

The Black 13



By Ellery Watson Calder

He laid his last five-spot on 13—and a lovely girl claimed his winnings! What did she know of the grim secret that made him a hunted fugitive?

I LOOKED at my last five-buck chip. If I lost it, I'd be plenty broke. I hesitated. Then I said, "What the hell!" and slapped the chip down on a black square that was numbered with a big 13.

The Mex *croupier* flipped his little ivory ball. It ran around the top rim of the wheel. Then it clicked downward. I held my left ventricle.

The wheel slowed. The Mex *croupier* said, "Thirteen wins." He counted out thirty-five blue chips, shoved them out into the middle of the roulette table.

I reached for the pile. One hundred and seventy-five simoleons looked big to me. Maybe Lady Luck was with me after all!

And then a good-looking red-haired dame alongside me said, "I beg your pardon. That was my bet." She reached out under my nose and raked in the stack of blue chips.

I stared at her. If she'd been a man I'd have poked her in the snoot. But she wasn't a man. She was a girl—a young girl. And she was damned attractive. Her hair wasn't exactly red; it was auburn, with glints of gold in it. Her eyes were greenish, and they had flecks of gold also.

The rest of her was a complete knockout. She was wearing an evening-gown that didn't leave much to the imagination. It was slashed plenty low in front, so that I could see the creamy crevice between her round, hard young breasts. Her curving hips were the kind you'd like to pat.

She gave me a cold, haughty glare. Her expression was as insolent as go-to-hell. I grinned at her and said, "Sorry, sister. My mistake." I turned and strolled out of the Casino, into the soft warm night. I set fire to a gasper and wondered what the devil I'd do now.

If I'd had the price of a quart of Scotch. I'd have tried to get drunk. And if I hadn't hocked my return ticket to San Diego I might

have taken a chance on slipping back into the States. Even though such a move would probably have meant jail. After all, a guy gets three square meals a day in the hoosegow.

I HEARD somebody coming up behind me in the darkness. I turned. It was a girl. It was the red-haired wren who'd cabbaged my thirty-five blue chips. She looked at me and said, "You're Steve King, aren't you?"

I grinned and said, "Not for publication."

She said, "I know all about you, Steve King. You were a pilot on the Trans-American Air Lines. You washed out your ship over the desert near Victorville—killing three passengers. You were accused of being dog-drunk at the time. The Department of Commerce inspectors would have you in a cell right now—if they could find you."

I flipped away my cigarette and said "For a youngster, you certainly know one hell of a lot."

She laughed. It was a musical laugh, but there wasn't much mirth in it. She said. "I know more than that. I know a few things that even you don't know, Steve King. For instance. I know that you weren't really drunk when your plane crashed on the desert. Somebody poured a pint of gin down your throat while you were unconscious, after the crack-up. And I know what caused that crack-up, too."

I looked at her. "What caused it?" I whispered quietly.

She said, "Somebody filed almost through your control-wires, just before you took off from Glendale."

I took a deep breath. She'd told me some things I'd been wondering about— things that had puzzled me plenty during the past week. I said, "What's the game, baby? How about giving me the low-down? I think I can use you in my business."

I had an idea in the back of my head as I spoke. If this dame knew so much, maybe I

could take her before a board of inquiry; maybe her testimony would put me in the clear!

She shook a decisive negative. "No, you can't use me in your business," she said softly. "But, maybe I can use you in mine." Then she reached down into the low décolletage of her dress, fumbled between her firm white breasts.

She brought out a wadded roll of bills. She handed them to me. She said, "Here's your money. I laid claim to your bet so I'd have an excuse to talk to you later."

I took the money. I envied that wad of greenbacks. They'd rested in a place where I'd have liked to put my hands. I said, "Thanks. And now maybe you wouldn't mind telling me what this is all about."

She said, "Are you staying here at Agua Caliente?"

"Why not?" I shrugged. "It's a good a place as any—while the dough holds out."

She looked into my eyes. Then she said, "I want you to come up to my hotel room at eleven o'clock tonight. The Caliente Hotel. Room 314." Then her voice changed, grew grim and somehow warning. "But don't get any funny ideas, Steve King. Because I'm not that kind."

"You'll be as safe with me as though you were in the arms of your mother," I told her.

