A metallic click told him his weapon was empty.

INSTALLMENT ONE
CHAPTER I

The erect middle-aged man in blue business suit who came briskly out of the White House paused reluctantly before the inquisitive press of correspondents.

"Anything new on our rearmament program, General?" one reporter wanted to know.

Another asked, "Did the President have anything to say about Mexico?"

General Hague, Chief of Staff of the Army, had managed to dissipate with a calm smile that gravity in which he had emerged from conference with the President.

"There is nothing to give out, gentlemen," he said with quiet firmness, and strode to his military sedan that was waiting in the driveway.

The general's car sped off to the long, concrete Munitions Building on Constitution Avenue that houses the War Department. General Hague hurried to his offices on the second floor and instructed his aide-de-camp to summon Colonel Flagwill. In a few minutes Flagwill, acting assistant chief of staff G-2, in charge of military intelligence, reported in from another wing.

"Sit down, Flagwill," the general invited. "The President has just decided to go to the bottom of this Mexican situation."

Flagwill's lean, aquiline face remained impassive except for a quick gleam of fire in his piercing black eyes.

"That's good news, sir!" he exclaimed; and added in a quiet voice: "In that connection, my section has just completed our final estimate of the situation based on all present available information. Would you care to hear my report now?"

"Go ahead," Hague invited.

"I'll be as brief as possible, sir. Our best estimate is 200,000 European regulars mobilized in Mexico. That covers organized infantry divisions, artillery, cavalry, tanks, air corps, and technical groups transported from Mediterranean ports during the past six months, together with some reservist infantry assembled from South American points. To all outward appearances they fully support the arguments of the new Mexican dictatorship that, as a part of the Mexican military forces, these troops are not the concern of the United States."

General Hague's straight mouth parted in a cynical smile.

"There is the big rub, Flagwill. The Mexican version has so rationalized their European army that the American public falls for the fiction completely. It almost has our State Department fooled, even when our ambassador knows the real commander in Mexico is Van Hassek, one of the smartest tacticians of the old Imperial Army."

"The subterfuge is obvious, sir," Flagwill averred. "My whole section agrees that the United States faces attack from Van Hassek's army."

General Hague somberly nodded his head.

"I agree perfectly with your deductions, Flagwill, and informed the President pretty much to the same effect today. He is very gravely concerned and wants the facts as quickly as possible. But what can the President do unless Congress is convinced and facts are available for the public?"

"In the meantime, General, are we to reinforce our border garrisons for defense in event attack comes sooner than expected?"

The Chief of Staff groaned and said: "The President doesn't dare order troop concentrations now, Flagwill. Congress would probably refuse him an appropriation for transportation. He'd be accused of saber-rattling."

Flagwill mopped his brow and said slowly: "I see it all, sir. Just what's our move, please?"

"To collect facts. Our ambassador to France has something very secret hatched up with the French secret service. A chance to slip one of our officers into the Mexican service at Mexico City. Our first move is to select our man and send him to Paris to get his detailed instructions. It's very important that we pick the right man for this, a man with plenty of brains and backbone. I rather had young Benning in mind."

"An excellent choice," Flagwill promptly agreed. "But right now I've got Captain Benning down in San Antonio. Investigating another spy mess at Eighth Corps Area Headquarters."

"Better bring him back to Washington at once," General Hague decided. "Instruct corps area to ship him by fast plane. Benning must sail from New York for France without delay. That's all, Flagwill."

* * * * * * *

Captain Allan Benning, in civilian clothes, sat waiting in a battered old coupe just outside Fort Sam Houston. For two weeks past he had been following one of those slender threads of investigation that were intended to connect local espionage activities with the Van Hassek army in Mexico.

Important secrets had been stolen from southern military headquarters at the fort. Not least of these was the secret tables of organization of the proposed new American fighting division. Gone, too, was the file copy of army mobilization plans.

