

SPORTSMAN FLIES HIGH

by Lawrence A. Keating

NINTH 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.

Dan replaced the receiver. His eyes met the rich brown eyes of Helen Pane, who looked questioning. He shrugged. They talked of Otto Graber's hunting alibi until the corridor buzzer sounded.

"This fellow won't interrupt us long," Colwell told the girl. "Won't be any rough house, I guess."

He moved to the door, peered through the slot, and saw Sommers with a hulking blond giant. Colwell admitted the man, who clumped inside and dropped his kit of tools, smiling the shy smile of Swedes. "I got right at it," he announced. "I don't stay long, mister."

"That's right don't stay long." He walked to the inner office where Helen waited. She was burrowing in her purse. Suddenly she whipped out a gun. His face took on a hard, tired look.

"Sit down!" Helen commanded. The steamfitter stepped cat-like after, shoved a weapon into his back. He hesitated, then obeyed. The Swede without a word returned to the corridor door. He fumbled a lock and bolt and swung it wide. Otto Graber sauntered in. "Good work, Helen!" The florid face of the man wore a jeer and his blue eyes danced. "How are you, Dan?" He swung a thigh on Colwell's desk and sat facing him. "Come across with it."

Dan scowled from Graber to the girl. He dropped his eyes. "Guess I'm a sucker," he said. Graber leaned and plucked the gun from Dan's shoulder holster.

Then he got the second weapon from his hip pocket. "I want that snow, Colwell, and we'll tear up the place if you don't produce it, quick!"

"Forty grand buys it." Graber's face darkened. "You're asking trouble then? Ole, tear up the floor. It's likely between the floor and the ceiling below. Sit tight, Colwell, because if Ole does not find it we'll be wanting next to tear you up. The safe," he said with a wave of his fat hand, "is empty. You forgot to ask the salesman what the combination is. Just a front. But I'll open it to be sure. I got the combination easy—made out we were partners."

Dan did not move or change expression. There was a wrench of splintering wood in the outer office as Ole's crowbar began the desecration of the pine floor. A board here and there gave onto blank spaces between steel beams. His flashlight slanted into the dark. His grumbling indicated Ole was having no success.

Methodically the fake steamfitter ripped one board from each beam section. Methodically he dropped on his knees and poked his flashlight for a look. Minutes passed but the tableau in the inner office did not change. Graber had found the safe empty, of course.

Finally Ole stood in the doorway mopping his brow with his sleeve. "It ain't here. I bet it's under the floor in there."

"No use bothering," Dan suggested. "It isn't in the office at all but you wouldn't have believed that before. I could get it in a hurry in case you brought the forty thousand, Otto."

Graber leaned with a curse and struck Dan on the head with muzzle of his gun. The steel bruised Colwell's scalp and hurt. Otto struck again where the adhesive tape crisscrossed. Dan turned pale, sucking his breath.

"Don't do that," he protested angrily. "You knock me out and you'll never get it! Nobody else can tell you, you fool!"

Graber rose and paced up and down, his lips twitching. The Swede watched from the doorway. Finally Otto halted, feet apart, hands on hips, and the automatic still in his fist. "You're tough, Colwell. I never thought you had much guts. But—" He sighed resignedly. "How soon can you get the stuff here?"

Dan's pulse speeded. He did not relish another beating such as Lefty and Graber had administered in the Kennebec Hotel. The question seemed to indicate that Otto knew he had met his match and that he had at last concluded to pay.

"I can get it here in ten minutes. But before I send for it. Ole goes. I want to see him across the river on that boardwalk. Just you and I stay—not Helen either."

"Aw! What's the matter with Helen? She'd have to wait for me somewhere, anyhow. And," he added with suspicion, "how do I know you'll be alone? The guy that brings the stuff in... I don't want any tricks, Colwell!"

"There won't be any." He fingered the new bruises on his head while he gazed thoughtfully at the girl. "She does ornament the place at that. 'I'll tell you: I'm keeping my gun out, see? You and Helen don't. When the stuff comes. Those are my terms. Take it or leave it."

Graber hesitated. "Hurry up," he snapped briefly.

When Colwell saw Ole across the river on the boardwalk he picked up the telephone. He looked around. "Put your money on the desk, Graber."

