

The HORMONE MENACE

A Complete Novelette
of Future Conflict

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etc.



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to answer. Instead he leaped sideward

CHAPTER I The Giants

WINGING its way down from the clouds, a snub-nosed Boske leveled at two thousand altitude. It was a hell-dark night, no moon or stars, and, below, a few twinkling lights marked a habited spot in the general desolation of that region. The airplane, its motor purring almost noiselessly, crawled, along warily, it seemed.

When it was almost directly over the cluster of lights a figure dived from its rear cockpit and disappeared, falling rapidly. The quiet little Boske went on steadily. A mile farther its purring deepened and the airplane rose, disappearing into the heavy cloud-bank.

James Wistert, secret operative S-23 United North America, extricated himself from his parachute harness and stood erect to breathe deep of the air over enemy land.

"Well," he mused, "here I am. Hope the rest is as easy."

He knew it wouldn't be. Not daring to

light a match, he fumbled on the ground in the pitch darkness for a bulky bundle heavily wrapped in oilskin which he unleashed from the parachute straps. With it under one arm, he felt around his middle.

"Food pellets—flashlight—ammunition—automatic—okay."

He was not far, apparently, from his destination, for he could see a glow of hidden lights beyond a rise of the ground. The parachute would occasion suspicion when found the next day. But Wistert expected to be safely away before the night had passed. If not—well, such was fate. Topping the rise, the spy saw, not a quartet of a mile away, a large brick building from whose windows lights glowed. A lone building in a boulder-strewn, uncultivated region in the heart of the Allied States of Europe. What purpose did it serve? What mysterious connection did it have with the terrific war going on between Europe and America?

When the building loomed close, Wistert stopped in the shadow of a large rock. He undid his package, and draped about

himself a hooded suit of a peculiar crinkly material. It seemed made of metallic fiber, and a half-dozen insulated wires ran from various parts of it to a heavy, flat, rubberized case which he strapped to his chest. The suit covered him completely from head to foot. It had two small glass-shielded peepholes for his eyes, and its hem dragged on the ground.

Snapping a small switch at the side of the case on his chest, the spy felt a tingling sensation. But that was all. Somehow, he had expected more. They had assured him back at headquarters that, wearing the suit, he was invisible to others except for a faint, indistinct halo. Such a thing did not seem possible, but in these remarkable days of the late twentieth century anything could happen. This Invisibility Cloak was one of the enemy's inventions. The one he was wearing was the only one his country ever confiscated. That alone bespoke the importance of his present mission.

Anxious to test the thing—but apprehensive at the same time—Wistert stepped from the rock's shadow and strode warily toward the large brick building.

THE side he approached was unbroken by even a single doorway. Rounding the corner, the spy muffled a gasp as a uniformed man shouldering a rifle came toward him. Instinctively his gauntleted hand dove for his automatic; then he relaxed sheepishly. For the soldier passed not ten feet away, staring straight at him. Yet not at him, but *through* him!

His nerves somewhat shaken, Wistert followed the wall. Under the first doorway he reached stood another guard. The spy paused. To enter this portal he must open the door and shove past the guard.

Wistert thought of a dozen and one plans in the space of a minute. The dilemma was still unsolved when he stiffened suddenly at the sound of a motor. The guard came to attention as a big black sedan whined down

the tar road, coming to a stop thirty feet away. Two figures stepped from the car and approached.

Wistert's «yes grew big as the foremost figure was revealed in the light over the door. Baron Laiglon, ordnance chief of the North African sector! The mysterious building took on a new significance in the American's mind.

The guard now knocked on the door, and stood aside. It was opportunity knocking for Wistert. He followed the two men in like their shadows' shadow; fate was still with him. Beyond the door he quickly edged to one wall of a corridor as the two officers strode ahead.

Careful not to scrape his shoes on the hardwood floor, the spy followed down the hallway, which seemed to stretch interminably. Finally the two officers paused before a great steel door.

The baron's companion stood before a Ronaldson scanning disc and pressed the button below it. There was a click of relays, the interplay of photoelectric beams, and then the steel portal rolled aside like a dinner plate. Perhaps it was fortunate that the two officers were speaking as they stepped beyond the threshold; else they might have heard the hurried tread of their invisible follower as he squeezed through with them. The ponderous steel valve rolled back into place.

The one man spoke a few low words to the guard standing at attention—he who had scanned the transmitted image and opened the seal upon seeing who it was—and then motioned for the baron to follow. Like a ghost, Wistert slipped along in their wake.

A staircase led below at the end of this new corridor. Wistert paused at the bottom to see the two officers enter an elevator car, which immediately descended. The spy stared around, surprised. There were no less than ten elevator shafts opening upon the room. From the opposite side led half a dozen large corridors. What lay below this mysterious

brick-building?

