

SPORTSMAN FLIES HIGH

by Lawrence A. Keating

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS: Detective Dan Colwell of the Graber-Vael private detective agency is assigned the job of shadowing McDonald whose wife fears gangster enemies are plotting to murder him. McDonald is killed in spite of Colwell's watchfulness. Now, with McDonald dead the smuggling ring which he led has become disorganized. Colwell risks his life to gather evidence by playing one against another.

"Had a little fracas, nothing much. What do you hear from Otto—is he still hunting?"

Vael nodded. "Saw in the paper yesterday a note that Otto shot a buck." A lynx-eyed chap with quiet manners and the air of a family man and home-lover, Vael tried a smoke ring. "Guess you're still on that case for Mrs. McDonald, eh? Funny they haven't got the two mugs that killed him. Prominent lawyer and all. One of them was found in an alley, you know."

As Colwell merely shrugged the visitor hunched forward. "Say what did you want me here for, Dan? You've something up your sleeve. I haven't much time, so spring it."

There was a short silence. "All right, I'll put it plainly for you, McDonald, you know, was the boss of a snow smuggling ring."

"No, Arthur McDonald?" Vael whistled. "What do you think of that?"

"And Otto Graber was—is mixed up in this ring. You too, Vael. Don't lie!" he charged as the man started to protest. "Don't let's waste words. I've got something to help you, so there's no use getting tough! You're in it Vael—you're one of the smaller fry. Graber treats you like dirt, always has, always will."

The greying complexion of Vael's face was ample proof that he knew it to be true.

"I've seen it and filed it away for reference. Now, you aren't a bad sort. I like you a heap better than Graber. He's—" Dan raised a hand to his head and ruefully rubbed a spot there still tender. "You're all right, Vael, but they're making a sucker out of you. Had it planned before McDonald kicked the ghost. Now they're making new plans and leaving you out just like before. And more than that: they'll likely make you the goat if anything goes wrong."

"You must have suspected this, Vael," he appealed with a gesture. "Shucks, I'm not telling you anything, am I?"

The visitor struggled with conflicting emotions. "How do you know? You're not in the deal!"

Colwell admitted this with a shake of his head. "Happened on to it from working for the agency you and Otto run. From this McDonald case. Anyhow, I know it. And I like you, Vael. Enough to ask you here so I can give you the low-down and a warning. So you can protect yourself."

Vael considered carefully. The ash on his cigarette grew very long and finally tumbled to the carpet unheeded. "It's—true," he said with a sigh. "With McDonald gone, nobody trusts anybody else. It's dog eat dog. What are you after, Dan?"

He smiled. "A sale. Told you to bring a thousand cash, and I hope you brought it. Look here: I'm not peddling snow. Gosh, I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole! But they're out to rook you and each other, if they can. Now, I don't know what yarn they told you, how the stuff was coming in. But I've got it straight. For five hundred I'll hand it over. The half a grand looks good to me, Vael, for you fellows don't pay me much."

The grey haired, hook nosed man kept a poker face. "I'll pay, provided your information does not coincide with mine. I'm not paying for something I may know already."

"Of course not. Put your money on the table."

There was some hesitancy about this. But at length the visitor roused himself, stood up, and produced five crisp one hundred dollar bills. He placed them on a small table which was an equal distance from the chair of each. Vael sat down again. "Well?"

"It's coming in by truck. They're going to lift a packing case off the truck."

"I know all that," Vael snapped impatiently.

"Did you know it was in a case of toys from Czecho-Slovakia?"

Vael jumped to his feet. "Toys? That straight?" He burst into a string of oaths, his hands working convulsively. "Why, the low rats told me it was brushes from Holland! I'll be—" He cursed again, and began to stride up and down. "That was Mac's original scheme, I'd swear by it! Unless Mac and Graber figured—"

He halted and shot a keen look at Colwell. "What else?" Which way's the truck coming?"

"Through the Anawanda Valley along the Indian Highway."

Vael's fury redoubled. "What!" he ejaculated. "Why, those dirty carps claimed it's over the Telegraph Road! Of all the double-crossers, the yellow livered double-crossers! And they think they can shake me out like that, eh? But listen, what about the truck license number? Mac had that and . . . You haven't it, have you, Dan?" he wheedled.

Colwell grinned and nodded. "For five hundred."

Without hesitation Vael placed the sum on the table, making a cool thousand.

"Now feel under the table and take out those thumb tacks. It's there. Here, I will." He rose and stepped to it. His hand went under the table.

A gun prodded his back. "Stick 'em up, you fathead!"

He stiffened, growling. Vael's laugh was bitter and taunting. "You sap! Pull me here with a fairy story, will you? He snatched the crisp hundred dollar bills and stuffed them into a pocket. "Now back off. Careful! I want that license number, Colwell, and the boys are waiting downstairs for it. Hell, they're such dubs they couldn't get it off you! Let you go on a fake 'phone call from Harry Deane, eh? I'll take that license number, Colwell . . . and then polish you off like Otto should've a couple days ago!"

