

THE DICTATOR

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CHAPTER I

STEEL JEFFERS, PRESIDENT OF America, was not a large man. But no one thought of size, when confronted with his fiery eyes, his thin implacable lips, and his firm jaw.

At the moment, however, as he sat at his desk in the bay window of the Blue Room of the White House, he permitted himself to relax a little, and his face lost some of its grimness. No one else was present except his athletic military aide, Lieutenant Jack Adams, in the trim black uniform of the Federal Guards; and the hawk-faced, bearded Secretary of State, James Dougherty. Two soldiers were pacing up and down on the sunlit lawn outside.

President Jeffers passed a tired hand across his eyes, then looked up inquiringly at the scowling Dougherty. 'Do you, really think, Mr. Secretary, that I should sign the death warrant of those two young men?' he asked, with a touch of sadness. 'They thought they were influenced by patriotism. Isn't there some other way in which we can maintain our regime, without putting to death everyone who plots against us?'

Lieutenant Adams tensed. These men awaiting sentence had been closely associated with him—secretly, of course. For Adams was an important cog in the conspiracy to rid the country of its undemocratic President. Was there nothing he could do to save his pals?

'Excellency,' he ventured eagerly, 'would not a little mercy-'

'Nonsense!' snapped Secretary Dougherty, his red lips leering through his black beard. 'Mercy, bah! What mercy would this rabble show to us, if they ever got the upper hand? Excellency, we must be firm.'

The President sighed. 'I suppose you are right; but, even so, I hate to do it.'

A white-coated, bullet-headed man, with thick-lensed glasses, appeared in the doorway of the Blue Room, and announced with a Teutonic accent, 'Excellency, your medicine.'

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' said President Jeffers, rising with what Adams could almost swear was a trapped expression, and stepping out into the hall.

Adams had witnessed the rubbing-out of a number of patriots in the two years during which he had served as personal aide to this autocratic President. And to think that he himself had been one of the large number of young enthusiasts who only four years ago had helped elect Steel Jeffers to the presidency, as a reaction to the autocracy of President Hanson!

The rise of Steel Jeffers had been spectacular. Elected Governor of Iowa in the same election at which John R. Hanson had been made President, Jeffers was among the first to protest against Hanson's attempted increase in executive powers. Meanwhile his astute campaign manager, State Senator Dougherty, had been building political fences. In the election Of 1956, Jeffers defeated Hanson on this issue of executive usurpation, and had carried into office scores of yesmen— Senators, Congressmen, Governors, and minor officials—all carefully handpicked because of their subserviency.

Two years later, in the Congressional election of 1958, opposition candidates were intimidated or bought off, or else mysteriously disappeared. Vacancies in the judiciary, as they occurred, were filled with willing tools. The pay of the Army was raised, its size increased, and the ranks gradually padded with high grade mercenaries. The F.B.I. was disbanded; and the Intelligence Service of the Army expanded, to an extent unknown because they now went about dressed as civilians.

Yet, because of his espousal of popular causes and his ingratiating personality, Steel Jeffers had retained and increased his hold on the proletariat; for he had carefully studied his predecessors, adopting their outstanding characteristics—from the charming manner and pseudo-liberalism of Roosevelt, to the inflexible and ruthless egotism of Hanson.

After the 1958 election placed him in undisputed control of all three branches of the government, and he had arrogantly established the Roman salute and put the Army into black uniforms, there came the first rumblings against his dictator-like power. But a few ruthless blood-purges, followed by his persuasive voice on television attacking the character and loyalty of the deceased, quickly drove the opposition to cover.

Lieutenant Jack Adams, participating in some of these, purges, had helplessly witnessed independent newspaper editors and statesmen lined up before machine-guns in the soundproof basement of the State War and Navy Building. And so he could now vividly picture to himself the end of his two pals. Their death would be of the clear-eyed, defiant variety. Well, if they had the courage thus to die for American freedom, he could have the courage to keep a stiff upper lip and let them die. The success of the conspiracy depended on his continuing in the good graces of President Jeffers.

Just then Jeffers strode back into the room, once more seating himself at his desk. A strange Jekyll-Hyde sort of personality Jeffers! A few moments ago human, almost wavering, now fierce and ruthless. Briskly he scrawled his flowing signature across than foot of the death warrant. Then he turned his cold eyes toward his aide. 'Here, Adams, take this paper over to the War Department.'

'Yes, sir,' replied the Lieutenant, raising his right hand in a Roman salute. His fine features were expressionless, but he could not conceal the deep pain in his gray eyes.

'I know how you feel, Adams,' said the President. 'But you must be a good soldier—for the Cause.'

As Adams left, with the warrant clenched in his fist, he muttered to himself, 'If Steel Jeffers only knew

what a good soldier I'm being— for the Cause.'

Returning to his house on P Street that evening, Adams changed from his trim black uniform into a loose gray Norfolk suit and hastened down into the cellar. The brick wall at one side was interlaced with many crisscross cracks. One irregular seam now swung open like a door. Adams felt a gust of cool musty air. A light shone dimly in the distance through the dark hole. Presently there crawled out a stocky dark young man with a serious face. Adams shook his hand.

'Well, Godfrey, no one yet seems to have discovered that we know each other, even though we do live in adjoining houses. Have the rest of the crowd arrived?'

'Here's Liam and Sim.' Two men, one tall and dark, the other short and roly-poly, crawled out through the hole.

'Had a devil of a time getting here!' the former announced. 'Black-coated soldiers everywhere, damn them! No offense to you, Adams.'

The short fat fellow chuckled. 'Never mind the black-coats, Liam,' he said. 'It's the Secret Service we ought to worry about.'

Several more men emerged from the hole in the wall.

Adams solemnly shook hands with everyone. 'Tom and Bill are dead,' he gravely announced. 'Shot against a wall. I myself carried their death-warrant over. Jeffers would have let them off with mere imprisonment, if it hadn't been for that fiendish Secretary of State of his.'

'Don't make excuses for Jeffers!' snapped Liam Lincoln, his dark eyes glittering with fanatic light. He brushed back a trailing lock of black hair. 'Jeffers is a heartless usurper, though doubtless his experience in college theatricals when he was at Princeton enables him to put on an act. Sometimes, Adams, I begin to wonder if you-'

'Well, you needn't,' the Lieutenant interrupted. 'I risk my life daily for the Cause, while you boss things in comparative safety.'

'For cripes sake!' cut in roly-poly Simeon Baldwin. 'If we can't trust each other, fellows, who can we trust?'

'You're right, Sim. I'm sorry, Jack,' Lincoln graciously apologized. 'Well, to business. Very gratifying secret reports are coming in from all over the country. Our organization is growing by leaps and bounds. The Governors of nearly half the states are either active members, or at least in sympathy. Patriotic leading citizens everywhere are waiting for the word from our little Washington group that the time has come for action. Meanwhile Sim here has completed his study of Jeffers' early life.'

'I'll skip what you already know,' said Baldwin. 'What I've lately been working on is his sister.'

'You mean the one who died on the day of Jeffers' election?' Adams asked.

'Did she? I wonder,' Baldwin replied enigmatically.

'Did she what?'

'Did she really die? That's the angle I've been working on for the past few weeks. If she did die, old Svengali Dougherty killed her, and Steel Jeffers wouldn't have stood for that. So I believe she is hidden away somewhere to prevent her from influencing her brother.'

'But why should Dougherty fear her influence?' asked one of the others. 'The three of them were hand-in-glove.'

Liam Lincoln laughed harshly, and tossed back his long locks of black hair. 'That was back in the days when even we were following Jeffers toward 'the better economic day' for America.'

'You're right, Liam,' Adams chimed in. 'The change in the President seems to date from the death—or disappearance—of his sister. You're on the track of something, Sim. Go on.'

Baldwin continued. 'There's something fishy about the death of Helen Jeffers. The girl was in charge of her brother's campaign headquarters and apparently perfectly well, right up to election day. The coroner who signed her death-certificate hasn't been seen since. Her brother was reported prostrated by her death—went into seclusion immediately in a mountain camp—yet no doctor went with him.'

'But—weren't Southworth and Vierecke there?' Adams interrupted.

Baldwin replied, 'Southworth—now Rear Admiral and White House physician—didn't arrive at the mountain lodge until two weeks after election. Doctor Vierecke didn't land from Austria until a week after that.'

'But if Jeffers wasn't ill, why doctors at all?' asked Lincoln. 'He seemed weak and shaken when he came back from the mountains, just before inauguration.'

'That's the next point which I wish investigated,' Baldwin asserted. 'Just what is the why of Admiral Southworth and his Austrian assistant? Jack, can't you get a line on them? You're in the White House.'

'I know something about them already,' Adams diffidently replied. 'Southworth did research work in hormones, before he went into the Navy. That's how he happened to know Vierecke, for hormones was Vierecke's specialty at Goettingen.'

'Not much to go on,' said Lincoln. 'Do some spying, Jack. I understand that two of them have a fully equipped chemical and biological laboratory in the basement of the White House. Why should there be such an establishment there? We must investigate everything the least bit screwy about the President, in the hope of some day finding his weak spot. Well, go on, Sim.'

Baldwin thrust his hand into a briefcase as fat as himself, and pulled out a photograph. The others clustered around. From the picture, there looked up at them the frank sweet face of a young girl. 'Helen Jeffers,' he announced, 'just before her death—or disappearance. You'd know she was a Jeffers, wouldn't you?'

But Adams could see no resemblance to her brother. Soft wavy dark hair. Frank open eyes. Perfect features. Full alluring lips. Softly curved neck and shoulders.

Strange that such a thoroughly feminine girl had formed a compatible member of that triumvirate—with Steel Jeffers, the popular and magnetic front; and Dougherty, the practical wirepulling organizer—which had pushed Steel Jeffers up to the position of supreme power in America!

'Some baby!' murmured several of the conspirators, appraisingly.

But a stronger feeling touched Lieutenant Adams. Of course, he had seen newspaper cuts of her at the time of her brother's campaign, but this was different. He squared his shoulders with determination. His gray eyes narrowed, and a whimsical smile played on his lips.

'Gentlemen,' he announced, with mock solemnity, 'I am going to find Helen Jeffers for you.' In his mind he

added: 'And for myself.'

CHAPTER II

The next morning, a bright sunlit June day, Lieutenant Adams swung through the streets with a determined stride on his way to his post at the White House. Mechanically he returned the Roman salutes of the black-uniformed military men whom he passed. Civilians were few on the streets of Washington these days. Washington had become a vast military establishment.

Entering the executive mansion, he passed the shrewd-faced, bushy-eyebrowed old sea doctor, Admiral Southworth, going out. Adams reported to one of the Assistant Secretaries, and was informed that Steel Jeffers was not up yet. Fine! This would give him time on his own, to investigate the mysterious laboratory.

As he approached the always-locked doors in the cellar, they opened. Ducking quickly behind a pillar, he saw the bullet-headed Dr. Vierecke emerge, hat on head and without his white smock, then turn, key in hand, and lock the doors. Glancing furtively around, the doctor shoved the key into the dirt of a potted plant standing nearby, then hurried off down the corridor. Adams slipped out from behind the pillar, and followed until Vierecke left the building. Then he hastened to the office wing, and asked the appointment clerk, 'Where are Admiral Southworth and Dr. Vierecke?'

The girl consulted a memorandum book and replied, 'They've both gone to a conference over at the Public Health Service. Won't be back until after lunch.'

Grinning to himself, Adams strode back, extricated the key, from the dirt of the plant pot, unlocked the laboratory, and entered, locking the door behind him.

