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*There were many doors in Askandia, and all of them had been opened—except one . . .*

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# The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

WE FINISH up the issue with a Don Wilcox novelette entitled, "The Red Door." This ought to be enough said, since Don is one of the most popular writers ever to appear in our pages. We've put this story in the back of the book for a definite reason. Most people care to have their dessert after the main meal. We think this story fills the bill. It concerns a little kingdom known as Askandia, and a ruler named Levaggo. This ruler had a penchant for doors, and in all his kingdom there was no door closed to him—except one. This door was a red door, and what lay behind it, nobody had ever come back to tell about. The king was a naturally curious man—besides being a very proud and possessive man. So he set out to open the red door and take a peek . . . .

Which just about winds things up for this issue. But we'll be back next month with a string of headlines—as usual. See you then. . . . .*Rap*

# *The* RED DOOR



The knifeblades hung motionless, and yet the goat was cut to ribbons before their very eyes



by **DON WILCOX**

**It was easy to open the door, and just as easy to walk through it. But nobody had ever come back—alive**

CHAPTER I

Levaggio Worries

**K**ING LEVAGGO, the cruel monarch of Askandia, had grown fat from worrying. He had worried about seizing the throne in the first place, and for the past ten years

he had worried over keeping it. Today he was worrying more than ever.

He secluded himself in his private study where he could pace the floor unobserved. This room fitted his mood perfectly. The wall paper design was a dense forest with black trees, some growing to the left, some to the right, none straight up. When he paced to

the left, the trees seemed to push him back. When he paced to the right, more black trunks resisted him. His only relief was to pause in front of the big arched window that looked down on the winding ribbons of mountain highway.

"The devils! Why don't they come? Why don't they at least report? They're loafing. I ought to have them shot!"

All through this month his eager eyes had been watching for the return of six armed men. He had dispatched them on the first day of November to watch all the roads. There would be a reward for the one who committed the secret assassination.

"I ought to have them shot!"

"Save your bullets," said Whiteblock, sauntering into the study. "Relax."

The king glared at Whiteblock and said nothing. This little man was his confidential adviser, and smart. He was a man of many talents, and the king didn't belittle his words. At least not often.

Whiteblock paused at the window and looked at his soiled fingers in the light. He had just finished building an ingenious instrument of death, a job to which he had devoted many months.

"As I told you before," Whiteblock said, "it's very risky to send men out on the road with the order to assassinate your nephew."

"In secret."

"Secret assassinations aren't easy. They require the skill of an artist. Any of those clumsy louts you sent would leave clues that the common people would pick up. Then the Old Lady would find out, and where would you be?"

**T**HE king stared gloomily at the wall paper. He knew where he would be. In the deep forest. Hiding out.

For in spite of his power as King of Askandia, the real power belonged to the people. And their champion was that eccentric old character, his own great aunt. She was cross-eyed and homely and old, and had the wildest head of white hair in all Asia Minor, and laughed with a laugh as deep as a barrel. Her name was so long no one ever bothered to remember more than Maria Kagofanzi Dodoplume. Everyone called her the Old Lady.

"I know you'd prefer to have your murders committed away from the palace," Whiteblock said. "No blood on the floor. No suspicions."

"That's right," said the king. "If they could catch him on the way home from the wars, and murder him quietly—by accident—no one would need to know that he was Prince Randall—"

"The rightful heir."

"Shut up."

"Sorry," said Whiteblock. But he wasn't. He knew where the king's sensitive nerves could be struck. A deft stroke here and there. The more the king worried, the more important Whiteblock became. It was a job with rich rewards, being the most intimate adviser to the monarch of Askandia. "As you were saying—"

"No one would need to know it was Randall."

"My theory is, as you know, precisely opposite," said Whiteblock. "Let him come back to the palace, if he will. Let him roam through the halls, through the gardens, through the power plant, into the Arena. Let him know that death awaits anyone who tries to trespass through the Red Door into the vault—"

"You've said all that before."

"I repeat it. Let the Council know that he has been warned. *But make him want to trespass.*"

"And if he doesn't?"

"He will. That's his nature. He's bold. He'll take the risk. When he does—zinggo!—he's gone!"

"Are you sure?"

"I tell you, the deadly gadget is complete, Levaggo. Relax! Relax!" Whiteblock took his own advice and slipped into the huge green chair in front of the monarch's desk. His diminutive form was dwarfed by the massive furniture. But he was not completely at ease. When his nerves were thus on edge, his high-pitched voice was capable of a savage bark. "Relax, I say. This can't fail. I'll demonstrate it to you."

The king growled something inarticulate. Three times in the past three years his best laid plans to do away with his second cousin, Prince Randall, had gone awry.

Whiteblock waited for a response. His thin dexterous fingers toyed with a cloth kit of small steel tools which he always carried. The king stood silent, angry, staring out at the afternoon sunlight. His bulging shadow across the desk betrayed the nervous twitches of his puffy jowls and his sharp double-pointed beard.

"Are you still worrying about that servant girl's dream?" Whiteblock snapped.

"I didn't like it," the king said, turning to look down into the narrowed eyes of his cocky little adviser. "I didn't like it a bit."

"Just because a servant girl happens to dream of trouble here in the palace—"

He broke off short. A girl's heel-clicks sounded through the adjoining hall. It was the beautiful Sondra, bringing water for the window plants.

"Sondra!" the king barked. "Come here."

Whiteblock raised an eyebrow. "I'll wait by the Red Door. It's ready to

deal quick death whenever you want a demonstration. First I thought I would try it out on a criminal, or one of the palace musicians," he gave the king a cynical wink, "but I softened and decided to use a goat instead. See you later."

## CHAPTER II

### Sondra's Dream

WHITEBLOCK looked up at Sondra as she passed him in the doorway. She chose not to see him. As a servant, she squandered no smiles. He shrugged his thin shoulders and walked away.

Sondra moved around the desk to the sunlit windows. Her soft waves of light brown hair caught a glint of copper from the sun.

"Rather late in the day to be watering the plants, don't you think?" the king said hatefully.

"I did not wish to disturb your majesty this morning," Sondra said softly. "You were standing at the window, lost in thought. So I decided to wait."

He turned to block her path. "Sondra, you're a sorceress."

She stopped short. She was afraid of King Levaggo and she rued the night by the great fireplace that she had first spoken of her strange dreams. The less he knew her, the safer she would be. With forced poise she placed the water pitcher on the window shelf and folded her arms.

"I want you to repeat that last dream to me," he said.

"Again?" Her low, calm voice was almost mocking in its contrast to his rasping words. He seemed to be consuming her with his lustful red eyes. "Again?"

"The whole dream. Don't lie to me, now, or I'll hang you."

"I would never lie to you, your majesty," she said. "I simply dreamed that you were about to tear the month of November from the calendar when a fanfare of trumpets sounded outside the palace. Someone had arrived. It was the son of Randello, the rightful heir—"

"*Rightful!* Why, you damned traitor!" He struck her across the cheek with his open hand. He stood glaring at her, breathing hard. "Go on! Go on!"

She shrank back, her fingers touching her face, her lips trembling.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. You see, that was just the dream. I forgot—"

"Go on. You dreamed that my cousin Randall came here to the palace. Then what?"

"He was on his way back from the war with Japan. Now that it was over, he was coming back for a visit. And so—I can't tell you any more."

"What happened? Give me everything. Don't you dare slight a single detail!"

SONDRA pressed her hand over her eyes. She regained her voice and went on, slowly, evenly.

"You and Whiteblock whispered together. The two of you agreed that Randall must be killed before the tenth anniversary of his father's death. Otherwise—"

"What do you know about the tenth anniversary?"

"But doesn't everyone know? Doesn't the whole kingdom expect the Old Lady to enter the Vaults and read Randello's letter—his message for all people who still love his memory ten years after his death? Doesn't everyone know?"

"All right, all right," the king growled. It annoyed him that all the court gossip could become so common-

place that even the servant girls could dream about it. But there was something about Sondra. Her keenness. Her sure knowledge of matters that he thought were closely guarded secrets. How did she know what he and Whiteblock had been whispering about? "So you've dreamed up some fantasy about Randall being killed. Very funny. I think we can laugh that off and dismiss the whole matter."

"Thank you, your majesty." Sondra picked up the water pitcher and started away.

"Not so fast, young lady. Come back here."

"Very well, your majesty."

"Did you tell me everything?"

She hesitated. "Not quite."

"Set that water pitcher down. It's all absurd." The king began to pace. Now Sondra knew how much her words had disturbed him, and she saw the color of rage filling his face. "Why should you have such a dream? Why should you think that Randall must be killed? Is he a criminal?"

"In my dream you were afraid he would regain the throne," Sondra said simply. "The people would favor him."

Levaggio beat his fists on the desk. He paced back to the window and beat his fists on the sill.

"It's a poison lie. Utterly false. Utterly false." He seized her arms and shook her. "I suppose you've been telling it around. Have you? Have you?"

"I haven't breathed a word, your majesty. Why should I?"

"Tell me the rest."

"You invited him in. You made him believe he was welcome. As a guest. He was very tall and handsome. And very kind, like his father, the late King Randello. I wanted to warn him that he was about to be murdered. But you and Whiteblock—"

"Don't stop."

"You and Whiteblock had everything planned."

"Shut up!" Levaggo leaped at her. His brutal fingers went for her throat. He was choking the breath out of her. Her arms flailed, she caught the pitcher and dashed the water in his face. He let go, then, and she saw him mopping at his rage-filled cheeks and black beard. Terrorized by her own boldness, she backed away from him, toward the door. He followed her, roaring.

"Go on, tell the rest. Say that we murdered him and I'll hang you."

"I didn't say it."

