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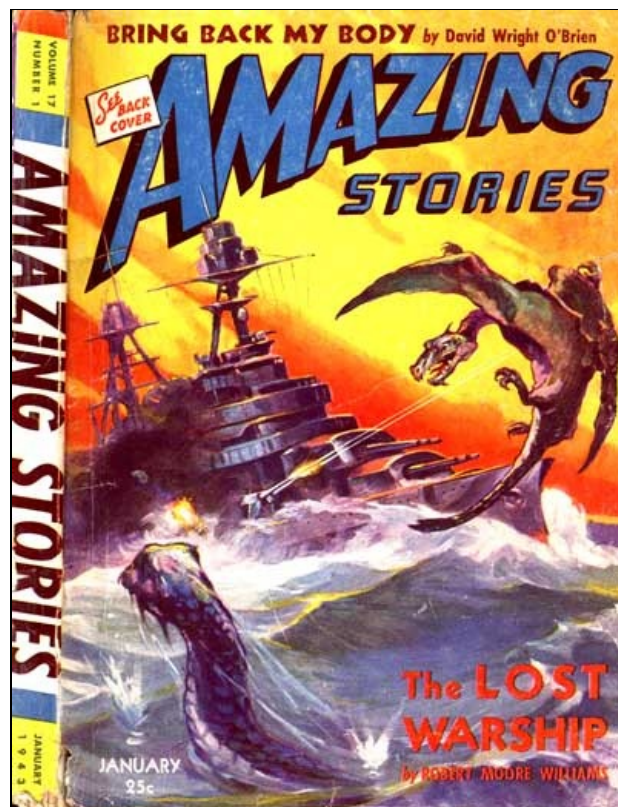
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK QUEEN OF THE FLAMING DIAMOND \*\*\*

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QUEEN  
OF THE

# FLAMING DIAMOND

by LEROY YERXA

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The Owl Limb Night Club was crowded with smoothly gowned women and paunchy men as Owner George Lardner approached the hanging "mike" to announce the midnight attraction. At Lardner's appearance "Puffy" Adams nudged his well-dressed boss in the ribs and whispered thickly.

*There it was, in a night club, the biggest diamond in the world. Why was it here when a whole race depended on it for existence?*

"Come on, Jim. Let's get out of here."

Jim Drake lifted a tousled head from the smooth linen. He gazed at his right hand man with a washed-out expression.

"Huh?"

"Puffy" Adams stood up slowly. His coat was wrinkled and creased across his powerful back. He pulled it down impatiently and rubbed a warm hand across his face. Looking down at the unsteady figure of Jim Drake he grunted. Three crooked teeth that seemed at odds with the world, appeared coyly against "Puffy's" lower lip.

He was accustomed to this old routine. Placing both hands under Drake's armpits he lifted. Jim came to his feet with a surprised gurgle.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "Wanta' see dance."

Puffy Adams pushed a thick arm around Drake and steered him across the floor between the tables.

"Special feature tonight—diamond of mystery...." The night club owner was still talking, his voice drowning the murmur of voices and tinkle of glasses across the big room. "Sylvia Fanton—girl from nowhere—!"

Puffy struggled onward under the almost dead weight of his boss. Drake was trying to hold back.

"You gave me orders to take you home at midnight," Puffy protested, "and, 'Cinderella' Drake, home you go."

He succeeded in dragging his charge up the three low steps that led toward the coat room. A silvery crash of music drowned out Puffy's voice with the suddenness of striking lightning. He dropped his arm from Drake's waist and pivoted, surprise on his broad face. Something weird and lovely about the sound turned them both toward the stage. His chin dropped in delight. This wasn't Lardner's usual nightly feature.



**She went into a weirdly sensuous dance....**

They watched with hypnotized eyes as the girl's slim body twisted and swayed from between the bright shower of curtains. It wasn't the girl that caught Puffy's gaze. Cupped in her slim hands was the biggest diamond he had ever seen. The gem was skillfully cut with the perfection of a Tiffany. From its multi-faceted sides a million sparks of rainbow fire quivered and danced through the room. The shadows seemed to come alive and burn under its presence.

Puffy gasped loudly.

"Shhhhh!"

"It ain't true," Puffy said. "A paste if I ever stole one."

Blake leaned on the low rail that bordered the dining room. His legs were spread wide, body balanced unsteadily with firm-gripped hands. George Lardner had picked a winner this time. Clothed in ankle-length silver cloth, she wafted across the floor lightly as a breeze. Sylvia Fanton was a light, floating angel of beauty. Her hair was raven-black drifting to her waist and the eyes, dark as her hair, seemed caught in worship for the precious stone in her hands. She hardly danced yet the smooth torso, the swaying hips held her admirers fixed.

A sigh of longing escaped Drake's lips.

"Wunnerful," he breathed.

"Yea!" Puffy was still watching the great gem. "Not real though."

"Perfect as a dream," Jim Drake went on, not hearing.

"Perfect phony," Puffy insisted.

Drake swung around unsteadily.

"Who you calling phony," he lisped angrily. "That's girl's wunnerful."

He staggered and collapsed against Puffy's barrel chest.

"Home for you," Puffy decided.

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**H**e retrieved Drake like a sack of spuds and placed him carefully on his feet.

"We're going out." He took a last look toward the dance floor and pushed his boss through the curtains toward the outer lobby.

The music behind them stopped. The lights in the dining room blinked out and a woman screamed somewhere in the darkness. Adams didn't wait to find out what had happened. He pushed Drake along the hall toward the coat room. Beside the tall youngster, Adams assumed all the importance of a harbor tug heaving away at an ocean-going liner.

Mary, the checkroom girl, was waiting. When midnight brought Drake from his whiskey, the girl had learned to expect a lavish tip. She looked at Puffy with a puzzled smile.

"What's wrong in there?"

"Revolution," he answered shortly. "Light went out. Lardner probably forgot to pay the light bill."

Jim Drake fumbled uncertainly in his pocket and brought out a numbered ticket.

"Coat please," he said stiffly. "Coat please!"

He waved the ticket under Mary's nose.

She took the stub quickly and returned in a minute with a woman's silver fox cape. It was a lavish, deeply rich fur.

"How long since you started wearing these things?" she asked and pushed it across the counter.

"Hey!" Puffy grunted. "That ain't ours."

Drake clutched the fur protectively.

"Here—here," he cried. "My coat. Just grew whiskers. My coat just the same."

Before Adams could stop him, Drake was lurching toward the door and into the waiting arms of the doorman. Puffy tossed a bill on the counter and Mary's eyes popped a fraction.

"We'll bring it back when he sobers up," he said quickly. "Must have got the wrong number."

"Thanks!"

"Forget it." He went toward Drake and the grinning doorman. Rescuing his drunken charge. Adams helped him across the walk toward the car.

"Come on, Cinderella. You got a date with the sandman."

Somewhere down State Street came the mournful howl of a siren.

"Whee!" Drake waved the fur in the air above his head. "Fire—want to go to fire."

---

A crowd of patrons were pouring from the club behind them. With a quick push Puffy deposited Drake in the streamlined coupe and rounded the rear tires on the run. He jumped behind the wheel and turned the key. Sirens were whining in close now.

The door slammed and a girl landed squarely on Drake's lap.

It was the dancing girl, Sylvia Fanton. Her face was flushed brightly with fright.

"Whee!" Drake shouted gleefully. "The Angel herself. Where's the Tiffany?"

He threw his arms about her slim, silver-clad waist and planted a popping kiss on her cheek. The flat of the girl's hand caught his face, hard. Drake sobered a degree.

"My jacket!" her voice was strained and tense. "Please! I must have it at once."

Drake was interested. His pale eyes started to show fight.

"Sure!" he said. "But it's *my* jacket."

The sirens were dying now. A powerful police car shot to the curb behind them. Puffy's eyes narrowed and he drove the coupe away from the club smoothly.

"Too hot around here," he said to no one in particular. "Can't stand the smell of copper's feet."

Sylvia Fanton's dress was badly ripped on one side. The silken stocking and smooth flesh of her thigh was visible through the tear.

"Please!" There were tears in her cold eyes. "I *must* have the jacket. It *is* mine, you know."

Drake was coy.

"Aw," he insisted. "I had a ticket for it."

She slipped between them, her arm around Drake's shoulder. Realizing that he was drunk, she tried a different approach.

"Now what would you do with it?" she asked sweetly. "You would look funny wearing a silver fox jacket. You'd be just an old fox."