She sniffed. Then she turned and went back into the casino. I watched the lithe, feline grace of her hips as she walked. Her smooth flesh rippled under the tightness of her evening gown. I liked that.

I WENT into the bar and killed time with some Scotch highballs. Pretty soon it was eleven o'clock. I walked over to the hotel and went upstairs Room 314. I knocked.

The door opened. The auburn-haired girl stood aside to let me enter. Then she closed the door and locked it.

I looked over. My heart bounced up and down like a cage full of loose rubber balls.

She had discarded her evening-gown. She was clad in a flowing diaphanous negligee. Black crepe it was, and her white body showed through it like a Turk's dream of paradise.

I've seen a lot of legs in my time, but none like this girl's. They were gorgeous. So were her firm, heavy breasts. So were her lips, her eyes, her hair. She was perfect. She wasn't wearing a single stitch under that black negligee.

She said, "When you've finished inspecting me, you can go and hide in that closet over there." She pointed.

I looked at the closet. Then I looked at the girl "What kind of shenanigan is this?" I wanted to know.

She said, "There's a man coming here in ten minutes. When his back is turned, I want you to bat him over the head. Then we'll take him down the fire-escape. I've got a coupe parked near. And there's a plane waiting at the landing field. You're to fly us back over the border."

I went toward the door that led into the corridor. I said, "No, thanks. I'm in plenty dutch already. You'd better get another boy."

Her blue eyes widened. "You—you're backing out on me?" She came toward me. Maybe it was an accident and perhaps it wasn't, but the front of her negligee gaped open. I saw more than a generous hint of her pink-tipped, cream-white breasts. She came close to me, touched my arm with her fingers.

I got quite a thrill out of that. I looked into her eyes, tried to fathom them. I wasn't quite sure whether she was giving me the come-on stuff, or whether she was just trying to suck me into a jam. There was one way of finding out.

I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against me. I kissed her. While I was kissing her, I pulled her negligee all the way open and fondled her breasts with my hand.

She backed off and slammed her clenched fist into my mug, as hard as she could paste

me. A little diamond ring on her finger split my lip. Her eyes blazed; her bosom heaved up and down. She said, "You lousy rat! I told you I wasn't that sort. Now—get to hell out of here!"

She was mad clear through. And I was glad. Because now I know she was on the level. I grinned and said, "I was just testing you, baby. I was trying to find out if you'd play."

"You found out!" she rasped. "Now get out. I can do without you. I don't need you."

I said, "How about the guy you want slugged?" I went toward her, tried to reason with her.

She backed off. She opened a bureau drawer. She flashed a wicked-looking roscoe at my guts. She said, "Get out—before I let atmosphere through your liver!"

I GOT out. She slammed the door in my face. I heard a choked sob from the other side of the door.

I went downstairs. I was worried. That girl had trouble on her mind—had wanted me to help her. And I'd fozzled my chance.

I went out of the hotel, walked around toward the back of the building. There was a fire-escape. It led up past the red-haired girl's room. I knew she was going to have a guy in her room pretty soon. A guy she wanted cold-cocked. But how in hell she was going to manage it by herself was beyond me.

"She's going to need help," I told myself. I reached up, grabbed the lowest rung of the fire-escape, pulled it down. I started climbing.

Pretty soon I was outside the auburn-haired wren's bedroom window. The shade was drawn: but there was a narrow edge of light at the bottom, where it didn't come quite to the sill. I peered in.

The girl was sitting on the edge of her bed, waiting. Her eyes looked suspiciously red-rimmed. Her lower lip trembled.

I heard a soft knock. The girl sprang to her

feet, opened the bedroom door. A guy came in.

He was olive-dark, and he wore a pointed moustache. He was tall and powerfully-built—almost as big as I am. He grabbed for the girl. He kissed her. She didn't seem to mind. She pressed herself against him. His hand fumbled over her hips, through her thin negligee. That made me sore, for some reason or other.

I heard him say, "God you're sweet!" Then he kissed her again.

After a while she broke loose from him. She said, "How about a little drink, Leo?"

"Sure!" he grinned at her.

