

Captain Hazzard in...

The
CITADEL
of **FEAR!**

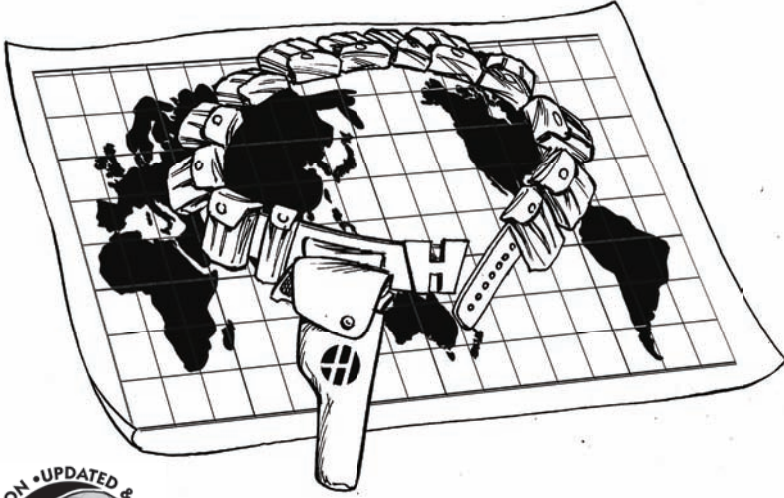
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CORNERSTONE BOOK PUBLISHERS



CAPTAIN HAZZARD #2: THE CITADEL OF FEAR

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An Airship 27 Production
www.airship27.com

Published by
Cornerstone Book Publishers
New Orleans, LA
www.cornerstonepublishers.com

Associate Editor: Ilena George
Cover © 2010 Laura Givens
Interior illustrations © 2010 Rob Davis
Re-design by Rob Davis

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ISBN: 1-934935-66-2
978-1-934935-66-8

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Contents

<i>Flight Into Terror.....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Sky-Pirates.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>The Psychic Scream.....</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>A Dire Warning.....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>The Returning Dead.....</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>The Hidden City.....</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>Aftermath.....</i>	<i>54</i>
<i>The Reluctant Traitor.....</i>	<i>61</i>
<i>The Wickedest Man.....</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>The Dead Man's Warning.....</i>	<i>74</i>
<i>The Chase Begins.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Airport Assault.....</i>	<i>88</i>
<i>Randall Captured.....</i>	<i>94</i>
<i>The Dragon's Lair.....</i>	<i>99</i>
<i>The Pretty Stowaway.....</i>	<i>104</i>
<i>Theater of Horror.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Flying Into Danger.....</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>The Blue Dome.....</i>	<i>126</i>
<i>The Green Dragon.....</i>	<i>133</i>
<i>The Fate of Martin Tracey.....</i>	<i>140</i>
<i>A Battle of Wills.....</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>Hazzard Strikes Back.....</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>Unleashing the Beasts.....</i>	<i>158</i>
<i>The Race.....</i>	<i>165</i>
<i>Final Flight of the Black Cloud.....</i>	<i>171</i>
<i>Circe's Escape.....</i>	<i>177</i>
<i>AFTERWORD-Citadel Pals.....</i>	<i>185</i>

Chapter One

The Frightful Forest

There was fear in the woods. The two intruding human hunters didn't sense it. Not at first. Still, the horror was there, creeping, watching and waiting. Unknown to both men, something terrifying lurked in the shadows beyond those deep tangles of ivy and oak.

And no birds were singing.

"So quiet here I feel like I'm in church," whispered Redman Kane, duly impressed by the deep silence.

"You city fellers just ain't used to the woods," Albert Olsen snorted. "Probably grizzlies nearby, that's why things've got so still."

Redman Kane smiled at his guide, suspecting full well that Olsen was right. Kane was just a big city writer from New York where he was paid good money, two pennies per word, to fill double columns of fiction between the lurid covers of a plethora of monthly adventure magazines. It was true that he was, in fact, an amateur to the woods, but that was the entire point of the trip into the forest glens of the Rocky Mountains, to get a taste of some real-life escapades with which to flavor his future yarns.

"You mean the bears might actually be that close to us?" Although not by any means a nervous man, Kane couldn't help but glance anxiously all about them.

Olsen cocked his head knowingly.