Jim hesitated. Then he slipped the jacket from his arm and around her soft shoulder.

"I'll make a deal with you," he suggested. "Let us take you home and you can have the old animal."

---

or the first time his eyes were clearing enough to get a really good look at the girl at his side. He started to wonder vaguely how she had gotten here. She was small and her tiny face seemed almost cupid-like to his uncertain vision. Her eyes were frightened like the eyes of a timid animal.

"Okay!" Puffy said sharply. "You've made a bargain. I ain't driving all night. Where to?"

Her voice snapped out sharp and cold.

"Nowhere. Stop right here."

Jim Drake chuckled.

"Wait a minute," he stammered. "Be a sport. You promised."

He looked away for an instant, trying to shake some of the fog from his head. When he looked back the girl was gone. There between them on the seat was a small silver fox.

He shook his head dazedly and groaned.

"They got me," he moaned. "Stop car. I got to...."

Puffy took his eyes from the road. A sharp oath escaped his lips. The brakes squealed as he felt sharp teeth settle deeply into his wrist. Howling with pain he twisted the coupe to the curb.

The fox released its grip and leaped gracefully over the door into the street. It was gone, weaving swiftly like a small dog through the straggling crowd. It went out of sight quickly into a nearby alley.

"Holy Ned!" Puffy held a bleeding wrist in his good hand. "I'm getting this way from *being* with you."

Jim Drake's lips quivered strangely and he turned pale.

"I wanna' go home. Don't wanna' see anyone. No one, understand?"

Puffy nodded, but Drake persisted brokenly.

"Fox woman, that's what she is. Darned old fox woman wouldn't play fair...!" His lips murmured off into something Puffy couldn't understand.

---

Long shafts of sunlight split the obscure shadows that had hidden Jim Drake's room for the past twelve hours. Drake turned over carefully in bed, groaned and reached for the full glass on the table.

"Puffy!" His voice arose in shattering crescendo across the stillness of the rich apartment and crashed against the door. "Puffy—it's me. Take these damned rocks off my head."

Adams opened the door and came forward with a sly grin on his face.

"Okay—Okay." He was impatient. "I'm coming, Cinderella."

Drake swallowed the contents of the glass in a single gulp and stretched out with a sickly grin.

"That was a wonderful dream I had last night," he said weakly. "Remind me to call Walt Disney."

Adams went across the room and drew open the curtains. A two o'clock sun slipped into the room and Drake hid himself hurriedly in the pillow.

"Turn out that damned light," he shouted. "Now—about that fox woman. Walt Disney oughta' pay...."

Puffy had braced his feet and placed his stocky arms behind his back.

"It wasn't any dream," he said calmly.

"Yea, I know. I was drunk."

"It wasn't a dream," Puffy said stubbornly. "That girl you saw really was a fox. At least she turned into one. Oh! Damn!"

He tossed the morning paper on the bed.

"Read what the *Star* had to say about your dream," he said. "They got the story straighter than I did. We took a lady for a ride, Cinderella, and she turned into a silver fox."

Drake sat up stiffly. The foolish look of surprise was gone. He reached for the *Morning Star*. In huge headlines he read:

## DARING HOLDUP AT NEW NIGHT CLUB

## World's Largest Diamond Stolen From Under Eyes of Police

Sober as a lord now, Drake sent his eyes wavering along the column of newsprint:

Chicago, May 6.—A group of daring jewel thieves last night stole the Lardner diamond, largest gem of its kind in the world, from beneath the eyes of an armed guard.

The stone was a perfect cut, pronounced priceless only last week when it was first seen by Tiffany experts.

George Lardner, the owner of the Owl Limb, one of the city's newest night spots, had taken it from a private vault to display in a special dance.

Miss Sylvia Fanton, who danced with the gem has also disappeared, but Lardner insists that she was well known to him and could have had no hand in the robbery.

This story is feasible, as the gown Miss Fanton was wearing at the time has been discovered badly torn in a State Street alley. Murder of the dancer is suspected.

---

Drake tossed the paper across the room.

"Rubbish!" His eyes were clear and snapping now. The night of adventure was thrown from his mind. "It couldn't happen, Puffy. We were seeing things."

Adams picked up the *Star* carefully, thumbed toward the last page and held the news sheet where Drake could see another, much smaller caption.

"Look at this," he begged. "You'll sing another song."

Jim took the sheet again, as though afraid he *would* believe the impossible. This story was short, and wedged in at the bottom of a last page.

### ZOO OFFICIALS CAPTURE FOX RUNNING WILD IN CITY STREET

Captured while trotting calmly down a State Street alley early today, a perfect silver fox has found its home at Wildwood Zoo.

Keepers chuckled when asked for a statement to the press. They expect a fox farm to place a claim on the valuable animal within twenty-four hours.

The fox was in perfect condition, with a deep, rich black coat, tufted with snow white tips on each hair.

The Mayor has already offered to convert the pelt into a cape for his wife, should an owner fail to claim the animal.

Jim Drake shuddered.

"I was drunker than I had any business being last night," he said finally. "Did it all happen, what I saw?"

Puffy Adams grinned woefully. He drew his arm from behind his back and displayed a clean, bandaged wrist.

"I got teeth marks an inch deep in my wrist," he said. "What do you think?"

Drake was out of bed in one bound. He pulled his slippers on hurriedly.

"Plenty of hot water for a shower?"

"Coming up!"

Puffy retreated toward the bathroom door. Over his shoulder he asked.

"Going to the zoo?"

"I'm crazy," Jim admitted. "But if they found a girl's dress a block from where we parked, and there's a silver fox at the zoo this morning, I want to know why."

Puffy's stout figure was hidden behind the glass door. Water started its inviting swish from the shower. His voice came out with a hollow ring.

"Well, Cinderella," he said whimsically, "we're on the make again, but the odds are against us. If that dame can bite my arm and turn into an animal in the same night she'll make a hell of a mate for Jimmy."

Drake was already halfway across the room, knotting the sash of his robe with long brown fingers.

"It's the call of the wild," he shouted above the hiss of the shower. "We all have to answer it some time."

---

Half way out of town Jim Drake drew the coupe skillfully to the curb and turned off the motor. He had parked opposite the city library. Drake felt much better this morning. The sobering effect of the *Morning Star* had made a new man of him in short order. Dressed neatly in a brown sport suit, clean white shirt and white shoes, Jim looked his type perfectly. Young bachelor with cash to burn, yet with a certain dissatisfaction in himself that had etched little wrinkles around the clear brown eyes.

He pushed the door open and tapped Puffy Adams lightly on the shoulder. Exhausted from the events of the night before, Adams was cat-napping peacefully.

He sat up stiffly under Drake's touch and his face reddened.

"Huh?"

"This is where you get out," Jim grinned. "You're going to do some reading this afternoon."

Puffy was dumbfounded. His only association with the printed page was the *Morning Star* and the *Police Gazette*.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "Don't I get a look at that fox?"

Jim piloted him skillfully from the car.

"Look up a book on gems," he said. "I want to know how big the largest diamond was that has been found to date, where it came from, and if they've ever been found in the far north."

Adams gulped, saw that the boss was sincere and started to turn away. Jim halted him.

"After that, go down to police headquarters and see what you can dig up on George Lardner."

Puffy's chin stiffened.

"It'll be dirt," he said. "This boy Lardner comes from an old line of dirty wash. He's the heel of the family shoe."

Jim Drake nodded.

"That's what I figure," he agreed. "But I want all the facts."

Adams pivoted, took one look at the imposing granite building in which he was about to trust his tender body and with a shake of his head mounted the long flight of steps.

Jim Drake stepped hard on the accelerator and sped away toward Wildwood Zoo.

---

Once on the grounds he had little trouble finding the section of open air cages that housed the small animals. Wildwood was built with a complete lack of eye appeal. Down a tarred path he passed through tangled brush and approached a short line of ugly wired cages.

The silver fox was crouching at the rear of the last cage. She stood up as he came near and started to trot slowly back and forth in front of him. Looking around carefully, Drake saw that he was alone. Afternoon crowds had long since deserted this uninteresting section.

His imagination told Drake that there was something feminine about the smooth motions of the animal's body. The black eyes were pleading—Sylvia Fanton's eyes.

"Please," the girl in the car had said. "I must have the fur."

The walk was deserted. He leaned over the fence and said softly.

"Sylvia—Sylvia Fanton."

The fox continued its restless pacing.

