



## **The Radiant Shell**

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**About Ernst:**

Paul Frederick Ernst (1899 - 1985) was an American pulp fiction writer. He is best known as the author of the original 24 "Avenger" novels, published by Street and Smith Publications under the house name Kenneth Robeson.

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"And that, gentlemen," said the Secretary of War, "is the situation. Arvania has stolen the Ziegler plans and formulae. With their acquisition it becomes the most powerful nation on earth. The Ziegler plans are at present in the Arvanian Embassy, but they will be smuggled out of the country soon. Within a month of their landing in Arvania, war will be declared against us. That means"—he glanced at the tense faces around the conference table—"that we have about three months to live as a nation—unless we can get those plans!"

There was a hushed, appalled silence, broken at last by General Forsyte.

"Nonsense! How can a postage-stamp country like Arvania really threaten us?"

"The day has passed, General," said the Secretary, "when a nation's power is reckoned by its size. The Ziegler heat ray is the deadliest weapon yet invented. A thousand men with a dozen of the ray-projectors can reduce us to smoking ruins while remaining far outside the range of our guns. No! I tell you that declaration of war by Arvania will be followed by the downfall of the United States inside of three months!"

Again the hushed, strained silence descended over the conference table, while one white-faced man gazed at another and all speculated on the incredible possibility of a world in which there was no United States of America.

"We must get the plans," nodded Forsyte, convinced at last. "But how? March openly on the Arvanian Embassy?"

"No, that would be declaration of war on *our* part. The World Court, which knows nothing of the Ziegler plans, would set the League at our throats."

"Send volunteers unofficially to raid the place?"

"Impossible. There is a heavy guard in the Arvanian Embassy; and I more than suspect the place bristles with machine guns."

"What *are* we to do?" demanded Forsyte.

The Secretary seemed to have been waiting for that final question.

"I have had an odd and desperate plan submitted me from an outside source. I could not pass it without your approval. I will let you hear it from the lips of the planner."

He pressed a buzzer. "Bring Mr. Winter in," he told his secretary.

The man who presently appeared in the doorway was an arresting figure. A man of thirty-odd with the body of an athlete, belied somewhat by the pallor of an indoor worker, with acid stained, delicate hands offset by forearms that might have belonged to a blacksmith, with coal black hair and gray eyes so light as to look like ice-gray holes in the deep caverns of his eye-sockets. This was Thorn Winter.

"Gentlemen, the scientist, Mr. Winter," announced the Secretary. "He thinks he can get the Ziegler plans."

Thorn Winter cleared his throat. "My scheme is simple enough," he said tersely. "I believe I can walk right into the Embassy, get the plans—and then walk right out again. It sounds kind of impossible, but I think I can work it by making myself invisible."

"Invisible?" echoed Forsyte. "Invisible!"

"Precisely," said Thorn in a matter-of-fact tone. "I have just turned out a camouflage which is the most perfect yet discovered. It was designed for application to guns and equipment only. I'd never thought of trying to cover a human body with it, but I am sure it can be done."

"But ... invisible ... " muttered Forsyte, glancing askance at Winter.

"There's no time for argument," said the Secretary crisply. "The question is, shall we give this man permission to try the apparently impossible?"

All heads nodded, though in all eyes was doubt. The Secretary turned to the scientist.

"You are aware of the risk you run? You realize that if you are caught, we cannot recognize you—that we must disclaim official knowledge of your work, and leave you to your fate?"

Thorn nodded.

"Then," said the Secretary, his voice vibrant, "yours is the mission. And on your effort hangs the fate of your country. Now—what help will you require?"

"Only the assistance of one man," said Thorn. "And, since secrecy is vital, I'm going to ask you, sir, to be that man."

The Secretary smiled; and with that smile he seemed to be transformed from a great leader of affairs into a kindly, human individual. "I am honored, Mr. Winter," he said. "Shall we go at once to your laboratory?"

In the great laboratory room, the Secretary glanced about almost uneasily at the crowding apparatus that was such an enigma to one untrained in science. Then his gaze returned to Winter's activities.

Thorn was carefully stirring fluids, poured drop by drop from various retorts, in a mixing bowl. All the fluids were colorless; and they combined in a mixture that had approximately the consistency of thin syrup. To this, Thorn added a carefully weighted pinch of glittering powder. Then he lit a burner under the bowl, and thrust into the mixture a tiny, specially constructed thermometer.