"You were about to."

"I wasn't."

"Then what?" A glow of savage satisfaction filled his eyes, and he drew out his words as if now he knew. "Ahhh! You dreamed he was killed by accident. That's it! By accident!" He barked with a demand to make her admit it. "By accident! That's how he was killed! Do you hear?"

He was coming toward her again. Then he stopped. The sight of the calendar on the wall caught him. *NOVEMBER*. His puffy white hand reached out, tore the sheet off and crumpled it.

At that moment a fanfare of trumpets sounded from the palace gates. Someone was arriving. Sondra snatched the pitcher and fled.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Red Door Gets a Goat

FROM the palace gates the news spread through the court, through the drawing rooms, the kitchen, the stables, the power plant, and on to the village at the rear of the palace grounds. This was an event. A husky tramp with a whiskered face and

ragged clothes was being ushered into the king's palace. Why? Because he claimed he had seen the king's cousin Randall in battle.

Ornamental iron doors swung open, trumpets blared, guards moved briskly, ushering their guest into the king's brightly lighted reception hall.

Sondra and the other servants watched from behind doors, pillars, and chairs.

"What shall we do?" the king whispered to Whiteblock.

"I told you we should have tested this Red Door before. Now we're caught for time," Whiteblock retorted. "You're quite aware, I trust, that this ragged man entering our palace did not come here by mere chance."

"I'll talk with him at once. The Captain of the Guards believes he is a man of some importance."

"The goat is ready," said Whiteblock.

"Not now. Later. During the dinner hour."

Whiteblock shrugged and watched the massive king stride across the Arena floor to be joined by six gold-braided guards at the stairs.

Within a few minutes, history was being made in the reception hall. The whiskered stranger was standing before the king, doing his best to answer all the questions that were being so nervously fired at him. What was known of Randall? Had he proven himself in the battle of the Pacific? Had he fought with the American troops or the British? Was he a fighter, now that he had grown up, or was he a coward?

"Is there any likelihood that he might have been wounded—or killed?"

"Well, the last time I saw him," said the wayfarer, "was the last time I shaved. In India. Several days ago, as you might guess." He laughed, delighted with his own mischief.



"Then you—you are Randall yourself?" The king's jaw sagged. "Are you? Of course you are. I'd know you anywhere. You've grown up since I saw you. But you're the prince. You'd just as well admit it."

Randall laughed, and his white teeth gleamed. "I'll shave one of these days to be sure." He thrust his hand into the king's, as if meeting him on an equal plane. It was all happening too suddenly. The king hadn't time to collect his wits. His hand went limp. His face went white. Randall, devilishly handsome within his rags and whiskers, strong of face and solid of jaw, was taking him by storm. "How is our kingdom, cousin?"

"Why did you come?" the king uttered weakly.

"To see my father's picture in the south hall. Do you mind? Come along."

**A**BRUPTLY the prince whirled and started at a brisk stride into the south hall, toward the wide graystone fireplace whose lively blazes seemed to invite him.

To the guards the king snapped an order. "Accompany him. See that he stays in the south hall until I rejoin him. I must attend certain other affairs of state that are more urgent."

Heels clicked, and the gold-braided, white-uniformed guards marched in double file into the south hall, where each took his place to guard all exits.

From pillars, chairs, and doorways, members of the court and servants shifted their positions to keep within view of this bold young wayfarer. Sondra, who had chosen the south hall as a safe place from which to watch the king and the stranger confer, had meant to conceal herself in one of the two large tapestry-covered chairs before the fireplace. She was now caught

directly in his line of march. He whirled suddenly to discover her trying to scramble away.

"Hold on. What's this? An eavesdropper?"

He caught her by the hand, and his dark eyes burned at her fiercely, with a hint of a smile. He noted the neatness of her brown hair, her round arms, her trim figure. The simple blue and white servant's uniform had never looked so well on anyone else, he thought, and he wondered how she would look in the jeweled gown of a queen.

The pretty little creature appeared to be frightened, he thought. Could those marks across her cheek mean that someone had cuffed her?

"Let me go. Please."

"What are you trying to get away with?"

"Nothing, sir."

She looked at him with such a curious brightness in her eyes that he tightened his grip on her hand. She started to whisper.

"I must warn you—"

She stopped, looking around at the cluster of court people who were gathering around at a discreet distance.

"What are you saying?"

"Later. They mustn't hear. Just—be careful!" Her lips trembled a little.

Randall, struck by her beauty as much as by her mysterious manner, put her at arm's length and pointed at her accusingly. "Secrets, eh? Do you see that picture of my father?" He pointed to the huge gold-framed portrait of Randello that hung above the fireplace mantle. "My father has his eyes on you, young lady. He has sharp eyes. I should know. He never missed any of my mischief when I was a boy. I could tell you stories about his scientific experiments—"

A stern cough from one of the court

dignitaries cut his reminiscences short. Everyone was glaring much too fiercely at him, he thought. Perhaps they were embarrassed. It was not what they expected of a prince's return, that he should so suddenly be deserted by the king and left to converse with a servant girl. But no one knew what to do. He took matters in his own hands. He gave a gesture that took the whole group of twenty or more starchy dressed persons who had gathered around.

"So all of you want to watch me pay respects to my father? That's very interesting." A hint of sarcasm was in his voice as he saluted the portrait. "Father, the court stands here to pay its respects. I only wish you could take a bow. You were a great king. And kind. And never once dishonest, or treacherous or grasping. Take a bow, Father."

ALL the whispering in the south hall ceased. Those courtiers who played their loyalties to King Levaggo in exchange for his favors were stung by this act of sincere devotion to the memory of Randello.

Sondra broke the silence.

"I knew your father very well," she said. "He was a great king."

"A great king and a great man," Randall smiled at Sondra. "Thank you for your kind words, young lady. I'll see you after I shave—if these guards will let me shave."

Meanwhile, King Levaggo made haste to examine the mysteries of Whiteblock's latest and most treacherous invention.

The king, unattended, had hurried down the steps to the Arena. It was a wide, barn-like room, roofed over with skylights. Its walls were banked with tiers of seats to accommodate the largest crowds that ever gathered in the mountains of Askandia. American vis-

itors to the palace had remarked that this level floor was spacious enough for football games or a rodeo. King Levaggo knew that the next crowd that gathered here would come expecting to hear the Old Lady read a message that had lain, for the past ten years, in a chest in the Vault.

Randello had constructed the Vault shortly before his death. He had blasted the rocky mountainside at the rear of the Arena, and walled the room with steel, so that there was only one entrance—the twenty stone steps in the east end of the Arena, and the Red Door at the top of those steps.

Until a few weeks ago, the Red Door had been closed. The plates of steel that Randello had placed across it had not been moved—not until Whiteblock had at last won the right to have them removed.

Now Whiteblock stood at the foot of the twenty steps, with hands on hips, head lifted. He was watching the carpenters remove the last of the scaffolding around the rebuilt doorway. At the left of the stairs, a white mountain goat was tied to the carpenters' workbench.

"All right," said the king. "We haven't much time. Dismiss those fellows and show me what you've done."

Whiteblock was ready. Everything went like clockwork. The carpenters went out. Six members of the Council walked in. All of the numerous Arena doors were closed at the touch of a button. This was a strictly private party, and when the doors were closed, Levaggo and Whiteblock were satisfied that no one in the world would know what happened here—no one but themselves, their six confidential yes-men, and the goat.

Strictly speaking, the goat would be the only one to know the sensation of what was about to happen. But if the experiment worked—and Whiteblock

was sure it would—the goat would never blot the secret.

"We'd better have a janitor before we start," said the king. Two or three of his Council members echoed, "Yes, a janitor."

"What do we want with a janitor?" said Whiteblock. The Council members looked to the king for an answer.

"Those knives you've hung in the doorway," said the king, "make a pretty design. But if you have some scheme for making them whirl when the goat goes through, you should be prepared to take care of the blood. And the flesh. We don't want goat hamburger sprayed all over the door."

Whiteblock gave a cocky toss of the head. "I will personally mop up any part of that doorway that needs cleaning after the goat goes through."

"You will? With your handkerchief?"

"With the white silk shirt you gave me for my birthday. And another thing. If you see those knives move in any way to threaten the life of the goat, I'll tear them down and cut them into medals for your guards. Are you ready?"

THE king studied the sight before him. The Red Door was much redder than before. The steel plate that had closed this entrance for the past ten years had been red with paint. The new open doorway was deep red with a blaze of concealed lights. The full arch above the twenty steps was marked with two bold concentric circles of glowing red. A curved steel V reached down from the top of the arch. Its point, precisely at the center of the circular arch, exactly seven feet above the level of the top step, held the axle to which the two seven-foot knives were attached.

The knives stood out horizontally, like a two-bladed propeller. Apparent-

ly, the knives were intended to rotate like a propeller. They were wide, flat glistening blades, curved slightly like two immense scimitars. A vertical slit in the edge of the V that supported them seemed intended for them to swing through when they spun into motion. But, as Whiteblock had observed, no motion whatever was apparent. They appeared to be set, frozen in a horizontal balance, two dangerous outspread arms guarding the doorway.

But if they did not move, wherein lay the danger? A giant of six and a half feet could walk under them without scraping his head.

"Watch close," said Whiteblock. He led the goat up the steps.

With a steel tool he gave the goat a sharp jab just before they reached the twentieth step. The goat bleated and ran hard. Over the twentieth step. Across the stone platform into the doorway. Running hard. Under the arch—

The king thought the knifeblades trembled just a trifle, yet certainly they remained rigid, horizontal, motionless. But the goat, rushing beneath, was being magically *sliced into nothing*.

Apparently not being touched by anything, yet somehow being sliced. The king went tense, and his eyes bugged.