Drake doubted his own sanity. If anyone heard him standing here alone, talking to an animal... He shook his head in disgust and started to turn away.

From the corner of his eye he caught the sudden flash of smooth, human flesh. Whipping around, eyes wide, Drake was sure that for a fraction of a minute a lovely nude girl appeared in the cage where the fox had been. *It was Sylvia Fanton*. A flash of nude limbs molded breathtakingly, snatched at his breath. Warm pleading eyes, full rich lips that seemed to cry beseechingly.

"Help me. You are the only one...."

Then the vision was gone. The silver fox stood silently in its place, head bent forward. Jim Drake suffered all the emotions of a man about to go mad. He knew it was all a crazy dream, and yet... Last night he had been drunk. Now, here in the harsh light of late afternoon it had been so real.

Hurried footsteps crunched loudly on the tar walk. He slipped quickly out of sight into the brush that grew beside the fox cage. Feeling like a fool, Jim waited. The heavy slouching figure of George Lardner heaved into sight. One of the keepers, trimly uniformed, was at his side. They stopped before the cage and engaged in hurried conversation. The keeper nodded several times and Lardner passed him a bill.

"Tonight," Drake heard him say in a low voice. "Make sure it's unlocked."

They were gone up the little incline when he stepped out on the path once more. Drake had been forced to make a decision.

---

**I**n spite of his addiction to the bottle, Jim Drake's body was hard and supple as he raced toward the car. Digging around in the trunk he brought out a sharp file. Thank God for Puffy Adams and his early safe cracking days. Returning to the cage he made sure no one was about. The door was a strong affair behind the inner building, hidden on the side of the hill. He started to file hurriedly on the Yale that held the bolt in place.

The fox came toward him and sat down patiently just inside the door. Its eyes never left his face as he worked. The curve of the lock separated and with a quick motion he tossed it from him. The animal came out swiftly as he opened the door. It trotted at his heels and they kept to the underbrush, running toward the car.

Pushing the door open with shaking hands, Drake said, "In—quickly, and stay on the floor."

The beautiful animal leaped and settled close to the floor boards. Drake rounded the car and in a minute they were purring swiftly toward the main highway.

From behind him somewhere in Wildwood Zoo, a sharp cry of alarm went up. His theft had been detected. In five minutes the roads to town would be blocked by police patrols.

Jim's forehead wrinkled into tight furrows. The coupe was doing eighty-five. With one hand he reached down and petted the fox's smooth head.

"You snap at me," he warned, "and I'll send you back to your cage."

A warm tongue touched his hand softly.

The police sirens were dying now, and he breathed with relief as they passed the city limits and swept into heavy traffic. Slowing down a little, his forehead smoothed out and a sly smile swept across his face. Fifteen minutes later Drake eased the car into the alley behind the apartment hotel.

There was no one on duty at the freight elevator. With the silver fox in his arms Drake made a hurried entrance and shortly they reached the private floor of his apartment. He placed the animal carefully on the floor and with his key opened the door.

Puffy Adams was stretched across the bed. His eyes opened with a jerk at the sight of Jim's passenger, and he drew himself toward the safety of the far end of the bed.

"Well," Puffy said hesitantly. "If you go for this kind 'a thing it's okay with me. Just keep that four-legged Dracula away from me. No more blood-letting this week, please."

Jim ignored him. He locked the door swiftly and turned on the fox.

"You can come out now," he said. "It's safe here."

---

**T**he animal crossed the thick rug with a bound, pounced to the bed with a stealthy spring and curled into a little ball of fur. Its eyes closed and it was motionless.

"I'll be damned." Drake slouched down in the leather chair beside the cocktail table and dragged out a much smoked pipe. "That's gratitude for you."

Puffy gazed with growing respect and admiration for the faults of the insane.

"I suppose," he suggested, "that you expected that pint-sized bundle of fur to kick one foot, toss off her coat and do a snake dance right here in the bedroom?"

Drake sat motionless. Smoke drifted in lazy circles around his head.

"What about the diamonds?" he asked. "Get any dope?"

Adams edged carefully away from the bed and glided safely away from the sleeping fox. He dipped a slip of paper from his wrinkled pocket and started to read mechanically.

"Largest diamond came from Africa—weight one pound and a quarter—didn't get the name of it, because I couldn't pronounce it anyhow." He looked up anxiously. "Is that enough?"

Jim put the pipe away carefully.



"For brevity," he admitted. "It's perfect. But it will do."

"So?"

"From what I saw of that diamond last night," Drake continued, "it must have weighed at least two pounds. Perfectly cut and yet by no one in this country. Puffy, we've a perfectly swell mystery on our hands."

"And the fox?" Adams added, with a suspicious look at the drowsy animal on the bed. "What in hell's bells made you bring it here?"

"George Lardner," Drake said slowly.

"*What?*"

"Lardner was at the zoo this afternoon," Jim explained. "He paid a large sum of money to make sure he could steal the fox tonight. If Lardner wanted it that bad, what could I lose?"

He didn't mention the sudden vision of Sylvia Fanton he had seen, haunting and lovely in the cage.

"So he thinks Sylvia had the rock?" Puffy's face awakened with new angles.

"So do I," Drake admitted. "At least she knows a lot about it."

He jerked upright suddenly, caught by the sudden movement on the bed. Adams wheeled, his eyes following Jim's.

"Holy Ned!" he shouted. "The girl...."

---

**T**he silver fox was gone. Sylvia Fanton, more lovely than ever was stretched comfortably across the bed, her slim limbs partly covered by the fox cape. She was real this time. Drake caught the look of gratitude in her eyes.

"Then you *are* real," he went toward her in long strides. "I was beginning to wonder."

She crouched away from him slightly, trying to stretch the short fur to cover her rounded limbs. The task wasn't very successful.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. He knew she *was* sorry. Sorry for all the trouble she had caused him.

"But why...?"

She sat up, shielding herself carefully.

"It's very simple," she explained. "I am doomed to wear the body of a fox during those hours when the sun is high. At night...." She motioned toward the window with slim fingers.

Drake turned, saw that the sun had drifted behind the distant skyline and darkness had come down on the city. He smiled, only partly understanding.

"At night you become a very lovely woman. I know that much."

Sylvia Fanton blushed.

"Thanks!"

Puffy whistled.

"Leave it to Cinderella Drake," he grinned. "Man, you sure hit the jack-pot this time."

Drake sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Please tell us about yourself," he begged. "There's something I should know? Some way I can help?"

She shook her head sadly.

"I'm sorry. I owe you an explanation, and don't think I'm not grateful. More than that I can't tell you now."

"Listen," Jim said. "I may have been drunk last night. Perhaps I'm a mild sort of rotter, but at least I want to try."

The girl shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It may sound foolish, but the success of my mission here depends on myself alone. The lives of many people are hinged on my playing the game alone. The curse that holds me, binds my people also."

Puffy Adams' jaw dropped. He reached for the always ready bottle in the small bar and poured a drink. He swallowed it with a loud gulp.

"George Lardner shares your knowledge," Drake said.

Sylvia's body shuddered under the fur.

"Lardner is a snake." Her voice was as cold as ice. "His greed has destroyed my people. Death will be his reward."

"All of which means," Drake said evenly. "You have recovered the diamond that you held in your hands last night at the Owl Limb."

---

**T**he girl arose slowly. The fur draped itself about her body revealing warm shoulders, slim, evenly tapered legs. She stood like something apart from them, small and queenly. Her voice was strained and hurt.

"I cannot say more. You have helped me in the quest of the flaming diamond and you will be rewarded. Now, I must go before I cause your death also."

Jim felt helpless—lost. She had aroused emotions in his heart that had been long buried. Now with stark death and worse threatening her, Sylvia Fanton proposed to leave him forever. He was at her side, his hand clasping the warm wrist tightly.

"Let me help," he begged. "I'm not much on speeches but you're in trouble. I can believe what I have seen. If there is a way of saving you torture, I'm going to do it."

Sylvia stared up at him, tears misting her dark eyes. For a moment he was sure she would throw herself into his arms.

"You're very nice," she said softly. "I'd be grateful forever if you *could* help, but you can't. I know my task and I have others with me who know theirs. It will be best if we never meet again."

Drake's jaw grew stubborn.

"And if I refuse to let you leave?"

The girl's eyes were cold and she twisted the cape around her slim body tightly, wearing it like a queen's robe. Words tumbled from her lips swiftly.

"There is nothing you can do to prevent it."

A worried grin spread over Jim Drake's face.