While he talked he fumbled under the table and with his other hand held a deadly bead on his victim. But Vael's triumph turned

slowly to suspicion. He fumbled harder, more anxiously, seemingly unable to find what he sought.

"Drop that gun!" It was a feminine voice from the kitchenette. At first Vael paid little heed. Dan watched hawk-like for an opening, a chance to spring on him.

With a muffled oath Vael started to crook his trigger finger. "I'll kill—"

Wham! The small apartment rocked with the explosion. There was a yell of pain, the metallic clink of a gun striking the hard composition floor that helped make the place soundproof. Vael huddled with his wrist between his knees and blood trickled down his forearm where the ripped sleeve exposed it.

Dan had out his own gun in a flash. The wielder of the weapon that he had been fired did not appear. The slender, white arm withdrew into the kitchenette. Colwell backed to Vael's gun. Getting it, he kept his own levelled while he got the cartridges out of it, and tossed it to Vael.

"Get out! And if you're wise you'll get way out! Keep away from those buzzards waiting for you, Vael: take a train tonight, and never, never come back. Don't play with snow again, ever—that's my best advice. Change your life, man!"

Astonished that he was being permitted to leave, the visitor hurried whining with pain to the door. Dan opened it and with an upraised foot gave impetus to Vael's flight. He closed and locked it again, quickly, then turned.

"Good work, Irita! Saved my bacon that's all. Came up here to kill me. Sure of himself, too. We've got to get out quick and over to the other place. They'll be up here in ten minutes and break down the door."

"You know," he muttered reflectively, "I think Vael told the truth about it being brushes from Holland. Anyhow, I'm sure going to find out if there are any brushes coming in from Holland, and if so we'll have the whole story, time, place and all!"

Colwell sat beside the driver of the black coupe, admiring her profile dimly seen. He smiled as he reflected Irita was a good sport, plucky and daring. She had to be for the game they were in. She was the kind who could hold her own in a drawing room, a hovel, or in a dangerous gamble like this—though Dan thought he preferred having her in a drawing room.

It was dark all around them, the sky a murky mass of ominous clouds, the heavy trees an efficient camouflage for the car drawn off the road with its radiator pointed to the highway. Colwell held his palm over the glowing stub of his cigar. Irita beside him seemed listening and watching intently.

"I hope they're coming." She changed posture. "I'm tired of waiting. And how do we know there's all the money in it you think? Just a guess Dan. I almost wish I had a soft job selling hosiery over a counter, or laundry soap or something. Twenty a week might be better than trying to collect thirty-five or forty grand apiece from two men who maybe haven't that much anyhow."

Colwell grinned in the darkness and squeezed her hand on the wheel. "They've got it, all right. They didn't set up in this game just yesterday; they've made plenty. Um!" he exclaimed at a sudden twinge in his shoulder. "It takes more than three days to forget how Graber and Quillen can play!"

She turned her oval face to study him. "I'm sorry it still hurts. I'm surprised you're still alive. You're so ambitious, Dan, that it leads you from one scrape to another, doesn't it? Oh!" she broke off. "There goes a truck!"

"Not the one." He watched the big canvas covered vehicle rumble out of sight around a turn in the road, its red tail light disappearing as though wiped out by an invisible hand.

They waited. Ten minutes passed. The rumble of another heavily laden truck reached their ears and presently its white headlamps swept the concrete highway. Irita looked intently at Colwell but again he shook his head.

Another, and a fourth truck passed. Suddenly through his side window, Dan saw a flash of light straight up into the black sky. It was a half-mile away. Colwell leaned to the girl. "Coming now!"

She turned a switch and pressed the starter. The motor buzzed softly. Irita looked at Colwell, then back to the road. They both were tense as they listened and watched.

Again a heavy rumble came, deepening and growing louder. The white paths of its headlamps grew vivid. The truck came abreast and passed them. When it was gone a half-mile Colwell patted the girl's arm. She slipped into first speed and eased the black coupe through a shallow ditch into the road. She twisted the wheel and headed after the truck.

As the roadster's lights picked it up Dan read the license number. He saw packing boxes lashed on the extended tail gate. Irita kept the little car trailing until

they rounded another curve. Then she speeded alongside the big van.

Irita began to sing happily, loudly, and to weave the car from side to side. Dan crouched out of sight on the floor. She brought the coupe abreast the cab of the truck and leaning out, gave a careless wave of her arm.

"H'ya, boys! Which way Washonville?"

The coupe swerved dangerously close to the front of the truck. "Hey!" the man beside the driver yelled. "Look out there!"