Sliced like cheese—no, like paper—no, like film. So thin were the slices, so rapid in succession, that to the king's bleary eyes there was no answer. At once it was all over. *The goat had run through, and there was no more goat.*

The slices? They seemed to have disappeared in the same instant that they were cut. The king ran up the steps to see.

"Come back!" the Council members shouted.

But Whiteblock was on the twentieth step, ready to catch the king and hold

him back at a safe distance. It was an unnecessary precaution. The king gazed through the Red Door into the darkness of the vault beyond. There were no slices of any goatly protoplasm on the stone floor.

Whiteblock sniffed the air. "Not even a smell left."

"Obliterated," said the king.

"A journey from which there is no return," said Whiteblock.

The king jogged down the steps thoughtfully, and faced his six Councilmen. "Gentlemen, it works."

The six yes-men bowed and murmured, "It works, your majesty."

#### CHAPTER IV

##### The Old Lady Smells a Storm

**K**ING LEVAGGO glanced back. The slightest hum had played upon his ears during the recent minutes, like an electric fan. He wondered. He saw the twinkle of satisfaction in the eyes of his cocky little adviser, watching the mystified faces of the six Councilmen.

"Don't worry about it, men," Whiteblock quipped. "Everything's under control. But just remember, don't yield to the temptation to walk into the Vault, even if those blades do appear to be stationary."

"We won't," the Councilmen said.

"Don't forget. If you do, you'll be a sliced goat."

"I'll give the decree to the court at once," said the king, swelling with authority. "No one will dare defy *this* order—not even the Old Lady."

"Not anybody—except some dashing young hothead prince."

The king chuckled evilly and the six Councilmen chuckled in the same key.

"Tonight," said the king.

"Tonight," said the Councilmen

under their breath.

It was a wonderful banquet, as everyone agreed. The moment the king appeared, dressed in one of his finest green and white dinner suits, fairly bursting with cordiality and good fellowship, the whole court knew that he had decided to welcome the returned prince with open arms.

In the presence of all the dinner guests the king rose and pronounced his official greetings.

"Randall, my own cousin! This is indeed a historic moment. We are honored. Indeed, indeed."

Randall raised his eyebrows in frank surprise at this change of mood. "Indeed? Well, thank you."

"Forgive us, Randall, if we were slow to recognize you in your—your travelling costume."

"My rags and whiskers!" Randall laughed. "I'm surprised you let me in. A few miles down the road I ran across some of your subjects in rags and whiskers who had been beaten within an inch of their lives."

"Indeed?"

"Indeed. I think they had been unable to pay their taxes and so your guards had used clubs—"

"Ah-ah-ah! How unfortunate," said the king, suddenly reddening. "Some stupid guards are always taking matters in their own hands."

"These people declared it was a very common practice. King's orders, they said." Randall faced the king coolly.

"What an unpleasant lie. Let's not mar this festive occasion with anything disagreeable." The king gave a generous wave to all the lords and ladies around the tables. "Come, let us feast. A feast in honor of our prince!"

**E**VERYONE stole glances at the returned prince during the feasting hours that followed. He was unques-

nably a dashing figure, very handsome in the black and gold uniform the court had furnished him. His eyes were deep, his features clean cut, his teeth gleaming with a bold smile. He tossed some rather roughshod remarks into the ring of conversation—some quips that might have stuck as insults if the mood had been less gay. It was obvious that he had a line on the king's cruel treatment of the lower class Askandians.

Two events occurred during the feast, one of them causing everyone to sit up and take notice, the other passing almost entirely unnoticed.

The first was an announcement by Whiteblock, speaking for the king.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the court," Whiteblock boomed into the microphone, "and subjects of Askandia, wherever you are, please give me your attention. The king has asked me to announce an important decree.

"As you all realize, the tenth anniversary of the death of our late King Randello is at hand. This week we observe that anniversary by reading the documents which have been preserved in the Vault. During all these years the Vault has been closed. At last it has been opened."

Low whispers of excitement greeted this announcement. Whiteblock went on.

"This week our honored Maria Dodoplume, whom we affectionately call the Old Lady will carry out Randello's will. She will read documents from the Vault. For this reason, the Vault has at last been opened, and it will remain open until after this event.

"Needless to say, it will be guarded constantly. From early dawn until the palace curfew, guards will be stationed in sufficient number to make sure that no group of bandits or other parties, however bold, will have any chance to

enter.

"The king regrets that it is necessary to take such measures. But a king can never know which of his citizens might take it into his head to steal into the Vault for an advance reading of these documents. Do you not agree?"

Many heads nodded in the affirmative, and there were whispered yeses throughout the banquet hall. Whiteblock drew himself up for the master stroke.

"Therefore your king does decree—and I read his own words from this sheaf—that instantaneous death shall strike anyone who shall ascent the twenty steps at the east end of the Arena and thereupon cross into the Red Door that leads to the Vault. Only by the king's special permission may this way be made open to any of his subjects, whether they be lords and ladies or the humblest servants. Do you understand my reading?"

A chorus of "Yes! Yes!"

"The decree is in operation from this moment," said the confidential advisor, waving the blank paper from which he had pretended to read. "The king signs it in your presence."

The king, slipping a sly nudge to Whiteblock, signed the blank paper with a great flourish of his pen, and Whiteblock bowed and took the document away. Everyone applauded, and the prince beamed to show that this action had his fullest approval.

"Excuse me for a moment, please," said the king to the prince. "I must make sure that Whiteblock's broadcast reached out to all my subjects."

THE dinner guests were left to themselves. The king hurried away. Out of hearing of their excited talk, he hurried down to the Arena. He opened a door and walked in, crossed the wide floor and came to the twenty steps. He

paused. There were no guards stationed here as yet. Very dangerous. He must attend to this at once.

Dangerous?

*Why* was it dangerous?

The king scowled. Why hadn't that devilish little Whiteblock explained the principle of this deadly magic?

The king walked up the steps slowly, his eyes on those level, silent, motionless knifeblades. There was a slight hum from somewhere in that vicinity, and the faintest smell of the heat of an electric motor.

The king reached the twentieth step. He drew the sword from its scabbard—the gold handled sword that had been a gift from a maharajah—which he always wore at formal dinners. He raised it slowly, cautiously. It pointed toward the vertical plane in which the blades *would* whirl— *if they whirled*.

The point of the sword, apparently touching nothing but air, *reached that plane*.

*Vlnnk!*

The sword barely jerked in his hand. Something invisible had struck it. Struck it with the force of lightning. Instantly he drew it back, to see whether it had been scratched.

*The point was gone.* Two full inches of the end had vanished.

Were his eyes mocking him, or had he seen a score of tiny slices of steel melting into the air almost instantaneously?

"Not bad," he muttered to himself. "Whatever the damned thing is, it's ready."

He hurried back to the dinner table, and quelled his trembling nerves.

"Ah, Prince Randall, how is the feasting? Be sure to eat aplenty. You never know how long it may be until your next meal. Ha-ha."

"Thank you, Levaggio," said Randall. "The service is excellent. And

here comes another helping."

It was Sondra who refilled his plate. "Eat heartily, gallant prince. You never know whether there'll be another meal."

He caught the message of warning again in her eyes. The king's ugly glare caused her to hurry on.

The second event of the feast, which went almost unnoticed, was a whispered message which fell disturbingly upon the king's ear.

"The Old Lady wants to know if it is true."

THE king looked up abruptly into the patient old face of Sebastian, one of the Old Lady's servants. The white haired man's lazy eyes were half closed, as usual. The king never saw him without wanting to kick him, just to wake him up. But strangely, the Old Lady had kept him all these years as her most reliable messenger.

"If what's true?" the king growled.

"If the Vault is being left open."

"Sure it's true, and death to all trespassers. Can't she tell an official decree when she hears it on the radio?"

"Thank you," said Sebastian. "I'll reassure her." And he started off.

"Wait a minute," said the king. His eyes narrowed with a glint of murder. "I want you to take a private message back to her. Private. No one is to know. Here, I'll whisper it . . . There are no guards on duty at the Red Door yet. You have my secret permission to walk in. I want you to see whether this key will work in the small iron chest just inside the Red Door. Do you understand? Then go try it at once. Report to the Old Lady if the key works. If it doesn't work, bring it back to me."

"Yes, your majesty." Sebastian trudged away, not knowing that he had been given a spare key to one of the

royal garages.

Very soon the king again excused himself, and this time he was gone for an interval of about fifteen minutes.

"Is the king not well?" the prince asked one of the ladies across the table.

"Of course he's well. Just slightly nervous. He's always that way. The affairs of state are always on his mind, you know."

"It must be very uncomfortable to be a king," the prince observed. "But if I were king, I'll swear I'd manage to sit through a feast like this without being interrupted. Oh, here he comes. What now, Levaggio? Is everything under control?"

The king was white and perspiring, but gay—so very gay that the prince thought he was outdoing himself for the sake of appearances.

"Is something wrong, Lavaggio?"

"Nothing's wrong," said the king. "Everything's fine. Everything's fine. What was that story you were telling about the war? You walked in front of a cannon or something?"

"It's a very dull story," said the prince. "I'll repeat it some other time."

"There might not be another time," someone whispered over his shoulder. The soft voice of Sondra, serving him olives and throwing him another warning look for good measure.

The feast of welcome lasted until midnight. The pleasing personality of the returned prince was taking a hold upon the court. They liked his stories. They liked his laughter. They were mystified by the hints of certain adventures in the war that he did not care to relate in full.

But Prince Randall was no braggart when it came to his own achievements. His own modesty was in high contrast to the bluster of King Levaggio and some of the Council members.