The spy became aware of a steady vibration in the floor, as of ponderous machinery. Speculatively he eyed the sentinel leaning against the wall. Perhaps; if the guard were out of the way, Wistert might get on an elevator himself, for they were automatic.

Prepared to take the risk involved, he was about to step forward when one of the elevators came up. As its grillwork door was pulled aside, a dozen men stepped out. The spy gasped.

Those men were giants! Each was eight feet tall and built proportionately. Their faces were brutish in cast, thick-lipped. They were, obviously witless creatures, mere mountains of strength. Dressed in baggy jumpers of denim, they trudged forward silently and awkwardly, followed by two guards who had ready pistols and barked sharply in tones of command. Like a herd of driven oxen, the giants turned into a corridor.

Hardly had this group disappeared than a similar group of giants came from one of the corridors and entered the elevator which had first disgorged its human load. Thereafter, eight more elevator loads came up and an equivalent number went down.

Wistert noticed that those who came up were grimy and looked tired and hungry, while the giant men who were taken below were clean and fresh-looking. The spy could come to only one conclusion—that it was change of shift. Some great project was going on below that sapped the strength of eight-foot men so that they had to be replaced periodically with fresher forces.

AT last the interchange of giant men was over. The first elevator came up again, but from it this time stepped men who, though normal in size, were distinctly odd in some way. They too were silent and tired-looking, and obeyed the guards' orders mutely, turning into one of the corridors. One after the other the elevators arose, emptied their loads of weary men, and

descended with reinforcements which came from the various hallways.

The spy suddenly knew what made these workers so queer in appearance. It was their facial expressions. Almost as though they were prototypes, their visages reflected an extreme dreaminess. Wistert discounted drugs; it was something deeper, more basic—something in their very natures. Their eyes held strange lights.

Then this shifting of men ended, and the elevators came up and went down with another series of groups. These men, also normal in size, seemed extremely nervous. Their stride was jerky and the muscles of their faces twitched uncontrollably. Yet it was not the type of nervousness associated with hysteria; it was more the sensitiveness of energetic, high-strung personalities.

What was the solution of this mystery? Why this change of shift of workers who were so alike in their own group, so greatly different in different groups? The key to this, Wistert realized, would be priceless information to American headquarters. Wistert's one aim then was to go below himself and see just what these pitifully slavely creatures were made to do.

CHAPTER II

The Invisible Cloak

“MON DIEU!” exclaimed Baron Laiglon, speaking French, the official language of the Allied States of Europe. “What is the meaning of all this?”

He swept an arm around to include the immense workshop filled with industrious humans. Beyond pillared arches he could see other large chambers; and he understood that there were three more sub-levels of a similar nature. It was strange to find all this beneath a plain brick building in semi-desert land.

His companion, Director Bergmann,

chuckled at his astonishment. "You are surprised, baron?" He spoke French with the guttural accent of a German. "But where did you think our great military inventions came from?"

"Oh, I knew, of course, M. Bergmann, that this place existed. That it had been established ten years in advance—in anticipation of the great European-American struggle for world supremacy. But because of the utter secrecy with which it was done, none but the highest officials knew just where it was, and what it was expected to accomplish."

"Naturally," said the director, "secrecy was paramount, lest the American espionage get wind of it."

"Of course," agreed the baron. He laughed. "M. Bergmann, if America but suspected that this place existed! They would undoubtedly withdraw half their aerial forces from the very Nile sector to attack and bomb this cozy nest of yours."

The director cooed gleefully. "No doubt, baron, not a tiny doubt! For from this place are turned out in quantity the Invisibility Cloak, the Radio-Wave Absorption Screen, and the Super-Sonic Gun—to mention only three of the inventions which have beaten back powerful America."

"Beaten her back!" said the baron scornfully. "These inventions have turned the tide of the war! Yes, it is so. Beginning within a month, Europe will take the offensive, whereas for three years we have been on the defensive. Our first drive—" He clipped his words and peered uneasily around.

The director smiled. "What do you fear—spies? Not here!"

"I had the uncomfortable feeling for a moment that we were being watched," admitted the baron.

"Ach, no spies here!" said the director.

"Nevertheless—" The baron did not take up the topic he had dropped, still uneasy. Instead, he waved his hand again to include the bee-hive industry surrounding them. "M.

Bergmann, as long as I'm here on my first visit, tell me how you have made such marvelous military and scientific strides in so short a time. I have seen many men working industriously—queer men, deformed physically—or mentally, perhaps?"