"You can really make yourself invisible?" breathed the Secretary.

"I can," said Thorn, "if the blisters don't upset my calculations by making my body surfaces too moist for this stuff to stick to. I'm going to have you paint me with it, you see, and it was never intended to cover flesh."

He regulated the burner anxiously, and then began to take off his clothes.

"Ready," he said at last, glancing at the thermometer and turning off the burner. He stood before the wondering Secretary, a fine, muscular figure. "Take this brush and cover me with the stuff. And be sure not to miss any of me!"

And then the Secretary saw why Thorn had said the colorless paint was never intended to be applied to human flesh. For it was still seething and smoking in the cauldron.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Don't you want to wait till it cools a little?"

"Can't," said Thorn. "It has to be applied hot or it loses its flexibility."

The Secretary dipped the brush and began to paint the naked flesh of the scientist. Not a quiver touched that flesh as an almost microscopically thin, colorless layer formed into a film after the brush strokes. But the Secretary's fingers shook a little.

"My God, man!" he said finally. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's a little like being boiled in oil," replied Thorn grimly. "Outside of that it's all right. Hurry, before the stuff gets too cool."

The clinging thin shell covered him to his chest, then to his throat. At that point he reached into a drawer in a workbench beside him and drew out two small, hollow hemispheres of glass. These he cupped over his eyes.

"What are those for?" asked the Secretary.

"So my eyes can be covered with the film. If they weren't, I'd present the somewhat remarkable spectacle of a pair of disembodied eyes walking down the street."

Painfully, agonizingly, the hot film was applied to throat and face; over the glass spheres that cupped around the eyes; over a tight leather cap covering the scientist's hair; and over a sort of football nose-guard which extended down an inch below the end of Thorn's nose in a sort of overhanging offset that would allow him to breathe and still keep his nostrils hidden. The Secretary stepped back.

Before him stood a figure that looked not unlike a glazed statue of a man. The effect was that of a body encased in clear ice—and like clear ice, the encasing shell sparkled and glittered radiantly in the sunlight that poured in at the windows.

Thorn moved. His glazed arms and legs and torso glistened with all the colors in the spectrum; while under the filmed bulges of glass his eyes looked as large as apples. The Secretary felt a chill of superstitious fear as he gazed at that weird and glittering figure with its enormous glazed eyes.

"But you aren't invisible," he said at length.

"That comes now," said Thorn, walking ahead of the Secretary while on the ceiling above him danced red and yellow and blue rainbows of refracted light.

He stepped onto a big metal plate. Suspended above was a huge metal ring, with its hole directly over the spot on which he stood.

"Soft magnets," explained Thorn. "As simply as I can put it, my process for rendering an object invisible is this: I place the object, coated with the film, on this plate. Then I start in motion the overhead ring, creating an immensely powerful, rapidly rotating magnetic field. The rotating field rearranges the atoms of this peculiarly susceptible film of mine so that they will transmit light rays with the least possible resistance. It combs the atoms into straight lines, you might say. With that straight-line, least-resistance arrangement comes invisibility."

"I don't quite see—" began the Secretary.

"Refraction of light," said Thorn hurriedly. "The light rays strike this film, hurtle around the object, it coats—at increased speed, probably, but there are no instruments accurate enough to check that—and emerge on the other side. Thus, you can look at a body so filmed, and not see it:

your gaze travels *around* it and rests on objects in a straight line behind it. But you'll see for yourself in a moment. Pull that switch, there, will you? And leave it on for two full minutes after you have ceased to see me."

Straight and tall, a figure encased in shimmering crystal, the scientist stood on the metal plate. Hesitant, with the superstitious dread growing in his heart, the Secretary stood with his hand on the switch. That hand pulled the switch down... .

Soundlessly the overhead metal ring began to whirl, gathering speed with every second. And then, though he had known in advance something of what was coming, the Secretary could not suppress a shout of surprise.

The man before him on the metal plate was vanishing.

Slowly he disappeared from view—slowly, as an object sinking deeper and deeper into clear water disappears. Now the face was but a white blob. Now the entire body was but a misty blur. And now a shade, a wavering shadow, alone marked Winter's presence.

The Secretary could not have told the exact instant when that last faint blur oozed from sight. He only knew that at one second he was gazing at it—and at the next second his eyes rested on a rack of test-tubes on the wall beyond the plate.