During the final course, after the

king had observed that it was growing late and all good things must come to an end, Randall announced his own plan briefly.

"Of course I shall be glad to stay for a day or two—until the Old Lady reads from the Vault. But please do not bother to provide a bed for me. I'm not in the mood for sleep. I would prefer to spend the night by the fireplace—alone."

THE court dignitaries shook their heads skeptically. We he suspicious of the king's hospitality? His gaze came to rest on Sondra, standing in the doorway beyond. She was talking to him with her eyes again, nodding her approval of what he had said. He must know it would be dangerous for him to sleep in this palace.

"Prince Randall's wish shall be granted," said the king. "He may sit by the fire and admire the portrait of his father all night if that is what he prefers."

An hour later the palace was quiet. Nearly everyone had retired. Randall sat gazing into the low flickering coals. The king bade him goodnight.

"One moment," said Randall. "I have a very personal question to ask." "Huh?"

"Was it my father's wish that you take over the throne? I'm entitled to an official statement, you know."

The king gave a laugh that was heavy with irritation. "Such a simple question. How old are you, cousin? I took you to be mature. You must know that such matters are always properly executed by the members of the Council." He pointed to the east wall, where a series of entrances opened the way to the Arena. Through the largest arch, the whole stretch of dark Arena floor could be seen, and beyond it, in the dark distance, the twenty steps leading up

to the glowing Red Door. "Can you see the Red Door through that arch?"

"What about it?" said Randall.

"Do you remember when your father constructed the Vault beyond?"

"I was away most of the time," said Randall, "attending school in India."

"Within that Vault are the official documents of your father's will."

"I am entitled to read them," said Randall.

"I hope you will stay to hear the Old Lady read them."

"I wish to go in and see them tonight. This very hour, if you please." Randall rose and motioned for the king to accompany him.

"No, Randall. You can't do it."

"Why can't I?"

"Because everyone is strictly forbidden, upon the pain of death. Didn't you hear Whiteblock read my decree? That applies to everyone." The king mopped perspiration from his white forehead. "No person, whether servant, or Councilman, or prince may enter the Red Door. I have placed balanced scimitars in the arch as a reminder. The punishment is death."

"Cousin Levago, I have traveled eight thousand miles."

"But you would not disobey your father's order."

"*Wouldn't I?*"

"Of course you wouldn't."

The prince looked at the king steadily and tried to swallow his anger. He said quietly, "It's not like my father to make such mysterious arrangements."

"I have no more to say. You understand, I trust."

"Yes."

"Good night, then."

"Good night."

**D**OWN the south wing corridor Whiteblock had been listening to every word. Now the king, having

walked the length of the corridor with loud footsteps, slipped back quietly to join him.

"Perfect," Whiteblock whispered. "Perfect. It can't fail. It's even better than you think."

The king mopped the sweat from the edges of his double-pointed black beard. "Better—how?"

"I planted a microphone to carry your conversation to the six Councilmen. They were holding a midnight conference, expecting trouble. Now they've made a recording of your words with the prince. History will know that you gave him full warning."

The king gave a relieved sigh. "Then the worst is over. *If* he goes in—"

"*When* he goes in, you mean," said Whiteblock eagerly.

"*When* he goes in and gets sliced by those invisible knives, or what-the-devil-ever they are, you and I will be in the clear. All we have to do now is sit back and wait."

"And relax."

"Relax? That reminds me. Where's Sondra? Do you know whether she retired? She's in danger of warning him. I meant to put her under lock and key for safe keeping."

"You'd better do it yet. I'll keep my watch. S-sh! Someone's coming."

The hard thumping footsteps, with just the slightest limp, were easily recognized. Down the dimly lighted corridor came the Old Lady in a gaudy purple dress and the yellow boots she always wore. The anger in her eyes could be detected instantly. Her wild white hair was in worse disarray than usual. She was muttering to herself.

The king hurried down the hall to intercept her. "Maria! What are you doing up this time of night?"

"I smell a storm," the Old Lady snapped. "I smelt it all the way across the village, and the closer I got to the



palace the more I smelt it."

"You're dreaming," the king mocked. "There's not a cloud in the sky."

"I smell a storm, and it smells awful thick around here. Where are all your guards? You've sent 'em to bed, huh? You must have wanted to get 'em out of the way."

The king tried to turn her back, and Whiteblock joined him in the effort.

"Go home and go to bed. It's too late to be starting a search," the king said nervously. "Wait till morning. He'll probably turn up."

The Old Lady turned savagely, and her crossed eyes seemed to straighten for a moment. "How did *you* know?"

"I don't know a thing," the king growled.

"I didn't tell you Sebastian was gone. You must know." The Old Lady's hands tightened into claws. "You've done something with him, that's why."

"You're crazy. You're crazy. You're crazy. You're—" The king broke off his enraged words only because Whiteblock throttled him. The little confidential adviser took matters in his own hands.

"Maria, if you've lost a servant, we'll start a search at once. There. Are you satisfied?"

"You'd better find him and get him back to me safe and sound. This is the first time he's missed his duties since they got him drunk one Saturday night thirty-five years ago. You better find him."

The Old Lady trudged away.

Whiteblock turned to the king. "What this all about. Is Sebastian missing?"

"I don't know," said the king. "I don't even know what she's talking about. She's crazy if she thinks I—"

"Shut up!" Whiteblock cracked, and then added, sarcastically, "Your majesty, I smell a storm."

## CHAPTER V

### Whiteblock Wants a Medal

WHITEBLOCK had wanted a particular medal for a long time. It was a large white-gold medal set with a circle of fifteen emeralds. It had no official significance, for it had been given to the king by one of the wealthiest noblemen of India simply as an ornament, and a handsome ornament it was. The king wore it tonight to match his green and white dinner suit.

"He'll give it to me tonight," Whiteblock thought.

Twice in the past, when the king had been particularly pleased with Whiteblock's favors, the confidential adviser had been on the verge of requesting this gift. Tonight would be the night. Within the hour. As soon as the prince—

"What's happened to Randall?" the king asked.

"He's still there by the fireplace," said Whiteblock. "He's boasting about his father's portrait again."

"To whom? Not Sondra!"

It was Sondra. She was looking very charming, indeed, and it was quite apparent that she and Randall were falling in love.

"This won't do," the king muttered. "I'll give her the royal order to get to bed." And he forthwith marched across to the fireplace to do so.

In their brief conversation that preceded the king's unwelcome interruption, Randall and Sondra had lost no time getting acquainted.

Randall was certain he had seen her before, somewhere in India. Didn't she and her father interpret dreams on the stage? Sondra, smiling, admitted that this was true. Until her father's death they had been entertainers. But here at the palace of Askandia, no one knew of this except the Old Lady.

"My dreams," Sondra admitted, "brought me to this palace in the first place. Someday I must go through a terrible explosion of fire—if I wish to be a princess."

"How do you know that?" Randall was on the edge of his chair with curiosity.

"My dreams," Sondra smiled. "I know that if I wish to be a queen someday, I must be a match for the prince who will become my husband. And my dreams tell me that my prince has already gone through fire."

Randall suddenly lifted her to her feet. He held her at half an arm's length, his hands pressing her elbows at her waist. He tried to read the mysterious depths of her eyes.

"You know so many things," he said. "You knew my father during the years that I was away at school. You must have known that he was a learned man—a scientist—and that he and I built the most wonderful laboratory. Did you know these things?"

"At the laboratory I must go through fire," Sondra said, gazing at him with a far-off look in her eyes.

He wanted to kiss her, then, and he would have. But the intrusion of the king prevented. In another moment Sondra retreated, according to the king's orders. Then the king repeated his own good night and trudged off in the other direction.

NOW left to himself, Randall turned and walked toward the nearest arched entrance to the Arena.

"She must know the secrets of those documents already," Randall thought. "Father must have planned . . . Or perhaps the Old Lady has prepared her to share my secret . . . I wonder what Father wrote . . ."

As he crossed the wide Arena floor slowly, certain stimulations played upon

his senses. He broke out of his reveries and began to study the Red Door. He could hear a faint hum, as if of a ventilator fan somewhere in the Vault. He must be mistaken. The Vault, he knew, had been hewn out of the solid stone of the mountainside. The faintest odor of warm machinery could be detected.

The lights around the door were all red, and none too bright. They gave the glistening pair of blades, which hung like outspread propellor blades, an ominous reddish-black cast.

He stopped and listened. A large room like the Arena could not help echoing the little sounds of squeaking floorboards. He moved up the steps slowly. On the tenth step he paused, listened.

Then he knew. He was being watched. Not one, or two, but several persons were lurking in the shadows of this room, watching his every move.

He chuckled to himself. "So this whole welcome becomes transparent," he thought. "They are expecting me to walk into death."

On the eighteenth step he paused again, looked up at the blades, and smiled to himself. He could imagine how agitated they must be, how terribly eager, watching and waiting for him to take those last few steps. He kept his eyes on the blades and began to back down the steps.

"I'll play their game," he thought. "I'll work them into a frenzy. Then what will they do with me?"

For a full hour he did play the game, and all the while he knew, from the tiny sounds, that his hidden audience was being worked into a cold sweat.

Sometimes he would climb the stairs briskly, as if fully determined to walk right in. Then he would stop abruptly, and hesitate for minutes, as if debating, finally shaking his head and descending dejectedly. Sometimes he would retreat

all the way across the Arena floor. Then, as he started out, he would look back, and be tempted all over again.

He knew the king's impatient temperament simply would not be able to endure the waiting, and he was right.

Presently the king was crossing the floor toward him.

"I couldn't sleep, Randall." The king was breathing hard. His fingers were twitching. "I felt that I had done you an injustice."

"How so?"