"Ah, a shrewd guess, baron," said the director. "Yes, these men are all deformed—except, of course, my own personnel, who are ordinary menials and soldiers. But they are deformed, baron, to a purpose! Perhaps you know little of the science of biology. It has been my life work. I shall explain what I have accomplished; you shall then judge whether it is the work of genius or not."

THE director rubbed his hands as he began: "I was early in life fascinated by the study of the mysteries of human nature—especially in its attributes of intelligence. What essentially was intelligence—or intellect? I was very soon brought face to face with the gland question. Each human is controlled and governed to a great extent by ten glands of internal secretion. These small organs manufacture certain powerful chemicals, called hormones, which react in the blood-stream and make the individual what he is—mentally and physically!

"You have heard of diabetes and its cure by insulin. Insulin is the hormone produced by the pancreatic gland, situated near the stomach. Perhaps you have heard of cretinism, and its eradication by the feeding of thyroxin, which is the hormone product of the thyroid gland in the neck. Diabetics, cretins—as well as abnormally tall people, intellectual people, sensitive people—are the result of over-active, or under-active; glands.

"It came to me that miraculous things might be done through these glands. I made endless experiments with animals. But animals could not satisfy me; I wanted human animals as my control subjects!"

The baron involuntarily shuddered and turned his eyes away from the beady, fanatic

ones of the director.

“My chance came ten years ago,” went on the scientist. “Military officials were pleading for advanced armament with which to wage war against powerful America, who was slowly but surely gaining dominance in Africa and Asia, having it already in South America. I laid down my plans—promised great inventions. And all I would ask for were condemned criminals from the jails, the flotsam of life. That, and a free license to use them as laboratory subjects!

“My petition was granted, in the desperate hope, no doubt, that I might know what I was saying. They are not sorry—the members of the Governing Council—that they consented. Eh, baron?”

The Frenchman nodded, but a fine sweat had beaded his forehead.

The scientist went on, his voice eager: “Then began my monumental work. I performed a great series of experiments with my gland-products, on my human guinea pigs. Before five years had passed, I began to see some glimmerings of success. I was beginning to bring order out of chaos, simplicity out of complexity. And these indefatigable, super-clever workers of mine”—he swept a quick arm-around to include the hundreds of men in denim—“are my symbols of success!”

The baron nodded, but his soul felt sick within him. Human beings—criminals, it was true, but still human beings—experimented upon like rabbits, by a cold, heartless scientific genius. Yet—the baron sighed reflectively—it was serving a purpose. It had brought the Allied States of Europe within reach of its goal as *the* world, power.

“To leave generalities and explain more fully,” continued the director. “You have seen the eight-foot giants who do all the heavy labor in these workshops. They were ordinary men who were fed an excess of the pre-pituitary hormone. This gland substance promotes bone and tissue growth-beyond the normal. To give them added strength in

keeping with their great stature, they were fed also adrenal-cortex hormone. They are the simplest of my transmutations.

“Think now of the men in the second chamber who do the mechanical work: fitting gears, running machines, and such. They have been overfed on the hormone of the adrenal-cortex to give them strength and determination, and on adrenal-medulla to give them a great capacity for work. They work sixteen hours of every day without tiring; each is worth three ordinary men for his work.

“THOSE men who work at the super-sonic testing apparatus—they are infinitely sensitive to rhythm and vibration. The post-pituitary extract gives them that over-developed sense, which in us ordinary mortals is displayed when we keep time to music with a tapping foot, or beat a drum in a certain cadence.

“Then, the workers at the electrical apparatus are hyper-sensitive to even the magnetic field of a small helix. They substitute for galvanometric meters quite well, and have the added faculty of being able to reason, which a meter does not. They eliminate hours of rechecking and testing because they *feel* differences in potential and make immediate corrections.

“But the core of the work that is going on in this humanized workshop is shaped in my scientific laboratory. In the third sub-level are my prize gland-men. Some are fed with the thymus hormone, to give them the *eidetist* perceptions, or the ability to photograph on their minds what they see and hear, and refer to those things hours later without the slightest loss of memory. They are storehouses of valuable knowledge—human reference books.

“Others are fed with the pineal hormone to give them psychic and super-normal perceptions. Such men can *see* ultra-violet light, and even radio waves! They can telepathize their thoughts, and read those of the eidetist-sensitive; and they can perceive the answer to a mathematical problem before

it is finished! To explain fully would involve technicalities not understandable to the layman.

“But my greatest results have been with the thyroid-hormone. This substance increases the rare quality of *imagination!* Most of these criminal minds are too coarse for the use, but some few have responded admirably to thyroid feeding. They are my right-hand men in my scientific work. With their help I have been enabled to invent the dozen and one important things which come from this place—including the great Super-Sonic Gun.

