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Strange STORIES

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The Hunchback



By **DON ALVISO**

Author of "Death is Forbidden," "Mask of the Marionettes," etc.

From a Land of Terror Across the Sea, Blinken Calls on the Five Wooden Soldiers Into which He Has Breathed Gypsy Magic!

CHAPTER I

Blinken Is Real

LOOK out of the window into the night, my friend, and tell me —what do you see? You asked me why I am content just to sit here this night before Christmas and look out of the window. I want

you to look and see what is there in the clear cold darkness. What do you say? You see San Francisco, all dressed up for Christmas Eve? Christmas trees in the windows and Christmas trees in the streets. San Francisco, lying like a great winking jewel between our hilltop and the dark waters of the bay.

of Hanover

A Complete
Novelet



I was left behind for dead

Yes, of course, I knew you would see that. San Francisco is always beautifully decorated and festive on Christmas Eve. But I mean, is there not some one thing that stands clear by itself in all that myriad lights? Ah, you see it! One great white star, blazing high in the air, calling to all the world that it is the night on which

the Christ child was born, and that he is still being born in a million hearts and in a million humble places all over the world.

Do you know where that star is, my friend? It is on the roof of the building which houses Erich Tein's toy shop. You do not know Erich Tein? That is your loss, my friend. He is

one of the bravest and kindest men I have ever known. He is like his father, old Julius Tein, and I am sure no Christmas Eve shall pass as long as I live but that I think of Erich, of his father, and of that other one, the hunchback of Hanover.

I first met Julius Tein in the summer of 1919, when I visited Germany as toy buyer for one of our large San Francisco department stores. Of course, I would call on Tein, since he was then the proprietor of one of the foremost toy factories in the city of Hanover. In those days, when Germany's toy factories filled Christmas stockings all over the world, the products of Tein's workshops were marketed in America under the brand of *Tein-y-Toys*.

I think the most noticeable thing perhaps about old Julius Tein's toys, aside from their most excellent workmanship, was the trademark stamped upon each article: a dwarfed gnome-like figure known to millions of children as Blinken. Until I made that buying trip to Hanover, and was invited by kindly middle-aged Julius to spend a week-end at the ancestral Tein home on the outskirts of Hanover, I had naturally believed Blinken to be the clever creation of some artist's pen.

I had been talking shop with Tein, and had strolled across the room to look out the window. I saw a group of ragged children playing on the banks of the Hesse River which skirted Tein's estate. For an instant I thought nothing more than that here was a group of children, and marveled at their complete happiness and their abandon to the frolic of the moment, until suddenly the group spread a little, and I saw that the children had been gathered around an odd figure quite as ragged as they. An oddly impressive being, not much taller than the children, who was one of them in their play and yet was strangely of another world.

The figure was familiar. How many times I had seen it before! Broad of shoulder, with long powerful arms, with a rather large head set upon rounded humped shoulders. There could be no mistake. Every line of

the shape, every feature of the shrewd bright face was there. Astonished, I whirled upon Julius Tein.

"**B**LINKEN!" I said. "He's real! I never dreamed it. I can't be mistaken? That merry face, that gnomelike figure with the hump between his shoulders. Isn't the hunchback Blinken?"

Tein had come to stand beside me at the window and his clear brown eyes sought the river bank where Blinken tumbled on the grass with the children. He nodded and glanced at me.

"Yes, it is Blinken. He is deformed, but he is not an ordinary hunchback. He is not one of those whose body has been twisted and misshapen by cruel mischance in this mad, rushing world. He was born as he is."

I suppose I looked my surprise.

"Born as he is?" I said. "I'm afraid I am ignorant, Mr. Tein. I thought all hunchbacks were born that way."

Tein shook his head, and his gaze went back through the window to Blinken playing on the river bank with the little children who were nearly as tall as he.

"No, indeed. Few are really born that way. The condition usually grows from an injury to the spine, often in early childhood. Blinken is a strong soul. His soul is as unusual as his body, though it is not warped."

Down by the river I saw Tein's two sons running to join Blinken and the other youngsters. Erich was around twelve, a serious-faced brown-eyed lad much like his father. August was a few years older, a brilliant little chap who promised much, trim and straight in his uniform of cadet at the old University of Heidelberg. I could see the proud light in Julius Tein's quiet eyes as he saw his two sons mingle with the poor children who had come to play on the river bank with Blinken.

"Four years ago, in nineteen-fifteen, my factory had been taken over by the military for the manufacture of munitions," Tein said softly. "I was serving with the infantry in the Black Forest where Italian planes were

bombing the coal mines near Eiderwein. A piece of shrapnel struck me in the head, and I was left behind for dead. The next thing I knew I was being carried into a cave by that little gnome figure, cradled carefully on those long strong arms, and that wise old face of his was looking down at me in anxiety and concern.

"He was wounded, too. A sharp fragment of shell had imbedded itself in the flesh of his side. Poor Blinken! He was smeared with blood, frightened and half starved, but he managed to take care of himself and me as well. He snared small game in the forest and cooked it over a campfire. He stayed by me while I was unconscious. During my days and nights of delirium he was always there hovering over me. When we were strong enough, we left the Black Forest, and of course I brought Blinken home with me. He has lived with us ever since."

Fascinated, my eyes went again to Blinken, at the moment laughing merrily and parading about with young Erich Tein held high on his humped shoulders.

"But who is he?" I asked. "Where did he come from?"

Tein smiled faintly. "I wondered that, too, when I brought him back here to Hanover. He was shy and reticent concerning himself. Yet, since then, piece by piece, I have gathered the main essentials of his history. As I said, Blinken is a strange soul. He was born one stormy midnight in the fastness of the Black Forest which, if you do not know, lies in the extreme southwestern part of Germany. His parents were Atzigans, descendants of that small tribe of ancients who came up from the Himalayas and became the forebears of the Gypsies.

"In case you do not remember, it is believed that the Gypsy clans which have since spread all over the world, had their origin from that original tribe which settled in the Black Forest. Blinken's father was a *bulabasha*, a kind of Gypsy magician, and knew all the old Delva lore which his people had brought up from India and Tibet.

