

THE FORGOTTEN FLEET MYSTERY

by Van Wyck Mason

CHAPTER XIII

All at once the ex-soldier shrank silently back into the deep shadows of cabin 332—not 329. Anyone advancing on 329 would perforce go by 332 with his back presented. Mears might be trustworthy but—well, experience had taught Colby that to be wary was to remain in healthy condition.

A black blur passed the crack of the door through which Colby looked out on the passage. The prowler proved to be Mears, who was moving quickly and very silently for one of his size.

"Mears," Colby whispered and swung open the door a crack.

The other wheeled, gun leveled, then relaxed and brought the odor of damp wool and stale sweat with him as he stepped into 332.

"Miss Benny said you wanted me. What's up?"

Colby cursed the dim light of the cabin—no telling just how much Mears knew. He drew near the big watchman and whispered, "Three men working a 'cet'lene torch in 313—cutting through a steel plate."

Colby wondered whether the other would seem surprised or ask questions, but either Mears was one of the most unemotional men he had ever encountered or the watchman already knew the answer.

The big man only gathered himself and whispered, "That's funny—what are we goin' to do?"

"We'll watch 'em—let 'em finish the job, then when I give the word we'll jump 'em. Understand?"

"Okay—I'm out to get these birds."

Inch by inch the two advanced until Colby, in the lead, was able to look into cabin 313 and beheld two sharply dissimilar figures bending above a tongue of fierce, blue-white flame which a third man in mask and goggles was directing

at a wide stretch of gray painted steel. The oily reek of blistering paint beat in Colby's face and made him want to cough.

Beside one of those lanterns which must have first attracted Geneva Benet's attention stood a slender, pale looking man with gray hair and a mustache. This must be Ehrenbreit, Colby decided, for Ferguson was standing to the right, staring fixedly at the metal glowing white-red under the flame. Squatting on his heels and manipulating the torch was the man called Tug—a small, terrier-like individual with "professional cracksman" written all over his battered features. Already he had cut nearly through a plate from which the rivet heads had been removed.

"Won't be long now," Tug grunted. "Get ready to steady her, Fergie."

At this Colby's rate antagonist promptly caught up a pair of steel worker's nippers and, bracing his massive shoulders, took a grip on a single rivet head left in the center of the plate about to be amputated. On the gray wall to the left Ferguson's grotesque silhouette mimicked the performance.

"Ach! Be careful—too much heat would be dangerous—" How tense were the German ex-convict's pallid features—sweat had converted them into a glistening mask.

So intent were all three on Tug's labors that Colby could have stood in plain sight in the door.

"Get set," Tug warned sharply. "She's coming loose any second."

The reek of scorched paint and of hot iron grew very strong now and a heavy blue smoke went swirling out of the door top and along the steel plates of the passage ceiling. Colby felt his pulse quicken when a little cry of triumph burst from the three and Ferguson, not without effort, low-

ered to the floor a slab of scorched steel some two feet long by a foot wide.

"Ja! See? There iss the paneling." Ehrenbreit's voice was thick with excitement, and he tried to reach inside.

"Okay—better let 'at iron cool off or yer'll burn yer mitts into minute steaks."

Methodically, the thug disconnected his torch to presently join his companions in peering at a section of wooden moulding which, originally painted white, was now sadly charred and blistered.

"This iss the right moulding," Ehrenbreit babbled, his slender prison-paled hand trembling as he pointed into the ragged black rimmed hole. "See? There iss even the little pencil cross I scratched on it. Ach, mein freunden, ve are rich—all of us rich!"

Ferguson roughly elbowed Ehrenbreit and Tug aside to stoop and squint into that aperture which showed up black in the lamplight as an open barn door in a snow storm.

"By God, the Dutchman's right!"

A queer sense of unreality gripped Colby when the German, reaching through the hole, began prying at the charred section of moulding. He wheeled and glimpsed Mears at his elbow, nervously wetting his lips and staring fixedly in at the lantern lit cabin with an ugly twist of his big mouth.