"By refusing to let you—" the king preferred to whisper. "Why don't you go ahead and break the law? With everyone in bed asleep, why don't you go on in? No one will know."

"You're coaxing me to go in, Cousin Levaggo?"

"For your own piece of mind, yes."

"Very well." Again he mounted the stairs, this time to the twentieth step, and two paces beyond, so that he stood within inches of the deadly doorway. "Why don't you come along, Levaggo?"

"Me? Oh, no. I'll keep watch. You go ahead."

"I'll keep watch," said Randall. "You go."

**W**ITHIN a few minutes, Whiteblock, who saw that the king was in danger of spoiling the whole set-up by his nervous manner, decided to come out of hiding and join the effort.

Within a few more minutes, the whole Council had appeared, quite as if by chance, to add their moral pressure to the campaign. The argument took various turns and twists, and at last Prince Randall sat down on the twentieth step and laughed.

"All right, gentlemen, I am about to enter the Red Door. You've tried so hard, coaxing and cajoling me in every possible way. The least I can do is reward you by walking in and look-

ing over the documents to my heart's content. But I am disappointed that none of you will go in with me."

He looked at the king and Whiteblock, each standing on the nineteenth step, and at the Council, who had arranged themselves on the seventeenth and eighteenth steps.

"But before I walk in, let me tell you something about the blades in the doorway. You would say that they are motionless, wouldn't you, Levaggo?"

"Of course they are. You can see that for yourself."

"No, I can't," Randall said, and smiled with gleaming teeth. Then he grew very serious, like an earnest teacher delivering a lecture. "I would say that they are *rotating at high speed*. I would say that they only appear to be stationary because they are *synchronized with the light*. Do you Councilmen understand what that means?"

From the blank expressions it was quite apparent that the Councilmen understood absolutely nothing.

"I'll explain," said Randall, "for the benefit of you who appear a little more innocent than your friend Whiteblock. The image of any light is retained in your eyes for a split second. That's the reason a light may appear to be a constant glow when actually it is a rapid series of flickers. From the stationary appearance of those steel arms, it's plain to me that we are in the dark more than half the time. But the flashes of light are coming at us fast and regular, and they're timed to catch the knives at the same position on each round. It's a simple principle, Levaggo. Your chauffeur could explain it as well as I. Ask him about the workings of a stroboscope some day and he'll tell you. Do I make myself clear?"

**T**HE king said nothing. He was as white as a chilled chicken. But

some member of the Council murmured that he didn't understand a thing.

Whiteblock was brazen. "The prince is trying to accuse us of sending him into a wheel of death. He's mistaken, of course."

"Then why are the rest of you afraid to walk through the door?"

"We're not afraid," said Whiteblock. "It's out of respect for the law. If there was any reason to walk through—"

"I'll make it worth your while," said Randall. He lifted the emerald medal off the king's chest like a magician snatching a watch out of a concealed pocket. He slid the object onto the stone floor. It scooted for about three yards and came to rest well inside the Red Door. "Why don't you go in and pick it up?"

"Why don't *you*?" Whiteblock retorted hotly. "Maybe the king would let you have it for a souvenir."

The king nodded. "Indeed, indeed."

"Then it's mine," said Randall. He straightened, drew a deep breath, and strode straight through the doorway. He looked back at the eight gaping spectators. "So it's mine."

He saw that Whiteblock's eyes were flashing fire.

"So it's mine," Randall repeated and he bent down slowly and picked it up.

The king blurted. "The damned thing's not going. Whiteblock! The damned thing—"

"Shut up!" Whiteblock, still eyeing the medal greedily, sprang over the twentieth step and marched into the doorway. "I'll take that—"

His last words. Within a yard of Randall, he was sliced away into nothingness.

Randall stood, gazing back at the open-mouthed members of the Council and the flabbergasted, dumbfounded king. Between himself and them there appeared to be absolutely nothing.

There was certainly not one shred of the late Whiteblock.

## CHAPTER VI

### Descent to the Laboratory

THE king was confined to his bed.

The whole palace was in an uproar. The facts had leaked out through the Council. A deliberately planned murder had gone awry, it appeared, though no one dared say it.

Everyone was speculating over what would happen when the Old Lady took charge of the Randello Tenth Anniversary Memorial Service. Those few members of the court who wished to prove their loyalty to King Levaggo begged her to postpone the service until the king was ready. But others said, "Don't wait for him. He'll play sick all winter, just to keep from facing the facts."

The guards visited him, from time to time; his chauffeur, a lantern-jawed, gangling, bow-legged fellow known as Muggs, paid his respects daily. The cook brought him special dishes, and tasted them in Levaggo's presence to allay any suspicion that they might be filled with poison.

A heavy guard was kept stationed at the Red Door day and night. It was hardly necessary. No one dreamed of trying to enter after what had happened. Muggs, the chauffeur, and some of the mechanics and electricians from the power plant and the village offered to pry into the mysterious door mechanism. But the king forbade it.

So the Red Door continued to hum quietly, and its balanced seven-foot scimitars seemed to stand as motionless within the arch as ever.

But the rumor that Prince Randall had successfully defied this death trap and had walked through it unscathed was a story to spread like wildfire.

"He's young and handsome, a dashing young soldier back from the wars," the gossiping villagers would say, "and he's in love with that beautiful servant girl, Sondra. She's really some sort of entertainer, and they say she tells your fortune from your dreams."

"Can she defy the Red Door too?" others would ask.

"They say that she wants to. She has a notion that the Old Lady will make Randall the king and Sondra the queen if she can learn to walk through death the way he does."

"But how can she learn?"

"That's something the Old Lady won't tell anyone. I took a plate of cookies to her yesterday and she told me practically everything. All about how grieved she was over losing Sebastian her servant. She's just sure the Red Door got him, and she thinks the king did it. But she wouldn't say a word about the prince and Sondra. Maybe she'll just leave them to their own troubles."

SO THE gossip went. But it sharpened on the morning that an automobile rolled out of the palace grounds before daylight. Sleepy villagers who hurried to their windows were probably too late to see it go, for it shot away at great speed as soon as it was out on the highway.

But if those vigilant villagers lingered at their windows for as much as five minutes, they were rewarded by seeing another car race off in the same direction. "The Old Lady! And she's got a chauffeur! Who do you suppose she's chasing so early in the morning?"

Randall and Sondra did not know they were being followed. They thought they had made a clean getaway.

They wound around the mountains of Askandia until they came to a seemingly forgotten road. Soon they were

driving up to the entrance of what might have been a deserted mine.

"There's been a bit of landslide," Randall observed, braking to a stop. "Otherwise we'd be able to drive right in. Are you good for the walk?"

"Lead on," said Sondra.

They climbed over the heap of fallen stones that had threatened to block the doorway, and soon found themselves within a zigzagging tunnel.

The turns were sharp, sharper than right angles, with the switchback effect of mountain roads, all enclosed within walls of rock. Deeper and deeper. The irony blueness of the rocky surfaces added to the feeling of depth. A touch of a switch had turned on a circuit of electric lights, one dim bulb at each turn. Much too dim, Sondra thought. Like something out of her half forgotten dreams. She felt that there were observers lurking around those dark corners. She clung to Randall's hand.

The smells of deeper air. The warmth of the earth's subterranean chambers. Then, to Sondra's relief, signs of civilization. Here was an American army jeep parked in the very center of the passage. They walked around it and hurried on. There were drums of fuel.

"If it's much farther, we might drive," she suggested.

"We're almost there, Sondra. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"I'm sure, Randall. Even if I didn't trust my own dreams, even if I didn't trust the Old Lady—and I do, very much—I will still trust you above all people."

He must have liked her answer. His head was high with pride, his eyes were on fire with purpose. He was strong and brave, as a prince should be. But he also had that rare quality that women admire so much in men—a full understanding and appreciation of the

strength and courage she brought to him.

"What tremendous instruments!" she gasped. As they rounded the corner into a great laboratory chamber, the brighter lights that shone in long parallel bars from the walls revealed a more complicated sight than she could begin to begin to understand.

A few things were familiar—certain instruments of warfare. Fuel barrels. A truck. In a distant corner, a small airplane.

But the great machine in the center of the room, more intricate than her most fanciful dream, was a mystery that she had no words to describe. Around it were immense tubes, like the bodies of dirigibles set up on end, all shining with glossy purple metal, seemingly alive under bars of violet light.

THERE was not a soul here, and yet Sondra felt as if she were in the presence of a thousand master minds, all of whom had fixed themselves into something timeless, through these great monsters of power. Now that Randall had snapped a master switch, instrument boards had lighted along the platforms halfway up the side of the central machine. Generators hummed softly, gadgets came to life with pinpoint of light, immense governors began to spin. Huge glass spheres glowed with colored light, revealing smaller spheres within, and still tinier globes in the center. A flare of sparks played back and forth through their surfaces.

"Are you frightened, Sondra?"

"Do I look frightened?"

"You look fascinated."

"That's it. Not frightened. Not with you."

"Here we are, at the end of the room."

The long subterranean chamber tapered beyond the vast machine, but

the end was quite rounded out, with a hollowed-out effect. It was streaked with wierd shadows from the fall of rocks that had been shattered and pulverized, as if from some terrific explosion.

High overhead, Sondra observed, the hollowed-out effect was still more pronounced. The rock seemed to have been eaten away for many yards up into the mountain overhead, so that a black emptiness hung over them.

"It's like a stage," Sondra said. "Somewhere up there the curtains are ready to descend."

"Do you feel that the curtain is about to descend, dear?" He seemed troubled over her comparison. What did he mean? Did he think she was speaking of impending death?

