

"BLACK ORCHIDS" by F. V. W. MASON

CHAPTER XV

"Please do not look so sad." Lolita drew near again, in either hand holding a slender stemmed glass of cognac. "It depresses me and I do not like to be depressed. Some, I have always heard that the Americans were good losers. Will you drink to my success?"

Theatrics. Ian's lips curled. Oh, all nothing mattered now. Smiling, Lolita held forward a glass, which he took and appraised automatically. Then she straightened, and raised her glass.

"To the Soviet Republic."

Before she finished the word she whirled, quick as the dart of a kingfisher, and hurled the fiery contents of the liqueur glass into the expotman's stupid blue eyes.

Ian, after a stupefied fraction of a second, hurled his glassful at the other.

"Bogu!" snarled the Russian, wiping back and clawing at the pocket of his coat. Ian was upon him in a single bound for he held the pistol was clawing his eyes in helpless agony. Ian would be able to see again in a minute, Ian knew that, and launched himself on the cursing ex-butler like an enraged leopard.

Smack! Putting his shoulder behind the blow he drove his fist squarely into the Russian's cheek, it something gave. The Russian made no effort to strike back but yanked everything on getting his pistol free from that side pocket. Ian dealt the fellow another hissing smack that must have made the Russian's teeth rattle for he reeled back under the blow.

Goaded by desperation and infinitely strengthened by the definite knowledge that Lolita, splendidly stressed that she was, was true. Ian sprang in and put all his strength behind a terrific uppercut which

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landed on the point of the Russian's jaw and stretched him senseless and bleeding on the shining hardwood floor.

It was the work of a moment to wheel on the half-blinded footman and administer a quietus by bringing down a liqueur bottle on his egg-shaped skull.

"Time is short!" shrieked inner voices. Catch Bobkine!"

He glanced at his watch—great lord, ten minutes more! Bobkine and that fatal copy of the treaty must be drawing near. In his mind's eye he could see the great touring car whirling at break-neck speed over the straight white Hungarian pike.

Bleeding from a cut hand, he whirled to find that Lolita, superbly Amazonian, had snatched up the footman's pistol and stood waiting quietly, her glorious eyes fixed upon his.

"Where's Bobkine gone?"

She answered with a swiftness and clarity that delighted him. "To Hatvan, yesterday I learned that a plane will be waiting there."

"Hatvan? Near the Czecho-Slovak border?"

"Yes."

"Good lord! That's a good thirty-five kilometers out of Budapest. Quick. Get a coat and maybe we can catch him."

"Impossible, he is too far ahead." Nevertheless she darted off. Meanwhile, Ian secured his own and the pistol of the two Russians before starting for the door. In his car was a detailed road map of Hungary.

Leaving the two unconscious men grotesquely sprawled between overturned chairs on the floor of that smart little sitting room, the American, hair over eyes and tie askew, snatched up his previous brief case, glanced inside and was delighted to see the original treaty safe inside.

Then he went bounding down the stairs. After him ran Lolita von Waldeck, the hem of her luxurious tea gown showing ludicrously from under a heavy cloth overcoat that had a mink collar.

"You'll have to come faster," he called from the foot of the stairs.

"Every second counts."

Nodding, she gathered her skirts garter high and with him darted out into the dark silent street.

On the opposite sidewalk a figure lounging under a lamp post started and, when the two dashed around the corner towards Ian's parked car, the watcher commenced to run, also.

"Can you drive a car?" he panted. "I've got to study a map—maybe there's a short cut."

"Yes," she replied.

"Good. Drive out the Waitzen road and don't stop for man, god nor devil!"

She shot him a look of calm courage and leaped into the driver's seat of the long-nosed car with

the ease of a born athlete. Simultaneously her foot pressed the starter pedal and the motor commenced its deep roaring song. Just then the figure which had watched from across the street came running up. The fellow halted, cried out something, and Ian glanced up to recognize the sinister passion-clouded features of Colonel Maxim Solobloff.

"Good-evening," said he, teeth wolfish in the moonlight. "Will you get out and fight? Or must I shoot you down like the dog you are?"

"Get to hell out of the way!" Ian waved a furious hand. "See you later—I'm busy now."

Just then Lolita let out the clutch and, like a spurred colt, the automobile lurched off along the cobbled street. The Bulgarian rasped a furious curse and jerked out a pistol.

Just as the car careened around the corner, a long orange finger stabbed the night and Ian felt a sting in his left shoulder as though a giant bee had stung him. Crack! Solobloff fired again. In the windshield between him and the girl a small star shaped hole sprang into being. Lolita's eyes, wide with alarm, flicked sidewise.

"Keep going!" yelled Ian over the roar of the motor. "He missed." But he knew very well that Colonel Solobloff's first bullet had not been sped in vain. Inside his shirt and over his chest, blood was trickling in a warm erratic stream, didn't feel as though bones were broken, but a man could not tell, high powered bullets had a numbing effect.

Setting his teeth he reverted to the matter in hand, first kicking off the exhaust and then switching on the dash light. By its dancing rays he strove to read the road map which the madly rushing wind fluttered and sought to tear from between his fingers. He concentrated with a desperate effort, conscious that amid a blaze of headlights the car jolted and swerved like a refusing horse. All about sounded the squal of suddenly applied brakes, frightened shouts, the yelling of angry curses; but the girl merely bent further over the wheel and, as the car gathered speed, her hair streamed out behind like a pale but lustrous war flag.