"If you insist on going," he said, "there isn't much else to say."

"Don't think I'm not grateful to both of you." This time her smile was for Puffy and his chest swelled a good three inches under its influence. "If you'll promise not to follow me tonight, I'll return here in the morning. If you insist on getting yourselves in trouble on my account there isn't a thing I can do about it without appearing ungrateful."

"That's more like it," Jim said cheerfully. "Now, about your clothes. You can't wear that fur without something under it, although the effect is appealing."

"And revealing," Puffy added.

She blushed.

"Could—could you find something for me. Some of your clothing?"

Puffy Adams chuckled. "With those shoulders Cinderella's got, you'll look like an ex-prizefighter," he warned.

---

**D**rake started a search in the closet. Ten minutes later Sylvia Fanton made an appealing picture in tan slacks, light jersey sweater and a pair of sport shoes Jim had discarded years ago but had forgotten to throw away. She stood at the door holding the fox fur close to her breast. Then smiling brightly, she tossed it into his arms.

"Take good care of it," she said. "If it's not here in the morning...."

Drake stood close to her. He couldn't find words for what was in his heart. A dull hurt feeling welled up in his throat. It was so damned futile sending a girl out when he had promised not to follow. If she didn't come back in the morning....

Sylvia's eyes grew tender. Standing on tiptoe, she pressed her lips to his stubbled chin.

"You've been up for a long time, laddie," she whispered. "Better shave and get some rest."

The door slammed quickly and she was gone. Drake held the fur carefully over his arm and rubbed his chin reflectively.

"I'll be damned," he said.

"So will I," Puffy spoke from somewhere behind him. "Looks like Cinderella Drake is gonna go

huntin' for that other slipper, and after all these years."

Jim looked around the room for a safe place to hide the precious silver cape. He decided on the big cedar chest in the open closet. He locked the fur in safely and dropped the key in his pocket.

"Ready for a little traveling?" he asked.

Puffy had discarded his shoes and was stretched out comfortably, a frosted glass in his hand. His chin dropped, jumped forward protestingly.

"Just let's relax," he begged. "I've worn the heels off my feet for you today."

Even as he talked the stout one started to tie the laces of his shoes. They went down the quiet hall and into the private elevator.

"What about George Lardner?" Drake asked as they shot toward the main floor. "Find out his life history?"

"At the police station." Puff admitted. Then in a puzzled voice he added, "all but the last two years of it."

"And those last two years?"

They passed quickly through the rear lobby and into the alley. The car was still where Jim had left it. As they drove out of the narrow alley and into the street, Puffy talked.

"George Lardner has been in every racket the law knows about," he said. "The police have a complete record of him since he cut his eye teeth stealing milk. But the last two years get me."

---

**D**rake settled down behind the wheel and they headed toward the rush of downtown traffic. "Don't kill me with the suspense," he said. "What's Lardner been up to that's so startling?"

"Exploring," Puffy said dryly.

"An expedition to the city's slums?" Drake queried.

"No!" Puffy crossed his legs comfortably and scratching a match on the bottom of his shoe, touched the flame to his cigarette. "I had to go to the Explorer's Club to get the dope on him. Lardner has been spending a lot of time in the Baker Lake district just east of Hudson Bay in Canada."

Drake's foot released its pressure on the gas pedal. "Thought that country was pretty well explored years ago," he said mildly. "Nothing much but snow and ice up there, is there?"

"And maybe diamonds," Puffy said. "At least that's what Lardner and some of the boys at the Explorer's Club think."

Drake's interest was increasing.

"Is that where he found that big gem he displayed at the club the other night?"

Puffy's lips split in a wide, toothy grin.

"Cinderella Drake knows the answers," he admitted. "Yes! That's where he found the diamond and that's how he happened to get in with the stuffed shirts at the Explorer's Club."

Drake was silent.

Adams hesitated, then added,

"Lardner showed up there six months ago claiming he had found the world's largest diamond. He claimed he got it from a secret valley somewhere in the Baker Lake district."

"Fantastic!" They had reached their destination and Drake pulled the coupe in smoothly to the curb. The lights over the door of the Owl Limb Night Club were darkened.

"The Explorer's Club doesn't think so. They are mighty stirred up about his find. The only thing that puzzles them is how come the stone is cut. Lardner refuses to tell them who did the job. As for finding it where he did, it seems they've had an idea there were diamonds in that country and were just waiting for someone to prove it."<sup>[1]</sup>

[1] Professor Hobbs of the University of Michigan has found several small diamonds and diamond particles in the strata of the glacial flow throughout certain northern states.

Hobbs, a careful and painstaking research worker, used his knowledge of geology to trace the strata of the glacial flow. He determined several years ago that the diamonds came from the north, somewhere in the Hudson Bay area. Although his co-workers are confident that he is correct, a rush of prospectors failed to find anything that would prove his theory.

Although opinions among geologists vary, many believe in Hobbs and his work. A consulting gem expert at the world famous Field Museum put forth this story to your

editor, and convinced him that Hobbs is a clear headed expert who knows what he is talking about. Somewhere under the waste of snow, probably a little east of Hudson Bay, there is a fortune in uncovered diamonds. A fortune that could easily eclipse the yield of Africa's richest diamond fields.—Ed.

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Jim Drake knew all he wanted to for the time being. He turned toward the unlighted marquee of the Owl Limb.

"Looks as though the police closed the place up," Puffy said soberly. "Gonna stay sober tonight?"

"Do you know where that check room girl lives; the one you call Mary?" Drake asked.

Puffy's face sobered.

"She's married and has three kids," he said. "I don't know where any married women live."

Jim chuckled. He twisted the car into the traffic again, and with a swift U-turn, headed the coupe toward home.

"Just the same I need information from a married woman," he said. "And you're getting out at the next corner in a perhaps futile effort to find Mary."

"And if her husband doesn't meet me at the door with a shotgun," Puffy asked, "what do I ask her?"

Jim shot an appraising look toward the deserted corner ahead, whipped the coupe up beside a traffic officer and opened the door.

"From now on," he said, "we are interested in Lardner. He's a busy man these days. Mary ought to know where her boss is. Women like that have an idea of everything that is going on. Find out where Lardner went and meet me at the apartment as soon as you can."

Puffy was already on the sidewalk.

"Leave it to me, Cinderella," he said. "I get the idea. If you can't follow the fox, you're gonna follow the wolf and let him lead you to her."

Drake nodded and smiled after the sturdy figure with a growing respect.

"Move along there!" The gruff voice came from his side. "Can't be holding traffic all night for you."

Drake turned, saw the officer grinning at him, and shot into the traffic.

---

The door of the apartment was ajar. The puzzled expression on Jim Drake's face changed to one of worried interest. He pushed the door open swiftly, and silently. The lights were out. A sound came from the direction of the window and straining he thought he saw the curtain blow in slightly. On tiptoe he went swiftly around the side of the big room. The chair by the bed had been moved and he struck his shin on it in the dark.

The room flashed white as he pressed the electric button. Hot anger passed through his body. Every piece of furniture in the room had been tipped upside down. Linings were torn from the chairs. His clothing was heaped in an ugly pile in the middle of the floor. Drawers were pulled out and emptied.

The fur! He ran swiftly to the closet, twisted the handle and breathed a sigh of relief. The cedar chest was broken and splintered around the lock, but the cover hadn't been lifted. He inserted the key quickly and drew out the fur cape. Its rich depth felt more precious than ever in his fingers. Here in his hands was the link to his first real love affair.

A footstep sounded faintly behind him. His heart was in his throat. Drake whipped around and sprang to his feet. He stared straight into the barrel of a wicked automatic. Lifting his eyes slowly, he studied the man who held the weapon.

The stranger's face was hard as stone, almost barbaric. His bronze skin stretched tightly over firm, high cheek bones. The mouth was open slightly in a determined way. Teeth that flashed like an uneven row of pearls seemed half savage, yet not unfriendly.

"You will come toward me slowly," the man's voice was cultured, yet hesitant, as though he hadn't spoken English for many years. "A false move will destroy you."

He backed away toward the center of the room.

"How ... where?" Drake stammered.

"You forgot to examine the bath," the gunman said. "You are not a painstaking young man, Jim Drake."

Jim started. The man knew his name, held a gun on him that threatened immediate death, and yet

his voice was friendly, ever courteous.

"I have nothing here that you want," Drake said.