Benning's suspicion had centered promptly on a staff sergeant, Gaujos. Not by reason of any action on the part of the sergeant, but because of an eloquent intangible, the palpable inconsistency of Gaujos' background, personality, and intelligence with his present occupation. Gaujos was a man of forty, a Frenchman by birth, had served as a combat pilot with the French air corps during the World War. Three years ago he had taken out papers as an American citizen and enlisted in the army.

At headquarters Gaujos' superiors swore by him. He was highly competent as an administrative clerk having supervision over half a dozen typists. To the casual observer Gaujos might have appeared a saturnine, stolidly satisfied man who had given up the struggle for higher success and settled happily into his present little groove. His face was long, lean, and angular and with small, level black eyes in which there was no friendliness.

With Benning, it had been a matter of baiting a trap. He had fabricated a secret report that American reserves were being sent to the border and had it placed, the night before, where Gaujos would find it in the course of his duty today. Now Benning was waiting for Gaujos to leave the fort when the headquarters crew knocked off work for the day.

The suspected man took a bus into San Antonio and had dinner at a hotel. He engaged a taxicab and headed south out of the city. It was dusk when Gaujos left his taxicab and proceeded down the road on foot from a point south of the old county poor farm. Benning parked his own coupe by the roadside and held the trail from a discreet distance. The suspected masquerader turned suddenly off the road into a field. Benning recognized it as a field that did service on occasion as an emergency landing-place for student fliers from Randolph Field. A fringe of willows lay along the road, and through these Gaujos plunged with the decisiveness of a man who knows where he is going.

But Benning learned a few moments later that Gaujos was not off his guard. As the captain eased into the willows, a stab of flame blinded his eyes, the bark of a pistol clapped his ears. He dove to the ground, his right hand whipping his own service pistol into play and sent a bullet driving at the spot whence had come the attack. Then he lay tensely waiting.

The grim silence that followed was broken shortly by the kicking-over of a propeller out in the field, followed by the easy purr of a high-powered engine tuning for a take-off.

As Benning leaped to his feet, his eyes made out, in the vague light, a figure zigzagging at high speed into the field. Aiming carefully he sent one bullet after another driving after the fugitive until a metallic click told him his weapon was empty.

The runner made the plane, vaulted inside. Benning, now helpless to act, saw the shadowy plane waddle down the stubble and roar into the sky. In a twinkling it was swallowed up in the void of a Texas twilight.

Benning swore under his breath at his ill luck, returned to his coupe, and drove to his hotel in San Antonio. There was a burn at his neck which told him of a close call with death. He examined it critically, decided it was not serious enough to require an anti-tetanus treatment, and called the corps area G-2 officer, Lieutenant Colonel Bart, on the telephone.

"Hard luck, sir," he reported. "But at least the experience confirms a hot trail. No doubt Gaujos was a more important agent than we thought and it's likely he has a team in San Antonio."

Bart replied crisply: "Meet me immediately at Kelly Field, Benning. Drive as fast as your flivver will take you."

When, fifteen minutes later, Benning sped up to the gate at the flying field, Lieutenant Colonel Bart was waiting in a military sedan into which he ushered the captain at once.

"I've a fast plane waiting for you, Benning," Bart announced. "You're to return immediately to Washington—orders of the Chief of G-2."

Benning felt the rise of his pulse as they drove down along the rows of hangars to where a sleek new observation plane waited with spinning motors. A captain in flying togs was standing under the fuselage of the observation plane. Bart said to him: "Wallin, this is your passenger for Washington. You're to deliver him there in the shortest possible time. That's all, Captain!"

In the sky there was the first rose glow of approaching sunrise when Benning made out, through the glass bottom of the plane, the wide silver ribbon of the Potomac. In the distance, Washington's Monument stood sentinel over the sleeping capital, the large round domes of Congress loomed up out of the granite and marble huddle of government buildings. As the plane swung down for a landing at Bolling Field, he glimpsed the gray hulk that houses the State Department and, near-by, the trim outlines of the White House.

