because 'multiple' smothers them and doesn't give them a chance to get away."

"How horrible!" said Diane, her voice weak and far away. Her eyes were wide and staring. It was pitiful to see her as she sat there in the chair. But she was fighting the battle of her sanity against the terror that had come to her.

We waited for thirty minutes more, while the ship drifted slowly inshore, Creel and his men noiseless. Captain Benton became restless.

"At least this party could have been given a few comforts. We shouldn't all be compelled to remain in one cabin, nor to have Miss Nordham suffer like this."

"I'm not suffering," Diane assured him. "Really, if there wasn't so much murder I'd think it was a wonderful adventure. But to see all those people running in the streets and to hear their cries—"

"Don't, Diane, be quiet!" I said. "You musn't think of that. Try to sleep."

Her nerves were worn to a frazzle, I could see. She relaxed though, and as darkness came upon us again, we sat down on the deck in silence and waited.

The awful picture of Valparaiso came back to me with all its horror and death. I could still

see that great mass of strange and terrible and malignant chemical that grew, rolling down from the mountain upon the city, the people running for life, knowing not what they faced, save death. The great tower off Avenida Brazil; the statue of Arturo Pratt, the great admiral of Chile; the public buildings and hotels—all covered with that mass until every living person had been smothered to death, with a comparative handful of the Black Legion waiting outside until their agent had finished the vile business of killing people who believed in democracy and the upbuilding of the race.

The thought of this awful conquest took me back to the time as a very young man I had edited a small newspaper and shouted through its columns a warning to the government that then was the time for action to save the younger generation from this invasion of this destructive element with its vicious propaganda. I knew they were trying to gain power for themselves to prevent the free opportunity in America of other elements just as strongly insistent upon gaining a foothold for their children. It was about that time that a Department of Education was created by forward looking congressmen, only to find later they were blocked by the measures taken by other congressmen who, perhaps unknowingly, represented the factions most adverse to the cause of civilization.

The "Legion Forever" they might sing—that was all they would ever do—sing, so long as they depended upon men of Creel's caliber and methods to carry out their program of conquest. He was probably paid and paid highly for his work, but so crude and horrible were his methods that I knew he could meet with only disaster. The sooner that disaster came to him the more lives would be saved; for God knew where he would turn next in his conquest of the cities of the world.

You perhaps wonder how one could be in the midst of such a tangle, perhaps facing death, and think such thoughts. I must confess myself this much; I am not modest. Therefore I can explain that just so long as I had an incentive to live I wanted to live for the betterment of the world. My incentive lay sleeping in that chair—Diane. At least I thought her asleep until Captain Benton arose impatiently and tried the door. It did not give. He stepped back. Suddenly he pulled from his pocket an old-fashioned jack knife and began cutting through the tapestried wall and into the aluminum that constituted the bulkhead.

At first I was amazed at his recklessness. But I dared not try to stop him. He was a man of iron, one of the most famous pilots in the world, and his judgment was better than my own, I thought.

This did not prove altogether true, realizing what we faced when he had finished cutting a hole large enough to give us a view of the saloon. He was the first to look through the hole. He stepped back quickly, and then I put my head through and looked. The sight that met my eyes, while gruesome, was more welcome than anything I had ever seen in my life.

Forward in the control room, partitioned off from the saloon by glass, air tight and sealed in, were Creel and his four men, all smothered by a great mass of "multiple" which had somehow escaped into the room. And now it was left for us to hurry out and somehow control the plane until a rescuer came.

Once having cut a hole large enough through which to escape the tiny room, Benton waved his men forward through a door and out upon the great transparent wing. Diane and I remained in the saloon while he started an auxiliary motor and applied a suction hose to the port hole in the control room where the five lay stiff and stark after an hour's burial under the smothering "multiple".

When they had finally cleared the room and we were skimming across the water and rising into the air, the captain came in to say that we were on our way back to the good old United States where bandits used mild machine guns; and Legion propaganda would be stifled by an efficient government and good schools; and where a girl with a fiery spirit could marry the

man of her choice, instead of avenging the murder of another. And Diane was looking at me when he said all that!

So passed the last effort of the Legion on the western hemisphere. It was a feeble, futile effort, so we learned when we returned to Los Angeles the second morning, and it did their organization so much more harm than good that they have never tried again. Beautiful Valparaiso was a city of the dead until the second day when the Legion returned to find the "multiple" had receded and began making ready for a wholesale burial and a celebration which never took place, for behind them as they passed into the city was an army of Chilean constabulary, and overhead droned the "mosquito swarm", the tiny one-man planes belonging to the International police of the nations of the world.

Of all the strife and turmoil and destruction and death, no one had gained a thing save I. And Diane was overjoyed to again touch American soil and know that she was home. If we ever adventure together again into the world of plots and intrigue and mystery we shall do so together.

THE END