She turned her back to him, went to her bureau, pulled out a bottle and two glasses. She was facing me, although she didn't know it. I heard her say, "Did you bring . . . those plans?" He grunted. "Yes. I brought them." I saw her reach into the drawer pull out a tiny vial. She poured some colorless liquid into one of the glasses. Then she filled both glasses with whiskey.

She turned, handed one of the drinks to the olive-skinned guy. It was the one she had dumped that colorless liquid into. I caught the play. She was handing him a Mickey Finn.

He took the drink, raised it to his lips. Then, suddenly, he lowered it untasted. "Just to be sure, my dear," he purred silkily, "suppose we exchange drinks?"

The girl stiffened. So did I. I knew she was in a jam—and I couldn't see how she was going to wiggle out of it.

But she was game. She exchanged glasses with the mug. As she raised the doped whiskey to her mouth, she half, turned. I saw her make a move to pour it on a potted fern.

But the dark-faced guy was watching her in the bureau mirror. He leaped to his feet, grabbed her savagely. "Damn you!" he rasped. "Just as I thought. You were going to double-cross me—!"

She tried to scream. He smothered her

mouth with his palm. He ripped at the negligee, clawed it away from her naked breasts. He drew back his fist to smash it into those trembling, creamy hillocks—

I smashed myself in through the window, leaped at the guy. My hands went around his throat. I throttled him.

His face got red. He gasped for breath. I tightened the pressure of my fingers around his throat. I shook him.

He went limp. His knees sagged; I lowered him to the floor. Then I doubled my fist and slugged him on the jaw, to make sure.

I turned to the white-faced, auburn-haired girl. I grinned and said, "Well, you needed me after all!"

"Th-thank you!" she whispered faintly. Then she went to her knees beside the outstretched olive-skinned mug and fumbled at the inner pocket of his coat. Her hands came out with a small leather folder. She opened it, stared at its contents.

"They're all here!" she cried. She leaped to her feet, faced me. "You—you'll help me take him to the plane? You'll fly us north?"

I said, "Yeah. I'm in so damned deep now I might as well go the whole route."

"I'll get dressed!" she breathed swiftly. In her haste, she probably forgot that I was watching. I saw her nearly naked body—and it did things to my arteries. Her breasts were like white melons, gloriously rounded and soft-looking, and her flat, deeply-indented tummy made my hands itch to touch her.

Her rounded hips—well, I almost lost control when she turned her back to me and dived for the closet where her dress was hanging.

SHE had laid that flat leather case on the bed—the case she'd taken from the olive-skinned guy's pocket. While her back was turned to me, I picked up the thing and examined it. There were some folded papers inside. I don't know what made me do it, but I

sneaked the paper out of the case, slipped them into my coat pocket.

I whipped out an old letter of my own, shoved it into the case. I tossed it back to the bed, just as the girl turned.

She had inserted her lovely legs into a brief, provocative step-in that was fringed with naughty black lace. She was struggling with the snaps of a brassiere that cupped her overflowing voluptuous breasts. She fastened the snaps; drew tissue-thin chiffon hose up over her delicious legs; slipped her tiny feet into high-heeled pumps.

She wriggled into a dress. Then she turned to me. "Grab that guy and come on!" she spoke sharply, excitedly. She snatched up the leather case.

I picked up the dark-faced fellow's unconscious form, slung it over my shoulder. The red-haired girl went ahead of me to the window. She threw a leg over the sill. Her skirt went up. I saw a flash of white thigh topped by an edge of black lace. Then she was out on the fire-escape, descending into the black night.

I went after her, with the unconscious guy still over my shoulder.

When I got to the ground, the girl was already behind the wheel of a coupe. She had the motor going. I dumped the mug she'd called Leo into the machine and scrambled in after him. I slammed the door. The coupe shot forward.

I said, "Don't you think it's about time you were telling me something about this business, baby?"

Her face was set in purposeful lines. "All right. I guess you're entitled to know," she spoke softly. "It all started when your plane smashed on the desert near Victorville"

That almost floored me. I said, "What—?"

She nodded grimly. "There was a Government agent aboard your plane. He was carrying a certain formula back to Washington—the formula for a new and

deadly poison gas." For a single instant she turned to me. "Did you ever hear of the Black Thirteen?" she asked me.