CHAPTER II

The plane swung back across the Anacostia and glided to a landing. Benning thanked the pilot for a safe journey north and sped by military sedan across the river into Washington. At the War Department he went to the second floor and reported to the G-2 section.

Colonel Flagwill had come down early for Benning's arrival. His placid, unemotional face broke in a slight smile and his eyes sparkled at sight of the young officer. He led the captain into a private office and closed the door.

Without formality Flagwill said: "Someone must go into Mexico and get the facts, Benning. I needn't remind you of the danger of such an enterprise. While I have thought of you for the detail, you need not accept unless you want to."

"Thanks for thinking of me, Colonel," Benning said with an easy smile. "When do you wish me to leave?"

There was an approving gleam in the Flagwill eyes as he took from his pocket a bulky sealed letter and handed it to Benning.

"You're sailing for Europe at eleven on the America. Available information is in this letter. When you've read it, destroy it by burning. You'd better take a commercial plane to New York. Your boat reservations have been attended to. On landing at Southampton, cross the Channel to Le Havre and proceed to Paris by express. Our ambassador, Mr. Shields, will be expecting you in Paris. Any question, Benning?"

"I think not, sir," Benning said.

"Good luck," Flagwill said, rising. "Do a thorough job of it and get the Mexican picture back here as soon as possible, consistent with thoroughness. I'll have an officer at the airport with your tickets and expense money. That's all, Captain."

* * * * * * *

The embassy staff had calculated to the minute when Benning was due to arrive from the Gare du Nord. No sooner had he dropped the bronze knocker than the embassy front door opened. A bespectacled male secretary looked him over in sharp appraisal and said, "You are the gentleman we're expecting?"

"Captain Benning, just in from the United States," the captain answered.

"Please come in," the secretary said. "Mr. Shields has reserved this hour and is waiting for you."

The ambassador was at the door of his reception room to receive his visitor. Mr. Shields was a portly, smartly groomed man in late middle life. His round, florid face was an ingratiating smile as he invited Benning to a seat and tendered a cigarette.

"I'm glad you're here on the dot, Benning," he said. "There's quite a bit to be done in Paris, and you must be in Bordeaux tomorrow to catch your boat for Vera Cruz."

Benning said, "I'm at your disposal, sir."

The ambassador regarded his visitor with a certain whimsical wistfulness. He lighted a cigarette.

"You know, Benning," he said, "I decidedly envy you this opportunity for distinguished service. I think I know what's under the surface of things in Europe, but I can't prove anything in the concrete way that's necessary. So you must go to Mexico to do the job."

"I'd suppose, sir," Benning commented, "that our government was informed at least of the larger diplomatic facts."

"Facts?" Shields echoed the word derisively. "But there's only one accepted fact in international relations today: that the maps are listed for an overhaul. Outwardly everyone is praying for peace to come out of the current muddle. Under the surface the big question is, When will the lid blow off? We're looking to you for the answer, Benning."

Benning's eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure I understand, sir."

Mr. Shields laughed mirthlessly.

"I'll speak frankly. Why, after those devastating, murderous months of savage mass murder last year did the Coalition Powers patch up an armistice with the Allies while their armies squatted inconclusively on a mere segment of conquered Europe? Ostensibly to work out a peace formula to save civilization. But now everyone suspects the armistice is a Coalition subterfuge to shift some alignments, gather new forces, and—vastly more important—circumvent the United States from a disastrous armed intervention. I didn't mean to get all steamed up on that subject, Benning. But in this grim world of reality in which I have to work, our smug provincialism at home does get on my nerves at times, not to mention how it cramps our style. Getting down to your work, do you by any chance remember the case of a Lieutenant Bromlitz of our army who escaped some two years ago from the United States?"