Otto did. Dan gave a number. "Hello, Ah Wel? You savvy which laundry Mr. Colwell? Right. I got read Chink. Savvy? Send 'em 'em laundry slip here but no can quick this number: 1124 Lawyers and Doctors Building. You know right one? All right—quick!"

As he talked he shook the contents of the waste basket, scrutinizing scrap after scrap of paper. At last he found an ordinary laundry slip with Chinese characters painted on it.

Presently the buzzer sounded. "Sit tight," Colwell warned. "Let's have the deal over and no funny business. You're getting a bargain as it is." Gun in hand, he walked to the door and after a preview through the slot, opened it a few inches. "Thanks, Ah Wel. Here's a buck for your trouble. So long!"

He brought the fat parcel back and placed it on the desk beside the money. "Now Otto, don't look so greedy. You'll get it. Let's say you hand me the cash as I hand you the package. Sure this is the stuff you want?"

"If it's the snow, the whole two hundred and fifty grand worth!" "Oh, it is, Otto, it is. He made the exchange and stuffed the bills into his coat pocket while Graber breathlessly ripped open the package. He sighed vast relief. "We made a deal, eh, Otto?"

The man straightened. "I'm beating it." He turned for the outer office but Helen, rising, spoke. "Wait Graber. You're pinched. At last, I marked most of that money."

He whirled. "Huh!" "Graber, we're federal officers!" Color drained from his face like water from an upturned bottle when the cork is drawn. For the space of twenty seconds Otto was paralyzed. His fat lips twitched but gave forth no sound. His arm around the package loosened then contracted with a crinkle of paper. He was stunned.

"Hold him, Irita. Her name's Irita Doran, Otto. Not Helen Fane."

"Sure, we're feds, all right," Colwell grinned. "Didn't you even suspect it? Looks like we made a sweet pinch—penalty's tough on a witnessed cash transaction! And the same gag ought to take in your friend Lefty Quillen, eh? See now why I made the price so low, Otto—to have it very, very attractive? Just stand there till I get my bracelets." He tugged at a drawer of the desk. "Why Otto, didn't you read what it says on my front door? 'The Federalist.' And you overlooked a plain warning like—"

He had been over-confident—the tremendous gratification of victory after months of this most ticklish of all cases. Graber's passion mounting faster than Colwell's words came out made the man a bull. He went berserk. He could scarcely have known what he risked but he succeeded by his very madness.

Wham! Crash! Helen screamed. A bullet flicked Colwell's sandy hair and splashed cracks in the outer window. The second slug struck Dan's belt buckle. It would have wounded him. The impact sent him off balance and he crashed against the wall.

He came up with his gun flaming. The office reeled with thunderous detonations. It was a cubbyhole of lancing crimson blasts. The girl's scream split all that sound. Dan glimpsed them struggling. Graber was bestial. Dan feared to shoot again. He charged.

Graber's gun arm crossed the girl's chest. She was his shield, her head flopped loosely her chin on his wrist. He clenched her with such ape-like strength that air burst from the curving red lips. Graber shot again—and again! Knife-like pain slashed Colwell's scalp. That was all he knew.

He went down a dead weight, consciousness switched off like a light, a crumpled motionless heap on the floor.

It seemed years later that Dan heard the insistent tinkle of a bell. Hazy realization came to his brain that it was... the telephone. Then he remembered that battle. There was a pool of his own blood beside him on the floor. He groped to reach his feet.

Graber had got away. It seemed incredible. It seemed an impossible thing!

He groaned aloud. Irita was due now for murder. That was positive—and it would not be long happening!

"Hello," Dan listened at the receiver. His dazed eyes rolled. "Lefty! What? You've got it—already? Wait. Wait'll I think."

Quillen had his cash: he wanted to come for the stuff now. "Listen," Dan mumbled. "I—I haven't got it any more. Hold on—I know I promised! But Graber came in like a cyclone. I was talkin' to Helen, see? I'm crazy about her. On the level, I am!"

He nodded. "Sure, I figured she was nothing to you. But I—I want her!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Otto skipped with the stuff, grabbed her to shield him backing out. He'll kill her sure! Listen, maybe you still can get that snow, Quillen. Won't cost you a cent. What do you say? You know Graber's ways! You must know where he'll head! Come on—you get the snow, I get the girl. What do you say? Take it?"