"Blinken was only about fifteen

when the soldiers came into the Black Forest and conscripted all the men for the army fighting on the Western Front. The women and children were left alone, and it was scarcely a month later that the Italian bombing planes came over, bombarding the Eiderwein coal mines. Two bombs fell on the Gypsy camp. Everyone except Blinken was killed. Wounded, he crawled away from the scene of destruction. Perhaps it was Destiny which placed both Blinken and me in the Black Forest that day."

"Then he is only nineteen years old now?" I said, amazed.

JULIUS TEIN'S clear brown eyes rested for an instant on Blinken's cavorting figure, then turned to me, and there was a strangely reverent expression in them.

"Blinken is ten years—a hundred—a thousand years old. The Gypsies are such a strange and secretive race. Only now and then does the outside world get some hint of the mysterious depths of Gypsy lore. Blinken's father taught him strange rites and secret practices. Some of the things Blinken does—I don't know. White magic? Miracles? Necromancy? I say again, I don't know.

"He has fallen into life here with us as naturally as if he had always belonged here. Perhaps, in reality, he is one of us. He goes about for me advertising *Tein-y-Toys*. The children love him, and he loves them. He is an expert wood carver and has originated many new models for me. Whatever uncanny power he has, he keeps it hidden deep within him, but one has only to peer into those twinkling black eyes of his to know that there is something in Blinken's soul far beyond human understanding.

"My business was all but ruined by the war, but with Blinken's help I am building it up again. My factory has been running full speed all spring and summer, to fill this order which your firm has been kind enough to give us. I think the children all over the world will be made happy with *Tein-y-Toys*. They will love Blinken, even as the children here love him. It was not an ill-advised move when

I took his small dwarfed figure for my trademark. You must see him closer; you must talk with him."

Tein stepped nearer to the window, and Blinken, out there on the river bank, as if with some psychic faculty sensing that he was the center of thought between Tein and me, turned suddenly and stared at the house. Tein raised a hand and beckoned to him. He waved a salute in answer to Tein's gesture, and immediately came scurrying across the lawn toward us.

The children all trooped at his heels. Within a few feet of the house Blinken stopped, and turned to face the youngsters, speaking a few quick words which I could not catch. The children nodded and made various signs of assent, and stood grouped together expectantly as if Blinken had promised them something and they were waiting for it.

Blinken wheeled and darted into the house, and within a few seconds he was back again with the children, his hands filled with cookies and cakes which he divided among the hungry-eyed youngsters. Then he spoke to them again, and they went on their way, laughing and calling back to him. For an instant Blinken stood there looking after them, then he turned yet again and reentered the house.

I waited with a great deal of eagerness for his appearance, but he did not immediately come in to join us. Julius Tein looked at me with shrewd understanding eyes.

"He is changing his clothes," he explained. "He would not come in to meet you wearing the ragged outfit he dons when he goes out to play with the ragged children. That is only one of the many strange little things Blinken does. Ah, here he comes."

CHAPTER II

Five Wooden Soldiers

I HEARD light swift footsteps approaching the door, and then Blinken was in the room. Tein introduced him, and when I took his hand I felt

the strength of his long supple fingers.

Blinken! The Blinken of the toys come to life.

His thick black hair curled in a piled mass over his high forehead and his thin red lips had a pleasant upward curve. His jet black eyes sparkled as he smiled and replied to my greeting, and when I looked deep into those eyes I understood a little better what Julius had tried to tell me about Blinken. His eyes twinkled with the joy of youth, and yet, meeting his gaze, you had the certain feeling that the wisdom of the ages lay there behind his high, clear brow.

Though he was less than four feet tall, I was neither conscious of his diminutive stature nor of his deformity; something in him, the spirit no doubt, was giant and straight and strong. He had clad himself in a silken shirt of bright scarlet and loose black trousers, and had wrapped about his lean waist a Gypsy sash, the exact garb of the gnomelike figure stamped upon *Tein-y-Toys*.

I wanted to talk with him, to draw him out, to know him. He seemed to sense this, and with a kind of indulgent friendliness he answered my questions in a pleasantly unaffected tone.

"Mr. Tein tells me that you do beautiful wood carving," I remarked.

He lifted his long-fingered hands gracefully and smiled. "Beautiful? Perhaps not in the ordinary sense, but I hope it is good." He gestured toward the huge fireplace at the farther end of the long room. "There are some of my little friends on the mantel. When my people lived in the Black Forest, all the men and some of the women were wood carvers. The Atzigans take great pride in carving truly."

I had already noticed the little figures on the mantel, and had been wishing for an opportunity to examine them closely. Now that the opportunity was given me, I lost no time in taking advantage of it. I stepped to the fireplace and centered my attention on the mantel.

A large mirror was set into the stonework just over the mantel. Before the mirror, placed precisely in a

neat row, were five wooden soldiers about ten inches high. Their painted uniforms were exact likenesses of the Heidelberg cadets' garb worn by August Tein, Julius' elder son. Their figures were finely proportioned, but it was their faces that held my gaze—those tiny wooden faces carved so faithfully by sharp tools held in Blinken's deft fingers. Those faces did not look wooden. They looked human. They did not look stiff. They looked like tiny living faces arrested and motionless, as if they were listening, waiting for something.

I could have sworn that those expertly executed little figures were flesh and blood; that their alert bright eyes were staring straight into mine, awaiting only some given word to break the tableau. The effect was uncanny. What elusive something had the carver caught and held with the deft strokes of his carving tools?

I drew a deep breath and turned slowly to face Blinken, who had followed me to the fireplace.

"How did you do it?" I said. "I swear, they seem alive. I don't understand how you can achieve such expression, how you can bring such realism out of a block of wood."

Blinken's jet black eyes held intent on my face, and there was a queer look in them.