"I didn't mean—I was just comparing it to the first big auditorium I played in back in India," she said. "It was vast, like this, and I didn't know what was going to happen. I mean, there was a big audience out in front, and my father knew I was scared."

"I'm your only audience this time." said Randall. Then looking around apprehensively, he added, "At least, I hope so."

They both stood breathless for a moment, listening. The rustle of sound from the distant tunnel was perhaps nothing more ominous than a tiny landslide of loosened stones.

"I am wishing you luck, Sondra," the prince said. He held her tight for a long moment and kissed her. At last he led her to the wall. "Stand here. Don't move. Just stand."

He walked away from her determinedly. He glanced at his watch. His nerves quickened.

SOME fifty yards from where she stood, there hung a cable with a hook. There were four or five small

buckets of stones lined along the wall. He climbed up on a bit of ledge and hung one of the weighted buckets on the hook.

It took her a moment to be sure.

Yes, the weight was descending slowly drawing the cable down. Out across the line of crisscrossed cables toward the big machine, she saw three huge rollers, like the cylinders of a printing press, beginning to turn. One very slowly, the second somewhat more rapidly. The third was not only rotating but was riding away from the other two, across the top of the machine. The intricate actions of other parts of the mechanism were partially revealed by the reflected glow of several dull yellow lights along the machine's vast shoulders.

Now all the lights were brightening, and the whole cavern became a place of such intense brilliance that Sondra was nearly forced to close her eyes. Those broken edges of natural rock might have been studded with diamonds.

But the most noticeable and by far the most ominous of all the effects that hanging the weight on the cable had apparently started was the movement of the massive black gun which projected from the very center of the machine.

It was a blunt-nosed cannon. Not more than thirty feet in length, it was so wide of diameter that it might have belched forth a small piano or a jeep.

It had been pointed upward, into the overhead cavern. Now it was slowly descending, black, glistening, frightening, and at last it was pointing directly at Sondra. There it stopped.

There was a moment of breathless silence. The easy whirr of well oiled machines ceased. There was a smell of heat in the air, like train brakes. No movement. No sound.

Sondra looked to Randall. Was this it? Was it happening—whatever it was that must happen? At a distance of several yards he was sitting crouched against the wall, his shoulders drawn tight with tension, his elbows hard against his sides. He nodded to her grimly, as if to say, "Stay right where you are. Don't move. Just wait."

Then suddenly he put his fingers to his ears.

A glow of green sparks rattled over the heaps of machinery. Everything was alive with the crackle of sparks.

Then for one blinding instant the light struck—a flash of fire that was like the end of the universe. That was all. All consciousness ended for Sondra.

## CHAPTER VII

### The Old Lady Gets an Eyeful

THE Old Lady had followed, all the way to the tunnel entrance, in the company of Muggs, the king's gangling, lantern-jawed chauffeur.

The Old Lady didn't like Muggs. She never had. He was one person she never understood. Partly because he talked with an accent. Too much of the Arabian in his speech. She wouldn't have minded that if he had ever had anything to say. He was too dumb for any use. He wouldn't even argue with her.

"Don't pretend you like these rocky roads," she had grumbled along the way, after he had been driving for miles without saying a word. "You know you don't like them."

"Yes, ma'am," said Muggs. No spirit whatever.

"As a driver, you're about as safe as a monkey," she said.

He gave a nod, as if fully contented to accept her verdict.

"What are you, an idiot?" she

growled. "Don't you ever get mad?"

He shrugged and concentrated upon the hairpin curve as if doubting that he would make it. She wondered. Maybe it took all his feeble concentration to control the car. Well, anyway she was glad she hadn't driven, herself. Her physician was right, driving was much too strenuous for one of her age, especially in these mountains.

They parked when the half-blocked tunnel entrance stopped them. There was the car they had followed. Its two passengers had evidently wasted no time following the tunnel to whatever destination it might lead to.

"Wait for me right here, Muggs."

"How long?"

"However long it is, you wait," the Old Lady snapped.

"I'll get hungry after awhile."

"Don't tell me!" Well, maybe the fellow did have some spunk after all.

During the next half hour, as she followed down the long zigzag trail, she grew increasingly uneasy about him. Maybe he would wait, maybe he wouldn't. She had taken the car key, but as a chauffeur he undoubtedly carried an extra.

Her worries were cut short when she came in view of the world of underground machinery. The mystery of this place started a chain of wild fancies in her mind. What were these great mechanisms intended to accomplish? She recalled the pictures she had seen of atom bomb factories in America. She knew, as everyone knew, of the limitless destruction that this awful source of power could achieve. She had read, too, that the usefulness of its mysteries had only begun to be explored.

She stopped short and hid back of a pyramid of fuel drums. She could see Sondra and Randall across the room. They were looking back, disturbed by the sound of her footsteps.

NOW they were going on. What would they do? Why was Sondra speaking of a curtain falling? The Old Lady wondered. Did Prince Randall realize how much she had sacrificed, leaving her glamorous career before the footlights to become a humble servant in his palace—all in quest of a beautiful dream?

With what remarkable grace she had borne her burden, the Old Lady thought.

"Why are they talking of death? Of the curtain falling? That rascally prince is giving her riddles—no, he seems deadly serious. Deep down, he's haunted by an awful fear of what may happen. He almost wishes she would back out and not go through with it. Or does he?"

The Old Lady heard his words, "I am wishing you luck."

Then she saw that they were going to kiss, and so she settled back in hiding and closed her eyes so as not to intrude upon their private moment. But the kiss lasted, and she did look, in spite of herself, and her old frame filled with a deep breath of days long gone.

Now she saw Sondra standing, waiting as if for death. She saw Randall walk to the cable and hang a weight on the hook. Machines began to roll slowly. Something was going to happen . . . Brighter, brighter, brighter . . . the glare . . . the sparkle of stones . . . Now quiet . . . deathly silent . . . The smell of heat . . . the sudden noise of crackling sparks . . .

An explosion! A universe full of fire out of the nose of that big stubby cannon!

The girl fell slowly.

Stones showered down from the hollowed-out ceiling. Stones and the dust of stones, puffing like smoke. Down over her prone body. She lay there, covered with the whiteness of it.



The prince was still holding his ears, but now he raised his head a little. He shifted his position and watched, half crouched on the flat stone, his chin resting in his hands. The Old Lady saw that he was mumbling something to himself. Perhaps counting.

The cloud of dust spread until it was a thin fog throughout the cavern. All the machines had stopped. The cable hook returned to its original position. The weighted bucket dropped to the ground and lay there on its side, still clogged full of rocks. The dust made it a blur of gray.

Now the Old Lady saw that the girl was breathing perceptibly. Randall sprang up and ran over to her. She raised her arm. She was looking up, brushing the dust from her face. "Randall!" she breathed.

He caught her hand. "It's all right, dear. It's all over. You've come through!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### If Muggs Were Only King—

**M**UGGS the chauffer lost no time in reporting his position to the king. The little two-way radio set in the car took care of that.

"Yes, your majesty, I'm all alone right now. The Old Lady just left me. We're at some kind of tunnel and she's gone right in . . . Yes, she's right on their heels, but I couldn't say what they're up to . . . Anyway, you've got nothing to worry about. I've got them surrounded."

"Surrounded—*how?*" came Levaggo's impatient bark.

"By a mountain. A great big mountain. It's as big as—"

"Never mind. Exactly where are they?"

"Down in it. Looks to me like the

tunnel leads 'way down, like a mine. It's an awful good chance for me to get them on the way out. I can shake a few stones down on 'em. It'll look like an accident."

"No, none of that, Muggs," the king called back savagely. "The people would know. We can't take any more such chances. There's only one thing to do. Let them go ahead. But follow them. Watch them. See what they do. There'll be some sort of laboratory. Maybe a chemical plant. I doubt if the Old Lady herself knows just what. Anyway they're going to try to work some sort of transformation on the girl—"

"What's that?"

"I can't take time to explain. The point is, you've got to see it happen. And they mustn't see you."

"Yes. Then what?"

"Then *you've* got to go through the same thing. Do you understand?"

Muggs gulped. "You mean I've got to go through a *transformation?*"

"That's the only way. I'll tell you why. When the prince and Sondra come back, they think they'll win the right to be king and queen on the grounds of having some special talent—a trick to escape death in a way that other human beings can't."

"That's wonderful," Muggs said tactlessly. He was about to add the comment that if they could escape death, they *should* be made king and queen. But the light of the king's idea began to burst on him. "Oh, you mean if I get transformed the same way—"

"Then *you'll* be able to do whatever they do. I wish I were there myself—"

Muggs was suddenly on fire with the idea. "You mean I might even be able to *walk through knives blades and things?*"

"That's exactly the point. We'll cut the ground right from under Prince

Randall's feet."

MUGGS began to expand, psychologically speaking, into something he had never dreamed of being. "If I can walk through knifeblades, *what's to prevent me from getting to be king?* What's to prevent folks from saying, 'Muggs, we like you, and you can defy death. You be king awhile!' How about that, Levaggio?"

The king's voice came back in a frozen reprimand. "Address me as Your Majesty, you lout."

"Sure, your majesty, I forgot," said Muggs. He was studying his own reflection in the glass dial of the radio, trying to imagine how he would look in a king's turban or a jeweled crown. "But do I have to call you Your Majesty? Look, *if I turned out to be the king*, your majesty, you could just call me Muggs—"

"Stop your driveling. You'll be rewarded soon enough if you get in on this trick. Yes, you'll be—never mind." There was a curious note of cruelty in the king's short laugh. "Get on with your duty, Muggs. When you come back we'll work together and everything will be fine."