He looked at his watch. Sweat glistened in tiny points on the hand that held the switch. It was all so like death, this disappearance—as if he had thrown the switch that electrocuted a man.

The specified two minutes passed. He cut off the power. The great ring lost speed, stopped whirling. And on the plate was—nothing.

At least it seemed there was nothing. But a moment later a deep voice sounded out: "I guess I'm invisible, all right, according to the expression on your face."

"You are," said the Secretary, mopping his forehead, "except when you speak. Then I have the bizarre experience of seeing glimpses of teeth, tongue and throat hanging in mid-air. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't witnessed it myself! That paint of yours is miraculous!"

"A little complicated, but hardly miraculous. It has a cellulose base, and there is in it a small per cent of powdered crystal—but the rest I'll keep locked in my brain alone till my country has need of it."

The glimpses of teeth and tongue and throat ceased. In spite of himself, the Secretary started as an unseen hand touched his shoulder.

"Now,"—there was ringing resolution in the deep voice—"for the Arvanian Embassy. Please drive me there—and be as quick as you can about it. I can't last very long with this film sealing most of the pores of my body."

The Secretary started for the laboratory door. Beside him sounded the patter of bare feet. He opened the door and walked into the hallway. Behind him, apparently of itself, the door clicked shut; and the footsteps again sounded beside him.

The Secretary walked to the curb where his limousine waited. His chauffeur jumped out and opened the door. The Secretary paused a moment, one foot on the running board, to draw a cigar from his pocket and light it. During that moment the car pressed down on that side, and as suddenly rocked back up again.

The chauffeur stared wide-eyed at his employer.

"Did you do that, sir?" he asked.

"Do what?" said the Secretary.

"Push down on the running board with your foot."

"Of course not," said the Secretary, his eyebrows raising. "You could have seen my leg move if I had. But why do you ask?"

"It felt like somebody got into this car," mumbled the man.

"Did you see anybody get in?" said the Secretary with a shrug. And, shaking his head, with a fuddled look in his eyes, the chauffeur turned away and got into the driver's seat.

The Secretary glanced at the rear seat. On the far side, the cushion was heavily depressed. He sat on the near side, feeling his knee strike another, unseen knee.

"Drive to the Bulgarian Embassy," he told his man.

Up Sixteenth Street the car swung, past the various embassies which looked more like palatial private villas than offices of foreign nations. Toward the end of the line, a smaller building than most of the others, was the Arvanian Embassy. Next to it was the Bulgarian.



The car stopped in front of the Bulgarian Embassy, and the Secretary got out. Again he paused, while the chauffeur held the door open, to hold a match to his cigar. Again the car sagged down on that side, and slowly swayed up again.

"Hey—" said the chauffeur. But meeting the Secretary's calmly inquiring gaze, he stopped. Scratching his head, he went back to the wheel, while the Secretary walked toward the building entrance.

Behind him, moving on soundless bare feet along the sidewalk, Thorn Winter hastened, cloaked in invisibility, toward the Arvanian Embassy—and the plans that spelled America's destruction if they remained in Arvanian hands.

The embassy building was a three-storied oblong house of white stone topping a terrace that started its climb from the sidewalk of Sixteenth Street. The doors at the head of the wide stone staircase were of bronze; and they were closed, and, Thorn surmised, efficiently barred. The windows at front and sides were also closed, in spite of the warmth of the sunny spring afternoon.

Beside the building, leading up in a short steep hill, was the driveway. Up this Thorn started. The front of the house was hopelessly barred; but at the rear entrance there might be a chance.

Up the driveway, then, he walked, a little startled at the fact that he cast no shadow—feeling as a ghost might feel. The pavement was hot to his thinly filmed feet. A little dubious as to the effect of heat on the vital shell that hid him, he stepped off into the cool grass beside the drive; and came soon to the rear of the embassy.

There was no porch or veranda, simply two stone steps leading up to a stout oak door which opened onto the embassy kitchens. From behind this door came the sound of crockery and the hum of voices. The Arvanian chef evidently was preparing afternoon tea.

Walking boldly to the very steps, Thorn began the vigil that should end when someone came in or out of that door, allowing him to slip inside the building before the portal was barred shut again.

For nearly half an hour Thorn stood there before something happened that at once helped him, and, at the same time, nearly proved his undoing.