“You’ll never see ‘em unless they wanna be seen,” he conspicuously lowered his voice. “Besides, might just be wolves instead. Or a mountain lion. Nothin’ we can’t handle.”

Redman Kane could see the man wasn’t kidding and he clicked off the safety catch of his newly purchased, and never fired, high-powered rifle. The blue steel suddenly felt particularly cold and heavy in his grip.

The forest had indeed utterly hushed. Only the faint itchy rustling of a chilled breeze through the brittle pines relieved the oppressive lack of sound.

“Careful with that thing,” Olsen frowned at Kane. “And keep in mind what I taught you back at the truck: We’re the ones in charge out here, not these dumb animals. If you’re scared, they can smell it and use it against you.”

“I’m not afraid,” Kane mumbled back at the grizzled woodsman. “I just don’t like being unprepared, that’s all.”

Olsen eyed the writer, finally shrugging, unworried.

“The slugs in that rifle makes you all set for anything. And it makes you boss, too. Remember that.”

Redman Kane nodded grimly and they pressed on, deeper into the dark green shadows of the forest. His heart was pumping and his breathing quickened, but he was not afraid. This was, after all, a genuine adventure. He could already imagine how easily the words would flow from his typewriter. He always sought a perfect tangible atmosphere in his stories, and he didn’t see how this one could fail. Was he apprehensive by his eerie, isolated surroundings? Of course. Excited? Absolutely.

But he wasn’t frightened. Not yet.

Olsen was a craggy-faced, barrel-chested man in his late fifties. Weathered and seemingly tireless, he looked like he could best any nine out of ten men in a New York City alley thirty years younger, and Redman Kane had no doubt that Olsen could actually do just that.

Kane, thirty-six years old himself, was in better than decent shape for a man bred to city life. He had caught his rustic host glancing inquisitively at him every few dozen yards ever since they’d left that rusted old truck on a lonely mud road hours ago. Olsen seemed to be

sizing him up. Finally the older man grinned and half suppressed a stifled laugh.

"I reckon yer tough enough, after all," the woodsman winked.

For the first time since paying Olsen his fee as a guide, Kane began to relax a bit in the company of the other man.

"Just trying to keep up."

"Aw, yer doin' fine. We should stop here a few minutes, anyway," Olsen shrugged. "Need to get our bearings."

The hunter consulted a pocket compass at some length, then, satisfied, took a swig of something sour-smelling from his canteen.

"Right on track," he winked again. "Due north. We should see some action soon."

Kane leaned against a fallen log and sipped some water. Olsen's sudden talkativeness had made him a bit more comfortable, though he doubted they had much in common.

"So," the woodsman wiped his mouth with a flannel cuff. "You say yer a writer? What kind of books have you done? Maybe somethin' I've looked at?"

"I don't know," Kane managed a friendly smile. "I write mostly for the adventure magazines. I've had quite a few spy stories and crime yarns published. Also done a few scientific romances, you know, rocket ships and wars on other planets, that kind of thing."

Olsen studied him for a long minute.

"Ever do any Westerns? I like them stories best."

"Sure," Kane nodded. "Not so many yet, though."

"I don't cotton to that outer space stuff," Olsen sniffed disgustedly. "Bunch of nonsense. Come on. We're burnin' daylight."

They walked on, continuing the northerly direction as earlier indicated by Olsen's pocket compass, with the creeping silence continuing with each careful step.

Kane's eyes darted to every nook and corner of the forest gloom, but nothing stirred. Nothing stared back, so far as he could see, although he developed a growing apprehension that they were spied upon. No bears, wolves, nor mountain lions revealed themselves, and Olsen could find no trace of their spoor. Among the trees was a definite deathly hush.

Suddenly, it seemed to writer Redman Kane of New York City

that he and his guide might have truly been the only living creatures within the whole surrounding wilderness. But that couldn't be so. There must've been rabbits, squirrels, and birds, multitudes of them, present in abundance. Even so, the men hadn't seen even a single breathing animal for hours. The woods just couldn't be completely void of creatures. That was unthinkable, impossible.

Little did he realize that the impossible was starting to close in all around them.

It was about midday when both men noticed that their watches weren't working. Albert Olsen snapped his timepiece angrily from his thick wrist and tossed it into the underbrush. Kane had already seen some evidence of his guide's quick temper when they were unloading the truck, so such a fit came of little surprise.