Colby had to nudge him to attract his attention. Together they stepped into the door—to be framed in the brass bound portal.

"Stand steady," Colby advised in a voice as chill as the snap of an ice laden branch.

Because they had no choice, Ehrenbreit and his companions remained frozen in their several attitudes, expressions of ludicrous amazement stamped on their faces.

"Stand up. Search 'em, Mears." The watchman obeyed and soon tossed onto the floor a varied and plentiful supply of pistols, knives, knuckle dusters and black jacks.

"Vell," demanded Ehrenbreit, his little steely eyes glittering with rage, "what do you want?"

"They're pals of Kraus," said the shortest of the trio. "Yuh are, ain't yuh?"

"In a sense," Colby admitted. "Turn around—back to us."

"I knew I shoul'da gone gunnin' for that interferin' tin soldier," moaned Ferguson.

"Ye'd have been cold turkey if ye had," came Mears' unexpected remark. "What shall we do with



nasty glint in his eye. Some ten minutes later the curious little column's feet boomed and reverberated in the vast empty forehold which had once creaked under the riches of two continents. Colby had the sensation of being abruptly dwarfed—how stiffly gray hair stood up on Ehrenbreit's sloping skull—how grotesque were Tug's "Klasy Kollege Kut Klothes," pinched in tight at the back and with impossible lapels. Was Mears going to turn ugly? As he tramped along over the splintered boards of the hold floor Colby did a little deep thinking.

The brig, it seemed, was located underneath the crews' quarters—a dreadful hole devoid of daylight and with walls of steel. Cramped and stuffy, it was barely large enough to accommodate the three scowling prisoners.

"Say listen," hoarsely pleaded the sparrowlike burglar when Colby motioned him behind the rusty bars, "take the stuff, but let us go—it don't get you nuthin' to send us over th' road."

"How about it?" Ferguson's heavy, sweating face appeared at the bars. "I know when I'm licked."

"Let you go?" Colby's short laugh was metallic. "And have you gunning for us? No, we'll just leave you here as a surprise package for the cops—if they ever show up."

"Surely, Herr Ofizer, you would not leave me in this hole?" Ehrenbreit protested desperately. "It iss disgusting—it iss no place for a gentleman."

"You're absolutely right," came Colby's imperturbable reply as he shot the control bolt of the cell door, which though not locked was well beyond the reach of the prisoners. "That's why you're staying in there."

"C'mon, boss," Mears rumbled and plucked at Colby's sleeve.

Haywood Gets 5 New Cars In Sept.

Haywood county will get a quota of five new cars for September, the office of price administration has announced.

North Carolina's quota has been set at 516. A reserve of 83 has been assigned in excess of the quota.

Buncombe got 12, Jackson 1, Transylvania 1, and Henderson 1.

BIRTH ANNOUNCEMENT

Lt. Commander John Ellis Edwards, U. S. Navy, and Mrs. Edwards announce the birth of a son, John Ellis Edwards, Jr., at the Mercy Hospital, San Diego, Calif., on August 22nd.

Commander Edwards is the son of Tom Edwards and the late Mrs. Tom Edwards. He is a graduate of Annapolis.

Mrs. Edwards was the former Miss Mildred Schreiber, of San Diego, and since her arrival from Honolulu during the past few months has been with her parents.

"Let's go back and take a look at that gear moulding."

"Boy, oh boy!" Ferguson burst into a sudden demonic frown "when I get outta here, Colby, I shore enjoy puttin' a slug through yer belly."

Tug's fearful curses, rich with threats of gang reprisals, joined Ferguson's and the forehold rang to their pungent blasphemies.

In sharp contrast Ehrenbreit slumped on the big bench, between hands as though dazed by a sudden and unfair blow of Fate. He did not move even when the retreating feet of the victors had died into silence.

(To Be Continued)

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