A light delivery van sped up the driveway. The wheels stirred up a cloud of dust. It was a very small cloud of very fine dust. Thorn at first

thought nothing of it, because he was so engrossed in the conviction that here ought to be provided an entrance into the house.

The truck driver got out, took a crate from the body of the van, and went with it to the back door. After a moment of waiting, the door opened. Thorn noticed that it was opened very cautiously, only an inch or so. He caught a glimpse of a heavy chain stretched across the inch opening, and saw a strip of bearded, resolute face.

The door was unchained. The driver walked in, while the door stood open. Thorn started to glide in after him... .

Mere chance made him glance at a window near the door. This window framed another bearded, resolute face. And the eyes in that face were like saucers as they stared full at Thorn!

For an instant Thorn knew icy fear. His invisibility! Had something happened to strip him of that concealing mantle? But what *could* have happened?

He glanced down at himself and saw the reason for the guard's saucer-eyed expression.

A little of the light cloud of dust stirred up by the truck wheels had settled over him and clung to the encasing shell. As he moved, these dust specks moved. The effect to the staring guard, Thorn realized, must be that of seeing a queer, fine dust column moving eccentrically over a grassy lawn where no dust column had any business to be.

Quickly Thorn moved toward the garage, with the eyes of the amazed guard following him. The scientist was savage at the delay; but it was vital that he rid himself of that clinging dust.

Behind the garage he broke off a feathery spray from a vine, and stroked it lightly over himself. That, too, presented a curious spectacle: a leafy branch suddenly detaching itself from the parent vine and dancing here and there in mid-air.

When the all-important task was done, Thorn raced back to the rear doorway. By great good luck it was still open. He stole in, just making it as the truck driver, staggering under a load of empty crates, came up the cellar stairs and went out to his truck.

Thorn drew a deep breath. He was inside the Arvanian Embassy. The place was a three-storied stone trap in which, if the slightest slip revealed him to its tenants, he would surely meet his death. But, anyway, he was

inside! And the threatening Ziegler plans waited somewhere near at hand for him to find and take!

Even had Thorn not known in advance that trouble was brewing, he could have surmised that something sinister was being hatched in the Arvanian Embassy. For, in this big sunny kitchen five men lounged about in addition to the white-coated chef and his beardless stripling of an assistant. And each of the five had a holster strapped openly over his coat with the butt of an automatic protruding in plain sight.

Thorn looked about. Across from the great range, beside which he was standing and holding his breath for fear some one of the seven men should become aware of his presence, was the door leading to the front part of the house. He started toward that door, walking on tiptoe. A shudder crept up his spine as he tiptoed across the floor directly in front of the armed guards who would have shot him down without compunction could they have seen him. He was not yet used to his invisibility; knowing himself to be substantial, feeling his feet descend solidly on the floor, he still could hardly credit the fact that human eyes could not observe him.

He got to the door. He put out his hand to open it, then realized just in time that he could not do that. A door stealthily opening and closing again, with no apparent hand to manipulate it? Such a spectacle would start a riot!

In a frenzy of impatience, he stood beside the door, waiting till someone else should swing it open. And in a moment it chanced that the stripling assistant chef came toward him with a tray. The boy pushed the swinging door with his foot, and walked into the butler's pantry. After him, treading almost on the lad's heels, came Thorn.

The boy sat the tray down, and turned to reach into an upper shelf. The space in the pantry was constricted, and he turned abruptly. The result was that he suddenly drew back as though a hot iron had seared him, and went white as chalk. Then he dashed back into the kitchen.

"A hand!" Thorn heard him gibbering in Arvanian. "A hand! I touched it with mine! Something horrible is in there!"

With his heart pounding in his throat, Thorn leaned close to the swing-door to hear what happened next. Would there be a rush for the butler's pantry? An investigation? He eyed the farther door—the dining room door. But he dared not flee through that save as a last resort. In the

dining room sounded voices; and again the sight of a door opening and closing of itself would lead to uproar.

"A hand?" he heard one of the guards say in the kitchen. "An unseen hand? Thou art empty in the head, young Gova."

There followed some jeering sentences in colloquial Arvanian that were too idiomatic for Thorn's knowledge of the language to let him understand. A general guffaw came from the rest; and, as no move was made toward the pantry, Thorn decided he was saved for another few moments.

Gasping, he raised his hand to wipe the perspiration off his forehead, then realized there was no perspiration there. His film-clogged pores could exude nothing; he had only the sensation of perspiring.