His gray eyes were alight with anticipation. What an opportunity! The only two men who ever entered the laboratory would be safely out of the way for the rest of the morning. And if the President wished Adams, the autocall bells throughout the White House would ring his number, and he could come running.

Most conspicuous in the room were two long workbenches with sinks, Bunsen burners, retorts, glass and rubber piping, and test tubes.

A squeaking noise in one end of the laboratory attracted his attention to dozens of caged guinea pigs. Adams strode over to the cage. On each cage was posted a sign on which each individual was identified by symbols, including some Adams had never seen. Thoughtfully he scratched his blond head, grinned, and then copied several of the charts into a little pocket notebook as samples—he could return and copy more if these few should hold any significance for the biologist among the conspirators.

He looked in the ice-chest, but found nothing there except some small unlabeled bottles.

Next he inspected a cabinet of surgical tools. The large number of hypodermic needles impressed him. His mind flashed back to the change which had come over Steel Jeffers when, wavering on the question of executing the young traitors, he had been called out of the Blue Room by Herr Doktor Vierecke, and had returned, filled with merciless determination. Could the secret of the power of the sinister cabal lie in drugs?

Adams shuddered. The brother of Helen Jeffers a drug addict? Incredible!

Nevertheless the possibility must be investigated. So, with sinking heart, Adams turned to a bank of open shelves, stacked with labeled bottles.

To his relief, he found no morphine, opium, heroin, cocaine, or any other substance the name of which he recognized as being that of a narcotic. He copied down the names of several chemicals which he did not recognize. These might be narcotics.

Then his attention was directed to several large drums, labeled 'Cholesterol.'

He was just jotting down the word, together with the name and address of the supply company, when a bell in the corridor outside clicked his autocall! The President wanted him.

Hurrying to the door, he was about to unlock it, when he heard voices outside. Putting his ear to the crack, he listened. In crisp tones, the old Admiral was saying, 'You fat-headed fool! Why didn't you hide the key where I told you to?'

'Ve haf two keys.'

I left mine in my other suit. It is at the cleaners.'

'Unt I did put der key in der pot.'

'Ding! Ding—ding—ding!' insistently rang the autocall. If Adams didn't hurry, embarrassing inquiries would be made.

'Now listen, you fat-head,' said the sharp incisive voice of the old sea-dog. 'Go to the head housekeeper, and tell her to find out pronto who's been messing around that flowerpot. I'll send someone over to the tailors for my key. Report to me in the executive offices. Now vamoose!'

Footsteps of both men could be heard moving off down the corridor. Adams unlocked the door, and peered out. No one in sight; so he hastily emerged, locked the door, thrust the key in his pocket, and dog-trotted to the Blue Room.

Stopping just outside the room, he smoothed down his black uniform, and entered unconcernedly. Stepping up to the desk in the bay window, he raised his arm in a brisk Roman salute. Steel Jeffers looked up.

'Oh, yes,' Jeffers absently announced. 'Here are some papers to be taken over to the War Department.'

Adams' set jaw relaxed, and he drew a deep breath of relief. Taking the papers, he raised his arm again in salute, faced about, and strode from the room.

In the big hall outside, he ran across Admiral Southworth. The bushy-browed old sea-doctor was visibly agitated. 'Oh! Ah! Lieutenant, you going anywhere in particular?'

'War Department sir,' Adams briskly replied; and he couldn't resist adding, 'But I thought that the Admiral was at a conference.'

Southworth bent narrow eyes of scrutiny at him. 'Meeting called off. Not that it's any business of yours, you young whelp.'

'Can I do anything for the Admiral?' Adams asked innocently.

'Why, ah, yes. Step over to that tailor shop on 17th between G and F, and get a key for me. I left it in a suit. It's—it's the key to my locker at the Army and Navy Club, and I'm going to need it this noon.'

'Yes, sir,' said Adams, with expressionless face.

He took the President's papers to the War Department, and then retrieved the Admiral's laboratory key. On his way back to the White House, he racked his brains for some excuse not to deliver this key; but finally he reflected that, if he kept both keys this would merely result in Southworth having a new lock fitted.

So he handed Admiral Southworth his key.

The rest of the morning he had to attend the President; but, after that, he hurried to the stenographic office of the White House.

Seating himself at one of the desks he penned a brief note, reading: 'P.N. Investigate White House purchases of cholesterol. J.Q.A.' Then, clapping his black military cap onto his head, he strode out of the White House, and down the left-hand driveway to the corner of West Executive and Pennsylvania Avenues, where he stopped to buy a bag of peanuts from the old Italian who kept a stand there.

'Giuseppe,' said Adams, as his eye happened to light on the man's tin license plate, 'the Federal Peanut Commission wouldn't let you stay in business, if they knew what your business really was.'

'I do not understand, Signore,' solemnly replied the Italian, stroking his long gray mustaches; but there was a twinkle in his beady black eyes as he said it. 'My business is to sella da peanut, no?'

'No!' Adams replied, laughing. 'Well, here you are.' He handed over a dollar bill, folded to conceal the note which he had written.

'Grazzia, Signore,' said Giuseppe, with a bow.

Then Adams ambled back to the White House, ruminatively cracking peanuts and eating them, and wondering what Philip Nordstrom, a conspirator who held a small clerkship in the office of the Comptroller General, would be able to learn on the subject of cholesterol.

Adams was famous in White House circles for the large quantities of peanuts which he consumed; but he was fortunately not famous for the large number of notes which he left with, and received from, the grizzled old peanut-vendor.

CHAPTER III

That evening when the little band of patriots gathered again in Adams' cellar, Nordstrom, a tall blond youth with pale blue eyes, was ready to report.

'I got your note from Giuseppe, Jack,' he said, 'but why your sudden interest in cholesterol?'

'Why Steel Jeffers' sudden interest in it?' Adams grimly asked.

'His interest isn't sudden,' Nordstrom replied. 'The White House has been buying cholesterol in quantities ever since Jeffers first became President four years ago.'

Liam Lincoln ran one slim hand through his long black hair. 'Cabot,' he said, addressing that solemn-faced individual, 'you're a chemist of sorts. What possible use can Steel Jeffers have for so much what-you-call-it?'

Roly-poly Simeon Baldwin eagerly cut in, 'I believe we are getting somewhere!' His fat face was alight with interest. 'Maybe this cholesterol, or whatever, will furnish us the clue we're after.'

'Well,' said Cabot judicially, 'let's first hear from Jack how he got a line on this.'

Adams then related how he had explored the laboratory.

'Did you find any small bottles capped with a rubber diaphragm?' Cabot asked.

'Why-er-no,' the Lieutenant replied. 'Ought I have?'

'Well rather! All those hypodermic needles! Lots of guinea pigs, to experiment on! President getting pepped up by Dr. Vierecke every time Secretary Dougherty wants him to do something particularly diabolical'

'Come to think of it,' Adams replied, 'there were some small bottles in the ice-chest. But I didn't notice them particularly—they weren't labeled.'

'Can you get in there again?'

'Yes.'

'Then bring me one of those bottles.'

The next day at the first opportunity Adams headed for the laboratory. Admiral Southworth and his Prussian assistant were talking together just outside the door as he drew near. Their heads were close, and their manner seemed furtive.

'Now while I am in the Adirondacks,' the old sea doctor was saying in an undertone, 'are you sure that you have on hand enough-'

'Sh!' admonished the bullet-headed Vierecke, catching sight of Adams. 'Yes, ve haf plenty.' He nodded vigorously.

Southworth smiled a wind-swept smile, and held out his hand. 'Well, goodbye Franz. Take good care of everything.'

'What!' Adams exclaimed, stepping up. 'You going away Admiral?'

'Just for a couple of week's fishing.' Southworth replied.

'But look here, Sir,' Adams persisted, with the sudden hope of getting a line on Southworth's White House activities, 'you are responsible for the President's health. What if he should get sick while you're away?'

The Admiral knotted his bushy eyebrows. 'I shall be in telephonic touch with the White House at all times,' he said. 'There will be an amphibian plane on the lake, always in readiness.'

'Good,' said Adams, but not with much enthusiasm. Vierecke scowled from behind thick-lensed glasses. Southworth cast a sharp beetle-browed glance. Then the two of them moved off together down the corridor, resuming their whispered conversation.

As soon as they had turned the corner, Adams took the key from his pocket and let himself into the laboratory.

In the ice chest he found a half dozen small bottles capped with rubber diaphragms, as described by Godfrey Cabot. But only one of them had a label—a strip of adhesive tape, bearing a blurred word, of which only the first four letters remained legible: 'Test-' This bottle, Adams slipped into his pocket.

Suddenly he had an idea. If he could cut off the supply of this drug even temporarily, he might get a line

on its effect on Steel Jeffers. So, piercing every diaphragm with his pocket knife, he poured the contents down the sink, and threw all the emptied bottles into the incinerator chute.

The corridor was empty when he emerged. On a sudden impulse, he shoved the key back into the plant-pot in which he had originally found it. Then, as the President didn't need his immediate presence, he ambled out to the street corner and bought some peanuts. Returning some time later, he reported to the Blue Room.

What a scene of confusion he found there! The hook-nosed black-bearded Secretary of State, pacing up and down, his face a thundercloud of wrath. Franz Vierecke, clad in his stiff white laboratory smock standing helplessly by, with a lost look on his pudgy fish-eyed face. President Jeffers seated at his desk, an expression of mingled concern and amusement on his finely chiseled features.

'Can't I do something?' Adams respectfully inquired, stepping up.

'Yes,' snapped the sinister Secretary. 'Get Admiral Southworth back here at once.'

'Oh!' said Adams, with well feigned surprise. Then wheeling around on Vierecke, 'How long has the Admiral been gone?'

'About an hour.'

'Where was he flying from?'

'Der Potomac Field.'

'By your leave, sir.' Stepping briskly over to the desk, Adams picked up the phone. 'Naval Base—Emergency.'

He got his number, ascertained that the plane had been gone for nearly an hour, and commanded that it be immediately recalled by radio.

A pause, during which he held the line. Then, rigidly suppressing any indication of the joy which the news gave him, he turned and reported, 'They say that the plane doesn't answer. That its radio must be out of order.'

'Ausser ordnung! Ach, mein Gott!' wailed Vierecke.

'And now,' said Adams briskly to the pacing Dougherty, 'hadn't you better tell me what this is all about?'

'Fresh young puppy!' spat the Secretary through his big black beard.

'Well, you don't seem to be being very helpful yourself, Jim,' asserted President Jeffers with some asperity. Then, turning to his aide, 'Lieutenant Adams, someone has gained access to Admiral-Southworth's private laboratory, and has stolen some small bottles containing chemicals of great value to the peace of America. The exact nature of those chemicals is known only to Southworth, Vierecke, Dougherty, and myself.'

'I can serve you without knowing, Excellency,' asserted Adams. 'Am I in charge?'

Secretary Dougherty ceased his pacing, and glared at the young officer. 'Certainly not!' he hissed.

'I happen to be the President, Jim,' Steel Jeffers interrupted incisively. 'Yes, Adams, you are in charge.'

'Good!' cried the Lieutenant. 'Excellency, will you please phone the airport, and order them to continue

trying to contact the plane. Herr Doktor, come with me:'

'But—but-' spluttered Dougherty. 'Am I, or am I not, the Secretary of State?'

And, as Lieutenant Adams pushed the white-coated Vierecke from the room, he heard Steel Jeffers wearily yet firmly assert, 'Yes, Jim, you are still the Secretary of State. But it is I who am the President.'

First Adams rushed to the Executive Offices, where he summoned the entire corps of White House guards, and gave orders that no one was to leave or enter the building. Then he led the bewildered Vierecke down to the basement, and made him unlock the laboratory, and hand over a sample empty bottle.