"Perhaps ordinary toys are only blocks of wood or pieces of tin," he said. "But these are not ordinary toys, Mr. Darrell. These are"—his voice muted oddly—"these are my comrades. These are five little wooden soldiers which I made especially for August and Erich when I first came here to Hanover to live with the Tein family. I carved them not alone of wood, but out of gratitude for the kindness these people have given me. And in so doing I put something into the bodies of those little figures—something which we Gypsies understand, but which would be very difficult for me to explain to you. I might say that, in a way I—I gave them souls."

A CHILL crawled over me. Standing there looking deep down into Blinken's guileless eyes, I could see veiled hints of ancient mysteries

unfolding. I remembered Julius Tein saying that Blinken was a thousand years old—or ten—that some of the things he did were White Magic, miracles, necromancy. And I knew in that instant that Tein had not spoken rashly or lightly.

For those few fleeting moments as I stood there beside him, I think that I faintly understood Blinken, but I make no attempt to explain him. I do not think he can be explained. I do not think there is any explanation intelligent to the human finite mind for those unearthly beings like Blinken who walk among us and share their mystery and their mastery with us for a little while.

A million mysteries haunt our humdrum lives, and we shrug them away with hypocritical platitudes, flee from them with hackneyed evasions, forgetting that sometimes when we are so wise, we really know so little. I knew that I was in the presence of some such thing as I stood there and gazed into Blinken's shining black eyes.

"These things of which I speak have been so befouled by charlatans that it may be difficult for you to separate the true from the false," he said softly. "I could say that we Gypsy woodcarvers put something of ourselves into our work, but it is really more than that. In Gypsy lore we have unseen people who are something like your own fairies and elves; similar, yet in a way quite different, because, you see, our little people are real." Blinken gestured toward the five little wooden soldiers. "In their bodies I have made a home for five of our Atzigan spirit creatures, and I have given them names from our old folklore. They are Tzain, Tzoll, Tzaren, Tzod and Tzest. They know me. See! They are looking at me."

My gaze was drawn to the wooden soldiers, fascinated, and I could have sworn upon oath that their eyes *had* moved so that they were looking directly at Blinken.

"You see, they are waiting," I heard his voice adding. "They will always be waiting my call. I made them for August and Erich. They are not ordinary toys."

I had a strong sense of unreality. I

had the feeling that there was something here beyond the knowledge of all men. Then I became conscious of Julius Tein. He had come up behind Blinken, and paused there, and he looked directly at me over Blinken's head, but he spoke to Blinken.

"Mr. Darrell is our friend, Blinken," he said. "Would you mind letting him see, as you have sometimes permitted me to see when we stand here before the fireplace?"

Blinken made no answer. He stood for a long moment looking intently into my face, then he smiled, and I had more strongly than ever that sense of the uncanny and the unknown. Then Blinken spoke.

"Yes," he said. "Mr. Darrell is our friend—our good friend. I can feel it—here."

His long-fingered hand touched his breast over his heart and then moved toward me. He laid the hand lightly on my shoulder, let it rest there a moment, as if through the tips of his sensitive fingers he might sense my thoughts. And I tell you truly that I felt a current running through those supple digits, into my flesh, into my veins, through my brain and back again to him. Then he dropped his hand.

"Will you look into the mirror, Mr. Darrell?" he said quietly.

I turned my gaze to that wide mantel mirror behind the five wooden soldiers. For a short space of time it seemed only that—a mirror. Then, it was not a mirror. It was space. Simply space, stretching away into the infinite, and I had a puzzling sense of something being lacking there.

Then I knew instantly what it was. While it had remained a mirror, the figures of the wooden soldiers were reflected there. Now it had become space and no reflections remained. Though we stood directly before the silvered glass, neither the image of Blinken's face nor mine appeared there. Illimitable space. Then something moved in that space, a faint mistiness began to gather, as a fog forming and drifting, and something beyond my own volition reminded me of fog over San Francisco Bay.

I suppose that we are all skeptics at

heart. For a fleeting instant I suspected some trick, a mechanical illusion of some sort. Toy makers are wizards of ingenuity, and I knew how many things could be done with mirrors. But I knew in the next instant that no trick was here. I saw the fog thicken, shifting, drifting, until it was as opaque as a heavy cloud bank.

Then, as if some magic hand parted a gauze curtain, the fog parted in the center of the mirror. In the cleared space I could see the uneven skyline of a great city beginning to appear, faintly. It was indistinct at first, but not for long. It intensified and took on solid lines, and I saw it living before me—San Francisco.

I saw the Ferry Building in the foreground, as if I were looking at the city from the bay. One of the East Bay boats was just pulling away from the ferry slip. Beyond the Ferry Building the steel and concrete structures of Knob Hill emerged from the thinning mist.

Like a swiftly enlarging scene on a motion picture screen, the view in the mirror moved forward and became still clearer, as whole sections slid outward past the edge of the mirror, and the Golden Gate Department Store was picked out of the maze of buildings and brought into direct focus as if by a television eye. I heard Blinken's voice at my elbow, sounding unreal and far away.

"THAT is where your thoughts led us, Mr. Darrell."

I tried to turn toward him, but volition had gone from me. I was frozen there, by amazement and awe. Then like a motion picture fadeout, the scene passed from the mirror. Again it was a mirror only, and there was reflected in it Blinken's face, my own astonished features and the five erect figures of Tzain, Tzoll, Tzaren, Tzod and Tzest. Standing there at attention, and I could well believe now that they were waiting Blinken's call.

I managed finally to turn and confront him. "What is it? Hypnosis?"

He shook his head. "No. You really saw what you thought you saw. For centuries my people have done these things. There are some who would

explain them away with a misnomer—second sight. But I cannot explain them. I do not try.”

Julius Tein stepped closer and laid a hand on Blinken's shoulder.

“No one asks explanation of you, my son. When all that you do is good, why seek method or source? Thank you, Blinken, and excuse us please, if you will. Mr. Darrell and I have much business still to talk over. And you will see him again. He is staying the week-end with us.”