Now the problem was to get through the next door. Thoughtfully, Thorn gazed at it. He saw that this, too, was a swing-door. Further, he saw that now and then it creaked open a few inches, and swung sluggishly back. Beyond it somewhere a window was open, and spasmodic gusts moved the swinging slab of wood.

The next time the door moved with the wind, Thorn caught it and augmented the movement a bit. Twice he did that, each time swinging it back a trifle further. Next time, he figured, he could open it enough to slide into the room.

Two glimpses he had had, with the openings of the door, into the room beyond. These glimpses had showed him a great oval table on which was set the debris of afternoon tea, and around which were grouped tense, eager men. Dark of hair and complexion were these men, with the arrogant hawk noses and ruthless small eyes of the typical Arvanian. Several of them were garbed in military uniforms and armed with swords. They were talking in tones too low for Thorn to distinguish words through the film over his ears. He would have to get in there to hear them.

For the third time the wind pushed at the door. For the third time Thorn caught its edge and swung it—six inches, eight, almost enough to slip through... .

"Shut thou the window!" crackled a voice suddenly. "Fool! What if some of these documents blew away?"

There was a slam, and the breeze was cut off. Thorn quickly let go of the door, and watched it fall back in place again.

He was cursing his luck when he heard the same commanding voice say: "Kori, see if there be one who listens in the butler's pantry. It seemed the door opened wider than the wind would warrant."

There was the scrape of a chair. Then the door was abruptly thrust open and coldly alert eyes in a hostile, wary face, swept over the pantry.

"No one here, Excellency," said Kori; and he returned to his place at the table.

But with him came another, unseen, to stand against the wall beside a great mahogany buffet, and to listen and watch. Kori had, not unnaturally, held the door open while he glanced around the pantry. And under Kori's outstretched arm, so close as almost to brush against his uniformed legs, had stolen Thorn.

"Then, gentlemen, it is all arranged?" said the man at the head of the oval table—a spare, elderly individual with bristling gray mustachios and smoldering dark eyes. "The plans leave for Arvania to-morrow night, to arrive in our capital city in ten days. Then day and night manufacture of the Ziegler projectors—and declaration of war. Following that, this great city of Washington, and the even greater cities of New York and Chicago, and all, this fine land from Atlantic to Pacific, shall become an Arvanian possession to exploit as we like!"

There was an audible "Ah!" from the score of men around the table—broken by a voice in the main double doorway of the dining room: "Gentlemen, your pardon, I am late."

Thorn looked at the speaker. He was a young fellow with an especially elaborate uniform and a face that appeared weak and dissipated in spite of the arrogant Arvanian nose. Then a bark came to Thorn's ears—and a cold feeling to the pit of Thorn's stomach. The newcomer had brought a dog with him!

Even as he gazed apprehensively at the dog—a rangy wolfhound—the brute growled deep in its throat and stared at the corner by the buffet where Thorn was instinctively trying to make himself smaller.

The dog growled again, and stalked warily toward the buffet.

"Grego, down," said his master absently. Then, to the spare man at the head of the table: "I have been next door, talking to the American Secretary of War. A dull fellow. Convinced, is he, that Arvania harbors only kind thoughts for this great stupid nation. They shall be utterly unprepared for our attack—Grego! What ails the brute?"

The wolfhound had evaded several outstretched hands and got to the buffet. There it crouched and cowered, fangs showing in a snarl, eyes reddening wickedly, while the growl rattled louder in its shaggy throat.

"Perhaps the heat has affected him," said one.

All were looking at the dog now, marveling at its odd behavior. But of all the eyes that observed it a pair of unseen eyes watched with the utmost agitation.

Thorn stared, almost hypnotized, at the creature. A dog! What rotten luck! Men might be fooled by the masking invisibility, but there was no deceiving a dog's keen nose!

The wolfhound started forward as though to leap, then settled back. Plainly it longed to spring. Equally plainly it was afraid of the being that so impossibly was revealed to its nostrils but not to its eyes. Meanwhile, one tearing sweep of blunt claws or sharp fangs—and a fatal rent would appear in Thorn's encasing shell!

The dog snapped tentatively. Thorn flattened still harder against the wall, with discovery and death hovering very closely about him. Then the beast's master intervened.