Next Adams called the War Department for a detachment of officers from the Intelligence Service, showed them the sample bottle, and turned them loose to find the stolen ones. Then he returned to the Blue Room, to report to President Jeffers, his keen gray eyes sparkling with enjoyment of the success of his make-believe.

He was wholly unprepared for the chilling reception which was awaiting him. Steel Jeffers and his sinister pal were seated together. As Adams stepped up to the desk and gave the customary Roman salute, both men looked up, transfixing him with narrowed eyes.

Then Dougherty smiled an evil twisted smile. His rat eyes glittered. 'Where had you been, Lieutenant,' he demanded, 'just before you burst in on us and took charge of this case?'

CHAPTER IV

From the doorway behind Adams came a smooth cold voice, 'I can answer that question, Mr. Secretary.'

Adams wheeled, and saw the clean-cut inscrutable features of Captain Silva of the Intelligence Service. Chilling as was the sight of this notorious ace of inquisitors, yet it came as a welcome diversion. For Dougherty would have had the admission out of Adams in another moment.

Silva continued, 'Lieutenant Adams was buying peanuts at the corner in front of the White House.'

Secretary Dougherty growled, and Steel Jeffers laughed a brief cold laugh.

Captain Silva, twirling one of his pointed black mustaches, went on, 'Naturally my first step when assigned to this investigation was to check up on Mr. Adams.' Then, as Adams bristled, 'No offense, Lieutenant. One should always suspect the man who calls the police. The doorman saw you distinctly. You walked briskly to old Giuseppe's stand, bought a bag of peanuts without even stopping to chat with the Italian, as I am informed you usually do; and then returned, munching your purchase. You met no one either coming or going.'

Adams, smiling confidently now, reached inside his blouse toward his left shoulder.

'Stop him!' shrieked the Secretary.

Captain Silva leaped forward. But, before he could reach Adams, the latter had brought out a half-empty paper bag, and held it toward the Secretary, 'Have a peanut, Mr. Dougherty,' he invited.

'Bah!' spat the Secretary, knocking the bag aside with one claw-like hand. 'Peanuts! Bah!'

Steel Jeffers sniffed contemptuously. 'What did you expect? A gun? He'd have reached for his hip, not his shoulder, if he'd wanted to pot you. He's an Army officer, not a gangster. Cut out the jitters, Jim, or

you'll have me jittery too.'

'Can you joke, Mr. President, when the fate of the nation is at stake? Sometimes—I wonder-' He caught himself. Then suddenly his evil eyes narrowed, as he wheeled around to Captain Silva, and pointed at Adams. 'Search him!' he commanded.

As Adams held his arms above his head, he grinned with thankful recollection of having put the laboratory key back into the plant-pot where he had found it. The search over, he asked, ignoring the discomfited Secretary, 'And now, Excellency, am I still in charge of the investigation?'

Receiving the President's nod, he swept from the room, followed by Captain Silva.

Newsboys were crying an extra on the Avenue. Adams sent one of the White House guards to buy a paper. The headlines read: 'ADMIRAL SOUTHWORTH CRASHES.' Adams hurriedly perused the item. It related that, on nosing down for a landing at the Adirondack lake where the Admiral had his lodge, his plane had grazed a tree. The Admiral had suffered a severe head injury and was unconscious, but was expected to live.

Adam's gray eyes flashed. It was too bad that something had to happen to the fine old sea-dog; but Southworth's incapacity would be worthwhile, if it should disclose just what part he had been playing in the life of the President!

Newspaper in hand, and with a synthetic expression of concern on his face, Adams rushed to the Blue Room. As he entered, Steel Jeffers was saying, '-which means a good long rest for me, Jim.'

'Unless that scamp Adams succeeds in finding the missing test-' added Secretary Dougherty, breaking off abruptly, as he saw the Lieutenant. 'Oh, it's you? We know the news, and are already in touch with Southworth's lodge.'

Lieutenant Adams carefully failed to find the missing bottles. He felt a bit guilty when, later in the day, Jeffers complained of a slight attack of dizziness, and retired to his bedroom. For, in spite of Adams' unquestioned loyalty to the revolutionary cause, he had developed a real affection and admiration for the chief whom he was supposed to be serving. Adams could not help believing that, if the evil influence of Secretary of State Dougherty were removed, the President would revert to the idealistic program of economic and social reform originally mapped out for him by his now-missing sister.

But, whatever good the purloined bottle of 't-e-s-t-' might have done to the President, it gave very little information to the members of the conspiracy. No methods of organic chemistry of which even the expert Godfrey Cabot was capable, produced any analysis other than simple cholesterol dissolved in alcohol. The stocky young chemist was a biologist as well, and positively asserted that cholesterol could not have any bearing on Jeffers' condition.

'I looked it up in the Pharmacopoeia and in the dispensary,' he stated. 'No mention of it at all in the former. Latter merely says it is a constituent of cod liver oil. Can be isolated by first saponifying the oil, and then exhausting the resulting soap with ether. Cholesterol in cod liver oil runs about 0.46 to 1.32 per cent.'

Simeon Baldwin's chubby face beamed with a sudden idea. 'Cod liver oil!' he exclaimed. 'The very thing. I'll bet that Southworth and Vierecke have discovered what causes cod liver oil to pep people up.'

'I doubt it,' Cabot thoughtfully replied, shaking his massive head. 'I injected some into some guinea-pigs over at Public Health Service. Didn't pep 'em up a bit.'

Baldwin's face fell.

Liam Lincoln shook back his black forelock, and inquired, 'Did the label give you any clue, Godfrey?'

Cabot pursed up his lips. Nothing in either book, beginning with 'T-E-S-T,' he said, 'except, of course, the whole range of test solutions.'

'What are those?'

'Solutions of reagents.'

'And what are reagents?'

'Things used in tests.'

'Well, couldn't the 'T-E-S-T' stand for that?'

'No,' judicially, 'don't think so. Cholesterol not a reagent. Test solutions are usually kept in glass-stoppered bottles, not diaphragm-covered ones. Official abbreviation for 'test solution' is 'T. S.,' not 'T-E-S-T.' No. Sim's hunch best; but the guinea-pigs don't react.'

The conspirators seemed no closer to the solution of the mystery. Nevertheless, the destruction of Dr. Vierecke's supply of little bottles, and the enforced absence of Admiral Southworth, had certainly in some unexplainable way contributed to the illness of Steel Jeffers! He remained shut up in his room, and refused to see anyone except Vierecke and Dougherty. Not even his aide, Jack Adams, or any of the servants.

Adams marveled at the speed with which, all over the country, unrest came to the surface, the moment that the iron grip of Steel Jeffers was relaxed. The Liberty League and the Civil Liberties Union staged demonstrations, of course expressing complete loyalty to President Jeffers, but disapproval of the way the country was being run during his temporary incapacity; and the dread Secret Service did not pounce upon them. 'Freedom of the press' appeared again. Several Governors raised their voices in opposition to Federal encroachment.

A whispering campaign of rumors, as to the state of the President's health and even of his mind, swept from coast to coast. One yarn had it that Jeffers had become hopelessly insane, and that the executive orders which were being issued over his signature were forgeries perpetrated by the much-hated Secretary of State, with the collusion of 'that foreigner,' Franz Vierecke.

Senator Anders of New Hampshire had the temerity to introduce a resolution declaring the Presidency vacant and calling upon Vice President Nieman to assume control.

Meanwhile Godfrey Cabot's guinea-pigs continued unaffected by the sample of the mysterious chemical which Adams had stolen from the White House laboratory. The conspirators, although still at a loss to explain the President's illness, nevertheless started a rumor, which spread and obtained a credence, to the effect that Steel Jeffers was afflicted with some obscure malady, with which only one physician in the whole world, the stricken Southworth, was capable of coping.

Admiral Southworth had finally come out of his coma, but was too weak to be moved. His assistant made a rush trip to his mountain cabin, and came back very much depressed. Rumor had it that Vierecke had gone in search of certain information, but that the Admiral had refused to talk.

At one of the secret evening meetings in the cellar of Adams' house on P Street, he and Liam Lincoln disagreed over tactics. The latter had reached the conclusion that now was the time for their movement to

come out into the open and throw its forces into the scales against the national administration. Many prominent public officials throughout America, who were in touch with this Washington group, eagerly awaited Liam Lincoln's assurance that the time for rebellion had arrived.

But Adams advised further delay. 'Wait until we absolutely know just how dependent Steel Jeffers is on Admiral Southworth. Their simultaneous illnesses may be a mere coincidence.'

'Adams, I doubt your loyalty,' the fanatic Lincoln declared.

Adams leaped at him. Their pals separated them. The two apologized. But the row rankled; and it rankled especially in Liam Lincoln, for the group endorsed Adams' Fabian policy.

Leaving the White House the next evening, Adams happened to pass through the servants' entrance. His foot was on the bottom step, when the door opened behind him. He turned at the sound, and the light from within momentarily illumined a feminine figure, shrouded in a hooded cape. Dainty silver slippers and the edge of a blue evening gown protruded below the bottom of the cape, but it was the brief glimpse of the girl's face which arrested Adams' attention. Tendrils of dark hair twined beneath the edges of her hood. Her resemblance to the President was striking; but, where Steel's face was firm and masculine, hers was delicately rounded and feminine and alluring.

'Helen Jeffers!' Adams declared to himself as she passed him and dodged into the shadows.

With sudden determination, he followed her.

CHAPTER V

The mysterious girl from the White House hurried furtively through the trees toward the Parkway, then along its winding stretches to the Hotel Washington. Never for an instant did Lieutenant Adams let her out of his sight. He entered the hotel only a few steps behind her.

As she paused and gazed around the lobby, Adams got a better view of her face. Unquestionably it was the face of the photograph from Sim Baldwin's dossier. But where the photograph had showed a mere pretty girl, this face had the maturity and charm of a ravishingly beautiful woman—exactly the change that the four years since her supposed death could be expected to bring.

Jack Adam's heart missed several beats, and then raced madly. The girl turned full toward him. He flushed, looked away, and stepped backward stumbling over the end of a stone bench in the lobby.

'Oh, I'm so sorry!' she explained in delicious tones. 'Did I bump into you, or something?'

'Er—no,' Adams hastily replied. 'I guess it's just that I can't stand so much sheer beauty, that's all.'

'Oh,' stiffening a bit. 'Do I know you or something?'

'I guess it must have been two other fellows,' laughed Adams. And the girl laughed too.

Adams squared his broad shoulders. Here was opportunity—for the Cause, of course. He must not misplay. The twinkle in his gray eyes, and the whimsical twist of his handsome mouth, belied his fixed determination.

'After all, I do believe that we've met,' he began.

'You're making me very conspicuous,' she objected, yet she did not move away.

'I'm so sorry!' he explained. 'Let's sit down over here.' He led her to a chair in a far corner of the lobby.

As she seated herself, and glanced inquiringly up at him, Adams added, 'And now that we are so well acquainted, perhaps you will tell me your name.'

He sat down beside her, and leaned across, intently studying her perfect features. She smiled back at him—provocatively. She let her cloak fall back from her shoulders, disclosing a summer evening gown of flowered blue chiffon, gently clinging, revealing.

'No,' she replied, but with the light of mischief in her violet eyes. 'I'm a stranger here—a school-teacher on a holiday. I don't pick up men—usually. I think I'm going to like you, but let's not spoil this charming interlude by knowing too much about each other. Just call me 'you'.'

'Hey, you!' said Adams laughing, though his pulses were pounding madly because of her nearness. 'Are you staying at this hotel, you?'