You can well believe that was one week-end in my life which I can never forget. Not that Blinken made any display of what he was. He would not have evoked that vision in the mirror had not Julius Tein requested it of him. There was nothing of the showman or mountebank in Blinken. He was as simple and humble as he was good and wise. But he was there, you see; and those things he had learned from his father, that ancient wisdom, were around him like an aura. He was simply one of those creatures who are not of this earth.

CHAPTER III

When Despair Came

WHEN I returned to San Francisco, I remembered shrewd and kindly Julius Tein, his hospitable wife, soldierly August and serious-faced young Erich. I remembered them with pleasure. I carried with me the history of the Tein family, given me by Julius himself, of how the Teins had been toy makers for many generations, of how Julius had begun his career as a wood carver, making toys by hand at first, gradually building up his business until his Hanover factory was one of the greatest in all Germany.

I remembered warmly the whole prosperous, happy and contented Tein family. But there is a difference, a vast difference, between the things we merely remember, and the things we cannot forget.

For as I went about my business in America I carried with me always an

inescapable vision of a dwarfed, gnomelike figure dressed in scarlet shirt and Gypsy scarf. A pair of twinkling black eyes, clear and bright as a child's, yet deep with the wisdom of the ages. Blinken and his five little comrades were always with me. That was what I could never forget.

For several years I made my annual trips back to Hanover, and I saw the bitter change that was wrought in the fortunes of the Tein family. Nazi-ism was born and came into power, and that mad dictator rose from obscurity to despotism, to harry and persecute Julius Tein and all his people.

I knew only vaguely the terror and hardships they endured, for Julius was not one to burden others with his troubles. I could not help knowing that because of adverse conditions the production of *Tein-y-Toys* had fallen off to almost nothing; that so much was demanded by the government in taxes that Julius Tein was reduced almost to penury.

Another year when I visited Hanover I learned that Tein's fine estate on the banks of the Hesse River had been taken from him. I found Julius and his family living in a tenement a little way off the Weiderstrasse in the city of Hanover. Julius was growing old now, but the dogged, battling spirit of his race was in him. With Blinken's help he managed to keep the factory going, and he divided his small means between caring for his own family and extending aid to others even less fortunate than themselves.

It was during this same visit to Hanover that I saw Julius Tein's charitable instincts bring grief and trouble upon him. Blinken at the time was absent, having gone to the Black Forest to obtain a supply of special wood from which to carve toys.

Julius Tein went with his son August late one night to deliver a basket of food to a hungry family who lived a short distance away. Julius knew the risk he was taking. The father of the unfortunate family was in ill-favor with the agencies of the government of new Germany; their miserable hovel was being watched.

After Tein had delivered the basket

of food, he was arrested by a detail of the *Schützstaffel*, the dreaded storm troopers. When the troopers started to drag his father off to prison, August interfered, and one of the stiffly uniformed soldiers fired in haste.

August died with a bullet through his heart and Julius Tein spent six months in the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau. I know that Julius came back from that horror a broken man.

But when, a year later, I was again in Hanover, I was amazed at the courage and fortitude with which the Tein family accepted their lot. No weary complaining, no tirades of bitterness. Erich's mother was slowly dying of grief over the death of August, her elder son, and with her last breath she was patiently planning with Julius to send Erich to America. He could, they said, set up a branch toy shop in San Francisco and sell *Tein-y-Toys* to the American trade. I knew the real reason behind their planning was to save Erich from what they feared lay ahead in the homeland.

And of course when Erich reached San Francisco, he came straight to me. I helped him to find a storeroom and get his new toy shop started. I watched Erich's untiring industry. I saw his toy shop slowly grow into a thriving business and I knew the reason for his eagerness, his driving labor that would never let him rest. I would have known what lay in his thoughts even if he had not explained to me one day.

"**Y**OU see, Mr. Darrell," he said, "my mother is now dead and my father is all alone. When the business is enough here, my father comes to America with me."

I looked into his serious brown eyes, and spoke the involuntary thought that flashed into my mind.

"And Blinken, too?"

A smile lighted his thin face. "Of course, and Blinken."

Erich had his living quarters in the rear of the toy shop; frugal quarters, but pleasant. The larger of the two rooms, his combination living room and bedroom, had a fireplace at one end. Over the mantel Erich had

erected a broad mirror. On the mantel before the mirror stood five little wooden soldiers, the soldiers Blinken had made for August and Erich; but August was gone now.

And those five uncanny little beings seemed as bright and new and unmarred as they had been years ago when Erich was only a boy. When I would go there to see Erich, I could not keep my eyes away from those tiny unbelievable shapes on the mantel. And I seemed always to see in the mirror a vision of Blinken's face. Increasingly I wondered how it was with him and the aging Julius, and why those strange powers of Blinken's had not saved them in some measure from the bitterness of persecution they had suffered.

Then that persecution grew worse, and Erich went about white-faced and worried, like a ghost of himself, and there was no longer even a friendly smile on his calm, gaunt features. I grew more and more concerned about him, and one day when I was there I stepped close to him and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Erich, we've been friends for a long time," I said urgently. "What's wrong? Has something terrible happened over there?"

His clear brown eyes clouded with pain, and his lips quivered.

"My father. He is again in bad trouble. He has not much, but there are so many others who have less. He was caught giving food to some starving children. He was beaten and sent again to the horrible barbed wire prison at Dachau." Erich's white face flamed with bitter indignation. "I am afraid that he cannot stand another six months in that hell-hole. It is like being sentenced to death for giving food to his own people who are starving."

I gripped his shoulder tight. "Then why doesn't he come, Erich? Why doesn't he come to you, since there is nothing to hold him there?"

Erich glanced cautiously around before he answered, as if some of the fear and terror from his homeland had pierced the intervening space and chilled him there in the back rooms of his San Francisco toy shop.

"My father cannot get out of Germany," he whispered. "He has not the money or the way. The talk of war increases. He has heard too many things and he has seen too much of the horror of new Germany. They will not let him go and I am afraid for him. I am afraid I will never see him again. I am sick with worry, and I am afraid."

There wasn't much I could say. I was afraid, too. And I looked up at the little wooden soldiers on the mantel, and soundlessly, in my heart I cried:

"Blinken! Why don't you do something? With all your ancient magic, are you powerless now? Is there nothing in your wisdom that can answer your need?"