---

He stood in the middle of the room now. The stranger reached down carefully with one hand, still holding his aim. He twisted a chair upright and sat down. For the first time Drake had a chance to look him over more carefully. His eyes were the same deep black as Sylvia Fanton's. Cold and yet somehow gentle.

"You are holding in your hand what I need more than anything in the world." The man relaxed but the gun didn't waver. Drake sat down opposite him on the edge of the bed.

"The fur?" he asked.

"The fox fur." The gun settled on the strange intruder's knee and he leaned forward eagerly. "Give it to me at once. If I leave with it now, you will be troubled no more. This is as our mistress demands."

Then Sylvia Fanton had sent him. He must be one of the henchmen she had spoken of. At once Drake felt relieved. He pushed the fur away from him slowly, hating to part with it. The man stood up, took it with his free hand and held it tightly.

"You are very wise," he said slowly.

He started to back toward the window.

"Wait," Drake was on his feet, "Sylvia promised to return in the morning. Why...?"

A look of compassion spread across the gunman's face.

"Sylvia Fanton is no more," he said pityingly. "You had but a brief glimpse of an earthly woman who is the most perfect creation on earth. Now she has completed her mission and will return to her people."

"Then you did get the diamond?" Drake was sorry at once that he had spoken. The man's eyes turned icy.

"We have done what we came to do," he said shortly. "We appreciate the part you played in our success. More than that, I am not at liberty to discuss. Please do not follow me as I leave."

Then, carefully,

"Make no mistake, Mr. Drake. Our queen came very close to deserting her sacred trust. If you were to see her again, you would not enjoy the same close association. There is no place in her life for you, or you would be going with me instead of staying here at the point of a gun."

Drake moved forward hesitantly, and then stopped with the gesture of a man who knows he is beaten.

"Okay," he admitted. "You've got me on the spot. But remember this: George Lardner thinks more of that diamond than he does his life. He's going to leave a trail of blood in every country of the world, but he'll get it if you don't kill him first."

The gunman's face was a mask of hatred.

"Do not underestimate the power Lardner is fighting," he said grimly. "There will be blood, yes. It will be Lardner's blood. He has a debt to pay, and it is not our wish that you be involved when payment is made. Our leader whom you know as Sylvia Fanton has one message for you. Goodbye."

He tossed a small envelope of paper at Jim's feet and was gone through the window as silently as a floating cloud.

---

Jim stood speechless for a second, then he went toward the window and looked down the long line shadow of the fire escape. There was no one in sight. A small dog darted along the edge of the alley far below. Or was it a dog? His bewildered mind told him the animal was more like a fox in its quick, sly movements.

Drake picked up the slip of paper in shaking fingers. He opened it and stared at the neat longhand message:

*We were very close to love, Jim Drake. Love is not good for a woman who has my obligations.*

The outer door rattled noisily. Drake took a second quick look at the note and stuffed it into his pocket. Puffy Adams stormed in and stopped abruptly with a shocked look in his eyes.

"Been havin' a party?" he asked whimsically. "Looks like the guests came on a whirlwind."

Drake was silent. He started to rearrange the room mechanically. Duffy collected the clothing from the floor and replaced it in the closet. The boss would talk when he got ready.

From the chair by the cocktail table, Drake said suddenly, "What about Lardner? Did Mary know where he went?"

Puffy, his job completed, slumped across the bed.

"That guy Lardner is off on another trip." He started to slip his shoes off, thought better of it, and tied the laces again. "Mary says he gave the employees all a month's pay and said he'd be back in time to keep them in cash next month."

Through a cloud of pipe smoke, Drake was placing more pieces into the jigsaw of Sylvia Fanton's life.

"Any idea where he's going?" he asked.

Puffy shook his head.

"Not the slightest," he admitted. "Mary says her boss is tighter than a bum's pocketbook when it comes to information."

Drake had enough pipe smoke. He put it away carefully and stood up.

"I see you didn't get the shoes off after all," he said a little slyly. "Going somewhere?"

Puffy arose, took a suitcase from the closet shelf and started tossing clothing into it.

"I think so," he said grimly. "If I'm half as good a stooge as I think I am, we'll be needing overcoats before we get back."

Drake was already waiting at the door when his companion lifted the heavy bag to his shoulder and prepared to follow.

"Got your long underwear?" he asked soothingly. "We're going to the airport first, but after that I've got a hunch we'll go diamond prospecting somewhere east of Hudson Bay."

Puffy shivered.

"Cinderella Drake hunts the silver slipper." His voice was doubtful, his eyes were twinkling. "If you find it up there, you'll freeze your foot trying the damned thing on."

---

**T**he Municipal Airport was deserted, save for a small group of men waiting just outside the main lobby. They were obviously the members of a dance band. Instruments were packed and waiting on the baggage truck outside as Drake and Puffy entered. Drake went straight to the ticket window. The man behind the ticket cage looked up with a smile as he approached. His eyes were tired and questioning.

"Yes, sir?" in quiet friendliness.

Drake tossed a roll of bills on the counter.

"We're thinking of taking the night plane to Winnipeg," he said indecisively. "Any empty berths?"

The clerk grinned.

"Fortunately for you," he said, "there aren't any priority passengers tonight. The Winnipeg job has been full of flyers headed for the Canadian border for the past two weeks. Nothing of importance tonight. Five berths available."

Drake looked around curiously.

"Have you a passenger named George Lardner?" he asked.

The clerk took down a small file and thumbed through it. He shook his head.

"No. Had you planned to meet him here?"

Drake smiled.

"We had a date," he admitted. "George Lardner is headed for the same destination. He'll no doubt catch a later plane and meet us in Winnipeg."

The clerk was penning figures rapidly across the ticket.

"You won't lack for entertainment," he laughed in a low voice. "That gang at the door call themselves Harry's Rhythm Rascals. Headed for a dance job up there."

"I'd rather have a quiet berth," Drake admitted. "Need sleep more than I need rhythm."

The clerk collected the two fares and said sleepily,

"Your plane will take off in twenty minutes, sir. May as well get aboard. The berths are made up."

"Thanks." Drake pocketed the tickets and motioned for Adams to follow. As they passed Harry's Rhythm Rascals, Drake watched one of the men turn slowly and follow him.

"That guy must be the tuba player," Puffy said quickly. "He sure looks as though he'd been pushed around."

The luggage was disposed of and in ten minutes Drake was lying quietly under the dome of the plane. A sudden throb of motors came from up ahead. With half closed eyes he wondered, if at the end of this mad journey, Sylvia Fanton might be waiting for him. George Lardner wouldn't be far away. Although the plane trip had started like a wild goose chase, at least he was headed in the general direction of trouble, and the grandest girl he had ever met. Turning restlessly on one side, he was aware that the bumpy ground was no longer under the plane and the three great motors were purring smoothly as they drifted ahead through the starlit night.

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"Jim!—Jim!" Drake opened one eye with effort, remembered that he was in a plane bound for Winnipeg, and sat up. Through the parted curtain he could see the dark earth underneath sprinkled occasionally with a handful of twinkling lights. Puffy Adams was leaning over the berth, his body clad in oversized pajamas, eyes wide with excitement.

"The orchestra!" Puffy was muttering. "They ain't! They're Lardner's gunmen! Lardner's on board!" He babbled on.

"Wait a minute!" Drake was wide awake now. He helped Adams into the berth, holding a warning finger over his lips. "Now," he said firmly, "one thing at a time."

"Those punks that called themselves Harry's Rhythm Rascals. They got a plane full of tommy guns. They can't play but *one* tune on those."

Drake's eyes narrowed.

"How did you find out?"

"I couldn't sleep," Puffy said. "Went up front to get a glass of water and find that pretty hostess to keep me company."

"So?"

Puffy gulped.

"So she isn't aboard the plane. We landed somewhere last night right after we took off. I didn't think nothin' of it. Ain't used to these airplanes. Well, when I was up front I heard two of these punks talkin' in their berths."

He opened the curtain slightly and looked both ways along the narrow aisle.

"This whole damned plane is full of Lardner's men. They were laughing at the trick they pulled on the airlines. Seems they forced the pilot to land, threw out both pilots and the hostess. Lardner was waiting at the private field and he came aboard."

"You're sure Lardner's on this plane?" Drake asked. "You didn't dream all this?"

"Listen, Cinderella." Puffy was himself again. "This sky bird is headquarters for every ex-con in Chicago. I don't know why they didn't throw us off with the hostess, but I sure wish they had."

A hard smile twisted Drake's lips.

