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THE IRON DUKE

GALAXY
PRESENTS

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TWO men strode hurriedly through the black of the Aldorian night, shadows against the darker shadow of brush along the edge of the field. Beyond them, against the stars, loomed the foothills of the Balkan spur known as Bauchist Range. A sweet tang of spring drifted on the wind they clove, belied by the sharp chill of the passing winter. Far off a train whistled three ghostly notes.

“I’m f-froze!” said the shorter man. “W-Why didn’t you tell me that it was this cold in the B-Balkans?”

“Quit chattering! If a patrol hears those teeth they’ll think we’ve got a machine gun!”

“D-Don’t mention machine guns. They make me think of f-f-firing squads! Gosh, Blacky, aren’t we ever going to get across the fr-frontier?”

“Take it easy, sweetheart. When I stopped running back there, we’d *crossed* the frontier. We’re in Aldoria.”

“Blacky, what’ll we do for passports?”

“We’ll think about that if we meet up with a patrol.”

“Yeah. But we can’t use our own. The Nazi government would extradite us! And it’s too cold to get sh-shot.”

“Take it easy, sweetheart. Hear that?”

The shorter one paused and listened to the nearing hoot of a train and then had to speed up to catch his companion,

who had turned at an angle toward a distant light and was increasing his pace.

As the light ahead grew brighter, other lights about it came into sight, until the railroad station, the only illuminated building in the sleeping hamlet, took definite form. Gravel and cinders crunched beneath their feet as they struggled up the incline to the tracks. About a mile away, the headlight of the locomotive was growing.

“We c-can’t get on that!” said the shorter man. “We haven’t any Aldorian dough! And they’ll ask for our passports, and the Nazi government—”

“Have I ever let you down?” said the taller one crisply.

“No—*yeab!* You said they wouldn’t find out them artillery shells was loaded with sand and that the machine guns had solid barrels until we collected the c-cash, and *now* look at us! Broke in a postage stamp B-Balkan state! Why didn’t you l-l-let us try for the coast, where it’s w-warm?”

“Somewhere around here,” said the other affably, “there will be a grave marked Stub Doyle, unless I hear large quantities of quiet.”

“Okay, Blacky. B-But when I think of that n-nice checkered topcoat back in—”

Blacky Lee stepped off the track and hauled Stub Doyle with him. The chunky mountain locomotive snorted and squealed and rattled to a halt beyond the station, leaving the last car abreast of the two wayfarers. Blacky Lee fumbled with the door and finally got it open. He gave Stub a boost that landed the little fellow asprawl in the vestibule, and then

swung the one grip after him and swiftly followed it himself. Blacky closed the door and motioned along the aisle.

The train was already starting when they found an empty compartment and, shortly after, when the trainmaster glanced in on his way by, his attention was in no way attracted by the passengers therein, curled on the seats.

Stub Doyle, as soon as the menace was past, put his hands on the radiator with a grateful sigh. He was still occasionally convulsed with shivers, but gradually these subsided and he paid more and more attention to Blacky Lee.

Blacky was sitting up again, looking absently through the window at the flying night. He was a handsome fellow, but not in the sense of possessing regular features; his cheekbones were prominent and high, and his brows jutted in such a way as to give his light-colored eyes the impression of being masked. His mouth was pleasant, his teeth even and flawless, and his jaw strong. His ginger-colored mustache was usually neatly trimmed, but never pointed. He had the easy, careless air of the cosmopolitan, and there was something about him that suggested that he commanded any situation in which he found himself. And now, after he had scrambled through briars and creeks, his suit was still obviously from London's Strand. He was plausible and personable, and if, at times, he cared more about making his own laws than following those made by others, his good points still outweighed his bad.

Stub always had an uneasy feeling about Blacky Lee. Stub's state of mind was that of a man watching another holding

a cannon cracker and not knowing just when he'd let that cracker explode. At least once a day Stub wondered why he had ever allowed himself to become associated with as nerve-racking a fellow as Blacky Lee. One never knew what was going on in Lee's mind and never, never knew just when those thoughts would amalgamate with a bang. And sitting there watching Blacky just now, Stub forgot all about how grateful he was for the warmth in the radiator.