Irita laughed recklessly. "Wanna play?" She swerved the car back and forth. It darted within an inch of the truck's front wheels, then corkscrewed away—only to come back again. Irita drove with one hand, continuing to wave her other out the window.

"C'mon—issa game!" Which way Washonville? Hoo-pee!" she cried. "C'mon, less' race!"

Continued Next Issue

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Mr. and Mrs. Clinton Newman and Mr. and Mrs. Huston Darnell, all of Wilkes, were the Sunday visitors of Mrs. A. J. Williams.

Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Swift had as their Sunday guests Mr. and Mrs. E. C. Adams and family of Winston-Salem.

Rev. T. S. Draughn visited in the home of Mr. Howard Swift Sunday.

Mr. and Mrs. C. E. Williams and family, of Hamptonville, were the visitors of Mr. and Mrs. K. J. Williams and Mrs. A. J. Williams last Sunday.

Mr. and Mrs. U. H. Cockerham had as their Sunday guests Mrs. J. F. Haymore and family of Salem Fork.

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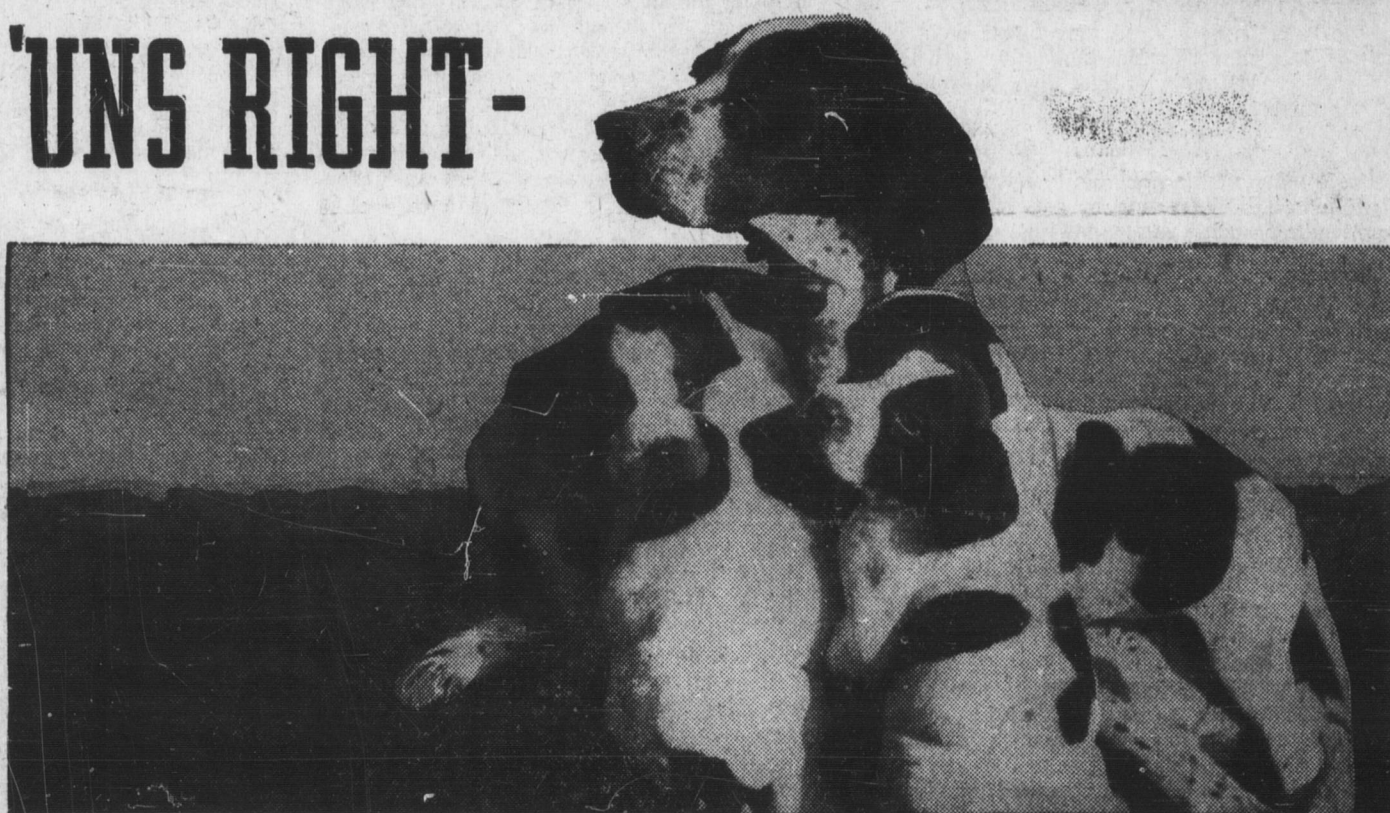


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