“One gland-man in particular is my pet. He responded splendidly to three hormone feedings—the pineal, thymus, and thyroid. As a result he is a peculiar super-genius in certain lines, with a photographic mind, three extra ‘senses’ like the ‘sixth sense’, and a virile, leaping imagination that amazes even me. Furthermore, I have had his parathyroid glands removed surgically, which makes him hyper-sensitive to all stimuli, as the parathyroid-hormone is the only ‘checking’ hormone in the human body. And whenever he fags and becomes enervated, I feed him insulin, which tones up his blood instantaneously, as it does for diabetes. It was he that conceived of a pseudo-magnetic field of force to bend light rays around and past obstructing molecules in solid matter. That resulted in the Invisibility Cloak.”

The baron twisted uneasily around at the mention of the Invisibility Cloak. He still had that indefinable feeling of being spied upon by invisible eyes. The Americans had no Invisibility Cloaks—or weren’t supposed to have any—but suppose they did—

“*Ach!* Are you listening to me, Baron Laiglon, or searching for ghosts?” growled the director, peeved that his words had so little effect on the military man.

THE baron turned slightly as though to answer. Instead, he suddenly leaped sideward.

His hands clutched for empty air in the corner just behind the director. To the latter’s amazement, the baron did not crash his head against the wall, as he feared, but struck something and rolled to the floor. His body miraculously raised; at the same time, his chin bobbed back with a jerk and a welt appeared below his lip.”

The baron’s own powerful fists raised and beat downward, to fall upon something just off the floor with the sound of bone on flesh. Too stupefied to cry out, the director edged back a step and watched the strange scene. Suddenly there was a sharp snap, and immediately a cloaked figure appeared under the baron. The officer leaped back, leveling a pistol with menacing intent.

“*Ach!* An Invisibility Cloak he had—”

“So, a spy!” panted the baron. “Keep your hands up, American dog, if you do not wish to die on the spot!”

James Wistert, facing the menacing pistol, cursed bitterly to himself. To have got so far and then to be trapped like a child!

“You see, M. Bergmann,” said the baron, keeping his sharp eye on the American, “that I was right about feeling eyes on me. I happened to glimpse, as I peered around, a faint human outline in that corner near us.”

“One of the slight defects of the Invisibility Cloak,” said the director as though apologizing. “It can be corrected—”

The baron interrupted. “Let us get our prisoner to a suitable place—a room from which he cannot escape. This will bear investigation.”

“A spy!” screamed the director, suddenly cognizant that his sanctum had been invaded by the enemy. “Shoot him! Kill him—”

“A death he deserves and which awaits him. But for the present we must try to find his accomplice, if any. Call your guards.”

The director hastened to comply, shouting loudly. As though from nowhere, uniformed men appeared, all heavily armed.

“You will give me your gun, *monsieur?*” said the baron politely.

For a mad moment Wistert thought of shooting it out. Then he shook that thought from his mind. The difference between a spy and a soldier was just ability to see when the odds were too great. He parted the overlapped slit in the cloak at his hip and pulled out his automatic, handing it over silently.

At the point of the baron’s gun, Wistert doffed his now-useless cloak. The baron had been clever in ripping loose a wire, instead of merely snapping the switch. It had rendered the cloak useless, and had automatically cut off Wistert’s chance of escape. After some discussion the guards were given orders and Wistert was conducted below to the lowermost level, and locked in a musty, cement-lined room bare of even a chair.

CHAPTER III

Y-44

AN hour later the American spy was thoroughly disgusted. The silence and darkness were getting on his nerves. Suddenly he heard footsteps. The heavy wooden door creaked open. At the same time a glaring beam of light crawled questingly along the wall.

The flashlight beam centered on him, blinding him for a moment.

“*Ach, there he is, the verdamnte Amerikaner!*”

“*Monsieur?*” came Baron Laiglon’s deep voice right after, although Wistert couldn’t see him. “Your name, *monsieur?*”

“Suppose you guess,” responded Wistert laconically.

The baron smiled, and then his voice became suddenly malicious. “He is intelligent, else he would not be a spy,” he said to the director. “He would make an excellent subject for you, *monsieur*. Perhaps he would be an

exceptional gland-man!” His tones hardened. “This place and its secret must never get to American headquarters. I wish to inform you, *Monsieur Spy*, that, in accordance with a time-honored custom, you will be shot at sunrise!”

There was a scraping of shoes and the flashlight beam swung away. “Sunrise will be here in one hour, *verdamnte Amerikaner!*”

And with these words of harsh farewell ringing in his ears, Wistert was left alone.

One hour to live! If only he could die knowing the information he had would be passed on. Priceless information! Possessing it, America could gather her mighty air fleets and hordes of ground tanks, and penetrate to this spot—blast it from the earth.