Blacky Lee had come out of his reverie and was now, by aid of his reflection in the glass, carefully twirling his ginger mustache into a pair of military points. Stub, who always ran on the assumption that now, at last, he knew everything about Blacky Lee, was sorely jolted by the little container of mustache wax which Blacky was using. Never in all the years he had been with Blacky had Stub known him to carry wax or use wax, and now, with their baggage abandoned in Austria, a thing as nonsensical as mustache wax was here in Blacky's possession! Certainly Blacky was attempting no disguise, for pointing a mustache would be a very weak attempt in that direction.

Stub gave over wondering. He sighed and rested his little round face in his pudgy hands. "There was such a *nice* bottle of anisette in my trunk," he sighed. "Do you suppose I'll ever see that bottle again, Blacky?"

"Probably never."

"And that nice new suit with the yellow stripes—"

"It's probably adorning the porter of the King's Hotel—if his taste in clothes is as bad as yours."

"Gosh! You really think so, Blacky?"

“You’re lucky,” said Lee, “not to have that suit full of holes—with you in back of each hole.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re always telling me how lucky I am to be alive,” sighed Stub. “You pull me through hell and high dives with one of your ideas, and then when we escape on the razor edge of execution you tell me how lucky I am! I’m not complaining, you understand, but sometimes I think my nerves just won’t stand it anymore. Tonight we should have been dining with generals and getting paid real money, but here we are, on a train without tickets, in a country which we didn’t enter legally, without so much as an Aldorian dime or a forged birth certificate!”

“You haven’t forgotten how to use a pen,” said Lee.

“Yeah, but now I haven’t even *got* a pen. Sometimes, Blacky—”

The train came to a screaming halt, nearly throwing Stub into the middle of the floor. He clutched the sill, staring with terrified eyes at Blacky.

“That conductor saw us. The Austrians figured we’d shuttle across the frontier and snag this rattler! Hell’s bells, Blacky, what are we going to do now?”

“Sit tight and hope,” said Blacky Lee imperturbably. “It’s impossible that they could have extradited us that fast.”

“They’d send word that we were in the country without papers,” groaned Stub. “Blacky, I can hear the rats in the dungeons already!”

Blacky was giving the troops outside the window an interested examination. A patrol, booted and greatcoated, was

splashing flashlights along the side of the track and boarding the train at the next car.

“We’re in for it now,” said Stub. “And me without so much as a drink!”

Stub twisted his neck so that he could look up the track at the somber figures of the patrol, and then, when he next glanced at Blacky Lee and saw that a 9 mm Webley showed its snout from beneath Blacky’s folded topcoat, his eyes got big and then narrow. Stub, without sigh or protest, put his hand into his side pocket and gripped the butt of the Colt Police Positive .38 therein. If Blacky was going to make a fight for it even against a large and well-armed patrol, then it would be a fight.

They sat very still, though there was no perceptible change in Blacky, hearing the patrol going through the cars ahead, hearing the complaints of roused passengers who, having had to stay up to pass through the frontier, now thought they were being slightly imposed upon. The search was coming closer, compartment by compartment.

Their compartment door was thrown open by the trainmaster, who consulted his record so as to address the occupants by name and save them as much embarrassment as he could. The trainmaster’s watery eyes came up with a jerk from the record and drilled Blacky Lee.

The lieutenant in charge of the patrol was all business. He had stripped off his great gauntlets and tucked them in his belt, but he had his crop in hand and was cutting nervously at his boots as he waited for the trainmaster to speak up.

“Well?” said the dark-faced lieutenant.

“Your honor,” said the trainmaster, trembling, “I have no record of the two gentlemen in there.”

“Ah!” And the lieutenant, with all the savor of a bloodhound at last treeing his quarry, thrust himself into the room, one hand resting on the butt of his gun.

Stub was waiting for the shot that would start the war. He could see the troopers in the corridor and the dull gleam of their carbines, and he knew how slight were his chances. But he had an accurate bead upon the lieutenant’s greatcoat, third button from the top.

The lieutenant’s smile of triumph suddenly congealed upon his face and then, from the eyes down, there dropped a curtain of fumbling terror. This, in turn, was swept away by a stolid parade-ground expression and looking straight ahead, his heels close together, the lieutenant spoke.

“My apologies, Your Highness. We are searching for one Balchard, leader of the Sons of Freedom, reported to have been on this train. My stupidity, Your Highness, is only that of zeal. May I be granted the favor of remaining aboard and posting adequate guard over your compartment?”

“I do not care,” said Blacky Lee, “to have attention called to my presence aboard the Trans-Balkan Express. You are excused, Lieutenant. Carry on.”