However, the writer was quite unprepared when the hunter's disgusted growl abruptly softened to a low hiss of unmistakable alarm.

The older man had apparently seen something that had startled him, something that was behind Redman Kane.

Kane turned and followed the woodsman's gaze, but saw nothing. Olsen had reached out and touched a gnarled old oak, running his slightly trembling palm across its soft patch of moss.

"This can't be." He finally muttered in disbelief. "It just ain't right. Ain't right at all."

Redman Kane also examined the same moist green space on the bark. "I don't see anything wrong," he admitted.

Olsen turned a bit red, then became quite pale.

"You don't git it, do you?" Olsen spat. "You city guys are real smart, ain't you? Don't you see? The moss is growin' on the wrong side of the tree. But you wouldn't know that, would you?"

The hunter stamped away, then whirled and stomped back again. His eyes were wild.

"Listen — now my compass ain't workin', just like our watches," he snapped through tobacco-stained tightly clenched teeth. "We've been goin' in the wrong direction for hours. The map inside my head is worthless. We're lost, Mr. Adventure Writer. That's what we are. And I'm never lost, plain and simple!"

Kane said nothing as Olsen leveled his rifle at the surrounding trees and slowly spun in a full circle. In the space of just a few mo-

ments the tough, skilled hunter had taken on the spastic manners of a trapped animal.

He suddenly gripped Kane by the sleeve and urged him on.

“Somethin’ is mighty wrong,” he declared, his eyes shining with sudden tension. “C’mon. Let’s git!”

They wandered on for quite some distance. Whether they were headed out of the forest, or deeper into it, was either man’s guess. The thick canopy of ancient intertwined branches effectively blotted out the sun. Their direction would remain a mystery until the men could vacate the deep woods.

Albert Olsen no longer said a word, although his wild darting eyes spoke volumes. Surely he must have been overreacting, Kane mused. They were indeed lost, but that was but a temporary problem that would, sooner or later, be corrected. They had water and some dried food. And they had their high-powered rifles. The situation hardly seemed to warrant such apprehension.

From a branch high above, a great horned owl silently spied upon the two men below. Redman Kane’s own stirring uncertainties might have gained a new and ominous momentum had he himself laid eyes upon the bird. Indeed, closer observation might have revealed the owl as no ordinary forest denizen. Its piercing yellow orbs were unblinking, relentlessly following every movement of the men, monitoring their presence, and seemingly recording their progress.

Just then it happened, quite unexpectedly. The two men were only a few steps away from the despotic confines of the wooded labyrinth. Their eyes squinted, smarting from the daylight despite the heavy overcast of thunderheads. A static electric-charged breeze tasted crisp, seemingly tinged with an odor of metal. The fine hairs writhed on their necks, and Kane felt his own skin start to crawl. There was something different about the air, something almost unearthly.

The instant Olsen trudged out into the unnatural glen, followed briskly by Kane, the strangeness made itself corporeal.

There were great bristling shapes awaiting the hunters. A legion of grizzlies loomed before them. Dozens of the beasts, posed like shaggy red-eyed sentries, utterly silent, scarcely seemed even to breathe.

Both men gazed in disbelief. Olsen spat out profanity and shouldered his rifle.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Kane gasped. “There must be thirty of them, at least. We can’t shoot them all!”

Olsen’s eyes rolled in absolute terror. Shoving Kane roughly aside, he dashed back into the shadow-haunted woods, leaving the adventure writer alone. Kane heard a shot ring out through the trees. A second shot. And another. Then nothing more.

The beasts continued their dispassionate stare. Abnormality grew as they rose, machine-like in unison, to their hind legs. Each of them towered nearly two-men-high. Redman Kane didn’t wait for what might happen next.

He scabbled backward wildly through the trees, falling once, then awkwardly sprang to his feet as if in a mad race.

“Olsen! Olsen — for God’s sake--!” his cries were piteous.

His guide had vanished as if he were never there.

Kane put on speed, rushing through sharp vines and branches of thorns. Suddenly he fell again, slipping in something wet and sticky. His boots were slick with some of kind of thick fluid from a syrupy trail that he hadn’t noticed on the forest floor. It was like nothing he’d seen before.

Parched and bleeding, Kane paused to catch his breath, darting about himself with wild glances through the darkening columns of pine and birch. The bears hadn’t followed him, that was pretty obvious. Still, he felt certain that something was watching him, keeping track of his every action.