"Grego! Here, sir! A council room is no place, for thee, anyway. Here, I say! So, then—"

He hastened to the dog and caught its collar. Twisting the leather cruelly, he dragged the protesting, snarling brute to the doors and slid them shut with the wolfhound barking and growling on the outside. "Someone put him in his kennel," he said through the panels. A scuffling in the hall told of the execution of the order. The council room became quiet again, and Thorn leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for an instant.

"We were saying, Soyo," the leader addressed the dog's owner, "that the Ziegler plans start for Arvania to-morrow night. All is arranged. These innocent looking bits of paper"—he thumped a small packet of documents lying before him—"shall deliver mighty America to us!"

A subdued cheer answered the man's words—while Thorn stared at the packet of papers with unbelieving eyes. It had never occurred to him that the Ziegler plans might be in that very room, on the table with the rest of the welter of letters, thumbed documents, and cups and saucers.

And there they were—the vital projector plans—not in a safe or hidden in some fantastic place, but right before his eyes!

Involuntarily his hand extended eagerly toward the packet, then was withdrawn. Not now. *He* was invisible—but the papers, if he grasped them, would not be. Clenched in his unseen hand, they would be perfectly visible, moving in jerks and starts as he raced for the door.

Like lightning his mind turned over one plan after another for making away with that precious packet. Each scheme seemed impossible of fulfilment.

"The biggest difficulty is in getting them out of the country," the spare, elderly man was saying. "But we have solved that. Solved it simply. I myself shall bear them, sewn in my clothes, to our native land. The American authorities could search, on some pretext, any other of our number who tried to smuggle them out. But *me* they dare not lay a finger on. That would be an overt act."

Thorn's thoughts whirled desperately on. Wait till later and follow whoever left the room with the plans? But he hated to let them get out of his sight.

And at this point he became suddenly aware that the man named Kori was gazing fixedly at him.

Thorn was between the section of the table where Kori sat, and the angular buffet-end. Kori could not possibly see anything but the shining mahogany, thought Thorn. And yet the man's eyes were narrowing to ominous slits as he started in his direction.

Thorn held his breath. Was the shielding film changing in structure? Were the repolarized atoms slowly losing their straight-line arrangement, allowing light rays to penetrate through to his body instead of diverting them to form a pocket of invisibility around him? The film had never acted like that before—but never before had Thorn applied it to living flesh with its disintegrating heat and moisture.

"Excellency," said Kori at last, a hard edge to his voice, "look thou at that buffet. No, no—the end nearest my chair."

"Well?" said the elderly man. "I see nothing."

Thorn breathed a sigh of relief. But the relief was to be of short duration.

"Come to my place, if thou wilt, and see from here," said Kori.

The leader got up and came to Kori's place. Kori pointed straight at Thorn.

"There—seest thou anything out of the ordinary?"

"I see nothing," said the leader, after a moment. "Thine eyes, Kori, are not good."

"They are the eyes of a hawk," said Kori stubbornly. "And they see this—the vertical line of the end of that buffet does not continue straightly up and down. At its middle, the line is broken, then continues up—a fraction of an inch to the side! Like an object seen under water, distorted by the sun-rays that strike the surface!"

Thorn fairly jumped away from the buffet and stood against bare wall. Fool! Of course the light refraction would not be perfect! Why hadn't he thought of that—thought to stand clear of revealing vertical lines!

"There, it is gone," said Kori, blinking. "But something, Excellency, made that distortion of line. And something made Soyo's wolfhound act as it did! Something—"

"Art thou attempting to say a spy listens unseen in this room?" demanded the gray-mustachioed Arvanian.

"Something is odd—that is all I say."

All eyes were ranging along the wall against which Thorn leaned his back. All eyes finally turned to Kori. "It is nonsense." "I see nothing whatever." "Kori has drunk of champagne in place of tea!" were some of the exclamations.

And then occurred the thing that, in Thorn's perilous position, was like the self-signing of his own death warrant.

He sneezed.

That agony of helplessness, as a man's nose wrinkles and twitches and—in spite of the most desperate attempts at repression—the betraying sound forces its way out! How many men have lost their lives because of that insistent soft nasal explosion which can be smothered, but not entirely hushed!

Thorn had felt the sneeze coming on for seconds. He had fought it frantically, with life itself at stake. But he could not hold it back. In his naked body, beginning to burn with fever from the long-clogged pores and insulated not at all by the film from the coolness of the room, the seeds of that soft explosion had been planted—and they *would* bear fruit!