'You sound like a detective from the Army Intelligence Service, or something, though your crossed guns indicate Coast Artillery. Perhaps you are one of the secret agents of the President?'

'Heaven forbid!' he exclaimed.

She was watching him intently. 'So you don't approve of Steel Jeffers?' she asked, innocently.

Did she know his identity? The President's sister ought to know by sight the President's aide. But was she Helen Jeffers? In fact, was Helen Jeffers even still alive?

Then suddenly a thought occurred to him. Might not her presence in Washington, rather than the theft of the missing bottles, be the cause of the slackening of Jeffers' ruthlessness? Down tumbled all the preconceived notions of the conspiracy. For a moment Adams felt depressed, then brightened again at the thought that maybe this new explanation could be turned to some use.

'A penny for your thoughts,' said the girl. 'When I asked you just now whether you approve of Steel Jeffers, you went into a blind daze. Yet that is a question which any loyal American ought to be able to answer offhand—without study.'

'Yes,' Adams replied, his eyes gazing intently into hers. 'I am a deep admirer of the President. And I am a sincere believer in the policies which elected him.' This line ought to go good with the girl who had outlined those policies, if indeed this were she. 'But I believe that he is unfortunate in the choice of some of his advisers.'

'I'm glad you like my—er—Steel Jeffers,' the girl exclaimed. 'But I am surprised that you do not approve of Secretary Dougherty.'

'I mentioned no names,' Adams hastily interposed.

'No?' She laughed her tingling silvery laugh.

'Let's not talk politics,' begged the young Lieutenant. 'Have you eaten?'

'Yes.'

'Then how about a movie?'

She nodded and smiled.

At the theater, the newsreel dealt very guardedly with the President's illness, exhibiting 'canned' flashes of Jeffers himself; of the sinister Dougherty; and of the flea-bitten old sea doctor, whom it reported as

rapidly convalescing.

The audience greeted the picture of Jeffers with applause, at which the girl seemed to thrill. Dougherty drew hisses and some boos, at which the girl stiffened. Southworth evoked merely a rustling interest.

After the show Adams took the girl to the Washington Roof. Several of the diners turned and stared at the distinguished-looking blond young man in black uniform and his stunning darkhaired partner in blue.

The head-waiter greeted him effusively by name. Adams tried to silence the man by a glance, but the man kept on bowing and scraping and calling him 'Lieutenant Adams.'

'Oh, so you're the President's aide!' the girl announced, as the waiter seated her. 'How banal of me to have asked what you thought of him! And how dangerous of you to have revealed your disapproval of Secretary Dougherty. How do you know that I am not a Secret Service agent, or something?'

'I'd trust you anywhere,' breathed Adams.

'So?'

'Yes! And look here, Helen, why can't we-'

'Helen'? Why do you call me 'Helen'?

Adams bit his lip. The name had come so naturally! His face took a hunted look. 'Helen of Troy, 'the face that launched a thousand ships', you know.'

Her purple eyes narrowed and her face became grave, as, ignoring the compliment, she snapped, 'That's not the truth, Adams. Why did you call me 'Helen'?

Cornered he stammered, 'I saw a picture once of the President's sister. Her name was Helen. You look so like her that I've been thinking of her all evening.'

'Well, of all the complimentary men!' she commented sarcastically.

But he was not to be laughed off. 'You are Helen Jeffers,' he insisted.

She sobered suddenly. 'Helen died four years ago. She was my sister.'

Adams gasped. 'I didn't know there were two girls in the Jeffers family.'

'There weren't. Helen was the only one.'

'But you said-'

'I said Helen was my sister. So she was.' Suddenly her voice became deep and guttural and male. 'I am Steel Jeffers.'

She paused to let that information sink in, as Adams stared in horrified silence. Then the disguised President continued, in feminine tones again, 'I played girl parts in Triangle Club shows at Princeton, and have not forgotten the art of make-up and impersonation. And so, in these hectic times, I disguise myself and go out among my subjects, like Haroun Al Raschid, to learn firsthand what they think of me. The results have been gratifying. And particularly gratifying, permit me to say, has been your own expression of loyalty to me—and to the principles which made me President.'

Adams continued to stare. Finally he found his voice, and gasped out, 'But, Excellency, you were

reported too ill to leave your room. How is it safe for you to be out alone and unguarded like this?'

'I am neither alone nor unguarded, thanks to you. As to whether I am safe—Secretary Dougherty does not know that I am out,' the disguised President enigmatically replied.

CHAPTER VI

'And now that you know who I really am,' Jeffers continued in his feminine falsetto, 'my Arabian Nights masquerade is at an end. Let us return to the White House.'

Just then the waiter bustled up. Adams handed the man a dollar bill, saying, 'I'm sorry, but the lady suddenly feels faint.'

He and his partner got up and made for the exit.

The head waiter rushed over. 'Lieutenant Adams, is there anything wrong?'

'Not at all, Pierre,' Adams assured him.

The President flashed the man a dazzling feminine smile, and murmured, 'I just feel a little faint, Pierre; but we certainly shall return some other evening.'

'I do hope so, Mademoiselle.'

Adams, still stunned, helped Jeffers on with his wrap, and escorted him to the elevator.

As they walked slowly back to the White House, Adams shuddered, sighed, and said, 'You can never know, Excellency, what a blow it was to me to find that you are not your sister. I saw a photograph of her once, and I believe that I actually fell in love with it. She must have been a wonderful girl!'

Steel Jeffers stiffened suddenly—Adams could feel it in his fingertips on the President's elbow. Then he relaxed. 'Helen and I placed the welfare of America ahead of anything else—I still do. But events—and James Dougherty—have hemmed me in. Well, anyway, I am glad that you feel as you do about Helen. Don't give up hope, Jack. Some day, perhaps-' He stopped abruptly.

'Is Helen still alive?' Adams eagerly exclaimed.

Steel Jeffers passed his hand in a tired gesture across his face, and shivered. 'I don't know just what I'm saying.' His voice broke strangely. 'In the language of the younger generation, let's skip it.'

He remained in moody silence the rest of the way to the White House, and dismissed his escort at the steps of the servants' entrance.

Lieutenant Adams stood at the foot of the steps, and gazed up at the seeming girl, until the door closed. Then he hastened to his own quarters on P Street, his mind a turmoil of emotions. All night long he tossed on his bed, longing for the girl whom he had thought he had found, only to lose again.

The next day, when Adams reported for work at the White House he learned that Admiral Southworth's condition had improved, and that a special amphibian ambulance-plane was already on its way to the Adirondacks to bring him back. Suppressed excitement pervaded the executive mansion. Secretary Dougherty smiled jeeringly through his black beard, and his eyes twinkled brightly.

He even slapped Adams jovially on the shoulder, and ejaculated, 'Well, my boy, back to normalcy, eh?' Then stiffened guiltily, as though he said too much. But Adams's thoughts were on Helen Jeffers, and he hardly noticed.

Shortly after lunch a motor-ambulance arrived at the White House from the Potomac naval air base, and two gobs with Red Cross brassards on their sleeves carried in a sheet-covered figure on a stretcher.

Secretary Dougherty bustled officiously up to the bearers, and was about to give some order, when Franz Vierecke, with unusual assertion shining in his pale blue eyes, elbowed him to one side, exclaiming, 'Nein! He moost haf rest!'

So the shrouded figure was carted off to one of the guestrooms of the White House.

But the return of Admiral Southworth did not immediately bring matters back to normalcy. The next day strikes broke out in Boston, New York and San Francisco. The police and State troops held aloof. But black-coated Federal soldiery moved in, and kept the strikers effectively in check, handling the situation with such finesse and regard for popular sympathy as to make evident that Secretary Dougherty was not in charge at the White House, and that Steel Jeffers was still running things.

Doctors and nurses were provided for Admiral Southworth, but still a black-uniformed military guard, placed in front of the door of the Presidential bedroom, denied admittance to all except Dougherty and Vierecke.

Students rioted and staged demonstrations at Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford. The ring-leaders promptly disappeared, but there were no wholesale executions.

That evening someone heaved a brick at Lieutenant Adams in the street. And all through the night he could hear sporadic popping noises throughout the city, as on the night before the Fourth. Each pop signified to his ears the elimination of one more potential enemy of the existing regime.

The next morning on his way back to work, he had to pick his way through the remains of several barricades, and once he slipped on a dark red slimy puddle. He shook his head sadly. Poor misguided individuals!

That day three things of note happened. First, an investigating committee from the Senate, headed by Senator Anders of New Hampshire, and accompanied by armed guards loaned by the State of Maryland, called at the White House, demanded to see President Jeffers, and were denied admittance. Lieutenant Adams marveled that the Marylanders were not arrested for treason. Secondly, Admiral Southworth, in a wheelchair, was pushed to the basement laboratory by Dr. Vierecke, and remained there for several hours. And that evening Liam Lincoln accused Jack Adams of disloyalty to the Cause for refusing to divulge to his fellow-conspirators the inside dope on the President's illness. Hot words again ensued, and the others narrowly averted a fight between the two of them.

The next day Senator Anders' resolution, declaring the Presidency vacant, was called-up for a vote in Congress. The leaderless yes-men of House and Senate did not know which way to turn. The few really intelligent members of the Administration forces began to wonder how to take advantage of this situation to advance their own ambition.

Then suddenly in the midst of the debate Steel Jeffers went on the air. His well-known voice boomed out of the little radio in the Senate restaurant. Instantly, the news swept up to the cloakrooms. A loudspeaker on the clerk's table was turned loose on the startled assemblage.

As the ringing appeal for peace and tranquility and loyalty resounded through the chamber, the opposition crumbled, although some die-hards still refused to believe.

'It's a trick!' cried Senator Anders. 'A tape recording of the President's voice is being used to fool us!' He rushed from the chamber, phoned the White House, and was informed that Steel Jeffers was

broadcasting from his sickroom. 'But has anyone actually seen him, to know that it is he?' Anders demanded.

Over the air came the answer, in the unmistakable voice of Jeffers himself, 'You still doubt that I am back in the saddle? Then let the Senate Committee call tomorrow at 2:15. I shall receive them in person.'

The next afternoon Senator Anders and his colleagues, with their bodyguard of Maryland State troops, arrived at the White House. The doors were thrown open by the Negro attendant, and they marched in.

The large hall was empty of any other persons, and had a closed-for-the-season look: shades drawn, musty smell, furniture shrouded with sheets. But, as the attendant closed—and locked—the doors, the sheets were whisked off of the supposed furniture-machine-guns, manned by black—uniformed troops.

A door opened at one side, and Secretary Dougherty emerged, grinning evilly through his black beard, his eyes snapping. Behind him there debauched into the hall a score of Federal soldiers. Rubbing his hands gleefully together, the Secretary commanded, 'Gentlemen, please reach for the ceiling.'

But the Captain of the Marylanders stepped resolutely forward. 'By whose authority?' he demanded.

'By the authority of the President!'

'It's a lie!' shouted Senator Anders. 'Steel Jeffers is dead!'

The Captain of the Marylanders snatched out his revolver, leveled it at the Secretary of State, and squeezed the trigger. A jet of flame roared forth.

CHAPTER VII

An answering roar came from the gun of one of the black uniformed Federal soldiers, and the Maryland officer pitched forward, dead.

Secretary Dougherty staggered backward and his dark eyes rolled. He straightened. His red lips parted in an animal snarl. 'I wear a bulletproof vest,' he snapped. 'And fortunately the Maryland militia still carry only thirty-eights, instead of forty-fives. Gentlemen, surrender.'

The entire delegation promptly raised their hands aloft, and were disarmed. The militiamen were then herded away, and the doors of the Blue Room swung open to admit the Senators.