What had happened to Albert Olsen? There wasn’t a trace of him anywhere. No tracks. No blood. Nothing.

Kane glanced at the rifle still clutched in his grip. He laughed humorlessly to himself, dimly realizing, under his cold sheen of sweat, that shock was overtaking him. He couldn’t continue much longer this way.

His mind must’ve cracked. Obviously, that’s what must have happened. Must be some kind of nervous breakdown. He’d known this kind of thing to happen to lots of men in his profession. The stress could be brutal at times. Perhaps, he mused almost mildly, he wasn’t really in the woods at all.

It was the self-assurance of his own mental instability that helped Kane cope with the miraculous vision suddenly before him. He thought he'd noticed the phenomenon a few times in the last few moments, but had dismissed it as a trick of the forest gloom. Now he saw it more clearly.

It was the most monstrous grizzly he had ever seen, towering a full twelve feet high, its powerful frame shaking the sturdy trees as it pushed through them like a juggernaut of claws and fangs.

Its coat was a dark rich brown, blending in with the lengthening shadows that seemed to be swallowing the world. Kane blinked, rubbing his eyes in disbelief, praying he was only imagining the monster.

Then it was upon him, a hellish killer with small, merciless eyes that looked upon him as something insignificant to be swatted under foot. A powerful arm descended on him and he wondered what death would truly be like.

The claws struck...

Redman Kane was dead before he could scream.

But—his adventure was just beginning.



A powerful arm descended on him and he wondered what death would truly be like.

Chapter Two

Flight Into Terror

Dr. Martin Tracey pushed his way through the terminal of the Van Nuys commercial airport, clutching his suitcase with one hand and his gray fedora with the other. A larger-than-usual crowd had gathered almost dead center of the busy terminal to ogle the arrival of yet another cinema ingénue. Being five feet-ten inches tall, the handsome young surgeon could see easily over the crowd. He caught a glimpse of a fur-clad cutie with platinum blonde hair and a figure to give Coke bottles competition in the packaging department. The blonde was surrounded by newshounds and cameramen popping flashes faster than you could say, “Miss DeMita, this way please.” Then pop, another flash. Tracey made a wide circle around the fans and mildly curious travelers to zone in on the Blue Skies boarding gate located at the opposite side of the huge complex. Sure enough, the flight crew was in the process of boarding passengers. He hurriedly increased his pace.

Standing at the end of the line, looking very whimsical, was a lanky, middle-aged bald gentleman in a rumpled, brown tweed suit, sporting rimless glasses and biting on the stem of a small, briarwood pipe. He was a man used to white lab frocks and not business attire.

Professor Washington MacGowen greeted his associate with his usual

good humor. “Good morning, Martin. I’m glad you could make it.”

“Hey, it wasn’t easy,” the dark-haired healer grinned, his features alight with boyishly handsome charm. “It’s not polite to leave a lady before breakfast.”

“Ah, yes,” the older man nodded. “The symposium’s social coordinator, Miss Caldwell. I take it the two of you had a pleasant evening.”

Tracey grinned from ear to ear. “Let’s just say, I look forward to our next scientific conference with great relish. Ha.” He patted his friend, and associate, on the arm and followed him through the exit door. There a young man, in the uniform of a Blue Skies attendant, took their tickets, one way to New York with stopovers in Denver and Chicago, and ushered them along. Outside, the line of twenty civilian passengers was led, ant-like to the mobile stairs leading into the belly of a parked, DC-3, twin-engine, commercial airliner.

Tracey, who enjoyed flying lots more than the academic MacGowen, gave the sleek, silver craft the once over. Of course it was nothing compared to the Silver Bullet he was used to traveling in, with his cousin, the famous adventurer—Captain Hazzard. Both Tracey and Professor MacGowen were members of Hazzard’s elite team back at Hazzard Laboratories situated in Long Island, New York. It was to this ultra-modern, scientific research facility they were returning after having been spent the past week in sunny California.

Both Hazzard, and his mentor, MacGowen, valued the importance of staying abreast of scientific advances. These were days of marvelous achievement in all fields. It was vital to Hazzard that he and his crew stay up-to-date with the latest discoveries. Although, not a scientist, per se, Tracy’s medical background legitimately qualified him to attend seminars dealing with both medical research and biological studies.

