



ACTION STORIES

JUNE
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THE WORLD'S BEST FAST-MOVING FICTION:

WESTERN
ADVENTURE
JUNGLE

**SEÑORITA
SIX-GUN**
A BORDER
NOVEL
by
**WALT
COBURN**



**QUICK PAY
FOR
MAVERICK MEN**
A SWIFT NOVELET
by
ED. EARL REPP

**CHANT OF THE
DEVIL-DRUMS**
A TALE OF
DARK HAITI
by
**ARTHUR
J.
BURKS**

WILLIAM
ANDERSON

PITYROSPORUM
OVALE, the strange
"Bottle Bacillus" regard-
ed by many authorities as
a causative agent of in-
fectious dandruff.

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UGLY SCALES?



TELL-TALE FLAKES?



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ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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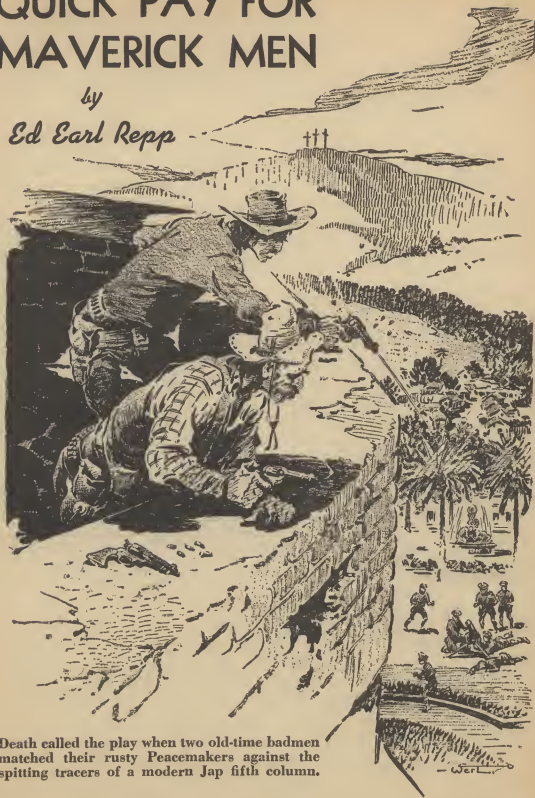
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QUICK PAY FOR MAVERICK MEN

by
Ed Earl Repp



Death called the play when two old-time badmen matched their rusty Peacemakers against the spitting tracers of a modern Jap fifth column.

CRAWLING stealthily on all fours through catclaw and cactus, Nevada Jim pulled up suddenly and with a low, colorful oath plucked a cholla

spine from the ball of his horny thumb. "Quit belly-achin' and move on!" husked old Utah McClatchey from close behind him. "I'm gettin' tired of havin'

them run-down boots o' yours shoved in my face!"

A dark silhouette in the pale moonlight, Nevada Jim stuck his injured member into a capacious mouth and licked the pinpoint wound which stung like fire. Then he grinned at his sour-faced old companion. "Don't get impatient, Utah," he said. "Good times await us at yonder mine. After we lift ol' Dan Conover's gold we won't have to do this kind of work no more unless we feel like havin' some fun."

Utah matched his younger partner's grin. "You know," he gave back quietly, "we're really doin' Conover a big favor by relievin' him o' his dust. Why, from what I heard in Tombstone, the poor jasper's been worryin' himself ga'nt for fear somebody was goin' to rob him. We'll take a big load off his mind."

Nevada Jim's thin, hawk-like face assumed a benign expression. "I believe you're right, pard," he said. "I bet he'll be tickled pink to see us!"

"I reckon," McClatchey chuckled. "Lots of other folks would too."

He was right. Lawmen from Laramie to Paso del Norte would have given time from their lives to nab this pair. Many had seen the two slippery owlhooters, but none of them had been capable of laying hands on them. One reason was because there wasn't a sheriff west of Omaha who didn't have a healthy respect for the old Colt Peacemakers they wore, tied-hard, at their thighs. Another reason was that times had changed and the law was more accustomed nowadays to riding along fine highways in high-powered cars, than forking mean cayuses over the rough western badlands in quest of the two old-time outlaws.