At his desk in the bay window sat the President, pale and frail-looking, but eyes snapping with old-time vigor. At his side stood Lieutenant Adams; and banked behind him was a full squad of black-coated Federals, with automatic pistols in their hands.

'Ah!' Steel Jeffers commented, in tones appropriate to his name. 'I am highly honored. Is it true that you gentlemen have the temerity to doubt my existence?'

Senator Anders coughed embarrassedly. 'Well-er-you see, Excellency, it was quite natural-er-'

'Cannot the President of the United States take a slight rest,' snapped Jeffers, 'without a pack of jackals snarling for his corpse?' His voice broke. His eyes wavered huntedly for an instant. Then he coughed, lowered the pitch of his voice, and continued incisively, 'Kindly return to the Senate, and inform your associates that Steel Jeffers is alive—and in good health and sane! Another occurrence like this will compel me to dissolve the Congress!'

'But, Excellency,' interposed Secretary Dougherty, 'ought these traitors be permitted to leave?'

Jeffers sighed, then drew himself erect. 'Let them leave while the leaving is good!'

As Dougherty ushered out the thoroughly cowed delegation, the President turned his eyes toward his aide, and asked with a grim smile, 'Well, Jack Adams, do you approve?'

Surprised, Adams stammered, 'You—you know my views about reprisals. I am glad that you spared them.'

Jeffers smiled the ghost of a smile. 'I have set my hand to the plow, and must go on to the end of the furrow. Ah, Dr. Vierecke. You take me back to my bedroom.'

The white-coated doctor strode across the room, assisted Jeffers into his wheel-chair, and wheeled him out.

Before nightfall Governor Carter of Maryland and Senator Anders of New Hampshire had been mysteriously assassinated. America was rapidly getting back to normal.

That evening in Adams' quarters, the Lieutenant was crowing over his discomfited co-conspirator, Liam Lincoln. 'Hasn't it all turned out just as I prophesied? The time had not yet arrived for us to strike the blow for freedom. Fellows, if you'd taken Liam's advice instead of mine, where would we all be now? In a wooden box like the Governor of Maryland and the Senator from New Hampshire. As it is, both we and our conspiracy still live.'

Lincoln viciously pushed back his black forelock. His dark eyes snapped with fanaticism. 'Jack, why don't you shoot the President?' he sneered. 'You're not afraid, are you?'

Adams stared back contemptuously. 'Don't be an ass, Lincoln! If we make a martyr of Steel Jeffers, his regime will live on. And you know how much worse Secretary Dougherty would be than Jeffers.'

'But Vice President Nieman would succeed to the Presidency, wouldn't he?' asked roly-poly Simeon Baldwin.

'Not if Nieman happened to die conveniently. In that event, the Secretary of State would take over.'

'Then why doesn't Dougherty arrange both assassinations?' asked Cabot the chemist, ruminatively.

'Because, so long as Jeffers displays just the right combination of ruthlessness and proletarian appeal, Dougherty is sitting pretty. Say, that gives me something to keep in mind.' Adams' gray eyes narrowed thoughtfully. 'If Steel Jeffers should ever become permanently ill, Dougherty will bear watching.'

'You will bear watching right now,' asserted Liam Lincoln under his breath.

Adams ignored him.

In the days which followed, the President became more and more his old forceful self. Once again he took sadistic delight in the ruthless pacification of America. One by one the individuals who had raised their voices against him, either disappeared or precipitately fled the country. Those newspapers which had had the temerity to assert the freedom of the press, found their stock and bonds bought-up by the Federal Finance Corporation.

Admiral Southworth, too, recovered his health, and again devoted himself to his basement laboratory as of old.

Adams resented the growing influence of Dougherty and the resulting ever-increasing ruthlessness of the

President. And he puzzled over the fact that Steel Jeffers seemed to take an amused interest in him. Formerly he had treated Adams as a mere appurtenance of the executive offices; but now, whenever he spoke to his aide, there was a twinkle in his cold eyes, with perhaps a trace of scorn and contempt in it.

At Adam's first opportunity, when Admiral Southworth and Dr. Vierecke were both absent, he hastened to the potted plant in the basement corridor. He plunged his fingers deep into the soil of the pot, he carefully sifted the earth; but the key was gone!

That night, when he reported this loss to the meeting of the conspirators, there occurred his bitterest break thus far with the fanatic Liam Lincoln, who heatedly accused him of lying—of being an admirer and a supporter of the President.

And there was just enough shadow of truth to this accusation, so that Adams could not reply very forcefully. He merely gave his usual rather lame retort about his daily risking his life in the very den of the enemy while Liam Lincoln sulked in the background.

The meeting broke up with considerable bad feeling, Lincoln's parting shot being, 'If you are really on the level, Jack, you can prove it in just one way. Get into that laboratory, and find out what is going on.'

'I will!' Adams rashly retorted.

All night he lay awake, thinking, worrying, discarding one plan after another. By morning he had evolved an idea.

So he carried a suit of overalls and a pair of telephone linemen's spurs with him to the White House, and at the first opportunity sneaked down into the subcellar, the floor below the one on which the laboratory was located. Hurriedly he donned the overalls, strapped the spurs onto his legs with the spikes outside. Noiselessly as possible, he crowded himself into the ventilator shaft and struggled up. It was tough going. The shaft was narrow and the spikes on his cleats did not bite very easily into its walls.

But finally he made it! His head reached the level of the grating of the laboratory outlet. He heard the voices of Southworth and Steel Jeffers. Peering through the grating, he almost uttered an exclamation of exultance. For Southworth held poised in one hand a hypodermic needle, and in the other a diaphragm capped bottle. By sheer luck, Adams had finally obtained sure proof of the fact that Jeffers was being inoculated regularly with the strange substance in the bottles.

Holding his breath tensely, he watched Southworth jab the needle into Jeffers' arm. The President, his coat off, and his sleeves rolled up, jerked his slim, unmuscular arm back with an exclamation, then laughed nervously.

'Guess I'll never get up enough backbone to take that needle without wincing,' he remarked a bit hoarsely.

The injection was completed in silence that remained until Jeffers had again donned his coat. Then, with an almost curt shortness, he left the laboratory, his lips tight, and his face set in an expression of stoniness and determination.

Southworth went about cleaning up the laboratory, restoring the needle and bottle to its place. Adams remained motionless in his position behind the grating.

A sound at the laboratory door attracted his attention, and he turned his gaze to see the Prussian, Vierecke enter. Southworth turned to face him.

On Viereck's face was a triumphant grin as he closed the door carefully behind him, then drew a gun

from his pocket.

Southworth stiffened. 'What does this mean, Franz?' he asked.

'It means, we haf come to der parting of der ways, Southworth. No longer are you necessary to my blans.'

In a voice level but charged with emotion, Southworth replied, 'Go ahead and kill me; but, as sure as God made little fishes, you'll lose by it. You still don't know the complete formula.'

'Don'd I? Vell, lissen to dis.' There followed a string of chemical language, quite meaningless to the man concealed in the chute.

Admiral Southworth gasped; and that gasp was a complete admission that his assistant had at last learned the whole of the secret which the Admiral had thus far so jealously guarded.

'Ha!' rang out the triumphant voice of Franz Vierecke, followed by a shot, a thud, and a gurgling groan.

CHAPTER VIII

With a sudden resolution Adams groped within his overalls with his left hand for the automatic pistol on his right hip, then shifted it to his right hand. Quietly opening the grating of the ventilator, he peered out.

The bullet-headed Franz Vierecke was standing with his back to the grille, holding a smoking thirty-eight, as he stared down at the sprawled corpse of the Admiral.

Adams reached out, leveling his automatic. Remembering Secretary Dougherty's bulletproof vest, he took careful aim at Vierecke's head: 'Hands up, Doctor!' he commanded.

The white-coated Prussian wheeled catlike, firing as he turned. But Adams fired first. Both weapons roared, and the laboratory assistant fell backward across the body of the Admiral. Adams scrambled hastily out of the shaft and thrust his gun into its holster. The two bodies still lay inert. He had to work fast! He unbuckled his climbing irons, stripped off his overalls, and thrust them all down the shaft. He took all the small bottles from the ice chest, emptied them in the laboratory sink, and threw them after his discarded equipment. He hastily wiped the dirt from his face and hands on a towel at the sink. Taking the key from the pocket of the dead Admiral, he unlocked the door, stepped out, and locked it behind him.

As he turned, and slid the key into his pocket, one of the White House guards came pattering around the corner. The man halted and raised his arm in salute. 'I thought I heard shots, Sir.'

'Correct,' Adams grimly replied. 'Vierecke and Southworth have killed each other. I go to report to the President.'

Stunned horror widened the man's eyes. Then they narrowed suspiciously, and he reached for his hip. But Adams' fist caught him on the point of the jaw. Down he went in a heap. Adams ran along the corridor toward the stairs.

In the Blue Room he found Steel Jeffers and the Secretary of State conversing together at the big desk in the bay window.

Raising his arm in salute, Adams panted, 'Things will be popping around here in a few moments, and I want to report before they pop.'

Dougherty glared at him, but Jeffers calmly said, 'Go on, Lieutenant.'

'I 'ened to be in the basement,' Adams replied, 'when I heard Admiral Southworth and Dr. Vierecke quarreling in the laboratory. The door was ajar, so I looked in. Vierecke was pointing a pistol at the Admiral, and the Admiral was saying, 'The injections are all gone. If you kill me, there will be no more.'

'What!' Dougherty's face went white. 'Did he-'

But Adams interrupted. 'Just a moment. I heard Vierecke retort, 'I know the formula!' He recited a lot of chemical gibberish. The Admiral nodded and admitted, 'Yes, you've got it right.'

Dougherty settled back in his chair, the color flooding his cheeks again. Steel Jeffers was watching Adams like a cat.

Adams continued, 'And then Vierecke shot the Admiral. I dashed in, but too late to save him. Of course I shot Vierecke. You'll find the two bodies lying in a heap on the floor of the laboratory. Here is the key.' He flung it down on the desk. 'And here is my gun, Sir, with one cartridge exploded.' He pulled it from its holster, laid it down beside the key, and drew himself up to attention. 'Private Jones tried to arrest me, Sir, but I thought I had better report to you.'

The two men at the desk stared at him with fascinated horror. Then suddenly Dougherty reached inside his coat, and yanked out a gun.

'The Presidency is ended!' he shouted, as he fired at Steel Jeffers.

But a split second ahead of his shot, another shot roared forth in the echoing Blue Room. Adams had snatched up his own weapon from the President's desk, and fired. The impact of its forty-five-caliber bullet smashed the forehead of the Secretary of State and hurled him backward.

There was a tinkle of glass behind the President as two black-uniformed guards crashed in through the French windows. 'Are you all right, Excellency?' they cried.

'Perfectly,' Jeffers calmly replied. 'He never touched me.'

'I—I'm glad,' breathed Adams.

'Take out the body!' the President crisply ordered. Then, as the two guards departed with their grisly burden, he turned to his aide, and said sharply, 'They do not live long, who stand in the way of Steel Jeffers. And, now, Adams, I want the truth about what happened in the laboratory. The truth, mind you!'

Suddenly, as it dawned on Adams that Dougherty's death had removed the only reason for not killing the President, he leveled his gun at Steel Jeffers. 'The truth is that I destroyed all the little bottles.'

Watching the President intently, keeping him covered with the automatic, Adams backed toward the main door of the Blue Room. He groped behind him for the knob. But suddenly the door was flung open. He was seized from behind, and his arms were pinioned to his sides. Like a flash, Jeffers dashed around the desk, and disarmed him. His captor was the guardsman whom he had slugged in the basement corridor.