But there was no reply. They were only five tiny wooden figures on the mantel, and the mirror was only a piece of silvered glass, reflecting Erich's bowed head and my own disturbed pale face.

That was the year that Erich said: "I will not put up the star this Christmas. It was my signal of gratitude to the world and to man for the better things that have been granted us. What have I to be grateful for now? There will be no star shining from the roof of the *Tein-y-Toy* shop this year."

I COULD not remonstrate with him. I could not remind him of all he still had to be grateful for when I knew the depth of his affection for his father, the bitterness of his grief over the murder of his brother August and the death of his mother. I couldn't help thinking of the desperate hope there had been in old Julius Tein's heart when he had sent Erich to America, of the hope there had been in Erich's heart when he came.

And now it seemed that all that hope had been in vain. Out of all that planning and dreaming for a salvaged future there seemed only wreckage and tragedy to come. And for Erich to say that there would be no star shining from his roof on Christmas Eve was enough to tell me how completely in despair he was.

The star was a great thing of alumi-

num and steel. Erich had had it constructed several years before, on hinged supports, so that during Christmas week it could be raised to blaze through the night from his toy shop. It stood thirty feet high, and was a solid mass of white frosted globes. After Christmas its hinged supports were released so that it lay flat upon the roof top. The globes were removed and the huge star was covered with a sheet-metal lid, to sleep until the next Christmas.

For several Christmases now, blazing Erich's gratitude and Erich's dream, it had gleamed from the top of the toy store through the crisp cold nights; that simple symbol to call to little children from the toy shop that was fairyland to them — one great white gleaming star. The star was not to shine this year. Christmas came and went, but only blackness hovered over the roof of the *Tein-y-Toy* shop.

I think there wasn't a child in San Francisco who did not miss the star. I know I heard comments concerning it for months afterward as the harried world rolled on into the year of 1939, and the intolerance and persecution in Erich's homeland grew more hatefully unbearable, and the dark shadows of war loomed ever more menacing upon the horizon.

Then came Germany's invasion of Poland. The war broke, and Erich lost all hope of ever seeing his father again. If Erich had been a worried man before, he was a broken man now. It saddened me to see him. His shoulders were bent; there were gray streaks beginning to appear at his temples. There was no least vestige of hope left in his clear brown eyes. It had been months since he had heard from either his father or Blinken.

CHAPTER IV

"This Is the End"

TWO days before Christmas—that is, only two days ago, you understand—I went into Erich's shop to see him. It was late afternoon and the

sidewalks on Mission Street were crowded with late shoppers hurrying to buy almost forgotten gifts. The shops were crowded, and the spangled and tinsel display windows were nearly hidden by the people crowded around looking into them.

Wreaths and colored lights festooned the lamp posts, and the faces in the stream of humanity were eager and bright. The Christmas spirit pervaded the chill night air, and seemed to be battling with the dank fog which drifted in from the shrouded bay and cast haloes around the street lamps.

Erich was busy with several customers when I went in. The whole shop was brightly lighted to combat the dismal fog, and the door into Erich's back rooms stood wide open. I could look through and see the mantel and the mirror. I could see the straight young bodies of the little wooden soldiers in their painted garb of a day long gone by, the cadet uniform of the old University of Heidelberg. I could see their perfect little faces with that queer attitude of listening, their still eyes staring at me, waiting; and they made me think of Blinken.

As I stopped by the counter, Erich took a wrapped package from beside the cash register and glanced beyond me with a sudden smile. I turned to follow the direction of his glance. Little Johnny Kelly, the crippled newsboy who had the stand on the corner, had just sold his last paper. He came limping his way homeward and paused a moment to call to Erich.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Tein!" he said gaily, and waved a hand.

Erich extended the tinsel-wrapped package across the counter.

"Merry Christmas to you, Johnny. Take this home with you. It's for you and the mama. And you'd better be scooting along. She'll be waiting for you."

Johnny took the package with eager hands.

"Gee—thanks! Gee—that's sure—swell. You're always givin' the kids things. But say, Mr. Tein, you're goin' to light the star, ain't you? You ain't goin' to leave it dark like it was last

year, are you? Gee, Mr. Tein! That star's the prettiest—well, all the kids, we—"

Erich Tein shook his head slowly, sadly. Something in his face stopped Johnny's tongue. Johnny Kelly had known his portion of misery. He nodded understandingly, murmured a repetition of his thanks and went on his way. After the boy had gone out of the shop hugging his package, Erich spoke to me bitterly. He spoke low, too quietly for any of the customers in the shop to hear.

"I wish I could find it in my heart to light the star—even for one Johnny Kelly. But there is no gratitude in me any more. Only misery, bitterness, and despair."

Then he went on to attend his customers, but his face was set and a blank look in his eyes showed that his mind was not there in the toy shop. I knew where his thoughts were; thousands of miles across the continent and an ocean and two decades of years. He was in Hanover. He was literally living again the days he had spent in the old ancestral home of the Teins, remembering the years when old Julius, now a hunted and beaten man, had been the foremost toy manufacturer of Germany.

And I knew, too, he was remembering the days before the fortunes of his family had been changed, never to be the same again. I could almost hear Erich repeating the words he had spoken to me only a few short months before: "Everything is lost. Now they have even changed the toy factory in Hanover from Santa Claus' workshop into a munitions mill where bomb fuses and hand grenades are made."

WHILE I was thinking of these things I saw Erich look once out through the big front window of the toy store. I knew he was not seeing San Francisco's neon-lighted skyline, or the dim lights of the Bay Bridge showing faintly through the fog which hung over the bay. He was remembering the holidays he had spent with his grandparents at Bremerhaven, where the heavy fog from the North Sea rolled inland—just as

the fog was drifting in from the bay tonight. Erich's thoughts were most bitter whenever he remembered the past, and especially that part of the past when his homeland was in chaos and old Julius had sent him to America to establish the *Tein-y-Toy* business in San Francisco.