Wistert tried his last hope, a forlorn one indeed. Putting one finger in his mouth, he rubbed vigorously the side of the tooth in front of his first lower molar. It was an artificial hollow tooth, of white amber, containing a minute apparatus which responded to the static electricity produced by friction on its outside, radiating a faint etheric emanation. It was like a broadcasting radio; any fellow American spy within range—one hundred feet—would, feel an ache in his jaw.

A forlorn hope, for Wistert had tried it several times already during this night. He wondered, as he rubbed diligently, what had happened to Y-44, who had been assigned to this place a month before.

Wistert almost bit his finger as his lower jaw suddenly began to ache. Lord, could it be possible, or was this some hallucination? In another moment he knew better, and with beating heart he crept stealthily to the door. There was a small barred opening in it, and to this he put his ear.

He heard the faintest of footsteps, and then a whispering voice hissed into his ear: “This is Y-44. Stand back; I’ll open the door.”

Wistert’s heart was in his mouth as the key grated noisily. Then the ponderous door

opened.” He heard the panting of the newcomer, then his voice, a low whisper:

“Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner. Knew you were here an hour ago—when you were captured. First chance I had—”

“I’m S-23,” said Wistert eagerly. “I thought, though, that you’d been caught long ago. H.Q. thought so too.”

“It’s a long story,” returned Y-44. “I tried undercover stuff, you see—got in here as a menial, or general servitor. Forged papers, cock-and-bull life history, and all that. But believe it or not, it took me till three days ago to find out anything important. I worked upstairs; never got past the steel door to get down here.”

“Well, now that we both know what we do, we’d better busy ourselves getting it out where it will do some good. Damn Bergmann and his gland-men! Can’t tell what they’ll cook up next, to America’s almighty surprise. That Super-onic Gun alone—”

“But there’s something worse on the way!” interrupted Y-44. “Heard of Bergmann’s prize gland-man?”

“The one with thyroid, pineal, and I don’t know what-all, who dug up the idea of Invisibility?”

“Yeah. Well, he’s working right now on controlled Atomic Power, if you know any physics. He’s getting places too; he has a vortex core—as they call it—of live energy in a lead-screened box. They’re adapting it to long-range transmission. If it works it will disintegrate airships at a hundred miles!”

“YE gods! We’ve got to get away. We’ve just got to! Any suggestions?”

“I’ve got your Invisibility Cloak—took it along when I stole the key to this room from Bergmann’s office. Clipped back the ripped wire-and it’s as good as gold.”

“Why, you’re the goods!” exclaimed Wistert joyfully.

“Ought to be,” sniffed the other. “I’m not Y-44 for nothing. Put it on and follow me.

I won’t need a Cloak because I’ve been recently, transferred to the lowest level, and the guards know me.”

The two spies—only one visible to unwary eyes—crept noiselessly down the hallway outside the room that had been Wistert’s prison, in a darkness broken only by a few faint beams of light from a barred opening in a door at the corridor’s end.

“This used to be a section of storerooms,” informed Y-44 in a whisper. “Unused now, though. See that door? Right outside of it stands a guard. I got past him wearing the Invisibility Cloak, while he was pacing up and down. I think—”

“Yes, I know,” returned Wistert grimly. “You walk out—talk to him For a second; I’ll do the rest.”

Y-44 listened at the barred opening till the guard’s footsteps came close; then he pulled open the door, stepping out.

“Halt! Who’s there?” challenged the guard, whipping put his pistol.

“It’s, I, Dobran,” said Y-44 in perfect French. “Put up your gun, fool. Would you shoot one who wears the service-blue?”

The guard stared suspiciously. “What are you doing in there—how did you get in there, anyway? *Mon dieu!*” His eyes sparkled dangerously. “Is it possible that you were attempting to aid the pris—*uh!*”

The guard instinctively reached for his throat, dropping his gun, as something clamped- viciously about his windpipe.

“Of course I was,” grinned Y-44, as invisible fingers choked the breath from the guard’s throat. Wistert lowered the body only when assured the man would never again call a challenge.

“In there,” pointed Y-44, and Wistert dragged the corpse into the dark hallway they had just come from. “You did a quick job of it, S-23.”

“I would willingly do a dozen more of such quick jobs, if it assured us of escape,” said Wistert grimly. “Now, what’s the

layout?"

"We're in the third sub-level," informed Y-44, "the lowermost, in which are contained all the scientific laboratories. Since our chances of going up through the whole place are practically nil, I suggest we try for the freight depot of this underground factory. It, too, is a sub-surface department, for purposes of secrecy; the freight-planes are taxied under-ground and unloaded there. There is a corridor connection to the depot from this, level—at the other end. But guards are not so numerous down here; we have a good chance."