"I think," he said, "that we're going to see Sylvia Fanton much sooner than I had planned. Unless we do some fast thinking we may not see her alive."

---

**T**hey sat quietly as Drake studied the country under the plane. He tried to discover some landmark listed on the map. There was nothing but scarred, snowcapped mountain peaks. A sprinkling of toothpick pines relieved the monotony of blinding snow, here and there. Gradually, as the plane droned on, even these were left behind. Ahead—only the white wastes.

From somewhere forward in the plane came a hard chuckle of laughter.

"Our hosts are coming to life," Drake said. "It's now or never." He pushed bare feet into the aisle and dropped, stretching his arms overhead with a yawn.

"As soon as I'm out of sight," he whispered, "get back to your berth and dress. I'll see you in the cabin ahead. Act as though you know nothing. Understand?"

Puffy grinned sadly.

"That'll be easy," he answered, "but I've been around those violins that talk death before. Don't like a tommy gun unless it's in my own hands."

"Okay," Drake said grimly. "Keep your mouth shut and you may get your wish."

He slipped into his shoes, dressing quickly, went toward the tiny wash room halfway up the aisle. One of Lardner's men was making a hurried exit. They met, heads down, with a jarring blow. The gunman started to swear loudly, caught himself and said in a mock pleasant voice,

"Good morning. Say, ain't this a darb of a trip?"

Drake nodded.

"Guess I'll splash a little water over my face if you're done."

The man's heavy face lighted in an embarrassed smile. He stepped hurriedly to one side.

"Oh—oh sure. The sink's all yours."

Once inside, Drake locked the door quickly. He washed the sleepiness from his eyes. So the laugh was on him after all. Lardner was in control of the ship, and headed for the lost Flaming Diamond. Where, Drake wondered, did he and Puffy Adams fit into the picture?

Suddenly there was a difference in the tune the motors were humming. The plane slanted down at an abrupt angle and Drake pitched forward against the wall. Struggling up, he heard a sharp knock at the door.

"Better strap yourself into a seat," a strange voice carried through the wall, muffled and far away.

He turned the lock quickly, lurched out, and felt an automatic in the small of his back.

"Hey!" Drake feigned surprise. "What the hell?"

"Never mind, buddy," the man gave him a sharp push toward the cabin, "get yourself strapped in. We ain't got time to tell stories."

A sharp prod of the gun settled the argument. Silently Drake went forward. Puffy was already in his seat, his face an expressionless mask.

"Remember," he whispered, "keep your chin stiff and wait for a break. The fun has really started."

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**T**he plane had dropped and leveled off. Lardner's men seemed to have forgotten their captives in the excitement. They sat with faces glued to the windows, watching curiously as George Lardner at the controls brought them down in ever tightening circles toward the valley below.

Adams nudged his companion.

"Look at 'em," he whispered. "The rattiest looking bunch of bums I've ever seen. What in hell does Lardner need so many guns for?"

"To finish murdering a race of people," Drake answered coldly. "A job that he started when he found the Flaming Diamond. If he has a chance, he'll finish the task to get it back again."

"Shut up, back there!" A lean, sharp nosed individual in the seat ahead turned slightly. "No talk now. You'll have plenty of chance later on."

A ripple of hard laughter went through the cabin.

George Lardner was an expert pilot. More than that, he was familiar with the country over which they were flying. Realizing that any attempt to escape now would be futile, Drake tried to memorize the layout of the small valley into which Lardner seemed to be heading.

With the entire country a white layer of blowing snow it was difficult to make out the sharp walls of granite that arose from the cup-shaped hole below. It was like a huge bomb crater, perhaps ten miles across. On the valley bottom was the smoothly swept blue-green of a frozen lake.

The plane banked abruptly and Lardner cut the motors. Drake felt the tenseness mount within the cabin. A fear was filling these State Street gunmen that had never troubled them before. The motors were silent. The ship dropped below the lip of the canyon wall and the wind died smoothly. Circling, Lardner gunned the motors again and roared in straight over the strip of frozen ice.

Try as he might Drake could see no sign of life or human habitation. Heavy fir trees came straight to the edge of the lake, standing guard stiff and frozen.

The plane zoomed up sharply and cut back over the lake leaving a black shadow against the ice. It sank down, bounced gently and rolled ahead. They went straight toward the high cliff at the far end of the lake.

"This guy better know what he's doing." Puffy clutched the chair ahead and held on grimly. "Or we'll crack up like a broken match against that wall."

Drake was silent. A murmur of anxious voices arose about them. They still rolled swiftly toward



the cliff. Lardner seemed to make no attempt to cut speed. The plane took the bump at the edge of the lake, and then Drake saw the cavern ahead. It was huge and black, cut at an angle in the surface of the rock. A sudden blur of rock walls and they were in the darkness of the cave. The plane settled back roughly on its shock absorbers and stopped. Lights flashed on within the cabin.

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George Lardner pushed through the small communication door between the pilot's cabin and the waiting gangsters. As he came, he jerked the helmet and goggles from his eyes. A hard smile on his heavy face left no doubt as to his frame of mind.

"Hello, Drake," the mouth a mask of expressionless hate. "I take my hat off to you. Never gave Cinderella Drake credit for being anything but a whiskey mill."

Jim stood up slowly, knowing these minutes might be his last. Fear was in his heart. Not for himself, but for the doom that faced Sylvia Fanton unless she could be warned of Lardner's coming. There was no doubt in Jim Drake's mind that this frozen valley was the home of the fox people and their queen.

Lardner wasn't the soft night club owner now. The man was short and stocky, but with bulging arms that were tensed for action. The dark face was filled with devilish purpose.

"I'd like to know why we weren't thrown out of the plane last night with the others?" Drake said quietly.

"Oh! That?" Lardner chuckled. "I knew you were headed toward this valley and I thought you'd appreciate the lift."

"For your information," Drake answered coolly, "we took the plane for Winnipeg. Where we are now I haven't the slightest idea."

George Lardner started toward the outer door. He whipped around savagely, his face twisted into a hateful grimace.

"All right, play boy," he snapped. "You asked for it. Now it's my turn. I know you helped Sylvia Fanton to escape. I know you had a part in stealing the diamond, and I also know you are in love with the girl. That, if you'll have the truth, is why you are with us now."

A hissing sigh escaped Puffy Adams' lips. He was beginning to understand now why Lardner had not shot them both long ago.

"So I am to act as decoy," Drake said. "If you think I'll let you torture that girl, you're a madman."

Lardner ignored him. He pushed the outer door of the cabin open and dropped heavily to the cave floor.

"Unpack your stuff, boys," he ordered crisply. "And keep an eye on our guests. I want them to be safe and comfortable."

The gangsters closed in, and some of them started for the baggage compartment.

A ring of steel closed about the pair.

"Out, quick," one of the plug uglies mumbled. "And don't try to get away."

---

To Drake's surprise the cave was warm, as though heated from some vast, hidden source of fire. Lardner was well ahead of them, going cautiously down the long tunnel. A flash-light sent its beam ahead of his outstretched hand. The baggage was handed down quickly and tommy guns came into sight from the instrument cases. They were smoothly polished and glistened under the dull light of lanterns. They followed Lardner slowly down the vast hall that led under the lip of the mountain. It was warmer and more humid now.

"The boss knows what he's doing," a voice said behind Drake. "These fox people can't do us any harm during the day. By night we'll be ready to blast them down in short order."

Unable to speak to Puffy, Drake was thinking plenty. If they went on to wherever the tunnel led them, it would be too late to face Lardner with any show of force. Drake knew that Sylvia Fanton would be caught off guard if she were here. Could he raise some sort of alarm?

The man at his side seemed a trifle sleepy and disinterested in what was going on. Making sure the man's gun was pointed away where he wouldn't jerk the trigger, Drake lifted an arm high, pointing toward the dark roof of the cave. Pretending fright, he shouted:

"Oh my God! Look!"

Before Lardner could control them, two men had raised their guns and sent salvos of lead screaming into the darkness. Lardner's voice, ahead in the shaft, shattered the silence that followed with wild oaths.

"Who the hell did that?" He stormed back toward Drake, but Jim was well satisfied with what he had done. The sound would carry for miles into the base of the mountain. If Sylvia or her people were here....

From far down the shaft a faint bark echoed clearly. It was the bark of a fox, followed in quick succession by more of the same sounds.

George Lardner faced him, neck red and arms akimbo.

"You're getting too damned clever for your own good," he shouted. "I oughta' knock some of the cockiness out of you."