He was so buried in his hopeless thoughts that he did not notice the stout, well dressed man who paused a moment by the big show window, then came on into the store. But I noticed him, and I suppose it was because something in him aroused my irritation.

I didn't know who he was, but he was definitely of the type that thinks the world is run to suit him, else it is ill-managed. He came into the toy shop with the air of one conveying a vast favor upon the proprietor by his mere presence. He acted as if he owned the place. He stalked around examining all the toys on the shelves and on display, and there was a faintly supercilious expression on his face as if nothing he saw was quite worthy of his exalted attention.

Then he happened to glance into Erich's living room, and his gaze fell upon the five wooden soldiers on the mantel. He stopped short, impressed in spite of himself, and stepped up to the open doorway and inspected the little wooden figures with a long intent look. Abruptly then, he wheeled about, and walked up to the counter where Erich had just delivered a wrapped package to a departing customer.

"I've been looking for wooden soldiers for my small son, and unable to

find anything fit," the stout man said peremptorily. "Those you have there on the mantel will do nicely."

Erich looked at the well dressed man with eyes that did not see him.

"I am sorry. Those are not for sale."

The stout man glared his quick indignation. "Nonsense! I must explain to you that money is no consideration to me, and a man should never possess anything he cannot sell if the price is right. I want those five wooden soldiers and no others."

Erich's voice did not sharpen. "I am sorry, sir. They are not for sale. I have any number of other wooden soldiers, here on this counter."

He moved to a table bright with tinsel, on which battalions of brightly colored soldiers were arrayed—dough-boys, blue jackets, Foreign Legionnaires, Bengal Lancers, almost every nation was represented. The stout man gave the table only a cursory glance.

"Ordinary wooden soldiers." His voice was acrid with contempt. "I want those on your mantel. I told you the price does not matter. I am used to paying for things I want. How much?"

He drew a thick wallet from his pocket, pressed it open and fingered the sheaf of bills it enclosed. Erich looked him levelly in the eye.

"You waste your time and mine. Under certain circumstances I might give those wooden soldiers to your little boy, or any other little boy, but I would never sell them. You see, they were made for me and my brother by a very dear friend when I was only a little boy myself. No money could buy them." [Turn Page]

The stout man's gaze scorched Erich from head to foot.

"My money can buy them!" he said harshly. "If you are wise, you will discard your stubborn attitude. I want those soldiers and I'm going to have them."

Erich merely stood there and looked at him, and I wondered for a moment if the stout man's arrogant insistence could possibly wrest those priceless little beings from Erich's possession. I should have known Erich better than that. He drew up his shoulders, his head went back, and he seemed to grow taller in stature.

"The only way you could ever get them would be to steal them," he said precisely, coldly, "and I think — I think I would kill any man who did that."

The stout man started, his face flushed with fury.

"It is poor business for a tradesman to grow insulting, Mr. Tein. You do not know who I am. I can see that, so I will tell you. I own this building in which you leased space from my agent to house your shop. This is once your independence is no mark of wisdom. If your business is so good that you can refuse a profitable sale, then you can surely afford to pay me a much higher rent for these quarters than you have been paying. I will see that this is attended to when your lease for the new year is drawn up."

He swept Erich with another disdainful glance, whirled on his heel and stalked in high dudgeon from the shop.

For that instant there was no one in the shop but Erich and me. Erich looked at me with tragic eyes. He spread his hands eloquently and his shoulders drooped in a helpless gesture.

"The last straw. So now I go out of business, my friend. I cannot afford increased rent. Business is too poor. This is the end. I am done; and all because I would not part with my dear little comrades, all I have left of my father and Blinken. Well, so be it, then. I will at least give as much happiness as I can with the stock I have left."

He cut himself short as a little old

woman came hurrying into the shop and he turned to her to ask what she wanted. I knew that his clear brown eyes encompassed her tired face, her graying hair and her thin, threadbare coat.

"What is it for you, Madam?" Erich said.

The old lady stopped by a table of dolls. Her eager, sunken eyes traveled over the numerous small figures and came to rest on one exquisite example of the toy maker's art; a beautifully carved, finely enameled wooden doll about a foot tall. The doll had jointed legs and arms and head, with a sweet, lovely face and curling honey-colored hair. The doll was dressed in gauzy spotless white. I happened to know that it was hand-made and expensive. The old lady's eyes clung to it as she answered Erich.

"I—I'm looking for something for a little girl." She hesitated and raised her gaze to Erich. "My granddaughter. She hasn't any mama or papa to buy her things. She's crazy for a doll, one with yellow hair like Goldilocks. I—I haven't very much. What is the best you could show me for about seventy-five cents?" Her eyes shifted back to the beautiful doll, and she added hesitantly: "I—I could pay a dollar."

Not a muscle of Erich's face moved. Not an instant's faltering slowed the movement of his hand as he reached toward the golden-haired doll in the white dress, and again I seemed to hear him saying that he would give as much happiness as he could with the stock he had left. He lifted the doll and held it up for the old woman's closer inspection.

"Would your little granddaughter like this one? This is a very special doll. It was made by Blinken himself."

The old lady looked dubiously puzzled. "Blinken?" she repeated inquiringly.

Erich pointed to the tag hanging from the doll's shoulder, a tag that bore the legend, "*Tein-y-Toys*," and the brightly-colored likeness of Blinken in his scarlet shirt and Gypsy sash.

"This is Blinken. Only, he is real,

you see. He models all of our best toys. He made this one with his own hands." Erich indicated the golden-haired doll.

The old lady drew a long breath. "Oh, it's lovely! But I really told you the truth. I can't pay more than a dollar."

"That is quite all right," Erich said gently. "It is such a short time until Christmas, the shopping is nearly over. I have much stock to sell in a short time. You may have this doll for fifty cents."

THE little old lady was embarrassingly pleased. She was still exclaiming her gratitude and delight after Erich had wrapped the doll and she went out of the door with the package clasped carefully in her arms. I looked at Erich.