I said, "Yes. I bet on it tonight and you grabbed my chips."

I saw the ghost of a smile hovering around the corners of her kiss-inviting mouth. "That's what gave me the hunch to ask your help," she admitted. "I recognized you as Steve King the pilot of the plane that had crashed. The coincidence of your playing the black thirteen at roulette—and winning—made me do . . . what I did."

I said, "I don't see any coincidence."

SHE stepped down on the gas, tooled the coupe out toward the flying-field. "The Black Thirteen is an organization of international spies," she told me tersely. "They knew about the Government agent being aboard your ship; knew he was carrying the new poison gas formula. They filed your controls, caused your plane to smash on the desert. The Government agent was killed. Members of the Black Thirteen were following in another ship. They landed by the wreckage of your plane, stole the formula from the dead body of the Government messenger, poured gin down your throat and got away."

I stared at her in frank amazement. I said, "How in hell did you learn all this? Who are you, anyhow?"

Moisture glistened suddenly in her blue eyes. "My name is Yolande Carteret," she whispered faintly. "The Government man was Ted Carteret. He was my . . . my brother." Her shoulders sagged. "Ted had told me he feared some mishap; told me about the Black Thirteen. When I heard that Ted was . . . dead, I—I started out to trail his murderers; started out on my own hook."

I whispered, "Good God! You poor kid!"

"I traced the Black Thirteen here to Mexico—to Aqua Caliente," the girl went on.

I scraped acquaintance with the leader of the band. His name is Leo D'Issay—the man we've got here in the car with us. I pretended that I, too, was a spy—a free-lance. I learned that D'Issay still had the formula; was negotiating with several foreign powers. He intended to sell it to the highest bidder, I—I vamped him . . . lured him with my b-body. He fell for me. I persuaded him to double-cross his associates. Together, we planned to get away with the formula, sell it, settle down together in some South American country.

“And you were all set to slug him and get the plans away from him?” I said.

Yolande Carteret nodded.

I said, “But now that you got the leather case—why bring D'Issay along?”

“I want to turn him over to the authorities. I want him to hang for the murder of my brother!” she flared vengefully. And at that moment she swung the coupe into the dark, unlighted entrance to the flying-field.

“You've a plane here?” I whispered.

“Yes. I chartered it after I met you in the Casino,” she told me. She braked the coupe to a slewing, tire-screeching halt.

I started to get out. A masked hombre jammed a roscoe into my belly and said “Reach. Reach high!”

I reached. Out of the tail of my eye, I saw three or four beefy-looking birds grabbing at Yolande Carteret. She tried to scream. They gagged her. A hand dipped down into the bosom of her dress ripping the cloth. I saw red. But I couldn't do anything with the muzzle of an automatic boring into my upper bowel.

Over the red-haired girl's muffled gasp, I heard a masculine voice, “Yeah—here it is! Here's the leather case with the formula in it!” They snatched the case from Yolande Carteret's bosom.

Then two of the gang picked up Leo D'Issay's limp form, carried him forward into the night. The others prodded at me, shoved

the red-haired girl along beside me. We stumbled toward a dark hangar.

MY brain was racing. I knew that we had stumbled into the hands of Leo D'Issay's spy-ring; that we had been captured by the Black Thirteen. In some way, they had got wind of D'Issay's plan to double-cross them; had ambushed us at the last minute.

We reached the unlighted hangar. One of our captors snapped on a single light. I saw the trussed, gagged figures of two flying-field attendants. The Black Thirteen had evidently overpowered them; were now in full possession of the field. My heart sank.

One of the masked men faced his fellows. He spoke, in a thickly guttural, Teutonic accent. “We shall kill D'Issay and these other two, ja? Then we take the airplane and fly north, nein?”

“Nix!” a voice rasped. “Bundle all three of them into the ship. We'll dump 'em out after we're five thousand feet up. We'll drop 'em over the desert. They won't be so easily found that way.”

“*Sehr Gut!*” the Teutonic accent replied. “Load them in!”

Many hands laid hold of a big, tri-motored cabin ship, wheeled it out onto the tarmac. My heart squeezed a little when I saw that the crate was the same type I'd been flying on my transcontinental run. I wondered . . .