The chauffeur felt a strange elation as he strode into the tunnel. The farther he went, the more his enthusiasm ran away with him. The king, he reflected, was many miles away. Many, many miles. And had no idea how to reach this tunnel. If there was magic here for the taking—

"I've been a chauffeur long enough!" Muggs exclaimed. "Why don't I—why shouldn't I—hm-m-m. I might be. I could be—and if I was, I'd tell them what was what. My friends could just call me Muggs, none of this Your Majesty stuff. H-m-m-m. If I was king, *he'd* have to listen to *me*. Then *my* orders would be the good ones, and

I wouldn't have to obey any of his."

He turned this over in his mind with a purpose, a moment later, when he discovered some bags of explosives tucked away in a corner of the passageway.

"Now there you are," he thought. "Dynamite. If I were king, I would say, Capture those trouble makers. Get them while the getting's good. Then, once I said it, that's what would happen and there'd be no argument about it."

He considered what should be done. He weighed a sack of explosives in his hands.

"But I'm not the king," he said. "I'd better hike on to that laboratory."

SOME minutes later, just as he came within view of the immense subterranean room, a terrific explosion blew him off his feet. The walls fairly rocked with the deafening blast. Echoes rolled back and forth through the tunnels for what seemed minutes.

Muggs could see that Sondra, far across the room, had fallen. Apparently she was dead. And apparently her friend the prince was too much stunned to do anything about it. The Old Lady must be hiding around somewhere, too, Muggs thought. Personally he didn't care to concern himself with their misfortunes. He had some ideas of his own.

"So the king thinks I should go through *that*, does he? Who is he, to do my thinking for me? I've got a brain of my own, and my ideas about this business are better than his. Because I'm here, and he's not." Muggs doubled his fists. "I know this for sure. What happened to that servant girl is not going to happen to me."

As soon as he was sure his footsteps wouldn't be heard, he broke into a run and ran most of the way back. He

stopped when he came to the bags of explosives. With his long arms he was able to carry several bags—able and willing.

The explosion he set off at the mouth of the tunnel was not loud, and he doubted whether it echoed down through the maze to the three persons in the laboratory. But it was an effective explosion. A few thousand tons of rock came smashing down. When the dust cleared, he saw there was simply no longer an entrance. There was nothing but mountainside. The laboratory was sealed over.

"That's what I'd do if I was the king," Muggs said to himself. Then he jumped in his car and sped away, wondering what had best be said to Levaggio.

## CHAPTER IX

### Atomic Immunity

NEVER in all her years had the Old Lady seen anything like this. It fairly made white hair curl. The dust was clearing a little, and her sharp old eyes, crossed though they were, managed to take in every detail.

"I knew I would be all right," Sondra was saying.

"You're one in a million, Sondra," the prince said. "Now trust me just once more, and then you'll know you have nothing to fear."

He climbed a stairway to the platform halfway up the side of the giant machine. A machine gun was there in the corner, mounted for guard duty. He aimed it at Sondra, and bullets prayed a path along the wall behind her. The path would have perforated her body, but she was immune now. She had acquired an "atomic immunity" that would be hers for life. Bullets had no power to hurt or mar

her flesh as they passed through her body. She was smiling up at him confidently.

The Old Lady watched and began to understand.

He next turned the spray of machine gun bullets on the small blue airplane at one side of the big room. He was testing, the Old Lady realized, to make sure that it too possessed this strange quality of immunity, from some previous treatment. No bullet holes appeared in the fuselage.

"We gave it the cannon blast more than ten years ago," Randall said to Sondra after he had silenced the gun. "We always kept it here for emergencies."

"We?" Sondra asked.

"My father and I." Randall hurried down the stairs to her. He brushed the dust from her clothes as he explained. "Before my father's death, he was well on his way to discovering many uses of atomic power that are still unknown. It will take me years to dig through the studies he has left for me. But I can't think of a happier or more useful way to spend my life. However, we've no time to talk of that now. In an emergency like this, we'd better take the plane."

"You're right. The Old Lady mustn't be kept waiting."

The Old Lady, listening to every word, sat down smiling to herself with pleasurable contemplation. "Bless their hearts, they're going to get there before I grow impatient. They're so refreshing. I wouldn't have missed spying on them for anything."

She might not admit to herself that she had come along because she had been so frightened over this experiment. She had watched Sondra all through these years, knowing that this day would have to come. For she had memorized all of those secret documents

before the late Randello had ever sealed them in the vault.

*"The girl who will dare to share these bold experiments in atomic transformation, who shall be the choice of my son Randall, shall be his queen, and he shall be king from that day . . ."*

AND that was to be today, and at last she had seen with her own eyes the transformation blast. Now she was seeing one more evidence of its marvelous effects. The plane.

The motors roared, the little blue plane raced out onto the floor. It lifted. It plunged straight for the rock wall on the other side of the room. It began to circle. One wing cut into the wall, but there was no ripping of wing or spraying of stone. Nor was there the slightest loss of speed. The plane plunged on as if the wall were not there. In another second it was gone, leaving no visible trail behind it.

"Through solid stone!" the Old Lady gasped. "The miracles of atomic immunity!"

Suddenly she came out of her daze and found herself still sitting beside a pyramid of fuel drums deep in the laboratory cavern. "Ugh! What about me? Why didn't I go along? Here I sit like I'd been struck by lightning. I'll be late!"

She hobbled toward the tunnel road. Her feet were sore but she felt compelled to run. She cursed herself for being so absent-minded. "It can't be that I'm getting old!"

Now she would have to puff all the way back through the long tunnel—but, no! There was the jeep.

The engine had a good rhythm, and all the long way up the zigzag trail she kept repeating to herself, in time with the bounces, "I'm in luck. I've got a jeep. I'm in luck. I've got a jeep."

But when she reached what should

have been the exit to fresh air and blue sky she discovered that she was no longer in luck. What had happened? The way was blocked. Closed. Sealed. An avalanche had come this way. A man-made avalanche? What could she do? "It can't be that I'm getting old," she muttered stubbornly, and climbed out and began throwing stones in all directions.

She unfastened a shovel from the side of the jeep and tried digging with all her furious strength. "My poor white hair will be black. I'm getting black in the face, too. This will never do."

No, it might take a day's work to reach daylight. Back at the palace they might scheme to give her up for lost, the same as Sebastian was lost. Then, with a free hand on those documents in the Vault, there would be no deed too evil for King Levaggio to attempt.

"They've got me! They've got me!" she muttered angrily. "If there was only a magic lamp to rub . . . Or a magic rope to pull . . . Or a cable? . . . With a hook, maybe, and a bucket of rocks. Ughhh!"

All at once the Old Lady was scared, and for the first time in many many years she wanted to scream.

"Bah! You're too old to scream!" she told herself. "Stop acting like a baby. Get back in the jeep and drive like hell. Something's got to give."

## CHAPTER X

### Guards, Mounted and Demounted

IN THE palace study, amid the criss-crossed trees of the wall paper, the king and his chauffeur, Muggs, engaged in a warm conference. Muggs was talking fast, but not quite fast enough. He had sped home from the mountain

trails like a good boy, and was doing his best to stick to the story he had rehearsed all the way.

"So that's how it is. They're gone. They won't be back."

The king growled. "I don't get it. Where did they go?"

"It's like I said, they went *poof!* Nearly busted my ear drums. You never heard such an explosion."

"So they went *poof*. Are you sure it wasn't *bang*?"

Muggs nodded quickly. "That's right, your majesty, it was *bang*. It was *bang* and *poof* both at the same time."

"What about the Old Lady?"

"Same *poof*."

"Where are their bodies?"

"No bodies left. Honest, I thought the whole mountain was going to shake down."

"Well, that's going to make things devilishly complicated, with no bodies. We've got to have some proof." The king scowled and pulled at the points of his double-pointed black beard.

"I guess maybe you'll want to give me a promotion," said Muggs hopefully. The build-up he'd practiced didn't seem to have been timed to the king's darkening mood.

"Don't be in a hurry. First you'll have to take me there, so I can see the scene for myself."

Muggs shifted his feet uncomfortably. "I don't know whether I could ever find my way back, your majesty. I doubt it. It was an awful strange road."

"Such talk! Get the car ready. The crowd's wasting in the Arena, and I've got to know what's what before I face them. We'll go at once and trace down that *poof* to be sure . . . What are you scringing about?" The king seized him by the shoulders. "Are you lying to me? What's the matter?"

"I just remembered, I left the motor

running." Muggs bowed as briefly as the law would allow and ran out before the king could stop him. It was high time, he had suddenly decided, for him to take himself for a ride. The royal wrath was about to descend in full fury.

The car responded to Muggs' touch. He swung around the circular drive, shot across one corner of the wide palace lawn, and headed straight for the nearest open gate.

*Clang!* The big steel-barred gate swung closed.

MUGGS brakes screeched, but too late. *Crash!* The royal bumper and radiator gave a left hook and an uppercut to the steel bars and went into a clinch.

"Muggs!" the gatekeeper yelled. "Have you gone crazy? You better go back and square things with the king. The way he rung that emergency bell, he must be mad. What'd you do to him? He's alerted the palace guard."

"Help me out of here! Muggs yelled, trying furiously to disentangle his limousine from the steel bars. Then—"What's that roar?"

"It's a plane. Look out! It's coming right at us. *Duck!*"

The small blue plane roared down from the air without warning. It was headed straight for the steel gate. To crash? The gatekeeper and Muggs dived for the grass. Then they stared. The plane shot straight through the upper half of the gate and the high steel fence. It shot through without so much as denting a steel bar or ripping a wing. It simply went *through*. It landed intact on the palace lawn.

The only visible damage occurred to the mounted guards, marching in formation around the palace grounds. The plane almost got them. Sixteen horses were thrown into a panic and half the

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riders were thrown into the grass.