Twenty minutes later, after getting their clearance from the control tower, Blue Skies Flight 38 taxied down the runway and lifted off into the powdery blue heavens, heading due east by north-east.

The interior cabin was cramped but cozy, and once airborne, Tracey stretched out his legs, the advantage of being in the first row, turned to Wash and said, “Wake me when we get to Denver, old man.”

An hour into the flight, MacGowen glanced past his sleeping friend to look out the circular portal. At an elevation of 16,000 feet,

they were practically skimming over the majestic Teton Range of the Rocky Mountains. Some of these massive, blue-gray, mountain peaks climbed to heights of 14,000 feet. MacGowen always marveled at their sight, each magnificent spire a testament to the raw power of nature. The aircraft pumped up slightly, and he sat back in his seat. With shifting winds playing havoc on the jet streams here, turbulence was a regular part of flying this particular route. The understanding of that particular fact made no noticeable difference to his nervous stomach. Wash preferred having his two feet solidly planted on terra firma.

Digging into his jacket pocket, he found a packet of mints and popped one into his mouth. As the ingredients in the tasteful candy began to work its effects on his stomach, he took the morning newspaper out of his briefcase and opened it on his lap. Readjusting himself in his padded seat, he lifted the front page and began to read. It was on page three that he found the article that grabbed his full attention.

Professor of Electrical Engineering, Gustoff Boreman was reported as having vanished from his Atlanta, Georgia, home two days ago. His friends and colleagues at the Broadhurst Institute for Scientific Advancement were convinced foul play was involved. The article went on to say that Boreman, a man happily married for thirty years, had left his home shortly after nine o'clock in the morning, climbed into his automobile and drove off as he had routinely done for the past decade. The Institute was a ten minute drive away from his home. When he failed to appear by noon, his staff called his home, only to discover from his wife that he had indeed set out hours earlier. The authorities were immediately called. The following day the professor's sedan was found, abandoned, on a backwoods road thirty miles outside the city limits. No ransom note had been delivered nor any other such clue been uncovered to explain the reason behind what the police were investigating as a matter of criminal abduction.

MacGowen folded the paper and slipped it back into his leather case. His mind was racing with the facts he had just learned. Not because it was a particularly bizarre or horrible event, but because it had been repeated several times before in the preceding months all around the globe.

The first noted scientist to vanish without a trace was Ellingston

Carter, from Cambridge in England. A molecular engineer without peer, Carter had supposedly failed to return from a holiday in Paris. That was six months ago. Then two months later, Dimitri Kormovsky, a leading chemist from St. Petersburg, vanished from a railroad sleeping berth on an overnight trip to Moscow where he was to conduct seminars. And finally, just two weeks ago, Dr. Hiyashi Sokama, a mathematician from Japan, supposedly disappeared from an ocean liner on its way to Hawaii. His mysterious disappearance had been written off as a supposed accident, since without a body, the Honolulu police assumed he'd somehow fallen overboard and drowned.

Three of the most respected leaders in their respective sciences all gone without a single shred of evidence left behind. And now, MacGowen realized, he would have to add Professor Boreman to the list. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes gently, closing them to relax his thoughts. Fortunately, he was not the only person aware of these mysterious disappearances and the implications they hinted at. Captain Hazzard had brought up the matter shortly after the Kormovsky case made the papers. Always alert to the international scene, the world-savvy Hazzard was concerned there was a link between the disappearances. Enough so that he began his own private inquiries via his overseas contacts. When the news of Sokoma's disappearance reached them, Captain Hazzard became very concerned and agitated. He suggested that Wash and Tracey cancel their western trip, but MacGowen argued against it. He felt confident nothing would happen, and that they were still basing their apprehensions on unrelated incidents. No matter the similarities. And, as he reminded his famous protégé, he would have Martin Tracey along for added protection. A former college boxer, Hazzard's cousin was really a formidable scrapper when the chips were down.

Reluctantly Hazzard conceded, and the trip went ahead as planned.

But now, en route to the familiar safety of Hazzard Labs, Washington MacGowen's doubts were piling up fast. Boreman was number four. What were the odds that four renowned scientists would all vanish within months of each other? No, this was no coincidence by any stretch of the imagination. Hazzard had been right in his assumption. There was a dark force at work here, cunning and ominous. But why,