"Must catch him!" Ian's brain said. No good to bring a disgraced husband to Lolita, and she would never be able to explain her part in the downfall of Leonard Holt if the story ever got out. It became thus doubly important to catch Bobkine, but could they?

At a rate that was never under fifty miles an hour, Lolita twirled the great motor through the drowsy, blue and white painted suburbs of Budapest while Ian desperately intent, mentally photographed the route he had chosen to Hatvan. The main first class road passed

through Aszd, but there was another through the village of Szent was, a secondary route, therefore undoubtedly rough, winding and ungraded.

On the outskirts of Budapest a policeman foolishly tried to block their furious career and barely escaped annihilation when the girl wrenched the car to the left. Ian never forgot an impression he got of her lovely features set, coat open and the soft lace of her tea gown fluttering like gossamer pennons.

"All right," he said. "We can change now."

With a mighty groaning of brakes she brought the car to a shuddering halt which dug deep furrows in the road and filled the air with the stench of scorched rubber.

Barely an instant was wasted in exchanging positions, then Ian threw the car into gear and, driving as he had never driven before, dashed off into the night with the wind blasting through that ragged hole in the windshield. Trees flickered past like fence railings and the road, lit by the headlights' leaping rays, swayed before him like an uncertain white ribbon.

The two-seater shot through one sleeping village after another tornado-like, leaving behind wildly yelping dogs and an enormous pall of dust. Lolita! Lolita! To have her in peace and happiness, unafraid of all men, he must win! Like a racing driver gone crazy he roared along straight stretches and skidded around corners. Ye gods, let him get to Hatvan in time!

Once in the wide flat countryside he pressed the accelerator to the floor, urging the great palpitating machine to its splendid best and

strained his eyes to watch the road ahead. Suddenly there appeared a fork in the road, he slammed on the brakes. Ah, Nagy-Kum already. He swung to the right, racing ever onwards towards Szent and distant Batvan.

Beside him the girl ignored her wildly fluttering skirts, to clutch the door and the handle of the cut-in in an effort to brace her slight body against the mad lurching of the roadster. Shadowy objects like ambushed monsters seemed to spring at the car, now a kilometer post, now a wayside shrine. A dozen times Ian thought they were lost and all the while the hissing warm night wind tore at his hair with unseen fingers, filled his eyes with tears. All at once he got a queer impression that the car was remaining still while the earth revolved under it.

On a straight stretch he shot a swift glance at Lolita. Utterly unafraid she crouched there, blue eyes wide and staring fixedly at the road head. The wind he noted, had pulled her hair back to reveal ears which were small and well-shaped, like the rest of her.

One hundred kilometers an hour, the indicator said, and Ian became confident that Bobkine's fifteen minute lead was being cut to ribbons, when suddenly the road blurred. Damn it! He had forgotten all about his wound. He must have bled a lot, his whole side felt wet and cold. He blinked and the careening landscape came in focus again.

"Get the name of the next town," he yelled above the tumult of the wind.

Ahead shone the lights of a car. Hell! This country road was nar-

row as an old maid's mind—and then to his horror he beheld just ahead a small stone bridge. If the cars met on that bridge all involved would perish horribly.

His driver's instinct warned him it was too late to stop; a hundred kilometers an hour is not an easy speed to handle. Then, forking to the left, he saw a track descending the low banks of a stream. It must be one of those fords arranged to allow peasants to water their thirsty little horses. How deep the water was not how rough the bottom, Ian could not know, but risk it he must, so, as the fork flashed near, he braked furiously and turned the wheel to the left.

Like a hunter taking a jump, the car seemed to sail off the ground when the track dropped a little then, with the heart-stilling plunge of a roller-coaster, the two-seater darted at the darkly flowing water. Ian's grip on the wheel tightened spasmodically as over the runabout shot a sheet of water which, de-

flected by the windshield, passed over his head. The car staggered like a life boat in a hurricane. Ian summoned all his failing strength and sought to steady the wheel. He had a fleeting impression of the other car high over head, its occupants yelling like mad.

The dripping automobile was back on the road almost before he knew it, for he was feeling very sick indeed. He must keep on. His mind was haunted by a vision of Leonard in bed, pale and helpless, and of Ilya who loved him.

There began a queer buzzing in his bones as he saw the short cut rejoin the main highway. Far ahead glimmered a tail light; another car was going in the same direction—Bobkine!

(To be Continued)

Singapore—Military Jewel of the Far East



This map gives an idea of the size of Singapore, mighty British island fortress at the crossroads of the Far East sea lanes, and key to domination of the rich Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. Inset map of Manhattan, gives its comparative size. Under severe attack by Japanese forces pushing down the Malay Peninsula, the Singapore forces are reported battling fiercely.

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Mrs. Bushnell Attends D A R. Meet in Asheville

Mrs. S. H. Bushnell, regent of the Dorcas Bell Love chapter of the D. A. R. attended a meeting of representatives of the chapter in this section of the state in Asheville on Saturday.

Plans were formulated for the state conference in Asheville of which the chapters in this district will be hostesses in March.

Francis Cove News

The Francis Cove home demonstration club met with Mrs. Robert McCracken on Wednesday afternoon to study "Family Plans for 1942."

Miss Mary Margaret Smith, the home agent, told the club women how they could help in national defense work.

A playlette was given by Miss Smith, Mrs. Homer West, Miss Adeline Boone and Mrs. Roy Hightower.

Miss Adeline Boone won the prize in the recreation contest.

After the meeting Mrs. McCracken served delicious refreshments, assisted by her daughter, Jackie.

The club will meet with Mrs. Will K. Boone for the February meeting.

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(To be Continued)

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