"You'll get rid of your stock in record time if you go at it that way. There'll be enough last-minute shoppers in San Francisco between now and closing time tomorrow night to clean out your store."

The smile on his face was thin and infinitely sad.

"It is better to give for joy than to hoard for loss. If I do not have a toy left in the shop tomorrow night besides my five little comrades, what do I care? I think all the wanting left in me is a feverish desire to go where Blinken and my father are, and my brother and my mother. I haven't the least doubt that they are together now."

I stood around his shop for an hour and watched him practically give away hundreds of dollars worth of toys. He moved about like a man in a dream, speaking calmly and quietly to customers, wrapping packages in holly paper and tying them with tinsel, and taking in return whatever the buyers were able or willing to pay.

Then it got too much for me and I left Erich Tein's toy shop and went home. I swore I wasn't going back there till after Christmas day, but we swear a lot of things we know at the time we'll never carry through. I thought I couldn't bear that look on Erich's face, I couldn't bear that beaten, mechanical way in which he

moved about, but I found that I could bear with still less equanimity not knowing what was going on in the toy shop. I managed to stay away until about four hours ago this evening—this Christmas Eve, my friend.

Then my concern proved stronger than I was, and I went over to Erich's toy store. It was no worse than I had pictured it. Erich moving about in the shop like a man in a dream, people coming in and going out—mostly poor people now, like the old lady who had bought the doll—carrying with them toys that were worth three times, ten times what they had paid for them. And over all the feverish festive air of Christmas Eve which left Erich untouched.

He closed the shop early, simply because he was too weary to attend to customers any longer. We went back into the living room and sat down and he offered me something to eat and I didn't want it. I just sat there thinking of the huge star up on the roof, lying flat on its back, masked, dark, like a European city after an air raid alarm. I thought of the plump well dressed man who had come into the shop the night before; of his insufferable arrogance and the final bitter hardship his pique had worked on Erich Tein.

I thought of the five little wooden soldiers on the mantel, and I got slowly to my feet and walked over to the fireplace to stand close and look at them. I heard Erich rise from his chair and follow me, and neither of us spoke, but we stood there, gazing at those five tiny erect figures, and the reflections of their straight little backs in the mirror.

CHAPTER V

To the Rescue

I DON'T know which of us noticed it first. I only know that in one instant the reflections of the soldiers in the mirror began to fade, and almost in the same instant Erich gripped my arm with fingers that

cinched tight and hard. I caught my breath, remembering a long-gone day and another mirror, remembering Blinken and his deep wise eyes.

I felt the same chill crawl over me as I had felt that day in Hanover. I felt my gaze glued to the mirror, with all power gone from me to draw it away even if I had wanted to do so.

And then the mirror was gone, and there was only space—space stretching away into the infinite; illimitable space. Then the mistiness began to gather, like a dark fog forming and drifting, and I saw that it was neither mist nor fog, but a drab wall fading away to expose the dim interior of a miserable darkened room where the only light was a small stub of a candle guttering on the floor in the corner.

The one window of the hovel was shrouded with a thick, dark cloth to prevent any light from escaping into the night. It was a dismal cubicle where one might hide from certain death and I strained my eyes for sight of some living person in that place.

Then I saw him, moving toward me out of the shadows into the foreground. Blinken! But what a changed Blinken! His thick black hair was disheveled. His black eyes were wide and wild. His face was thin and pale and streaked with blood. I heard Erich catch his breath and I saw then that old Julius Tein was crouched close at Blinken's side. The old man was weak and ill, and there was blood on the side of his face, running down from his hair where a blow had cut his scalp.

"Blinken! Where are you? What can we do to help?" I cried aloud, involuntarily.

His voice came thin and faint as if across measureless space, but his words were clear.

"You can do nothing. Again we have offended by giving food to the starving. Though we have little enough ourselves, there are others in more bitter need. We gave what we had and the *Gestapo* caught us."

"The *Gestapo*!" Erich breathed. "The dreaded secret police—that mad-man's spies!"

"The storm troopers are coming for us," Blinken's voice was going on.

"Listen. They are even now at the door."

"The *Schützstaffel*," Erich muttered. "Those Nazi fanatics with steel helmets and bayonets on their guns!"

And behind Blinken there came the sound of gun butts pounding on the door. Loud guttural commands from outside the hovel and then Blinken's voice again.

"There is nothing but death if they break down the door and find us here alone."

From across limitless space Blinken's keen black eyes seemed to search for something, and then rest on the row of wooden soldiers standing on the mantel before us.

"How long you have waited for my call, my little comrades," Blinken's voice went on. "And I promised you that call should never come, save in a last dire need to save the life of another. Only for that would I call you to this bitter reality of living, breathing, fighting men. That time is here! Tzain! Tzoll! Tzod! Tzaren! Tzest! Come!"

Hearing that voice from so far away, I remembered what Blinken had said so long ago—that these were not ordinary toys. Into each of them he had breathed an elf spirit which was something like a soul. They were waiting his call.

My gaze jerked to the five wooden soldiers. Remember, my friend, this may sound strange to you, but I saw it with my own eyes, this very night, a scant four hours ago. I saw these things and heard these words. I saw those five emotionless little figures stand listening for an instant, as if startled and breathless, and then they moved.

THEIR rifles went quickly from order to their shoulders, and they wheeled smartly and faced Blinken. He gripped his hands into fists and held them out before him in a beseeching gesture of prayer. At his shoulder old Julius crouched staring, a mad light of hope in his eyes. At the door behind them the storm troopers thundered and the frail portal sagged under the assault of their rifle butts.

Then the five little soldiers, wooden

no longer, swung briskly forward, and as they marched into that space that had been a mirror I saw them growing, growing, until they attained full stature, their lithely erect forms blotting out the sordid room, blotting out Blinken and the wasted figure of Julius.

How far had they to go? Who knows? Anyhow, what are time and space to those who have access to Blinken's ancient wisdom? One minute those five figures went marching into the infinite. The next minute they marched into that sordid room, and they stood ranked before the door,

go outside and give yourselves up to my men!"