Some newspapers in the Southwest frequently referred to the pair as the Hellers from Helldorado and poked fun at the law for being unable to put them where they rightfully belonged. Others called them ribald raiders because they seemed to enjoy themselves so thoroughly when they walked into some unsuspecting cow-country bank and lifted its cash. There were still other papers, and individuals too, who mentioned slyly when the pair made front page news, that Nevada Jim

James and Utah McClatchey sometimes did the country a service by preying upon their own kind. For deputy sheriffs, town marshals and border patrolmen frequently found dead gangsters in unexpected places, with miniature tombstones carved from chaparral or manzanita, placed neatly upon their chests. That was a symbol the Hellers from Helldorado always left behind them.

"We don't want nobody to git credit for our doin's but us," Utah always said. "An' we shore as heck don't want to git credit for orneriness that ain't our'n!"

They enjoyed many a chuckle over those miniature tombstones. And they were valued by the lawmen fortunate enough to get hold of one. They carried a message that was plain as the beak-like nose on Nevada Jim's predatory face. The miniatures were more than calling cards. They told all and sundry that the Hellers' hang-out was in the old ghost town of Tombstone, Arizona, hard by the fastnesses of the Chiricahua Mountains, the Turkey Creek badlands and the Mexican border. It was an open challenge to the law to come and get them—if it could.

But now the two pards had been forced to abandon their snug retreat in the old Oriental Saloon where Wyatt Earp had once held forth in all of his frock-coated, gun-hung splendor, for Tombstone was coming to life again. Mines were reopening and ore trucks were churning up the thick dust of Allen and Tough-Nut Streets.

"It's this here dee-fense program that's turnin' us into the hills again," Nevada Jim complained. "It might be a good thing for the country, but it's goin' to make it awful tough for us to keep dodgin' the law."

Utah McClatchey had squared his flaring old shoulders and snorted: "What this country needs is a few ol' timers like you an' me that are plumb handy with hog-laigs."

"We're handy enough," Nevada had agreed. "But we're also pizen mean an' ornery. Our law-dodgers say so."

"They ain't lyin'," Utah admitted. "There ain't no Social See-curety for us an' we gotta make a livin' somehow, don't we?"

NOW, the Hellers were high on the flank of a barren, Chiricahua peak, making their way with cat-like stealth up the tailings of an old mine dump. New streakings of ore marked it in places, for Dan Conover had recently reopened the Bronco Mine.

"Funny Conover ain't got his stamp mill runnin' tonight," Utah complained. "If it was goin', we could've rode our hosses right up to his shack without bein' heard instead of us havin' to crawl on our hands an' knees."

Nevada Jim grinned. The old renegade was always complaining about something. "You got to do a little work for yore dinero," he pointed out, "or you wouldn't appreciate it none."

He ceased talking as they reached the edge of the dump, and clamped a hand over his pard's wrist. His bleak, wintry eyes scanned the shelf for sign of life. There was none. A waning moon shed a faint radiance over the long, narrow plateau, and the gaunt shaft house at the mouth of the mine. The stamp mill, cook shack and long bunkhouse were on the other side of the shaft house. A clammy silence held sway over the place.

The only sign of human habitation was a pale, yellow light in one old shanty off to the right of the two renegades. Save for that, every building seemed deserted when the mine should be going full-blast. There was something subtle in the quiet that Nevada Jim didn't like. It made the hair crawl on his thin neck.

They stole forward again toward the lighted shack. There was a front and rear door to it and it boasted three rooms, a kitchen, bunk-room and a front room. Nevada was aware of that because he and Utah had once holed up there when a posse became too annoying.

They saw now that the yellow lamp-light was coming from the front room. They picked their way quietly to the rear porch. Testing each step, Nevada mounted slowly. The door was hung on leather hinges, but by lifting it a little, he managed to ease it open without a sound. He stepped inside.

The little kitchen was dark as the inside of his pockets. He paused, with Utah at his shoulder, to accustom his eyes to the darkness. After a moment he

could make out the door leading into the front room. Silently he crossed to it. Left hand reaching out, he jerked it open as his right whipped his long-barrelled Colt from its pouch. Like a cat he slipped through the door and took one long stride to the right. Utah, gun in hand, moved to the left. It was their system when entering a bank.