"Lead the way. If it comes to a showdown, this"—Wistert displayed the gun the guard had dropped to the floor—"will help considerably." He slipped the weapon beneath his garment so that it too was invisible.

Y-44 led the way along the dimly lighted passageways, peering ahead anxiously. Wistert, following ghostlike, noticed for the first time that his companion's dark-blue outfit covered a rather small and slight form. Beneath the tam, also of service-blue, was a delicately molded face—almost an effeminate one. It was hardly the picture Wistert had formed of Y-44, one of America's most trusted agents. Yet brains were more important in a spy than brawn, and that Y-44 was soon to prove.

"ON your toes," whispered Y-44, without slackening pace. "We must skirt the laboratory section."

Wistert gripped his pistol tighter. They passed doorways from which came the whining of dynamos, crackling of arcs, and other signs of scientific activity.

"This way!" said Y-44, leading the way straight into a laboratory. They threaded their way between towering apparatus attended by bewilderingly staring gland-men in denim.

"No guards in this section," explained Y-44, increasing the pace to half run. "These

gland-men—under orders—higher—type—do not require guards—"

Wistert was amazed at the ramifications of the huge laboratory, and at the astounding things spread about in what seemed disorderly array. Denim-clad gland-men—human machines—seemed everywhere, but they offered no resistance; most were so intent on their work that they did not look up.

Passing through an arched doorway that led into a long low chamber filled with great quartz tubes, Y-44 pulled Wistert behind a bulwark of bakelite studded with switches and buttons, then pointed eloquently at the back of the unsuspecting guard. Without compunction Wistert took careful aim and pulled the trigger. Y-44 leaped forward as soon as the man fell, jerking his pistol, from its holster.

As they started forward, a bell clanged loudly. Y-44 turned a grave face to Wistert. "The alarm! I've been expecting it, yet hoping against it. Every guard in the whole place will be on the lookout for us now!"

"How far yet to the depot?"

"Not far—if we can make it!" Y-44 dashed forward recklessly. They plunged into a corridor, raced around a corner. Two guards whirled, guns spitting. Y-44 threw himself flat. Before the enemy could aim again for the one figure visible to them, lying prone, Wistert's gun had spoken twice. His deadly aim stretched the men low with bullets in their brains.

As the two Americans ran past, both paused to reload their pistols from the guards' ammunition belts.

"Better take along some extras," admonished Y-44. In another moment they had supplied themselves, Y-44 filling a pocket, Wistert stuffing the shells in his belt pouch.

No more guards appeared for a time, and the two spies raced down a narrow corridor. Back of them the clanging of the

alarm system died away.

"We're in Bergmann's personal laboratory section," panted Y-44. "Don't think they'll look for us here for a while. Now—"

Wistert brought up his gun as a figure appeared suddenly from a side corridor.

"No—" Y-44 struck his gun aside. "That's him—Bergmann's prize gland-man, the inventor of the Invisibility Cloak!"

"What's he doing here?" demanded Wistert. "Looking for us too?"

"No. He often wanders around the corridors—when in deep thought with his gland-impregnated mind. He's privileged."

He stepped forward eagerly. "I want to talk to him."

"Good heavens, now?" spluttered Wistert. "When every second—"

Y-44 turned on him almost fiercely. "I've planned this for days! I wanted to come here, to meet him! Your coming to this place and getting me in a mess almost spoiled it, but I'm going through with it. If you're eager to get out, go up the steps at the end of this hallway, and turn to the right. It leads to the freight depot."

But Wistert did not take the hint; instead he followed Y-44, who approached the gland-man standing apathetically in the middle of the corridor.

"MORVAINE!" said Y-44, standing directly in front of the gland-man. "Do you hear the loud clanging of the alarm bells?"

The gland-man looked at the spy coldly, as though brought down from some Olympian height of thought. "Alarm bell? That noise! Yes, I hear it."

"It is ringing for us," continued Y-44, speaking slowly and distinctly. "They want to capture us—Bergmann and his men."

A frown came over the gland-man's brooding face. "Bergmann is—"

"Yes, he wants to kill us! Do you know why? Because we are his enemies. We tried to kill Bergmann and now he wants to kill us."

Something akin to interest came into the gland-man's face. A vague emotion was working through his somnolent nervous system—drugged by Bergmann to kill all personal initiative. Wistert, impatient at the strange delay, began to wonder what Y-44 had in mind.

"We tried to kill Bergmann," went on Y-44, "because he wishes to subjugate all the world, and make them all gland-men—make them slaves, as you are!"

The gland-man pondered this. Presently he spoke: "Slave? But I am a great scientist. I am a super-mind!"