Again he listened, panting. Hope flamed in his bloodshot eyes. "Sure, Graber flies—that's so! He's got a plane..."

"Right, Lefty. Meet you at the field, fifteen minutes. Hell, I tell you I want Helen, that's all!"

He hung up. Clinging weakly to the desk, Colwell uttered a prayer that had the fervor of his soul in it. He stumbled drunkenly for the door.

"If Lefty's wrong!" he mumbled

in anguish. "If Lefty's wrong—!" They left their hurriedly charted cabin ship at Norcross, a city of considerable size. Ewing had no airport nor even a landing field shown on the chart.

It was seventeen miles to Ewing. The deal with a taxicab driver was quickly made. The two men sprang in and the car rolled away. Colwell waved a ten-dollar bill before the fellow's eyes. "Keep over forty-five and this is yours. Get us there in a hurry!"

He sank back. His glance at Lefty Quillen made him ponder again for the dozenth time, on the strangeness of his sudden partnership. But there was no other chance so far as he knew. Graber's camp was not in Ewing, and a man could search these timbered hills for weeks aimlessly without discovering what he sought. Quillen would do: he was as anxious as Colwell to confront Otto.

Their glances crossed. "Remember, I get the snow; That's on the level, ain't it?" There was an evil threat in the way he said it.

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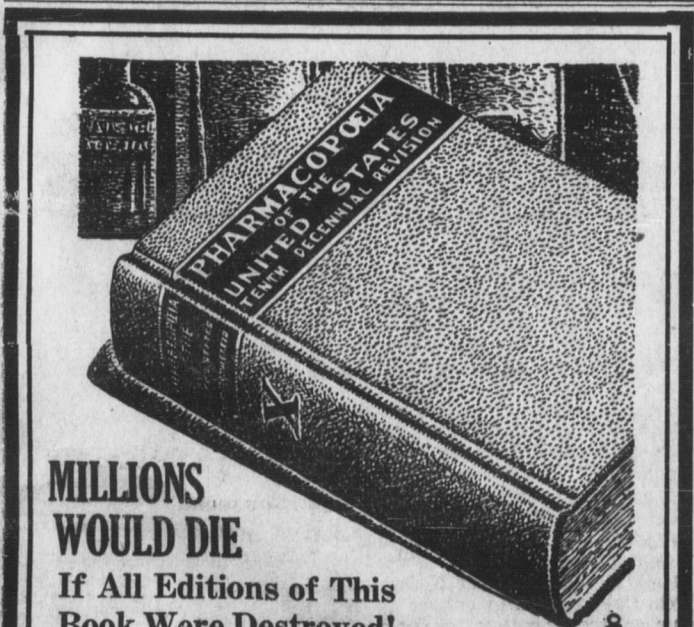
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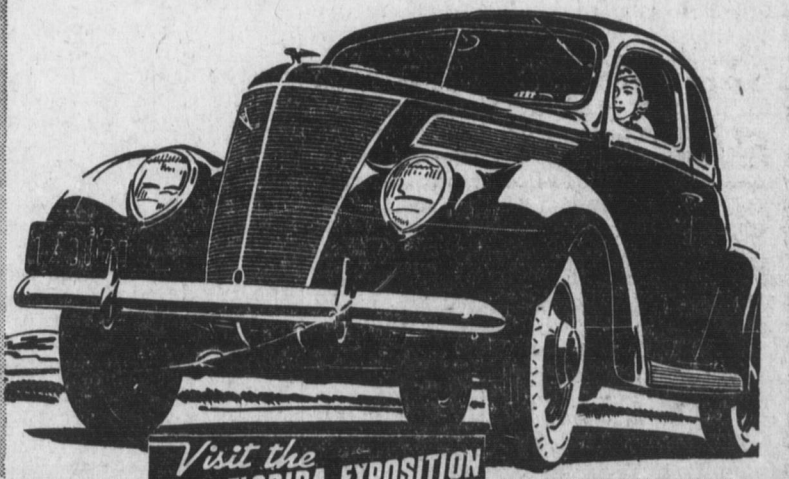
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