

A LIFE FOR SALE

BY SYDNEY HORLER

CHAPTER XXII

Staggering into the place, Martin Creighton collapsed in a heap. He was completely exhausted, and could not have gone another yard. Outside this barn, or whatever it was he had stumbled upon, he could hear the rain still falling in piles torrents. An hour before he had been soaked to the skin, and now his clothes hung on him like bedraggled rags.

His position was desperate. For forty-eight hours he had been a hunted man. The entire police force of the country had been striving to capture him. How he had escaped detection he did not know, since he had been forced to run many risks.

Meeting that drunken tramp on the roadside had been a godsend, of course. The change of clothes had been quickly effected. He had neither shaved nor washed, and with that filthy bowler hat, disreputable coat and trousers, that were only held together in some places by pieces of string, he presented an appearance which he hoped was as different from the Martin Creighton that the police were looking for as to enable him to get to the coast, his destination, unhindered.

The unmistakable smell of an English farmyard came to him. In the blackness of the night he had merely seen the outline of what appeared to be a barn, and, completely spent, he had decided to rest there for at least a couple of hours.

Fit as he was, the strain of the past forty-eight hours had been tremendous. Moreover, except for the rank cheese and grubby bread that he had found in the pocket of the tramp's coat, he had eaten no food since the night of his escape.

His weary body had found a fairly comfortable resting-place on a bundle of sacks. He was famished and very thirsty, but his most urgent need was sleep. He tried to battle against an overwhelming desire to sink into oblivion, but the struggle was an unequal one; and within a few moments the fugitive whose name was being broadcast throughout the country, not only through the newspapers but by wireless, sank into such a heavy sleep that he might have been drugged.

"Hey, what be you a-doin' here?"

Martin Creighton, aroused out of that deep, dreamless sleep, stared into a weather-beaten face fringed with curious whiskers. This man was dressed as a laborer, wearing a shapeless felt hat, a waistcoat with sleeves, and drab, corduroy trousers, strapped at the knees.

Still feeling stupid, Creighton sprang up. He must get away! What a fool he had been.

He endeavored to push the laborer aside but the man had the solid stubbornness of the true yokel.

"Don't you be a-goin' ter my yer 'ands-on-me, mister, or 'twill be the worse for 'ee, you varmine. Nobody ever puts a 'and on Joe Adams without gettin' the worst of it, so I be tellin' 'ee." Still standing by the doorway, the speaker raised his voice: "Hey, Bill, Andrew, Sammy! 'Ere 'e a drunken, stinkin' tramp a-messin' up the barn!"

The next moment three other men, more or less replicas of Joe Adams, filled the entrance.

Creighton, fully awake now, did the only thing possible: lowering his head, he en-

deavored to force a way out. But these yokels seemed made of granite and iron; they appeared impervious to blows, and it was not long before a clumsy sledge-hammer swing from Joe Adams' leg-of-mutton fist, catching the hunted man on the side of the head, sent him reeling to the floor.

"Now we'll see what the maister says," pronounced Adams, directing operations like a rustic field-marshal. "Hey, Sammy, and you Andrew, tie up 'is 'ands while I goes to the 'ouse."

It was an extremely humiliating experience, but Creighton realized the opposition was too much for him.

A quarter of an hour or so passed, and then he heard a cultured, impressive voice say:

"What are you doing here, my man?"

Looking at the speaker, Creighton received a distinct shock.

In the man standing before him he recognized Lord Belshaven, England's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Martin did some rapid thinking.

"I should like to see you privately, sir," he said.

The man in tweeds passed a hand over his shaven chin. He was obviously surprised to find that this disreputable figure had the voice of a gentleman.

"You look all in," he commented.

Creighton put a hand to his head. He was giddy through want of food.

"I—I'm afraid I am, sir," he replied.

To the gaping astonishment of the farm laborers, Lord Belshaven said kindly:

"Come up to the house. You must have some breakfast." Creighton flushed beneath his grime.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to let me have a bath, sir? I—" His voice trailed off, and he staggered.

"Adams, give this gentleman a helping hand. Bring him up to the house."

The one remaining tooth that Joe Adams possessed stood out arrestingly as he gaped in wonderment. But it was the "maister" who had spoken, and he did as he had been bidden.

This comfortable room, smelling so agreeably of old books and good tobacco, faced a wide expanse of velvety lawn, which was reached by means of the wide French windows. It was a beautiful autumn morning, and to Martin Creighton the cawing of the rooks in the tall elms at the bottom of the lawn was one of the most soothing sounds he had ever heard.

Only a real aristocrat could have treated him in the way Lord Belshaven had done. Despite his disreputable appearance, he had been taken by a servant to a wonderfully appointed bathroom and then back to a bedroom, where a suit of tweeds belonging to the Foreign Secretary himself had been placed at his disposal.