Randall and Sondra jumped out of the plane. They looked over the small riot they had caused and decided they could use a pair of horses as the quickest way of getting to the Arena at the rear of the grounds.

It was a mistake. Prince Randall had forgotten that these mounted guards were the king's special pets, known to be so belligerent that even the horses wore chips on their shoulders.

"Come back with those horses, you two! Who the devil do you think you are?" The captain of the guards spurred his mount to give chase. "Oh, it's them! That young upstart of a prince. Come on, men."

The mounted guards hadn't meant to do any hard riding this late in the afternoon. They were on dress parade, policing the grounds for the benefit of the Askandia crowds that were gathering in the Arena. But now that the king had sounded the emergency bell, every loyal officer knew it was his duty to arrest any disturbers of the peace.

Randall and Sondra galloped over a hedge and down the ramp that led to one of the outside Arena entrances. They could see that thousands of people were gathered, and at first they thought that the meeting was in progress.

**B**UT as soon as they were recognized, by the clusters of people at the entrance, and hailed with loud greetings of, "The prince! Sondra! Here they are! Make way! Make way!" they realized that they were not only in time, but were face to face with an impatient audience.

"Come on in!" several people yelled. "The Red Door is waiting! Let's see you do it!"

Randall laughed inside himself. So it had happened. The rumor had

spread far and wide that here was a door of death. A door with knives that spun invisibly. A death trap that had claimed its own inventor, the incomparable Whiteblock. And would claim anyone else who walked into it. But not Prince Randall. He had walked through it unscathed, and by now all Askandia had heard.

For a moment he ignored the bellow of the captain of the mounted guards, at his rear. "You are arrested, Prince Randall, in the name of the King!"

He could afford to ignore the bellow because Sondra was whispering news to him that one of her servant friends had just given her.

"The Old Lady hasn't shown up. Everyone's waiting."

"Where could she be?"

"Across the village, perhaps, at her own mansion."

"We'll get her. Come on."

Randall and Sondra reined about and started up the ramp. The mounted guards rode after them, and the captain continued to recite his orders for arrest. But they weren't listening. They broke into a gallop, they headed for the nearest open gate. The gatekeeper jumped to save his neck, and spun about like a top. The two riders were being pursued by fourteen mounted guards and two unmounted ones coming on a dead run.

The crowds at the entrances of the Arena heard the hard hoofbeats and the shouting of orders. People began to pour out, to look down on the village and watch the zigzagging course of this wild chase.

The Old Lady's mansion yielded nothing. "She's gone!" someone yelled in response to their flying questions. "She left early this morning. Hasn't been seen since!"

"This is dreadful!" Sondra cried,

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hugging the saddle, her brown hair flying. "What could have happened?"

"We'd better tackle Levaggo!" Randall yelled.

"He wouldn't dare harm her — or would he?"

THEY galloped back into the road and up through the village. Again fourteen mounted guards were hot on the trail, shouting threats, now, that they would shoot. "I command you to halt and submit! Halt or we'll fire."

"Bullets, indeed!" the prince yelled back, borrowing the king's favorite expression. "Why don't you give us an escort? We want to see the king."

Again he underestimated the captain's belligerence. Bullets began to pop through the streets. By the time the race returned to the palace grounds, the guards were shooting right and left. They seemed to be missing, and they couldn't understand it. They tried harder. Toward the palace the curious throngs surged back, screaming.

Pandemonium all over the palace grounds—the most undignified and unsuccessful engagement in the history of Askandia's mounted nobility!

Meanwhile, Muggs the chauffeur had again been brought face to face with the king inside the palace.

"You lout. You liar. You've failed me on every hand. Did they find a chemical laboratory down that tunnel or didn't they?"

"Honest, your majesty, I don't know."

The king looked to the window. "There they go again, defying death and liking it. Is the Old Lady as much alive as they are?"

"Alive," said Muggs, "but stuck. Imprisoned. Trapped."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I closed the mine after

she went in. Since she didn't escape in the airplane with them, she must still be there."

"Now we're getting somewhere," the king sighed hopefully. "So you think they flew out the top and she's still there. Stuck. I hope you're right this time. As long as she's there, I can still save my face. She can't enforce any deal now. She's too late. They're already beginning to leave. In another ten minutes—what are you staring at?"

The king's eyes traced the chauffeur's stare through the window and saw for himself. It was the Old Lady, driving up the highway in a jeep.

The steel gate was closed, but she drove right *through* and kept on coming.

The king knocked Muggs off his feet in his haste to get out of the room. For all his weight, he made a record dash from his study to the nearest Arena entrance. The aisles had begun to jam with people who had grown impatient and decided to leave. But suddenly the throngs began to surge back shouting, and the whole auditorium crowd at once knew.

"The Old Lady. The Old Lady. OOOOOOLD LAAADEEEEE!"

A CORTEGE of guards in white uniform and gold braid escorted the king along a balcony passage. He descended to the Arena floor and marched toward the front just in time to see the Old Lady enter.

The aisles made way for her. She was standing up in the jeep, her wild white hair was flying, her eyes were jumping in all directions at once, she was taking in the whole crowd and they were welcoming her, like a long lost mother.

She had driven down the ramp to enter, and now she drove straight through the center aisle, straight toward the twenty steps at the front of



the Arena.

The path didn't close in after her. Instead, it widened, to make way for the heavy galloping hoofs. She glanced back, nearly running over a pair of guards as she did so, and saw that Sondra and Randall were riding in after her as hard as they could come.

"Climb aboard, you youngsters!" she yelled back at them.

Randall leaped from his horse to the rear of the jeep and reached up to swing Sondra down in his arms. Back of them came their trail of pursuers, angry and cursing in the name of the king. The Old Lady stepped on it.

"The Red Door!" some shrill voice cried out. "Look out!"

And a thousand people were shrieking, "LOOK OUT! Stop! STOPPPP!"

With its three passengers, the jeep climbed the twenty steps and shot through the Red Door. It whirled half around, so that Sondra, Randall, and the old Lady stood, looking out at their crowd from beneath the horizontal knives. Neither they nor the jeep had been scratched during this ordeal, and the crowd went wild.

They went wilder still to discover that the mounted guards were coming on, determined not to be outdone. In fact, King Levaggo was there on one of the lower steps, shouting to his guards to come on.

They came, with plopping hoofs. The king pointed the way. And when some shrill voice cried, "*A new king!*" the arms of Levaggo struck the air savagely.

"Remove them, I command you! Arrest them!" Levaggo's rasping voice was lost in the clatter of hoofs up the twenty steps.

"We've got them now!" the captain of the guards shouted, as he passed the twentieth step.

Approximately ten thousand pairs of

eyes saw what happened. The first horse and rider got it. Captain and mount. They were sliced like colored paper, too fast to be believed, and the slices went *out*. The rear hoofs of the horse survived and fell back. The rest, along with the rider, were simply gone.

THE second rider saw and leaped from his horse just in time. The horse plunged into the knives' invisible whirl but was dead before it was half through. In fact, the rearward half never got through, for its momentum was lost. Half a horse fell on the stone at the twentieth step and half a saddle bounced down the steps to the Arena floor.

The third horse and rider were much too determined to succeed where the others had failed. Half a horse and half a rider fell back. But the half rider was struck by the oncoming horse and flew into the knives again and was gone.

The fourth rider's horse lost only a head.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh changed their minds and turned the chase back.

The king, running up to the eighteenth step, waving his arms madly, had changed his tune. In all justice to him, let it be said that he had tried to put the whole parade in reverse as soon as he had seen the captain of the guards depart into nothingness.

But also, in all fairness, let it be noted that a moment earlier the king had hoped the captain of the guards would *try*. For whatever the facts of atomic immunity, it always seemed on the surface of things that if one person walked or rode through a door, another should be able to. It was the same fallacy that had once seized Whiteblock.

The fact was, as Levaggo became accustomed to saying in later years, either

you have it or you don't.

Muggs the chauffeur came to that conclusion himself at this moment. He was standing somewhere in the rear of the Arena, taking in the whole weird show. And like hundreds of other simple and good hearted souls he would have liked to believe that he might move beneath those stationary electric knives as easily as Prince Randall.

"And then maybe I could be the king and have a beautiful queen like Sondra."

His eyes moistened a little as he listened to the hearty boom of the Old Lady, reciting from the documents she had found in the Vault.

**F**INALLY, to give the crowd what they wanted, she made her own little speech. "So I congratulate you upon your new king and—as soon as a wedding can be arranged—your new queen."

She paused to wait for the tumultuous cheering to die away.

"I know they'll be worthy. They are not only young, strong, and fearless, but they are also strangely gifted to live and to resist danger for all of their natural lives. Old age will take them in time, just as it is about to take me—" she rubbed her hip, thinking of the tough fight she had had in the tunnel.

Then she brightened, and slapped her white hair back over her forehead and felt strangely young. After all, she had had the nerve to take her own dose of that atomic magic, by hanging a weight on the cable and driving her jeep in front of the big black cannon. She felt young enough to shake the daylighters out of stupid chauffeur if she ever got her hands on him—though he was probably acting under the king's orders, for all she knew.

Her eyes caught the figure of the ex-king.

"In conclusion—you, Levaggio. Don't go away. The new king and queen are going to have a hard time clearing up all the troubles you've piled up for them."

Then she gestured to what lay on the stairs.

"Speaking of troubles piled up," she boomed, "I recommend to the new king and queen their first official order. Why not appoint your cousin Levaggio to an office? Let him begin at once. Let him do something big and clean. Make him the first superintendent in charge of cleaning up all surplus horseflesh."

From the thunderous cheers that greeted this suggestion, everybody, including ex-King Levaggio, knew that the appointment was unanimous.

THE END