"But Bergmann is your master!" cried the spy. "You do as he tells you. You must, or he would kill you. You are a slave!"

The travesty of a rage glared suddenly from the gland-man's eyes. An instinct that Bergmann had almost eradicated worked in the doped mind—manifested itself in clenching fists—man's instinct against personal slavery.

"Come," said Y-44 then. "Must you be a slave, you who have made a vortex of living Atomic Power?"

A strange look came into the gland-man's eyes.

"Must you bow to his will?"—the strange look deepened—"when you have inestimable power in your hands!"—the eyes widened—"You can show Bergmann who is master and slave!"—a deep anger flared—"You can in one moment defeat him"—an eager light now—"by releasing your super-powerful vortex, immediately!"

Y-44 watched the gland-man's face like a hawk. Had the play on subconscious emotions and instincts succeeded in arousing in that human thinking machine a desire for revenge against Bergmann?

"Come," said the gland-man suddenly. "We shall go to my laboratory—and release the vortex!"

CHAPTER IV
The Vortex

SAYING this, he turned about, heading for an open door down the hall. Y-44 made as though to follow, but two strong, invisible hands held him back.

"No you don't," said Wistert. "You're coming with me! Let Morvaine do what he will, but-you and I are getting out."

"No, no! I must go with him; he will forget! Everything depends on this! Let me go—"

Wistert wasted no further words but picked the other up bodily, and ran, for the stairs that led to the freight depot. As he gained the top, he heard the murmur of voices behind them. He set Y-44 down.

"Coming? Or would you like to plow through a few guards? You've done a great piece of work, Y-44. But whether it succeeds or not, it is up to you and me to carry on the way we should—escape and contact H.Q."

Together, then, they ran along. Pounding feet sounded behind them. They gained a door which opened out into an immense drome with great unloading platforms and derricks.

"This way, quick!"

Wistert followed Y-44, who ran toward a huge opening at one end of the drome, toward an auxiliary lift, designed for human freight. Automatic machinery raised the cage at the swing of a lever. Before it had risen ten feet, a dozen guards came scurrying from the drome, guns belching. The two spies threw themselves flat to the metal flooring of the cage, returning the fire effectively.

In another moment, as the elevator rose steadily, they were secure from gunfire below.

"We're safe enough now," said Y-44 panting. "Outside we'll have to take our chances again. You see, I took this way of getting out because Bergmann would not

expect us to try it. He may be a scientific genius, but I don't credit him with much sense of strategy. He no doubt has his main forces combing the upper levels for us."

With quick movements, Wistert suddenly doffed his Invisibility Cloak, extending it toward the other. "I have a premonition, though, that we're going to fall into the arms of a bunch of guards outside. That Baron Laiglon is a wise old buzzard. It's your turn how to be protected by this thing."

"No! I have never worn one; I would—would stumble! You—"

"This is no time to argue," said Wistert. "Put it on." He looked Y-44 in the face with an odd smile. "Besides, what kind of a man would I be, letting you take the greatest risk?"

Y-44 started. "What do you mean?"

Wistert's smile became a grin. "Do you remember, Y-44, when I shot that guard? I heard something resembling a scream from you in the excitement. And, in circumstances like that, men do not scream!"

Y-44 stared for a moment, eyes dilating. "All right," she said finally, "I am a woman. But I insist on taking my share of the risks." Pulling open the grillwork door, she dashed out, pistol in hand.

"You little fool!" said Wistert admiringly as he followed.

Y-44 ran to a door and opened it cautiously. Wistert peered through, to see a giant chamber whose one side was open to the night air. Here it was where the giant commercial craft, loaded with supplies, were taxied to the great freight lift to be lowered and unloaded in secrecy.

"We can't escape on foot," whispered Y-44. "We must gain the open air and then look for a motor-car; or, better, an airplane. If luck is with us, we may find a big Stuttgart outside, waiting to be taken in at daylight, to be unloaded. Think you and I could handle one?"

“Lead me to it,” grunted Wistert.

Y-44 took a deep breath and stepped from the small ante-chamber. The great room beyond was empty, and but faintly illuminated by a few overhead lights. Two hundred yards away lay freedom.

The two spies hugged the wall, making their way toward the large portal to the outside. They were in a precarious position, exposed to gunfire from three directions. Wistert did not breathe easily till they had gone halfway and gained the welcome protection of a bulwark which stood there to break the back-wash of powerful airplane propellers.

Wistert leaped ahead of Y-44 suddenly, and was the first to step from behind the concealing partition. There was a sharp pop and bullet whined past his ear. He jerked back with an exclamation.

“Tough luck,” said Y-44, biting her lip at this unexpected opposition. “How many are there, can you see?”