Drake had a slow temper. But behind the Cinderella Drake who had soused himself so thoroughly in Lardner's whiskey still lurked the keen eyed air patrol cadet who had only six months ago put his body through every air battle on the west coast. Some of the old strength and nerve were coming back now. Coming with a rush of hot blood to his head.

Puffy Adams had sworn he'd stick by Drake until that spirit returned. Now, ringed in by steel death, Adams' face lighted with interest. Yet, he realized that Drake had small chance against these bums.

The cave was dead silent again. Lardner breathed hard, crouched like an oversized wrestler about to spring.

---

Drake's face was suddenly cold, emotionless.

"If your men weren't ready to shoot me down the minute I move," he said slowly, "I'd pound you within an inch of your rotten life."

Lardner's face lighted slowly and a sardonic grin crossed his face.

"Talk big, play boy," he urged. "I don't need lead to put you out of the way."

Drake's slim body shot forward with the suddenness of a catapult. His shoulders were low as they struck Lardner's thick belly. Caught off guard, Lardner's heavy, ape arms twisted about Jim's waist and he started to crush Drake's body against his own. With a quick twist Drake was loose, dodging backward as a light left caught Lardner on the chest. Lardner jumped in quickly, puffing hard. His right arm swept out and brought blood to Drake's nose.

The slim air cadet shook his head, feeling the sting on his face. He brushed an arm across his nose, and felt warm blood on his fingers. This time Drake went in low, caught Lardner with his left hand just above the belt. The big man bent over with a grunt as Drake's right climbed under his chin like a looping Spitfire. Jim Drake's right fist went home with the entire impact of his shoulder behind it. He felt a twinge of pain shoot through his arm as Lardner's head swept backward with a jerk. The fat man stumbled and sat down abruptly. He looked surprised and frightened, shaking his head back and forth like an angry bull.

"You dirty...." Lardner didn't attempt to rise. His face was flaming red. "Shoot the legs out from under him."

A tommy came up swiftly, trained on Drake.

"Hold it!" A harsh, almost frightened voice came from the shadows by the wall.

Puffy Adams stood, back to the granite, sweeping a tommy gun around on the gang of men. His trigger finger was poised easily, the gun slung carelessly in the curve of his arm. His voice, frightened for Drake, became cool as he saw the last gun drop toward the floor.

"One shot," he said, "and I'll poke enough lead into your boss to keep you rats from ever flying anywhere again."

Drake was at his side now.

"How did you manage it?" he whispered.

"Black-jack," Puffy grinned. "They were interested in you. It wasn't hard."

---

George Lardner was frightened. The tommy gun was aimed at his head and he knew Puffy Adams wouldn't hesitate when the time came to shoot. He sat up slowly, eyes on the pair by the wall. Then like a shot he rolled quickly over and over into the darkness beyond the lighted area. His voice, harsh and powerful shouted.

"Get them, quick!"

A hail of lead swept the air over his head as Puffy jerked backward.

"It's the firing squad," Adams shouted. He dropped to one knee and opened up wide.

Lardner was snarling something unintelligible. Guns swept around on the men by the wall. Then from within the circle of men compressed hell broke loose. Someone was opening up a deadly fire from within the ranks. Gunmen screamed in pain and turned their guns in every direction, trying to determine who had betrayed them.

"Run for it, Drake. Down the tunnel."

The voice was vaguely familiar. Drake didn't hesitate. He clutched Adams' arm and together they dashed into the blackness ahead. From behind them, the sound of gun shots ceased. Only loud groans of pain drifted to them as they went forward through the midnight blackness. Then, far behind, single footsteps followed them hesitantly.

Lardner was still alive. Drake had heard him curse softly as they passed him. He felt blood on Puffy's arm.

"You're hurt," he said quietly. "Where did it hit?"

"Just a nick." Puffy sounded game. "Glanced off the shoulder. A bit of shirt will fix it up. Say! That was a nice poke you took at Lardner."

---

**T**he tunnel grew wider. Far ahead a pale shower of colored light tossed against the walls like a weak rainbow. There wasn't a sound ahead or behind them. Drake led the way swiftly. The light seemed stronger, drawing them toward its source.

Then they stood on the edge of a great chamber. From the walls of the circular room a barbaric curtain of rainbowed color sprayed down toward its center.

It flashed and changed as they watched with wide eyes, changing into rich shades of purple, gold, orchid and startling the eye with its everchanging spectrum.

In the direct center of the chamber on a raised dais stood the huge carved statue of a marble polar bear. It towered ten feet high, a magnificent standing beast with lifted outstretched paw. On the back of the bear a small throne had been carved. The blinding flood of color that converged on the throne, hid anything that might be seated there.

Drake clutched his companion's arm.

"Look!"

He pointed toward the low pit that surrounded the statue.

Puffy nodded.

"The biggest fox farm in the world," he said dryly. "Or I'm going nuts."

As their eyes grew accustomed to the changing light, the pit grew clear. The animals became visible against the floor of the pit. There were thousands of them lying about the chamber. They spread over the floor carpeting it with rich fur like a deep rug of precious black and silver.

One thing held Jim Drake spellbound. Every animal had its head lifted toward the throne atop the bear's back.

His eyes lifted again slowly. His vision broke through the bright haze of light. Stretched out in sleep across the stony back was the perfect nude figure of a girl. She seemed frozen in death, yet the bronzed flesh was alive and throbbing. It was the same girl he had saved from Wildwood Zoo — *Sylvia Fanton!*

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**H**e tried to take his eyes away from the vision but could not. Color seemed to splash and caress her body as though it alone gave her the power to exist. Then he knew what it was that made her look human. The light preserved her body during daylight hours, or she would have been forced to enter the body of a fox and mingle in the pit with her own kind.

A queen, Queen of the Flaming Diamond, doomed to lie dead until she could be restored to her normal life.

"What do we do now?" Puffy asked in a tense whisper.

"What I want to know first," Drake said wonderingly, "is who saved us from Lardner's mob?"

"Whoever it was," Adams offered, "he'll never escape them alive."

Soft footsteps came from behind them.

"But you are wrong!"

Drake pivoted, and faced the same man whom he had met in the apartment that night he lost the fur. The man who brought his last message from Sylvia Fanton.

"You see," the man went on quietly, "I am not your enemy. I asked you to stay out of this, but I could not desert you."

Drake's face was lighted in a relieved smile. His hand gripped the other's.

"Now you have saved our life, why did you do it?"

"Because," the man said simply, "you are human and you are good. Sylvia Fanton asked me to help you, and I am her brother."

Puffy Adams sat down abruptly on the cave floor.

"And I," he said unbelievably, "am the keeper of Cinderella Drake, the sap who still looks for the silver slipper."

"But Sylvia is no fox woman," Drake protested. "She's too warm, too human!"

For a moment there was silence. Then a warm smile lighted the stranger's eyes.

"We are all human," he said. "We are early settlers who came to this valley and sought its sanctuary. Only the curse of George Lardner has spoiled our paradise and driven us into animal form. Perhaps you will see...."

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**H**e looked hurriedly at the light that was growing dimmer above them. The rainbow had faded swiftly and darkness was coming down on the cavern.

"I am Silvaris, King of the Fox People," he said swiftly. "On the Flaming Diamond depends our ability to exist. Night is almost upon us again, but unless the diamond can be restored to the paw of the bear, there will be no more night or day."

"But you have it!" Drake protested. "Lardner came here to get it back again...."

"Lardner came by mistake to this valley six months ago," Silvaris said brokenly. "We welcomed him as we welcome all people. He betrayed our trust and stole our life source. We took him to our hearts as Sylvia and I were taken many years ago."

"Then you aren't really of the same race?" Drake's voice was filled with relief.

Silvaris shook his head.

"We are here by our own choice," he went on. "Sylvia and I, lost children, found our way here from a trapper's cabin when we were very young. We never tried to leave. When Lardner stole our precious gem, she and I alone knew the ways of civilization. It was our task to return the stone to its rightful place."

"If that diamond is the solution of this mess," Puffy asked in a puzzled voice, "why don't we clean up the mystery right now?"

"Wait!"

Silvaris went slowly down the long steps to the fox pit. He climbed the steps to the side of the polar bear and his sister's lifeless body. From her armpit, he took a huge gem. As he came toward them, Drake knew it was the Lardner stone, flashing and alive in the semi-darkness.

He pushed it into Drake's hands.