So he had sneezed!

Instantly there was chaos. Men looked at each other, and back at the blank wall from which had come the painfully muffled sound. Then all sprang to their feet.

"Champagne, is it!" Kori exulted savagely. "Did I not say my eyes were those of a hawk?"

"Double guard all doors!" roared the Arvanian leader, to the guards outside. "Someone is in the house! And you in here," he went on in a lower tone, "see that this unseen one dies!"

Soyo and several other men whipped out automatics and pointed them at the wall. Thorn dropped to the floor. But with his quick action came Kori's voice.

"No, no! The sword, gentlemen. It is not so noisy, and covers a wider sweep."

Thorn shivered. Far rather would he have had bullets as his lot than cold steel. The prospect of being hacked to pieces, of gradually emerging from invisibility as a lump of gashed and bleeding flesh, turned him faint.

The Arvanians split up into orderly formation. Two went to guard the door to the butler's pantry, and two to cover the closed sliding doors to the outer hall. Six, with drawn swords sweeping back and forth before them, walked slowly toward the wall from which the sneeze had come.

Thorn set his jaws—only just catching himself in time to prevent his lips from opening in the half-snarl instinctive to the most civilized of men when danger is threatening. That lip motion would have revealed his teeth for an instant!

The sensation of perspiring heavily flamed over him again. There were so many trifling things to keep in mind! And each, if neglected, meaning certain death!

The nearest of the marching six stopped with his foot almost touching Thorn's hand. The dancing sword the man carried almost grazed the scientist's shoulder on its down sweep.

Thorn could not stay there. Lying flat along the baseboard, he would be stabbed at any instant by an inquiring sword point.

The six spread a little. A very little. But there was room enough for Thorn to slide between the two men nearest him and roll soundlessly under the table.

There was no sanctuary for him there. The cursed Kori, with his hawk eyes, glanced under the table after stabbing vainly along the wall.

"The carpet!" he bellowed. "See how the nap is pressed down! He is under there, comrades!"

The thrusting swords raked under the table a half second or so after Thorn had rolled out the other side, upsetting a chair in his hurry.

"After him!" panted Soyo. "By the living God, this is wizardry! But he must not get away—"

"He won't!" snapped the elderly leader. "Men, form a line at the far end of the room and march slowly, shoulder to shoulder, to this end. The spy must be caught!"

The move was executed. All the men in the room, save the four guarding the doors, lined up and advanced slowly, swerving and slashing their swords. Like a line of workers hand-harvesting a wheat field they came—foot by foot toward the corner where Thorn turned this way and that in a vain effort to escape.

The line reached the table. Over and under and around it the swords slashed viciously, leaving no space unprobed.

Thorn clenched his fists. He gazed at the packet containing the Ziegler plans. He gazed at the guarded door leading back to the kitchen. Then he tensed himself and leaped.

"The plans!" shouted Kori hoarsely. "Look—"

The vital packet, as far as the eye could see, had suddenly grown wings, soared from the table top, and was floating rapidly, convulsively, toward the door.

"Stop him!" yelled Soyo. "Stop—"

At that instant the heads of the two who guarded the door were dashed together. The door itself slammed open. The Ziegler plans sped into the butler's pantry.

The door to the kitchen began to open just as Kori reached the pantry. An oath burst from the Arvanian's lips. He flung his sword. In the air, shoulder high, appeared suddenly a small fountain of blood. Kori yelled triumphantly.

Thorn, feeling the warm drip following the glancing slash in his shoulder, knew the veil of invisibility had at last been rent. Abandoning efforts at noiselessness, knowing that his whereabouts was constantly marked by the packet in his hand, anyway, he fled through the kitchen to the rear door.

The bolt jerked back, under the astonished eyes of the five guards who had not yet realized precisely what the commotion was all about—and who only saw a packet of papers waving in mid-air, a trickle of blood appearing out of nothing, and a bolt banging open in its slot for no reason whatever.

Thorn's fingers worked feverishly at the chain. But before he could begin to get it undone, the guards had recovered from their surprise and had joined the Arvanians who poured in from the dining room under Kori's lead.

With a score of men crowding the kitchen, Thorn looped back in his tracks like a hunted creature, and sought the cellar door. Four men he upset, one after another, aided by the fact that his twisting body could be only approximately placed by the papers and the wound.