On the floor, Leo D'Issay stirred feebly. He was just coming out from under the effects of that throttling I'd given him—the throttling, and the crack on the jaw I'd added for good measure. One of the masked men leaped at D'Issay, smashed the butt of an automatic against his skull. The spy-chief sagged back again, once more unconscious.

He was lifted, shoved into the capacious cabin of the big ship. Then Yolande Carteret was pushed inside the plane; and finally, I felt myself prodded into the cabin.

Nobody had thought to switch on the

ship's cabin-lights. In the gloom, I seized a desperate opportunity. My hand dived into my pocket, extracted one of the sheets of paper I'd taken from that flat leather case back in the red-haired girl's hotel room. As I passed a seat, I slipped the paper into a pocket in the chair's padded back—a pocket that contained water-proof paper bags. Every passenger plane carries them for air-sick passengers.

My movement went unnoticed. The masked members of the Black Thirteen were all in the cabin now. One of them climbed forward into the pilot's room. I heard the moaning sound of released inertia starters. The ship's three radial Wasps coughed and barked into roaring life. The man at the controls revved his motors expertly.

I sank into a seat. Across from me, one of the gang held a roscoe trained at my wishbone. Ahead of me, Yolande Carteret was similarly guarded. She turned white, stricken features toward me. She said, "I—I'm sorry I got you into this, Steve King—"

I sneered at her and said, "Nuts, baby! I don't need your damn' sympathy. Save it!"

She shrank back as though I'd whaled her across the face. Her eyes widened. I gave her a raucous horse-laugh. She turned from me; tried to cover her exposed breasts where prying fingers had torn her frock. Her shoulders slumped.

I felt an aching lump in my throat. She was so damned, pathetically wistful. . . . But I had a part to play. I couldn't tip my hand by showing my real feelings for her. I heard the triplet Wasps roar suddenly. The big ship rumbled and bumped across the field, gathering speed. Abruptly the bumping stopped. We were off the ground!

IN the sound-proof insulated cabin, the roaring motors were only a droning whisper. I leaned toward the masked guy who was guarding me, I said, "So you birds figure on dumping the three of us overboard, do

you?"

He said, "*Ja*. Yes." He was the mug with the Germanic accent.

I grinned in his face and said "That's too bad. Because if you bump me off, you won't have that gas formula!"

He stiffened. His little, pig-like eyes glared at me through the slits in his mask. "What do you mean?" he rasped. His automatic raised. Its black muzzle looked ready to cough in my face.

I made my voice sound steady, casual. I said, "You think you've recovered the formula. You think you've got it in the leather case you took from this dame." I gestured toward Yolande Carteret. "Well, you haven't!"

He gasped, fumbled in his pocket, withdrew that little leather case. He opened it. I saw his heavy jaw drop. "*Gott verdammte!*" he roared.

In front of me, the auburn-haired girl's eyes widened. I leered at her. "Surprised, eh, baby? You didn't know I'd double-crossed you, did you?" Then I turned back to my masked guard, I said, "You see, you haven't got the formula. I've got it."

He leaped at me, bore me backward. I let him. I didn't put up any fight. I felt his thick fingers delving into my pockets. He grabbed out some papers, stared at them. "So!" he rasped. "Here is the formula! *Gott*—it iss a good thing I found them before we dropped you!"

I laughed and said, "You haven't got all the formula. There's part of it missing. And without that missing part, your half isn't any damned good. Now what do you think of that?"

THE other members of the Black Thirteen were crowding close now. A mutter went up from them. It sounded vicious, threatening. I looked at the auburn-haired Carteret girl. Her eyes bored into mine, coldly, disgustedly. I

traded sneers with her. Then I faced our captors. I said, “Well, boys, suppose I make a deal with you.”

“You will tell us where iss the missing paper, or we kill you right now!”

I shrugged. “Go ahead. But if you do, you’ll never find that missing formula-sheet. I didn’t bring it with me. And after I’m dead you’ll never find it—not if you search till hell goes into the refrigerator business!”

Hard hands grasped at me, shook me. “Where is that paper?”

“I’m not telling—until I have your word you won’t bump me off. I don’t give a damn what you do with D’Issay or this red-haired skirt. But I want assurance that I’ll get out of this mess alive—and with a cut of the profits!” I grinned.