The President now fired three shots in the air, and other soldiers came running.

'Take him to the War Department,' Jeffers commanded, and lock him in a cell. Don't let any harm come to him. I want him saved for public execution.'

Manacles were snapped onto Adams' wrists, and he was dragged, kicking and struggling away.

CHAPTER IX

Adams soon saw that there was no use to struggle, and so he went peaceably. 'Let's buy some peanuts,' he proposed, as they reached the street.

'What!' exclaimed the Sergeant in charge, halting.

The old Italian on the corner shuffled up, with a couple of paper bags of nuts in his hand. 'Peanuts, Meester?' But Adams shrugged his broad shoulders, and held up his manacled hands. 'You see, Giuseppe, I can't buy. I'm a prisoner.'

'Whata for, Signore Adams?'

As they dragged him away, Adams shouted, 'For killing Southworth and Vierecke and Dougherty. They're all dead, Giuseppe! All, all dead!'

'Shut up!' shouted the Sergeant, felling him with a blow from his automatic.

Adams awoke in a windowless unlit cell. His head ached terribly. For a while he sat in darkness, and nursed his throbbing head. Then a soldier came, and brought him some food, and turned on a light. 'Well, fellow,' said the man, 'you certainly started something!'

'What do you mean?' Adams asked.

'Say!' the voluble soldier replied. 'There's hell broke-loose already, all over the country. Some crazy yap, who thinks he's Abraham Lincoln, has sent out a bunch of hooley, hollering for all patriots to rally to his standard, or some such rot. And are they rallying?'

'Well, I'll bite. Are they?'

'I'll say they are! Several Governors have seceded from the Union already, and it's funny—these were Governors who stayed loyal in the last ruckus.'

Adams chuckled. He could have named the exact Governors. For they were men who had been in touch with the Washington group of conspirators, and so had the sense to lay off until Liam Lincoln gave the word. Quite evidently Giuseppe had passed along the news of the triple killing, and the conspirators had at once sent out instructions that the time had come.

'Well, how are they making out?' Adams asked.

'Not so hot!' stoutly declared the soldier. 'You just wait until Steel Jeffers gets hold of 'em! He'll shoot 'em all against a wall!'

'How long was I unconscious?'

'You were out cold for about four hours.'

'And all this has happened in that short time?'

'Yes.'

'Phew! Lincoln certainly worked quickly!'

'Say,' asserted the soldier suspiciously, 'I'll bet you was in cahoots with that guy.' He refused to talk any further, and left.

Adams was much surprised when, later in the day, the soldier returned, all eyes, and informed him that

the Dictator wanted to see him. Manacled, he was led to the White House.

As he walked with his guards the short distance from the War Department to the executive mansion, he noted a marked overnight change in the city. No street cars were running. The streets were practically deserted, except for patrolling soldiers, and an occasional marching contingent of troops. And these troops were clad in khaki service uniforms, in place of the snappy peacetime black.

In the sky above, planes circled through the cloudless blue.

Adams could hear in the distance the occasional crack of rifles, and the boom of cannons.

Sixty or so enlisted men lay on the White House lawn beside a row of neat stacks of rifles. Two armed guards marched back and forth across the front step. A khaki-clad figure on a motorcycle roared up the circular drive, delivered a dispatch to one of the sentries, and roared off again.

Indoors the White House was a strictly military headquarters. Gone were all the civilian attendants and clerks and stenographers. In their stead were khaki-clad members of the military, tense and precise.

Adams was taken direct to the Blue Room. Here again were guards. Soldiers rushed in and out with messages. And, seated at the large desk in the bay window beside the Dictator, was a leonine Army Officer with bushy gray mustaches, and four silver stars on each shoulder. The two men were busily engaged in arranging pushpins on a map.

'As Adams entered under guard, Jeffers looked up. To Adams's surprise, the Dictator appeared perfectly well—in fact, younger and in better health than when Adams had been taken to prison. But, looking more closely, Adams noticed that the Dictator's checks had a slightly feverish tinge, and that his eyes were unduly bright.

'Sorry I can't salute, Sir,' said the prisoner. 'But, with these contraptions on my wrists, it's a bit difficult.'

Steel Jeffers laughed, but his face remained grave. 'The usually immaculate Jack Adams seems to have slept in his uniform, and to have gone without shaving. I may have to get myself a new military aide.' Then, to the Sergeant in charge of the squad, 'Unlock him, and withdraw.'

'But, Excellency—'

'Unlock him!'

'Yes, Excellency.' The Sergeant removed Adams's handcuffs, and then marched his men out of the room. Adams promptly held up his arm in salute.

'General Peters,' said Jeffers, 'would you mind receiving your dispatches in the next room for a few minutes? And please give orders that I am not to be disturbed. I wish a few words alone with the prisoner.'

The General stood up, gave a stiff Roman salute, and strode out.

As the doors closed behind him, the Dictator snapped, 'Sit down, Lieutenant!' Adams took a chair across the desk from Steel Jeffers. The latter continued, 'Did you know that your fanatical comrade Liam Lincoln has invited England and France to invade this country, to help suppress my Dictatorship?'

'I don't believe it, Sir,' Adams levelly replied.

The Dictator's eyes narrowed, and the flush left his cheeks for a moment. 'You wouldn't!' he crisply

asserted. 'But it's so. Why do you tie up with an erratic ass like Liam Lincoln? He hates you. The two of you have quarreled.'

A look of startled surprise flashed into Adam's eyes.

Steel Jeffers smiled coldly. 'A mere random guess of mine, but it struck home. Lincoln would double-cross you in a minute, to further his own ambitions. So why not side with me? I have the situation well in hand. The Regular Army is concentrating in Virginia, and the loyal Navy will soon be in the Chesapeake to clear the way for me to join the Army. Adams, I can offer you—'

'I'm sorry, but nothing you could offer, would interest me.'

'No?' Watching him like a cat, the Dictator's eyes narrowed. An amused superior smile played upon his lips, as—he studied his victim calculatingly. Then he purred, 'Adams, I offer you—my sister Helen.'

Adams flushed eagerly, stammered, then resolutely asserted, 'Even that wouldn't tempt me!'

'I wonder.' Jeffers seemed to be speaking to himself. 'How can you admire her, yet hate me so much?'

'She had ideals—'

'And I had those same ideals. You and the rest of your gang of young radicals were once followers of mine. Why did you desert me?'

'It was you who deserted us, Sir. Secretary Dougherty made a fascist out of you.'

Jeffers swung slowly around in his swivel chair, and stared moodily out through the big bay window. Then he turned slowly back again. 'Secretary Dougherty is dead, Adams,' he said in a low voice.

'You mean— That, if you succeed in putting down this rebellion, there will be no reprisals, no more frightfulness?' Adams felt himself weakening, hypnotized. 'What do you wish me to do?'

The Dictator leaned forward, his eyes shining eagerly. 'Give me back those bottles!' he demanded.

The spell was broken. Adams laughed grimly. 'I poured every one of them down the sink,' he explained. 'You can find the bottles themselves in the ventilator shaft, to prove it.'

The Dictator's face contorted with rage. He sprang to his feet, but instantly calmed as the door burst open, and General Peters rushed in, exclaiming, 'Excellency, all is lost! The Virginia State troops have captured Fort Monroe, and have taken over the coast defense guns and the mine fields. The Navy can't get into the Chesapeake. We're bottled up here in Washington!'

'General,' Jeffers sternly replied, 'I told you that I did not wish to be interrupted.'

Stunned and sputtering, the old war horse withdrew.

Jeffers turned back to Adams, and passed a hand across his eyes with a weary gesture. 'It's all over, Jack,' he asserted 'What would you think of my abdicating?'

'It would avoid further bloodshed.'

Steel Jeffers shook his head. 'Not if I fall into the hands of Liam Lincoln, it wouldn't. And once he tasted my blood, other heads would fall by the hundreds. No. Help me to safety. Then, with me out of the picture, let General Peters negotiate for a general amnesty.'

'Why should I do this for you?'

'You will not be doing it for me. It will be for America and for Helen.'

For Helen? Adams leaned forward eagerly. Then clamped his jaw and shook his head. 'Not for either you or Helen,' he declared levelly, 'but to put an end to the war. I may be making a terrible mistake, but—well, what are your plans?'

'I want you to communicate with your fellow conspirators, and arrange for safe conduct for yourself and a girl through their lines. Then I shall disguise myself as a girl—you have already had proof of my abilities in that line—and you will take me in your car. I have friends who will protect me until the storm blows over.'

'All right,' Adams agreed. 'I'll shave, and get my uniform pressed. Meanwhile you write me out a pass. Then I'll go to my own quarters, phone some of my pals, arrange for passes through their lines, and bring my car back here for you. Oh, and by the way, try to look less like your sister Helen than you did that time before.'

'For the sake of your peace of mind?' Jeffers taunted him.

'Please don't joke!' begged Adams seriously. 'No, it's for the sake of your own safety. The conspirators are all familiar with your sister's picture—Your name will be 'Mary Calvert'.'

'Why not phone to your friends from here?'

'And have your Secret Service operatives listen in? No thanks. Besides I have to go home to get the car. I'll let you know, when everything is ready.'

He arose, extended his arm in salute, and left the room. The Dictator's eyes were filled with a strange amused light, as they followed the Lieutenant's departure.

A half hour later, Lieutenant Adams left the White House, all shaved, cleaned, and pressed, with a Presidential pass in his pocket. Giuseppe Albertino was at his peanut-stand at the corner, the only civilian in sight. Adams bought a bag of nuts, but left no message. If he were being watched or followed, as he half suspected, he had no intention of implicating this ally.

Steel Jeffers must have wondered why Adams should fear to be overheard if he telephoned from the executive mansion, and yet should not realize that it would be equally easy for the Secret Service to plug in on his home telephone.

Adams chuckled. He had a scheme to test the sincerity of the Dictator. He hoped—he believed—that Steel Jeffers was sincere; but the lives of all of his pals depended on Adams guessing right, and so he was determined to make no mistakes.

He was still turning his plans over in his mind as he unlocked and opened the front door of his P Street quarters. Then he halted on the threshold, and his jaw dropped.

Chairs overturned. Drawers pulled out, and their contents strewn on the floor! Books swept from the shelves! The dread Secret Service had made a thorough search; and—finding nothing, had turned spitefully devastating.

Finding nothing? There was nothing to find. Adams had carefully seen to that. And yet- With sinking heart, he rushed to the basement.

Relief flooded over him. There was no sign that the secret hole in the brick wall had been disturbed. He swung the irregular section open. Cool musty air billowed out. It felt good to his hot cheeks.

Groping on a shelf just to the left inside, he found, also undisturbed, a small electrical contraption of coils and wires and dials and switches. Then, his confidence restored, he proceeded down the tunnel to the adjoining cellar of Godfrey Cabot. Cabot's house had not been ransacked.

Adams dashed upstairs, and called Simeon Baldwin's number on the phone. Then attached his bit of electrical apparatus. 'Hello S. B.,' he said. 'This is J. Q. A.'

'Giuseppe reported that he saw you,' replied the voice of his friend. 'Say, you did a swell job bumping off Southworth and Vierecke and Dougherty! Is Liam Lincoln fit to be tied, for envy! But how come you are on the loose? We had authentic info that you were to be shot against a wall.'

'I was. But Jeffers is pretending that he thinks I was falsely accused of the three murders. He has turned me loose in the hope that I'll lead his Secret Service men to your headquarters. But I've given them the slip, and am phoning from Godfrey Cabot's house, and using the tone-inverter, as you know. You can talk freely. Are you in touch with the Allied Governors?'