"Very distinctly, sir," Benning answered at once. "Happened in my own regiment at Fort Jay. Bromlitz was accused of stealing canteen funds. When the adjutant arrested him, Bromlitz knocked the adjutant down and, in his efforts to escape, shot and killed the corporal of the guard. By some black magic Bromlitz then vanished into thin air."

"At the present moment," Mr. Shields said, "Bromlitz is at the fortress of Vincennes, held incommunicado by the French. They nipped him a few days ago when he arrived from Luxembourg as an army intelligence operative for the past year. It seems he had made connection with Van Hassek agents and was selected for the Mexican service."

Benning made a swift deduction and said dryly, "I assume, sir, that I am to go to Mexico masqueraded as an escaped murderer."

"A very lucky break, Benning. We have the whole inside of it. Bromlitz is known to be an American with a record that strips him of any possible American loyalties. As a former American officer, Van Hassek no doubt thinks the fellow a valuable acquisition. Gave him the rank of major, which you now inherit."

"Isn't it a bit extraordinary, sir, that the French learned all this?" Benning wanted to know.

"Not when you consider the facts. Bromlitz, it appears, has a flair for romance. He fell very much in love with a girl in Luxembourg, told her his plans, promised to send for her as soon as he could afford it."

"And she spilled the beans."

The ambassador smiled and said: "Why not? The French keep their ears to the ground and they've been paging Bromlitz since he first showed up in Luxembourg. They put their cleverest she agent on him, a Mademoiselle Lucette Ducos. The French are turning Bromlitz' passports and secret orders over to us. You'll need only to transfer your own photograph to the Bromlitz passports. The French have a special process for doing this. At your convenience en route to Mexico you should practice his signature. I thought, too, you might want to look the fellow over to refresh your memory on his mannerisms."

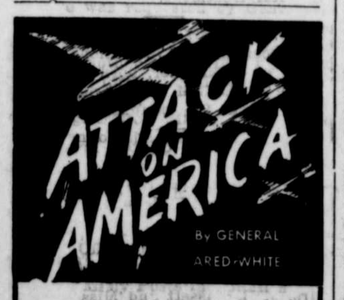
Captain Benning thought briefly and got to his feet.

"Very good, sir," he said. "If that's the game. I'm ready to go to Vincennes."

The ambassador handed Benning a packet of papers, comprising the Bromlitz carte d'identite and several orders in German and Italian. A secretary came into the room to make a photograph of Benning for transfer to the Bromlitz passports. Benning then left the embassy and took a taxicab to Vincennes.

Benning passed out of Paris through the Porte de Bercy and sped to the grim old walls of the ancient citadel. A sentry challenged at the gate, examined Benning's credentials, and sent him to the commandant who dispatched a sous-officier to guide the American to the Bromlitz cell.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Capt. Allan Benning, U. S. G-2 Operative, poses as a fugitive murderer to learn the plan of attack on the United States via Mexico. Lucette Ducos, an unwelcome ally, saves his life.

Read this portentous novel. It is both timely and of patriotic significance!

IN THIS PAPER

NEXT WEEK
Another Absorbing Installment

(Released by Western Newspaper Union.)

ONLY SIX WORDS NEEDED FOR NATIONAL PLATFORM

TO THE VAST MAJORITY of the American people—democracy, our American democracy — represents more than a way of life, more than a philosophy of government. We associate with democracy a system, our American profit system of free competition.

When we apply democracy to ourselves as individuals, we more often think of the opportunities offered by that American system, than of the privileges provided by our form of government, and to us they are associated, if not synonymous.

Our democracy, our form of government representing the privileges we enjoy, is endangered by subversive elements operating in this country. But in even greater danger is our American system of free competition through which opportunities are provided for each of us who has the energy and ability to grasp and improve them.

That system is being seriously undermined, and it is being done in the name of democracy.

To be sure, we might retain our democracy and all the privileges it offers, without retaining the American system and the opportunities it provides. To lose the opportunities would be as serious as to lose the privileges, except that so long as we remain masters of government, rather than slaves to government, we would be in a position to in time—a very long time—restore the opportunities.