After that had come breakfast—a meal the memory of which, Martin felt, would be impressed upon his mind until the day of his death: grapefruit, porridge, grilled sole, eggs and bacon, toast marmalade, with he could not remember how many sops of glorious coffee. His host had not said a word throughout the meal, occupying himself with *The Times*.

It was only when Creighton had finished the most wonderful meal of his life

and arrow and donations given him by the few farmers he numbered among his friends. He disappeared into the brush when strangers appeared and few ever saw him.

In the colder months, the hermit built a brush roof over his shack, but in the finer weather he slept in the open.

Three years ago, the rope that he used to hoist himself to his home in the tree broke, and Sternberger was forced to build a shack on the ground.

A new rope recently was pro-

vided by Amandus B. Grossman, who is one of the few persons to become acquainted with the aged man since his retirement. Now, Sternberger sits in a steeplejack's chair and pulls himself aloft by means of the rope and a pulley.

that Lord Belshaven gave any sign of being conscious of the other's presence.

"Ye will go into the study," he said; "it is quiet there, and we shall have no interruptions."

Dumb with amazement, Creighton followed his host into that long, pleasant room, the walls of which were lined with books.

Lord Belshaven pointed to a deep red leather chair.

"You smoke, no doubt?" he asked, placing within the other's reach a box of famous cigars.

Like one in a dream, Martin lit the cigar and blew a cloud of smoke. Then he was brought back to reality.

"Now, young man, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what you were doing in my barn last night?" Lord Belshaven, looking intently, suddenly changed his tone. His voice had been firm but courteous before; now it was sharp and insistent.

"I remember your face now," he said; "you spoke to my secretary in Rimini's Restaurant some days ago. You frightened Miss Steers, I remember . . . you must give me an explanation."

The young man turned and faced his interlocutor.

"I am going to tell you a very remarkable story, sir. Every word will be the truth. My name to begin with, is Martin Creighton."

Lord Belshaven started.

"The man wanted for the murder of Sir Simon Baste?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." It was too late to draw back now, and Creighton did not wish to do so. He felt intuitively that this man would help him to find justice. Besides, desperate as was his own plight, he hoped, through the agency of Lord Belshaven, to hear of the girl whose fate had become so strangely mixed up with his own. Hunted criminal that he had become, he could see little hope of giving her the assistance to which he had pledged himself; but his host, powerful personage that he was, would be able to do so, no doubt.

"Now, if you will be so kind as to listen, sir," he started; and Lord Belshaven nodded his head.

Creighton went on to narrate his astonishing adventures during the past few weeks. He told of the advertisement he had inserted in the *Meteor*; of his meeting the Colossus and the girl Xavia; of his experience with the dwarf, his following the latter to an attic room occupied by a very beautiful and terrified girl; of his signing a bizarre document with a thumb-print; of his meeting the masked man in the house at Highgate; of his entering uninvited Lord Belshaven's London residence in Carlton House Terrace, and what happened there that same night; and then, finally, that uprooting accusation of murdering a man he had never even seen.

"If you don't mind, sir," he went on, "I will leave myself out of it for the moment. I should like to talk to you about Miss Steers."

The Foreign Secretary's face became grave.

"I am very worried indeed about that young lady," he confessed. "Miss Steers disappeared from her rooms in Peter Street, Westminster, two nights ago, and no word has come to me of her since. I immediately informed Scotland Yard of the occurrence, but up till now they have been unsuccessful in tracing her. It is remarkable that you should have told me this strange story. What connection Miss Steers could have had with the persons you have described, I cannot possibly conceive. During the time she has worked for me, Miss Steers has proved herself not only a highly efficient, but a very loyal private secretary."

Creighton burst out:

"The man who called himself 'Jones' must have some hold over her, of course, sir; that is the only possible conclusion. That was the reason, no doubt, why she refused to let me help her—she must have thought that I was a member of the gang myself after seeing me in the house. Haven't you any idea at all, sir, where she can be?"

The foreign Secretary shook his head.

"None at all," he replied; "but I will ring up Scotland Yard at once, and tell them to search London for the man you have called 'Jones.' You couldn't possibly give any idea of the position of that house of his, I suppose?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. You see, I went and returned there blindfolded. But there's a house at Highgate—"

Lord Belshaven walked to the cabinet on which stood the telephone.

"That shall be thoroughly searched, of course," he said, before taking off the receiver.

At the end of ten minutes, after hanging up the instrument, he turned to his guest.