'Am I?' exclaimed Baldwin's voice. 'Underground directional radio direct to Baltimore headquarters, with a tone-inverter at each end!'

'Then,' said Adams, 'you arrange with them to let me through the lines in my car—District 5656. I can put them in touch with one of the Federal Generals, who is ready and willing to throw the works.'

'Who?' exclaimed Baldwin excitedly.

'Sorry, Sim, but this has to be arranged personally. I have given my word to the old General not to breathe a word to anyone but the Allied High Command in person.'

'All right,' agreed Baldwin a bit grumpily.

'And I want a special pass signed by you, identifying me and Mary Calvert.'

'Who's she?'

'A girl friend. Lives at the Wardman Park Inn. Has relatives in Baltimore. I promised to get her out.'

'Why, you old Lothario! I thought you were in love with that dead-and-gone Helen Jeffers.'

'No time for humor,' Adams snapped. 'Mary Calvert is an old friend of the family. Send the pass over to Giuseppe, and tell him to vamoose as soon as he hands it to me. There'll be no need of his hanging around the White House any longer after I've skipped out.'

'But how'll you get through the Federal lines?'

'Forge a pass from the Dictator. I know his signature and have access to his official stationery and seal.'

'Fine. Good luck, Jack.'

'Good luck, Sim.'

Adams hung up, detached the tone-inverter, and carried it back to its niche in the secret tunnel. From his own house, he phoned Steel Jeffers, and told him that all was ready. Then he squared his broad shoulders, and smiled. 'If I've been followed and plugged in on,' he said to himself, 'Steel Jeffers will

know that I've met none of my pals, and have sent out no phone calls from my house; so he won't believe that I have arranged for a pass, and he will refuse to go with me. Accordingly, if he comes along, it will be a sign that he is on the level.'

He was still smiling, as he changed into his gray Norfolk suit, thrust his forty-five into his left hand coat pocket, packed his bag, and drove his car to the White House. Parking by the servant's entrance, he entered, and made directly for the offices. Here he was handed a note from the Dictator, commanding him to report at once to the Presidential bedroom.

A totally strange girl, with curly yellow hair, let him in. She laughed at his open-mouthed amazement. Then said in the Dictator's voice, 'Well, Jack Adams, how do you like my blonde wig? Am I different enough to suit you?'

'I'll say you are, Sir! The car is waiting at the rear. And I've arranged for safe passage through the enemy lines. But what about abdication?'

'While you were telephoning from your home, I made all the necessary arrangements with General Peters. As soon as I am safe, he will contact the enemy and make the best peace possible.'

'I intimated as much to my pals, when I phoned them,' said Adams. 'But I merely told them that someone high up in your organization was willing to betray the city into Allied hands, if they would give me a pass through the lines, to arrange it.'

'Excellent!' laughed Steel Jeffers. There was a peculiar note in his laugh. Then, reaching for the phone, he called the Blue Room, and asked for General Peters. 'General, this is Steel Jeffers. If you don't hear from me by three o'clock, you know what to do.'

Returning the instrument to its cradle, the disguised Dictator said in a high-pitched feminine voice, 'Well, Jack, I am ready. Here is a Presidential pass, made out to John Q. Adams and Mary Calvert.'

'They'll never suspect you, Sir,' Adams admiringly asserted, as he picked up the bags, and led the way out to his parked car.

Circling the White House, he stopped at the peanut-stand of old Giuseppe, and bought a large supply of the nuts.

'Is the Lieutenant leaving?' asked the grizzled Italian.

'Yes,' Adams replied, 'and, if you're depending on my trade for a living, you'd better give up your stand. I shan't be back for some time.'

Driving north on 15th, to Scott Circle, Adams then cut east on Rhode Island Avenue. They hadn't gone more than a block or two, when they were halted by a squad of khaki-clad Federal soldiery. Adams flashed the pass which the Dictator had provided, and the soldiers let them through.

This was repeated every block or two. Their luck seemed too good. And gradually there came to the surface of Adam's mind a thought which had been struggling for recognition. Just why was the great Steel Jeffers cravenly fleeing for his life, disguised as a woman, and passing up the chance of using Lieutenant Adams as a decoy to trap the leaders of the conspiracy?

As Adams turned these thoughts over in his mind, the pretended girl beside him uneasily asked, 'When do we contact your friends? Here we are almost at the outskirts of the city, and you haven't yet secured the pass which is to let us through the Allied lines.'

Adams instinctively glanced up at the rear-view mirror, and saw a large black sedan following them.

'I'm going to chance it without an Allied pass,' he brusquely replied.

Just then they were halted again. But this time, as Adams was about to hand over the paper which Jeffers had given him, Jeffers himself opened his handbag and drew forth another paper. A trick? A disclosure of their identity? Probably.

'None of that!' shouted Adams, suddenly stepping on the gas, and scattering the surprised soldiery, as the car shot ahead. A few shots sounded behind them, but Adams was out of range before the soldiers could recover from their astonishment sufficiently to take good aim.

'And now, girlie, hand me over that paper,' said Adams, grabbing it with his right hand.

'Don't you call me 'girlie!'' raged the deep tones of the Dictator.

'Trying to double-cross me, are you?' Adams raged back at him. 'Planning to have me lead your Secret Service to my pals? Well, I already have my pass, and am not going to my pals. You can't win, Steel Jeffers!'

He shifted the seized paper to his left hand, took the wheel with his right, and stuffed the paper into his pocket. A glance in the mirror showed him that the big black sedan had come right past the squad of soldiers without being challenged, and now was rapidly gaining on him. Adams pushed the accelerator down to the floorboard.

The Dictator reached suddenly beneath the hem of his skirt. From a knee-holster he drew a pearl-handled Luger-38. Raising the weapon, he cried, 'I can win, Jack Adams!'

Adams' left hand came up like a flash from his coat pocket, grasping his Army-45. His right elbow shot out, throwing the Dictator off balance. The little Luger exploded harmlessly. Then Adams' gun crashed down on the blonde wig. Jeffers slumped in the seat.

Adams grinned wryly, as he returned his gun to his pocket. 'I'd hate to have to hit a real girl.' Then he gave the car everything it had, and sped down the road away from the pursuing sedan.

They were almost clear of the District, when a whole company of Federal soldiers, with drawn bayonets, loomed ahead, barring the road.

CHAPTER X

Adams set his jaw, and his gray eyes became slits. Leaning on the horn, he stepped on the gas, and drove his car roaring and shrieking straight toward the Federal soldiers.

The soldiers parted in a mad scramble. He was through!

Adams bent low over the wheel, unhurt. Bullets splintered the rear window. One crashed through the windshield. Then came two loud explosions—both rear tires blown out. The car lurched and bumped drunkenly. It required all of Adams' strength on the wheel to hold it to its course. In a few moments the enemy sedan would overhaul him.

He glanced at the rearview mirror, and saw the soldiers massed in the road behind him, loading and firing.

Then the big black pursuing sedan swung skidding around the group. Two startled soldiers stepped into its path. The sedan slid sidewise up onto the curb, ripping off two wheels, and rolled onto its side.

Adams brought his eyes back to the road just in time to see a lone soldier standing by the curb ahead, with gun raised to fire. Adams swung toward him, and sent him diving for the gutter. Then sped bumping on.

Ahead was open country. No more Federal soldiers. He was in no-man's land, between the two warring forces. Tanks lumbered about and shells crashed down all about.

Slowing down, he rearranged the Dictator's twisted blonde wig. Next he glanced through the note which Steel Jeffers had attempted to pass to the sentry. Adams smiled grimly at learning that this note identified 'Mary Calvert' as an operative of the Secret Service, and himself as an enemy to be arrested on sight.

He tore the note into little bits and scattered them from—the window of his car. 'Tracherous as usual!' he mused. 'And yet I wonder if Jeffers at the start planned to trick me. He seemed actually to weaken, to turn to me for help, when the old General burst into the room with the news that all was lost.'

Adams reached into one of the bags of peanuts which he had purchased from Giuseppe, and pulled out the pass which Baldwin had provided for him, just in time! For a dozen soldiers in the uniform of the Maryland National Guard popped out of the bushes, and held up their hands for him to stop. He stopped, and showed them his Allied pass.

'Is there a medical detachment anywhere near?' he asked. 'The last Federal who stopped us, got suspicious, and tried to stick me with his bayonet. I ducked, but the side of his rifle barrel bit Miss Calvert, and knocked her cold.'

The Dictator stirred and groaned.

'There's none closer than three miles,' said the Sergeant of the soldiers sympathetically, looking in at the crumpled feminine figure, 'and your car won't stand much more. But I tell you what. There's a State car down the road just a piece. I'll jump on the running-board and tell the guy in charge to take you.'

They bumped along for about a hundred yards to the State car. Adams lifted the Dictator into the rear seat of the new conveyance, and got in beside him. The military chauffeur in the front seat started the car.

And now what? The Allied surgeons would instantly discover that the disguised Dictator was a man. His identity would then become known. Death for him—and probably for John Q. Adams as well.

The Dictator began to stir into life. He groaned weakly.

Adams snatched out his forty-five, and thrust the muzzle against the back of the driver's head. 'Sorry buddy,' he said. 'Draw up alongside the road.' The startled soldier did so. 'Now get out.' The soldier got out, and Adams followed him.

Quickly Adams relieved him of his gun. Then trussed him up with his belt, gagged him, and carried him a short distance into the woods.

By the time that he returned to the car, the Dictator was sitting up and staring bewilderedly around. 'Where—am—I?' he asked in a cracked voice.

'Get in front,' Adams commanded, helping him to do so. Then starting up the car, Adams continued, 'You're within the Allied lines, Jeffers. You tried to double-cross me, and I knocked you out.'

'Well, what are you going to do with me? Turn me in?'

Adams pondered for a time before answering. Finally he said, 'I suppose that I ought to, but somehow I

can't. So I think I'll make you go through with your original proposal.'

They drove on in silence, both of them thinking hard. Several times they were stopped by patrols of soldiers, but their official car and the pass from Sim Baldwin got them by.

It was nearly three o'clock when they drew up before the City Hall in Baltimore. 'Miss Calvert,' said Adams pointedly, 'I can't trust you, but I'm going to give you a break. I shall have to take you into Allied Headquarters with me. But if you behave yourself, I shan't give you away.'

Steel Jeffers agreed.

General Saltonstall of Massachusetts was in charge of the Allied forces. He received Adams immediately.

Adams instinctively extended his arm in the Roman salute.

Then flushed guiltily, and brought the tips of his fingers smartly to his forehead.

General Saltonstall grinned, but otherwise ignored the mistake.

Adams,' he said, 'I'm glad to meet on. You struck a splendid blow for liberty when you did away with those three scoundrels at the White House. Too bad you couldn't have got the usurper too.'

The pretended Mary Calvert made a wry face. Adams introduced the General to her. 'Miss Calvert was knocked unconscious by one of the Federal soldiers,' he explained, 'as we were making our escape. She's still a bit shaky. Can she sit down over in a corner, where I can keep an eye on her, while we attend to our business?'

'My Staff Surgeon is-' Saltonstall began.

But Adams interrupted, 'Our business will take only a minute, and then we'll go right to her folks. The kid's got a lot of courage. In spite of her weakness, she insisted on our coming here first.'

With a smile of courteous appreciation, General Saltonstall held out his arm to the disguised Dictator and escorted him to a seat in one corner, while Adams watched the performance with an amused twinkle in his gray eyes.

Turning back to Adams, Saltonstall asked, 'What do you propose?'

'Get me General Peters on the phone at Washington. He is expecting the call.'