The lieutenant, embarrassed, about-faced and marched out. Angrily he motioned his men from the corridor.

The trainmaster stood blinking and peering, stupefied, and undoubtedly promising himself a new set of glasses, pride or no pride, at the next stopover.

“Is . . . is there anything Your Highness could wish, sire?”

“Yes,” said Blacky Lee. “A bottle of anisette for my friend and a ham sandwich for myself.”

“Immediately, Your Highness.” And he stumbled away.

Stub looked, slack-jawed, at Blacky Lee, finding it difficult to force a question out of his constricted throat.

“Your Highness?” gulped Stub. “He—they called you ‘Your Highness!’”

Blacky Lee smiled enigmatically and slid the Webley 9 mm into his side pocket. The train had started again and he sank back, staring thoughtfully out of the window at the flying night. . . .

Stub was nervous. He lay upon a bed which seemed an acre of silk and stared restlessly around a room in which a company might have drilled. He started convulsively each time anyone passed in the hall. This was the Imperial Suite of the Crown Hotel at the famous spa of Drachen, some sixty kilometers from the capital. People came here for rest cures, thought Stub dolorously, and maybe the place did have a sedative effect—on some. But he was still able to close his eyes and imagine an unwavering line of Nazi rifles, muzzles foremost, with cold, uncaring eyes behind each set of sights. Further, he could not understand just how either he or Blacky could ever again show his face to Winnington Arms Corporation (“From BB Guns to Battleships”) or even run the risk of meeting any representative of that greatly known outfit; for it had been Blacky’s idea to sell on contract, not on commission, and so, in any court of law in any land, Stub Doyle and Blacky Lee owed Winnington Arms Corp. nearly a hundred thousand dollars.

And where could they go from here? Not France, with that confoundedly efficient *Sûreté* all in a lather, what with a war going on. Not Switzerland, where they had amiably separated a banker and his money. Not Italy, with the ghost of “Marc Antony’s treasure” still floating about their names. Not Spain, where they had unfortunately chosen advisory capacities with the late-lamented Loyalist forces. Not Turkey. Not Russia—Oh, those tractors!

He had to lie there and suffer, for Blacky Lee was in a jovial mood. Blacky would say that such popularity was a certain indication of their true worth. Blacky would point out with a pleasant finger that they were marooned completely in the Balkans, having no egress therefrom without crossing land wherein they had made such a charming impression that they would be detained endlessly. Blacky would point out the silken draperies, the lovely little angels that were flying around chain-fashion on the ceiling, the gold trim on the bureaus and the thickness of the rugs, and bid him be gay. Blacky had already done that, but it had not kept Stub from suffering through the whole of a long day. Blacky would give out no information, but Stub knew in the depths of his soul that Blacky Lee was about to haul him through further hell and high dives, and that he, blindly following, would again have visions of firing squads.

As a respectful knock sounded upon the door, Blacky reared up from his bed, put on his big dark goggles and called, “Come in.”

An effeminate, smirking little man minced into the room carrying a small box. Behind him came assistants, each one carrying a larger box.

“Does Your Highness wish a further fitting?” said the little man. “We have had to accomplish this in such a hurry that I am very afraid that you will not be wholly pleased.”

“No more fussing,” said Blacky. “Get out!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” And the little man directed the boxes to be put down and then backed himself and his assistants out, closing the door softly behind him.

Stub groaned and relaxed.

Blacky took off the dark goggles and began to tear the boxes open. Stub dumbly fixed his eyes upon the window, through which he could see the dying sun. How could he know but that, when next he saw it, he would be back to a wall?

Presently a gratified mutter came from Blacky Lee. He was standing before a full-length mirror surveying himself in a suit of tails, turning a little this way and that.

“Not like London,” said Blacky, “but . . . it will have to do.”

For a moment Stub felt a pang of envy. He wished he could look as swell as that in clothes. And then he was shaken by new alarm.

“You’re not going out to dine!”

“Why not?” said Blacky.

“But whatever the hell you’re up to, you might get caught! Maybe you’re using hypnotism on these guys, and maybe you have gotten us to this place and put us in the royal suite and got some clothes, but there’s a limit even to *your* luck!”

“Get dressed,” said Blacky.

“I’m scared. I don’t talk this Magyar lingo like you do.”

“Magyar?” smiled Blacky. “Well . . . talk French. That’s it. You’re a famous French physician.”