"Somehow Lardner pawned a paste imitation of the real Flaming Diamond off on us that night in Chicago," Silvaris said sadly. "The real stone is the only gem that will make the transformation."

Drake examined the diamond curiously.

"Hey!" Puffy said excitedly. "Wait a minute. How come Lardner is so almighty hot after us, if he thinks we've only got a paste?"

"That I cannot explain," Silvaris admitted helplessly. "I purposely disguised myself to mingle with his men. He came to destroy us and yet he knows our life is short now that the diamond is gone. We cannot live long as animals."

---

**F**ar away toward the mouth of the tunnel came the sound of an idling motor. Drake sprang into action.

"I think," he said, "that we can outplay Lardner at whatever game he's playing. He must be wounded. Perhaps too badly to fly."

The face of Silvaris, the Fox King, lightened.

"You are a pilot?" he asked.

Puffy chuckled.

"Cinderella can fly the blind spots off a Jap Zero," he said. "Just strap a pair of wings on him."

They charged toward the mouth of the tunnel. A few hundred feet from the entrance Drake stopped. He picked up a tommy gun where it had been dropped by the fleeing gunmen. Going forward more slowly they saw three men at the entrance, guns pointed into the darkness.

On one knee, Drake fingered the trigger. He picked up a large rock with his free hand and tossed it ten feet to one side. It struck with a loud thump. Immediately red fire cut loose around the place where the rock had hit. Drake brought his finger back lightly against the trigger and watched coldly as the men went down. They pitched forward like alley pins, bleeding and screaming with the pain. There was no time to lose.

Dropping the gun he went forward swiftly, whipping an automatic from his pocket as he ran. Then, seeing Lardner, he took a head dive into the deep snow as the vicious crack of lead whizzed over his head. He rolled over silently coming to his feet with a bound. Lardner, waiting by the plane, shot again and the lead burned into Drake's shoulder. He sprang forward as Lardner's foot lifted toward the open door to the cabin.

Clutching his foot, Drake jerked the man back into the snow with all his strength and they rolled into a white, seething mass of fury. With a short, terrifying blow on the chin he snapped the man's head backward. It twitched queerly and his eyes bulged. Lardner's neck was twisted to one side, stiff and broken.

"The diamond?" Puffy was at his side. Jim Drake bent over the dying man, watched his face as it twitched in pain.

"You want the girl," Lardner croaked. "You'll never get her. Even with the diamond, you'll never...."

His body relaxed suddenly, as though deflated of life. Drake pushed him back into the drifted snow, a look of disgust in his cold eyes.

---

"Give me that paste imitation," Drake said. "Perhaps somehow...?"

Silvaris nodded helplessly.

"It's of no use," he groaned. "We tried, but it has no power."

Puffy, a knife in his hand once more, was working slowly over the gem with its keen blade. His face was solemn and deep with interest. In spite of themselves, the two men stood close to him watching the thin, case-like stuff that he peeled away from the surface.

"This ain't paste," he said excitedly. "It's a kind of silicate. Lardner must have dipped the gem into it and let the stuff harden as a protective cover."

Drake took the gem eagerly.

"Then he realized that whatever the power was that this stone has, it couldn't work unless the diamond itself was clean and unprotected."

The late afternoon sun was fading slowly beyond the far end of the frozen lake. They turned and went into the cave of the Fox People. Perhaps the gem would work. But if it didn't, Lardner had died with the secret on his lips.

"*You'll never get her,*" he had said, "*even with the diamond.*"

At the edge of the pit they stopped. Silvaris spoke in a faraway, silencing voice.

"Our lives depend on you. I am no longer able to control myself. In a few hours we will all be dead...."

He hesitated and the voice trailed off into nothingness. Before their eyes the man fell away into a light mist. Instead, a large fox stood at Drake's feet, tail drooping and its eyes staring ahead dully. Silvaris the Fox King had returned to the stature of his people.

The chamber grew silent as death. The fox turned slowly and walked down the steps into the marble pit. He mixed quickly with the others and no movement came from below. The spot of color over the throne wavered and went out. The cave was black as pitch.

"Now or never," Drake muttered. His tongue was rough and dry. His hands shook under the weight of the diamond. It and it alone seemed alive and glittering in the cold unnatural tomb of the cave.

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He went toward the bottom of the pit and gently forced his way through the sleeping animals. Up toward the throne his legs carried him step by step, and each step was a million years. A torture of uncertainty and hope.

He lifted the diamond and without hesitation pushed it with all his strength into the outstretched claws of the marble bear.

The Flaming Diamond suddenly glittered more powerfully than ever before. The claws seemed to grasp it tightly, as though the power of the gem must stay where it could never be stolen again.

Bright flames of every hue sprang from the surfaces of the stone. They bathed his body like colored lightning and he fell backward down the steps, his arm upraised in protection. The place came alive with sound. Pealing, silvery tones of rich bell-like music tore the air asunder and the light of the diamond flashed warmly against the flesh of the girl on the throne.

On his feet now Drake stumbled toward Puffy Adams at the entrance of the chamber. Puffy was on his knees, face blinded with the light.

"Holy Ned," he shouted. "Now look what you've done, Cinderella."

Drake didn't answer. His eyes had grown accustomed to the glare. The chamber was hot and brilliant with some new world born from the cold womb of the old. Men and women arose from where animals had been waiting for the end.

Silvaris, the Fox King, came toward them. His face was alight with thanksgiving. Looking over his shoulder, Drake saw something that made him lose all interest in the others. Something that he had prayed for was taking place atop the polar bear's throne-back.

Sylvia Fanton, her body alive and glowing, sat upright. No false modesty marred the perfect, classically molded body. She slipped down from the beast's back and caressed its side with slim fingers. Then she came toward him slowly.

---

**T**he men and women parted as she went among them gracefully. Her eyes were wide and wonderfully warm as she came up the steps toward him. Her gaze never wavered from his. They had changed from a cold black to soft, gold-flecked brown.

"I knew you would come," she said softly. "It was necessary that we have each other."

With a happy sob she was in his arms. He only knew that her body was pressed tightly to his. That the warmth of the Flaming Diamond had brought her life, and that Jim Drake would never be lonely again.

Voices arose happily in the chamber. The heat, now, was almost unbearable. He heard Silvaris's voice say happily:

"It is good that the Ice Gods have played their part."

Strong arms were on Drake's shoulder. He stumbled after the men toward the open valley. Then, with his emotions under control, he saw the transformation that had taken place because he had done his job well.

"You have once more breathed life into a lost valley," Silvaris was at his side. "We will be forever thankful."

Drake looked down at the wisp of loveliness at his side. She was partly clothed now in a small fur jacket. Somehow it displayed rather than enshrouded her charms.

Away toward the head of the lake frozen cliffs jutted up to the sky from green, lush fields of deep grass. The valley had come suddenly alive. Trees waved gently under the warm wind that rushed from the cave. Small cabins were visible where they had been brought to life from under the deep snow. Deep flower-splashed meadows crept to the water's edge and the ice of the lake was gone. This, he realized with a lump in his throat, was the magic power of the Flaming Diamond.

"The plane is ready," Silvaris reminded him. "It is best that you leave while my people will let you. They are very grateful."

Jim Drake looked questioningly at the girl. Her eyes answered his with a smile. As much as she loved the Fox People, her place was with him.

They went slowly toward the waiting plane.

---

**D**rake looked back once as he sent the big ship skimming along the meadow at the far end of the lake. Silvaris and his people were gathered in a tight, worshipping little group, watching the bird plane take to the air.

At three thousand feet he leveled off. Something soft and warm brushed his cheek. He turned and saw Sylvia's eyes close to his, warm and promising.

The valley was no longer visible. From the air one could see only vast sweeps of snow and ice. The secret of the Fox People was well hidden.

"Well," Puffy said from behind them, "Tiffany will never see another diamond to equal that one."

"Everyone is happy," Drake answered.

Adams chuckled.

"Cinderella Drake found the silver slipper after all," he said. "And man, what a queen there was in it."

Sylvia blushed prettily.

"I'll try to dress a little more modestly in civilization," she offered.

"Not for me," Drake urged. "When a man comes home from a hard day's work shooting down Japs, he likes to see as much of his wife as possible. Namely, in a very small fox fur."

"Yea!" Puffy said. "Guess you're right. Excuse me while I go curl up with a good book."

He blundered noisily toward the row of empty berths at the rear of the plane.

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\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK QUEEN OF THE FLAMING DIAMOND \*\*\*

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