"What I have to decide now, Creighton, is what is to be done with you. I believe your statement that you are innocent of the murder of Sir Simon Baste. I believe also your story, incredible as it at first appeared. There is no doubt in my mind that the man 'Jones' has used you as a cat's paw—it may be that he himself committed the murder."

The speaker stopped, as though to collect his further thoughts.

"My obvious duty," he resumed, "is to tell the police that you are here. I do not intend to do that, however. You noticed, Creighton, that in speaking to Scotland Yard just now I made no reference to you? If I handed you over to the police you would be subjected to a terrible ordeal. Although innocent, the circumstantial evidence against you must be very strong, or Mr. Jarvis Stark, the Deputy Commissioner, would not have had you arrested."

"The evidence against me is false, sir. So far as I can understand, it is based principally upon two things—finding my revolver near the body of the dead man and the discovery of my fingerprints upon various things in the room."

"But you say you were not there?"

"No, sir. The revolver was stolen from a drawer in my bedroom—how and by whom I do not exactly know, but, presumably, either by the girl Xavia or by a man who called himself Chipstead."

"Chipstead! You can leave him out of your calculations entirely, Creighton. Chipstead is a personal friend of my own, a trusted Secret Service agent, and a man more likely to be your friend than your enemy. What did he want with you?"

Creighton, remembering the glance of encouragement which Chipstead had given him at the police station on the night of his arrest, began to see a little daylight.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Dam Project Gives

Jobs to 1,200 Men

Harrisburg, Pa. — (UP) — The Pymatung Dam project is giving steady employment to 1,200 men in Northwestern Pennsylvania this autumn, according to the Department of Forests and Waters.

A force of 1,000 men is engaged in clearing the 8,000 acres of wooded land which will be flooded. Another gang of 120 is building the 2,400-foot dam. A third crew of 80 is constructing an elevated highway across the Pymatung Swamp, shortening the distance between Erie and Cleveland.

Water leaking from a faucet in a stream the size of a pin wastes about 150 gallons a day, it is estimated by federal engineers.

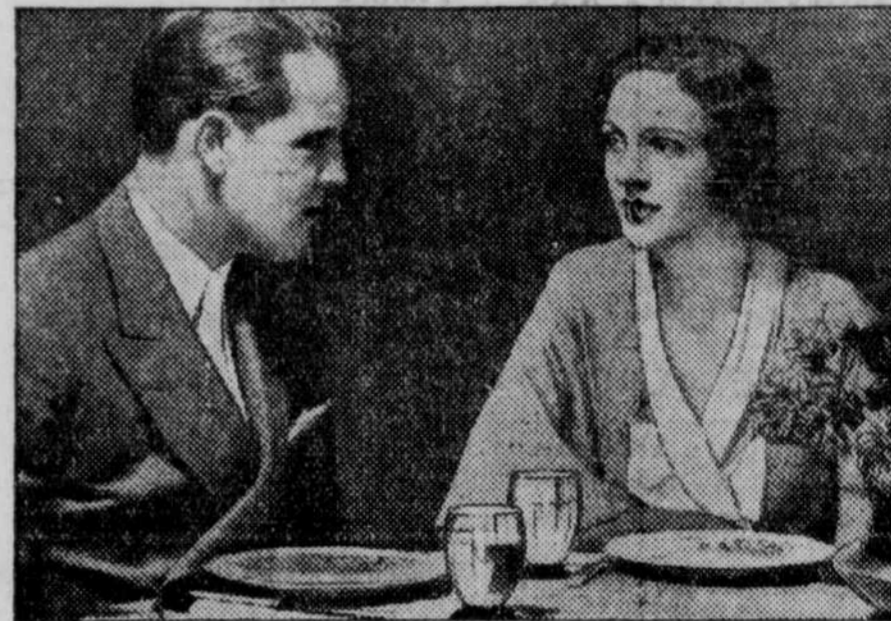
The superstition surrounding the number 13 is said to go back as far as the ancient Hindus.

Pinchot during August numbered seven. The number in recent months has been far below average.

"This seems to indicate that those wanted on criminal charges are on the move and are hard to locate, or that communities hesitate to incur the expense incident to securing the return of fugitives from justice," one official here said.

By soaking match heads in a solution of celluloid dissolved in acetone, they can be made waterproof.

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Marconi Not First?

Marconi is famous as the inventor of the radio and the discoverer of the wireless waves that make it possible. Actually, the man who did much of the spade work, and, indeed, sent the first wireless message, was Sir Oliver Lodge. But Marconi's results were published first and beat Sir Oliver by a few hours.—London Answers.

Dire Fact Concealed

Agent—Sir, I warned you before you took this place that it was haunted by the ghost of the former owner. Enraged Tenant—Yes, but why didn't you tell me he'd been a saxophone player.

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