Wistert was already peering cautiously around the bulwark. “Can’t make it out, but—” He clipped off his words to bring up his right hand. At the sound of his shot there was a short scream from the direction of the open doorway.

Wistert turned hard eyes on his companion. “We’ve got to make a rush for it—our only chance!”

“Let’s go, S-23!”

Wistert gripped her extended hand, looking down into her eyes. As they were about to dash headlong in a wild fight for freedom, a ringing voice reverberated through the place, coming from ahead.

“Messieurs Spies! You are trapped! I await you here with ten guards—here at the door which is your only escape!”

The two besieged spies looked at one another in dismay.

“What do you say, Y-44?” asked Wistert quietly.

The other turned away suddenly to

hide a trembling lip. Wistert expressed a strange desire to take her in his arms and comfort her. Then Y-44 whirled around, face set grimly.

“I say let’s give the baron his money’s worth!”

There was no chance to employ subterfuge or design. It was an open stretch from their position to the portal. There was not a stick or stone to use as temporary protection. It was obvious suicide. Already the first greyings of dawn were lighting up the huge open chamber.

THEY dashed out together, eyes grimly set to spot the enemy when he would reveal himself. Before they had advanced twenty feet, dark figures loomed against the pale sky, limned clearly in the doorway. A volley of shots rang out, and bullets whined by their ears. Sobbing in a deadly rage, Wistert sped forward, withholding his fire till he could make more effective use of it. Y-44 fell a little behind.

Another volley of shots, and by some miracle the two spies were untouched. A tall, broad-shouldered figure leaped forward to meet them. The guards in back, fearing to hit the officer, were forced to cease firing. When no more than a hundred feet separated them, Wistert and the baron stopped short as though at a signal, firing.

Wistert’s pistol barked three times. Something tore at his left shoulder and jerked him half around. But his eyes lighted up as he saw the enemy officer crumple and fall forward.

“Good work!” cried Y-44, dashing past him straight for the massed guards.

Wistert started forward again; he saw the opposing guards again bringing up their guns, taking deadly aim. Wistert was not conscious of the cause, but suddenly he noticed that something strange had happened. The guards were swaying as though caught in a twisting’ wind. Their guns fell from shaking hands; they seemed to be frightened.

Wistert became aware then that he himself was staggering forward drunkenly. It seemed as though the ground were heaving under him. He felt a hand on his shoulder; then an eager voice shouted into his ear:

“At last! I’ve been hoping and praying for it! Come on, S-23, now’s our chance.”

Wistert followed Y-44 just as a terrific rending and grinding noise tore the air to shreds. He saw walls tumbling, ceilings cracking; the floor seemed to squirm as though alive. It was like a nightmare in slow motion. Then they were in the open air.

In the half-gloom, a huge Stuttgart loomed before them. Wistert scrambled in the cabin, half pulled by his companion. He saw as in a daze that Y-44 was in one of the twin pilot seats, darting her hands around. A dull roar sounded ahead. Y-44’s face, a little pale, swung around to him.

“All set to go, S-23. But you’ll have to handle the stick and vanes. It’s a two-man job running one of these monsters. Oh!”—It was a wholly feminine scream—“you’re hurt!”

Wistert pushed her roughly away as she began to rip his coat sleeve. With an immense effort of will he caught his lagging senses, hammered them into alertness with pure mental concentration. He threw himself into the other pilot seat.

He was fully awake now. While the engines warmed up, he scanned the strange controls carefully. Then he nodded toward Y-44, who, to his irritation, was watching him anxiously.

With a roar the huge airplane’s three

motors revved to high speed, and the great ship plunged along the ground. In a few minutes they were climbing.

Then they looked back and down at the place they had left. It was a smoking ruin.

“Were we the only two to get out alive?” Wistert asked wonderingly.

“It’s a miracle that we got out!” cried Y-44. “Those guards a hundred feet away were crushed. It was like an earthquake, more than anything else. Of course, down below it was in reality a tremendous explosion, as the released vortex disintegrated everything around it into flying particles. I doubt if anyone can be alive in any of the sub-levels.”

“And that’s the end of Bergmann’s mad work,” said Wistert thoughtfully. “Betrayed by one of his own gland-men! Well, he had it coming.”

The ship winged its way toward Egypt—and honor for its two pilots—as a red dawn lit up the world below in rosy tints. That same dawn that was to have marked their deaths as spies. The sun rose ever higher.

Y-44 had bound Wistert’s wound as best she could. She turned suddenly to him, a little piqued.

“May I inform you, S-23, that you have been staring at me for one solid hour. What can be so interesting in my grimy face, anyway?”

“I was just wondering,” said Wistert dreamily, “if your eyes are blue or perhaps-violet. That will be my next mission—a private one—but rather important, in a way.”