Then Kori's hand swept through the air above the waving packet, to clamp over Thorn's wrist.

With an effort—that bulged the muscles of that blacksmith's fore-arm of his till it seemed they must burst through the film, Thorn whirled Kori clear off his feet and sent him stumbling into the charge of three guards. But in the meantime the cellar was barred to him by a double line of men.

Fighting for his life—and, far more important, the existence of his country—Thorn lashed out with his invisible right fist while his left clutched the plans.

A score of men arrayed in a death struggle against one! But the odds were not twenty to one. Not quite. The score could mark Thorn's general whereabouts—but they could not see his flying right fist! That was an invisible weapon that did incredible damage.

But if they could not see the fist to guard against it, they could see the results of the fist's impacts. Here a nose suddenly crumpled and an instant later gushed red. There a head was snapped back and up, while its owner slowly sagged to the floor. And all the while the still dripping wound and the packet of documents kept with devilish ingenuity

between the body of some swordless guard and the impatient blades of the Arvanian nobles.

Almost, it seemed to Thorn, he would win free. Almost, it appeared to the Arvanians, the unseen one would reach the big window near the door—which the path of his wreckage indicated was his goal. But one of the wildly swinging fists of a guard caught Thorn at last.

It landed on the glass cup over his right eye, cutting a perfect circle in the skin around the eyesocket, and tearing the film over the glass!

Now there were three things about the lithe, invisible body that the Arvanians could see: the crumpled papers, a slowly drying patch of blood that moved shoulder high in the air, and a blood-rimmed, ice-gray eye that glared defiance at them from apparently untenanted atmosphere.

Then came what seemed must be the end. Soyo appeared in the pantry doorway with a machine gun.

"Everybody to the end of the kitchen by the window!" he cried. "To the devil with silence—we'll spray this room with lead, and let the sound of shots bring what consequences it may!"

The men scattered. The machine gun muzzle swept toward the place where the eye, the papers, and the blood spot were to be seen.

That spot was now at one end of the great kitchen range on which a few copper pots simmered over white-hot electric burners. At the other end of the range, in the end wall of the kitchen, was a second window. It was small, less than a yard square, and had evidently been punched through the wall as an afterthought to carry off some of the heat of the huge stove.

Soyo's face twisted exultantly. The machine gun belched flame. Chasing relentlessly after the dodging, shifting blood spot, a line of holes appeared in the wall following instantly on the tap—tap—tap of the gun.

Eye and papers and blood spot appeared to float through the air. One of the copper pots on the range flew off onto the floor. The glass of the small ventilating window smashed to bits. In the jagged frame its broken edges presented, the Arvanians saw for a flashing instant the seared, blistered soles of a pair of human feet.

"Outside!" bawled Kori. "He jumped onto the range and dove through the window! After him!"

After precious seconds had been wasted, the rear door was unchained and wrenched open. The Arvanians, swords and guns drawn, raced out to the rear yard.

His Excellency's town car, that had been standing in front of the open garage doors, leaped into life. With motor roaring wide open, it tore toward the Arvanians, some of whom leaped aside and some of whom were hurled to right and left by the heavy fenders... .

Startled people on Sixteenth Street saw a great town car swaying down the asphalt seemingly guided by no hand other than that of fate; some said afterward they saw a single eye gleaming through the windshield, but no one believed that. Equally startled people saw the car screech to a stop in front of the home of the Secretary of War. After it, scarcely a full minute later, three motors with the Arvanian coat of arms on them came to a halt.

"My dear fellow," said the Secretary blandly to the livid Arvanian Ambassador, "no one has come in here with papers or anything else. I saw a man jump out of your town car and run south on Connecticut Avenue. That's all I know."

"But I tell you—" shrieked the Arvanian.

He stopped, impaled on the Secretary's icy cold glance.

"Your story is rather incredible," murmured the Secretary. "Valuable plans stolen from your Embassy by an invisible man? Come, come!"

Dark Arvanian eyes glared into light American ones.

"By the way," said the Secretary affably, "I am thinking of giving a semi-official banquet to celebrate future, friendly relations between our two countries. Do you approve?"

The Arvanian Ambassador tugged at his collar to straighten it. World dominion had been in his fingers—and had slipped through—but he would not have been a diplomat had he let his face continue to express the bitterness in his heart.

"I think such a banquet would be a splendid idea," he said suavely.

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