I should like to write the platform for both major political parties and could put it all in these six words: "Maintain Democracy and the American System."

* * *

GIVE THE FARMER THE HOME MARKET

TODAY WE ARE IMPORTING millions of pounds of beef and millions of bushels of corn from Argentina. We do that with the hope of selling Argentina automobiles, typewriters, sewing machines and many other manufactured products. We sacrifice the American farmer in the interest of the American manufacturer and to maintain wage scales in American factories.

Before the present war in Europe began, we were buying millions of pounds of pork products from Poland that we might sell to Poland the products of American factories. At the same time we would not permit shoe manufacturers in Czechoslovakia to sell shoes in this country. We prevented that by a tariff wall. To have permitted the sale would have taken orders away from American shoe factories, and employment from people who worked in those factories.

American farmers could, and would, have produced the pork products imported from Poland if they could have had a protected market, and that production would have helped to maintain the living standards in American farm homes.

Instead of giving to the American farmer his home market, we make of him a charity subject by paying him for not raising food products we can buy elsewhere. To do that costs us well over a billion dollars a year.

The American farmer would prefer to make his own way. What he asks is a fair treatment as is given other American industries.

* * *

USUALLY THE WEATHER IS A BIT UNUSUAL

FOR YEARS A FRIEND has written me of the glorious climate of California. I spent three months in that climate this winter and have listened to his frequent explanations of how very unusual the climate has been, more rains than the state had ever known before.

I have been in Florida during a period of unusual weather conditions, colder than was ever known before. I have been almost suffocated by heat in the hottest weather Minnesota ever experienced. I have been snowbound in the worst blizzard New York state ever knew.

Yes, the weather is always unusual when it is not ideal, or at least, so the visitor is told.

The weather is much like fishing. Before you arrive the resort keeper assures you days of fine sport. When you get there, something very unusual has happened that never occurred before, and the fish are not biting that day, if you are staying for only a day; or that week, if you are to be around that long.

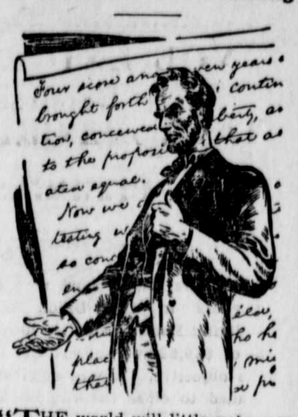
The philosophy of it all is to take it as you find it, and look happy. Possibly the conditions are unusual. At least the natives like to tell you they are, and that is not true of any one locality only.

* * *

WHAT TO RAISE

TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS in increased sales for each of America's 6,000,000 farms each year would mean a total of 1½ billion dollars. That represents the amount of agricultural products we are now importing from foreign lands which can be, and to some extent are, raised in this country. American farmers would like the opportunity of raising those products and a bit of governmental encouragement to do so would go far toward solving our farm problem.

The Gettysburg Address Available for Framing



"THE world will little note, nor long remember what we say here . . ."

Those were modest words Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg—and they proved wrong. For Americans do remember, still live for the ideal he expressed that day.

* * *

The Gettysburg address, in Lincoln's handwriting, is one of our new set, "Three Great American Documents." Others are the Bill of Rights and the original Star Spangled Banner, in Francis Scott Key's handwriting. All are handsomely printed, full size, in sepia on cream antique paper. Includes a 4-page leaflet giving the histories of the documents. For the set, send your order to:

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D-Daily S-Sunday

Faulty Memory

Every one complains of the badness of his memory, but nobody of his judgment.—La Rochefoucauld.

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MODERNIZE
Whether you're planning a party or remodeling a room you should *follow the advertisements*... to learn what's new ... and cheaper ... and better. And the place to find out about new things is right here in this newspaper. Its columns are filled with important messages which you should read regularly.