But the five erect scarlet clad figures remained, silent and unmoving, a living barrier between the *Schützstaffel* and their innocent prey. The storm troop captain drew his pistol and his voice rose to a hoarse shout.

"I command you! Surrender your arms!"

No answer, and no sign of compliance. The captain's thick neck bulged above the stiff tight collar of his tunic. He leveled his pistol at Tzain and fired. The steel jacketed bullet whined uninterruptedly as through space, and

their rifles lowered and leveled as the men of the *Schützstaffel* crashed through the door.

THE storm troop captain and three of his men entered, blinking against the dim light of the feeble candle. Then an electric torch flashed in the captain's hand. Its burning light flashed over the red and gold uniforms of Blinken's five comrades and the captain fell backward a step.

"What is this that we have here?" the captain demanded. "Those uniforms? Do you not know that they are forbidden by our leader? You should be wearing the uniform of new Germany. You should be fighting on the battle lines with the others. In the name of the *Reich* I place you under arrest. Throw down your guns and

something like a little smile of contempt lingered for a moment on Tzain's finely molded lips. Otherwise he did not move.

"You traitorous swine!" the storm troop captain snarled in rage. "You stand there protecting those who have displeased our leader! You will pay for your treachery. You will pay!"

The officer called out a harsh command and the others of the troop rushed crowding into the hovel. The captain gestured toward the five silent figures.

"Kill them!" he commanded. "Empty your guns into their bodies, and if some of your bullets strike those two behind, it does not matter."

So saying the captain raised his pistol again. He fired two shots point-

blank at Tzoll's breast and two more at Tzest.

"Kill them!" he shouted madly. "Kill them!"

But strangely the storm troopers did not move. There were a dozen or more of them, and their eyes were all glued to the oddly compelling stares of Blinken's five comrades. What they saw there only those men of the *Schützstaffel* knew. They were well trained soldiers, disciplined and taught to obey their officers' commands, but here was a greater power than any they had ever known before; a thing which instilled within them a fear greater than their fear of punishment for disobedience.

Those nearest the door began to step backward, and as if by common consent the detail of storm troopers followed in slow retreat. The frantic captain threw down his empty pistol and jerked a bayoneted rifle from the man nearest him. Pointing the wickedly jagged blade at Tzod's breast, the *Schützstaffel* captain was poised, ready to lunge. In another instant he would have buried the bayonet deep in Tzod's flesh, but then the five comrades moved.

With a unity of purpose requiring no spoken command, their hands tensed upon their rifles, and the crash of their volley was as one explosion. The storm trooper flung up his arms and staggered backward, falling. Outside the hovel could be heard the hurried footsteps of his men in quick retreat. . . .

THERE in the back room of the San Francisco toy shop, Erich Tein's fingers quivered on my arm. Standing there by Erich's side I saw Tzaren and Tzod lift Julius Tein between them, and Tzoll and Tzest likewise lifted Blinken. They went marching out past the door, Tzain in the lead with his rifle at ready. And then the dark fog clouded the infinite, and slowly cleared away, and the mirror was again only a mirror. And from before it the five little wooden soldiers were gone.

I stood for a long time staring at the empty place on the mantel. A thin film of dust coated the varnished wood

and there were only five clean spots there to show where Blinken's five comrades had stood in an orderly row. I felt myself shaking as I turned to face Erich.

He was a transformed Erich. He stood erect, and there was a great light in his face, and a new hope blazed high in his clear brown eyes.

"Come, we must get the workmen!" he said urgently. "We must get the globes! We must light the star. It will not take us an hour!"

But it took us nearly an hour and a half before we had every globe in place and the star erected on its high supports, blazing its gratitude and its promise against the dark waters of the bay. We left the roof and went down to Erich's rooms back of the toy shop. Erich seemed tense and ill at ease, and as if seeking some palliative for his restlessness, he switched on the radio.

A Christmas play was being broadcast over the network. We had tuned in close to the end of an act, and during the short intermission, the New York announcer broke in with the statement that we would now hear a short war news flash from London. A few seconds later we heard the voice of the London commentator. I thought I detected a note of joy in his brisk matter-of-fact voice coming to us over an ocean and a continent as his quick words followed close one upon another.

"Perhaps the strangest bit of war news in weeks came this Christmas Eve from Aalten, a small village in Holland near the German border. The report tells of five strange soldiers who came marching out of Germany amid a hail of machine gun bullets from the Nazi frontier guards. These five soldiers, scarcely more than boys, were dressed in the uniform formerly worn by the cadets at the old University of Heidelberg, and they brought with them into neutral Holland a venerable old man who has been identified as Julius Tein, former Hanover toy manufacturer, and a Gypsy hunchback known as Blinken.

"These seven refugees from Nazi Germany surrendered themselves to the military of the Netherlands, but

during the momentary excitement of their arrival, the five strange soldiers mysteriously disappeared. After being questioned and having their identity established, the old man and the hunchback were promised refuge in Holland until such time as arrangements could be completed for their passage to America where Julius Tein's son resides.

"And now comes the strangest part of this Christmas story from Holland. Early this morning the small son of a poor Dutch family trundled out of bed and went hopefully to the fireplace where he had hung his stocking the night before. He didn't expect to find more than a few cookies or a piece of candy, but in that stocking were five tiny wooden soldiers, all dressed in the red and gold cadet uniform of old Heidelberg.

"And this, ladies and gentlemen, ends the broadcast from London. I return you now to New York."

Erich stepped quickly to the radio and snapped the switch. I heard him sob, and I heard again faintly the voice of Blinken, calling his five comrades to life across half the world. I gripped Erich's hand and turned and went out of the toy shop. It was no place for me. Erich wanted to be alone with his happiness and his gratitude, with all the new hope of the future that was to come.

And I came straight home, that I might stand here with you at the window and look down upon that great star blazing high in the air. That bright white star calling to all the world that the Child is still being born in a million hearts and in a million humble places; reminding us forever that the day of miracles will never be done while there live men like Blinken whose twinkling black eyes are as fresh as a child's, and whose wisdom is as ancient as time itself.