'General Peters?' exclaimed Saltonstall eagerly. 'I can hardly believe it. Why, man, do you realize? If he will come over to our side, the war will be won!'

'Exactly.' Adams glanced over to note the reaction of the disguised Dictator, and saw him bite his lip.

Saltonstall barked out a command. A line was speedily put through to Washington, for communication between the two cities had not been wholly cut off, merely subjected to censorship by both sides.

'General Peters,' said Adams into the phone. 'This is Lieutenant John Q. Adams, calling from Allied Headquarters in Baltimore.'

There was a gasp on the other end of the line.

'You don't believe it?' Adams continued. 'Well, I can prove it. I was with the Dictator when he phoned you from his bedroom at half past twelve today. He instructed you to do something at three. I don't know

what he meant, but I do know that he tried to double-cross me. However, he didn't succeed. He is now a prisoner in the hands of the Allies.'

'I don't believe it!' declared the voice of the old war horse; but he sounded hopeful, rather than dismayed.

'I can prove it,' asserted Adams. 'Call the White House. Ask them if they have seen Steel Jeffers since noon.'

'Is he really a prisoner?' Saltonstall interrupted, his eyes shining.

The supposed Mary Calvert sat suddenly intensely erect. Adams placed his hand over the transmitter and said, 'No! But I threw him off my trail. Evidently he hasn't yet got in touch with General Peters; and if he doesn't do so within the next few minutes, it will be too late to save the Dictatorship.' Then into the phone again, 'I give you the word of the Allied High Command that Steel Jeffers will not be harmed, if you will at once make peace.' Adams glanced at Mary Calvert, and saw her smile and relax.

'I'll call you back, as soon as I check up the White House,' said the voice of the Federal General.

While they waited for the return call, Saltonstall and his Staff conferred, and outlined the terms of peace.

Finally Peters called back, and was turned over to Saltonstall. All the Allied Generals were clustered around their Chief. Adams considered it the psychological moment to fade out of the picture, before anyone could think to ask him any embarrassing questions. So he beckoned to 'Mary Calvert,' and together they tiptoed from the room.

As he helped the disguised Dictator into the State car, he asked, 'Have you really some friends who will hide you?'

'Yes,' said Steel Jeffers in feminine tones. 'In the mountains north of here, just across the Pennsylvania border. Keep right along east on this street, and turn north on Greenmount Avenue.'

'Good!' said Adams, and soon they were speeding northward

on the old York Road.

'Just think,' mused Steel Jeffers, 'I'm no longer Dictator and somehow I prefer it this way.'

He seemed younger, less careworn, than Adams had ever known him; but it was hard to tell, under his feminine disguise, how much was genuine, and how much was theatrical pose.

They drove on for a couple of hours in silence.

Suddenly Adams remarked, 'You know, we never ate those peanuts. I left them behind in my car.'

'Let's stop for a bite in this coffee shop,' suggested Jeffers, and soon they were seated at the counter.

The radio was playing a stirring march. Adams straightened his broad shoulders, and a wistful light crept into his companion's eyes.

The music hushed slightly, and a voice announced, 'This is the Federal Radio Control. The Allied troops are just marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, with Vice President—er, President now—Nieman at their head. Oh, what a day! What a day!'

Jeffers shuddered.

'Please turn it off!' snapped Adams. 'The lady would like something lighter.'

Surprised, the proprietor switched on some dance music. 'You two ain't pro-Dictator, be you?' he asked suspiciously.

Adams smiled whimsically, and shook his head.

For a while they ate in silence. Some advertising matter obtruded itself on the program, and the proprietor twirled the dials to another station. '-radio newscast. Liam Lincoln, leader of the Young Patriots, says that he now has positive proof that Lieutenant Adams, supposed hero, is a traitor; and that the supposed woman whom he brought through the Allied lines as 'Mary Calvert' is really Dictator Jeffers— ex-Dictator Jeffers, we should say—in disguise.'

Without waiting to hear more, Adams hurriedly paid the bill, and piloted his companion out to their waiting car.

A gray-shirted member of the Pennsylvania constabulary, with his motorcycle drawn up on the curb, and a broad smile on his tanned face, was leaning against the front door of the car.

'Well, well!' he announced. 'Stolen car, and Mary Calvert, and little Jack Adams, and everything.'

Adams gasped, and his hunted eyes swept rapidly around for means of escape.

'Why, officer,' he said, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' His right fist suddenly flashed out squarely to the trooper's chin, knocking him back against the car. Then Adams' left fist swung, and caught the man on the car sweeping him off the car onto the sidewalk. 'Quick!' Adams shouted.

In an instant, he and Jeffers were in the car, streaking down the road.

A sharp crack sounded behind them. Something seared the side of Adams' head. Everything went black, and his hands dropped from the wheel.

Adams, in a daze, felt strong capable hands reach across him, and seize the wheel. Nausea and unconsciousness swept over him in waves. He slumped down in a heap. Then oblivion.

CHAPTER XI

Ages later he came half awake again. It was night. Starlight. The cool windiness of high places.

The car stopped. Voices: 'Uncle Eph.'

'Aunt Martha.'

'Steel, lad.'

'Helen.' That name cut through the fog of his delirium. 'Helen!'

Strong rawboned male arms were carrying him. Into a house. Up some stairs. Onto a bed. Then capable feminine fingers loosened his clothing, and tucked him in. Receding footsteps. Silence.

Many days of illness, fever, delirium. Recurrent dreams of a mad flight from state troopers.

And then, one afternoon, Jack Adams awoke as from a deep sleep, and looked around him. He was lying in an old-fashioned high-post bed in a tiny room. On him was a patchwork quilt, covered by a tufted spread of homespun linen. Straw-matting on the floor. Quaint old furniture all around.

Very gingerly he pushed down the covers, and swung his long legs out of the bed. Shakily he walked to the window. Rolling tree-clad hills, bathed in sunlight, stretched away beneath his view. Where was he, anyhow? He went to the door of the room, and called down the stairs, not too loudly, 'Hi, there!'

No one answered. He opened the door to a closet, found his clothes, and put them on. Then he essayed to descend the stairs.

In the living-room he found a radio, turned it on, and sank exhausted into a chair. As the tubes warmed up, he caught, 'and this alleged hero had been sincere, would he not have turned Steel Jeffers over to the Allied Generals? Would he have fled with the Dictator in a stolen car belonging to the State of Maryland? Would he have kept in hiding? Only traitors hide, my friends. Patriots do not fear the light of day-'

Loud handclapping. Then, in another voice, 'You have just been listening to the Federal Radio Control's debate on the subject: 'Was Lieutenant Adams a patriot or traitor?' And now for a news flash. The secret hide-out of Steel Jeffers has been found. Troops have surrounded it, and are closing in. This is the F. R. C. network.'

Adams gasped. Surrounded even now? Closing in? With sudden resolution, he forced his fever-weakened body to stand. He must find and warn Steel Jeffers!

'Why, what are you doing downstairs?' asked a sweet feminine voice, filled with concern.

Adams wheeled. A young girl in a print dress and sunbonnet stood in the doorway. Her cheeks were smooth and unrouged. Her figure was delicately rounded. She took off her sunbonnet, and a wealth of brown curls fell about her high forehead.

'You are Helen Jeffers?' he breathed.

'Of course!' she exclaimed. 'Who else?'

Helen! Alive and real! Helen Jeffers, as her brother Steel had promised him!

But even in his joy at finding her at last, he did not forget the ominous news which he had just heard over the air. 'Where is your brother? I just got a news flash that the troops are closing in on us.'

'My brother Steel? Steel is dead,' she replied with a touch of sadness.

Adams sobered. 'Did that State Trooper get him?'

'No, Jack.' Smiling sweetly, she stepped forward and placed her hands in his. 'Let's talk of other things, for Steel is safe from his enemies.'

'But, Helen! Here we are talking together as though we had known each other for years. And yet I've never met you. Never even seen you. Fell in love with your photograph. Did Steel tell you-'

Helen Jeffers smiled whimsically. 'We have known each other a long time, for I was the Dictator.'

'You!' Adams stared blankly.

'Yes, my brother Steel died on election-day four years ago. He and James Dougherty and I had pledged ourselves to put through our program at any cost. I closely resembled my brother. And so James Dougherty conceived the fantastic idea of turning me into a man. We reported that it was I who had died. Then I retired to a shack in the mountains; and there two biological experts, Admiral Southworth and Franz Vierecke, injected a certain derivative of the hormone testosterone into my veins-'

'So that is what the letters 'T-E-S-T' meant on the little bottles!' Adams exclaimed.

The girl nodded, and continued, 'This hormone made me to all outward appearances a man, and even made me ruthless.'

'I see,' said Adams grimly, drawing away from her.

'Don't blame me too much,' she begged. 'I did it all for the Cause to which my brother had been pledged, not foreseeing where dictatorship and the unprincipled ambition of my Secretary of State would lead me. Well, anyway, Franz Vierecke had worked with the great Ruzicka, when the latter discovered how to produce testosterone synthetically out of cholesterol.'

'But, if the method was known,' Adams interrupted, 'then why all the mystery?'

'If the White House had bought large quantities of testosterone, our secret might have been suspected. Furthermore, different derivatives react differently, some even have the opposite effect from the effect which we wished. I myself discovered this to my horror, when doing some frantic experimentation on my own hook, during Admiral Southworth's illness. So, the secret died with the Admiral and Vierecke, and my masquerade was at an end. Fortunately the sinister Dougherty did not long outlive them. Then I struggled on alone, a woman again, double-crossing even you, my only friend.' Her eyes fell.

Adams tried to hate her, but he could not. She had been no more to blame for it all than Trilby had been under the spell of Svengali.

'You poor girl!' he breathed, taking her in his arms. He kissed her as she clung close to him. Then gently he released her.

An hour or so later, after he had met Uncle Eph and Aunt Martha, and had had a shave, he and Helen sat hand in hand on the front piazza of the little farmhouse, gazing off over the beautiful rolling mountain view. And waiting, silently waiting, for what they knew was closing in on them.

Finally a cavalcade of cars drew up on the highway in front. Out of the front car leaped the fanatic Liam Lincoln, his black hair awry, his dark eyes flashing. 'There's the traitor!' Lincoln shouted, pointing a skinny finger at Adams. 'Seize him.'

State soldiers poured out of the other cars, and cautiously approached the piazza. Also roly-poly Sim Baldwin, tall Phil Nordstrom, chunky Godfrey Cabot, and others of Adams' old crowd. Even Giuseppe Albertino, the peanut man.

Studiously ignoring Lincoln's inflamed words, Adams casually remarked, 'Hello, fellows! Meet my fiancée, the girl whom I called 'Mary Calvert'. Her real name is Helen Jeffers.' Adams chuckled. 'I told you fellows that I'd get her in the end. And doesn't this explain a lot of things, Liam, which were puzzling you? For example, why the Dictator gave her and me a pass out of Washington, and why I was so anxious to keep her identity a secret, until peace was concluded.'

Several of Adams' pals laughed—a nervous relieved laugh.

Lincoln angrily thrust back his black forelock. 'That's all very well, but why did you steal the State car, and assault that trooper? You threw us off the trail for days and days!'

'Well, you see, Liam, I didn't want to risk having a fanatic such as you butting in on my honeymoon.'

More laughter.

Liam Lincoln's prestige was rapidly slipping. He made one last attempt to regain it. 'Where is the Dictator?' he demanded.

Adams shrugged his broad shoulders. 'How should I know?' he replied. 'I can truthfully say that I haven't seen or heard from Steel Jeffers since his sister Helen and I left the White House together on the day the Dictatorship ended.'