Yolande Carteret gasped. “You—you’d sell me out—like that—!”

I said, “Sure I’d sell you out. You don’t spell anything to me, baby. It’s *my* neck I’m looking out for!” I put plenty of venom in my voice. It evidently went across with the masked men. They muttered among themselves.

Then the guy with the Teutonic accent said, “Very well, *mein Herr*. We agree to your terms. Tell us where the paper we can find, and we promise to gif you a share of the proceeds,”

I said, “Let’s go forward. I don’t want this dame listening when I tell you what I did with it.” I stepped boldly toward the front end of the cabin.

The Black Thirteen followed me. I leaned toward the masked Teuton, put my lips against his ear. He was listening so hard he forgot about keeping his roscoe in my kidneys. That’s what I’d been hoping for. I drew a deep breath. Then I yelled, “To hell with you!” into his ear. I yelled it so loud that he jumped backward. And as he jumped, I twisted the automatic from his hand.

I leaped behind him, used him for a shield.

His companions sprang at us. Every one of them had a gat. “Shoot him! Kill Heinrich if we must—but *get Steve King!*” a voice rasped. And with that, hell tore loose.

A crashing inferno of flame and sound and bullets filled the cabin. I felt a dozen lead slugs into the shrieking figure of the masked man who shielded me. He slumped. I held up his body. Then I started firing.

I fired deliberately, slowly. I didn’t have any bullets to waste. Before me two men crumpled and pitched forward with holes through their skulls. I took careful aim. I didn’t want to hit Yolande Carteret, who crouched in the rear of the ship. I drew a bead full on the heart of a masked, leaping spy, I pulled the trigger. My man went down, wailing weirdly.

The remaining members of the Thirteen were fanning slugs at me as fast as they could shoot. Hot lead whistled past my ear. I felt the plane lurching suddenly; felt it drop into a sickening dive—

“Good God!” I rasped in my throat. They’ve killed the pilot! *We’re going down out of control!*”

I blasted loose with my remaining bullets. Four masked figures sprawled down. But there were four left—and my automatic was empty. . . .!

THEY struggled toward me. I raised my voice. “Stop where you are!” I grated harshly. “Your pilot’s dead! We’re due to crash in another minute! Maybe I can pull us out of the spin— if you give me the chance! Take your choice. Let me get to the controls— or we all die together!”

The masked four hesitated. They glared at me. Then, “Go on—save us!” they shouted wildly

I said, “Throw down your guns!” They obeyed. I yelled to Yolande Carteret “Grab a gat, baby! Keep these mugs covered!”

She sprang forward, picked up a roscoe,

herded the masked spies back. Then I hurled myself up forward into the pilot's room.

There was a slumped figure over the left side of the dual controls. He had a bullet-hole in the back of his head. I flung myself into the right-hand side of the pilot's cabin, grabbed the wheel, kicked hard at the rudder. Below me, the moon-drenched earth was rising, whirling—

I smashed at my port throttle, gunned the roaring Wasp. I twisted the wheel, jerked it back. The big crate shivered and shuddered under me; began to flatten out of its dizzying spin. I felt my landing-gear brush faintly against some tree-tops . . . and then I pulled the ship's nose upward, fed soup to all three motors. Cold sweat ran into my eyes. I felt sick, nauseated. We had missed a crack-up by bare inches.

I drew a deep breath. Then I reached for the radio transmitter, switched it on, flung a message into the night. . .

WHEN I set the big ship down at San Diego, the cops were waiting. They took D'Issay and the remaining four members of his Black Thirteen off to the calaboose. And when they had gone, I turned to Yolande Carteret.

I smiled at her. I said, "Now you know why I pretended to double-cross you, don't you, my dear?"

She looked into my eyes. "Y-yes," she whispered faintly. The torn neck of her frock gaped open. I saw a hint of swelling white breasts. I touched them, tentatively, with my hands; explored their creamy-white, velvety surface. . . She melted against me.

I said, "Do you know you drive me nuts, Yolande? Do you know I'm screwy about you?"

She smiled at me, tremulously. "What—what are you going to do about it, Steve?" she whispered.

I grabbed her, kissed her parted lips. "Plenty!" I told her.