Their guns flipped up to cover the room, then sagged. Both stared open-mouthed at old Dan Conover seated beside a stained table in the center of the room. They blinked to make sure their eyes were not playing them false.

A dirty rag had been drawn tight between Dan's teeth and knotted securely behind his white head. His arms were bound to the back of the chair in which he sat, and his ankles were lashed to the legs of it. Only his blue eyes were active and they were filled with hellfire and brimstone. But when he looked up at the two renegades, Nevada saw his angry expression change. The old mine operator's shoulders shook and his chest started heaving. A sound came from behind the gag that was very much like choked laughter.

He looked at the renegades standing either side of the door. Utah McClatchey resembled a gaunt lobo. Tall, thin as a rail, bow-legged in his ragged Levis, his blue shirt and moth-eaten cowhide vest hanging about his spare torso in loose folds, he looked like a wolf emerging from a hard winter. His scraggy, drooping, iron-gray mustache fell below his narrow chin. The battered range hat atop his bullet head had seen better days, but now the brim was warped and floppy and the crown boasted two bullet holes. He looked older than he was, for he had hit the owlhoot at twelve, and forty years of night riding since weighed heavily upon him.

Nevada Jim flushed a little when he felt Conover's laughing eyes go over him. He was garbed much as his old partner, but there the resemblance ended. His eyes and thin face carried an expression of ironic, devilish humor most of the time. He was perhaps ten years younger than Utah, but heavier. A sparse stubble of roan whiskers, well on the gray side, hid the weather-wrinkles etched about his mouth and flat cheeks. He always en-

joyed a good laugh at the other fellow's expense, but this time he realized the joke was on them. And old Dan Conover knew it.

Utah was the first to speak, then explosively: "Shut yore gurglin', yuh dang fool!" he cracked out. "You sound like a b'ilin' teakettle! Untie the critter, Jim, before I get mad an' shoot the gag out o' his mouth. Of all the consarned luck I ever did see, this is the worst. Somebody beat us to our gold, by Gawd!"

Nevada had already pouched his gun and was striding toward Conover when he saw him stiffen suddenly back in his chair as though something had smashed him in the chest. Then he saw something had, for a red stain spread quickly over the old mining man's white shirt front.

A sound, scarcely louder than the low hiss of a snake, accompanied the bullet. Before he could do more than spin toward the bedroom door from which he thought the mysterious shot had come, a second slug sliced neatly through the crown of his battered range hat.

Then Utah McClatchey's ancient Colt let out a roar that shook the shack. His heavy slug screamed into the bedroom as he yelled: "After 'em, Jim! They're hidin' in the bunk-room! Maybe they got our gold in there!"

He started running, straight-up, for the door, with a reckless disregard for modern guns and gunners. But Nevada had other ideas. In a flying tackle he brought the old renegade down to the floor and rolled with him through the dark doorway just as lead from the hissing guns inside the bedroom sheeted above their prone bodies.

Nevada Jim found it disconcerting to fight guns that made no sound. He wasn't used to it, but he was accustomed to fighting in the dark and he had no more mercy in him now than a cougar has for a fawn between its jaws.

Pale gun-flame stabbed out of the thick blackness from the vicinity of one of the bunks across the room. Nevada snapped from the floor, gun swinging up as he triggered to cover the spot of flame. Instantly he heard the thud of a falling body accompanied by a shrill, high-pitched screaming of words in a tongue that was totally unfamiliar to him. The voice

gurgled off into the silence of death.

The whole thing here was more than he could understand. It was bad enough to battle soundless guns, let alone men who spoke a language that only a heathen could comprehend. "But before we get done here, I'll git me all the answers or git salivated tryin'," he avowed to himself. "An' I'll pay back them scuts for gut-shootin' a helpless man thataway, too. Hell, all we wanted was his gold an' there ain't been that much dinero runnin' around loose since hell froze over!"

BUT for a time it didn't appear that they were going to get anything in this dark room but a dose of lead. There seemed to be at least half a dozen men loose in the darkness.

Nevada Jim remained on the floor. He shot and rolled over, then shot again at each gun-flash. Lead slapped all about him, but he was used to that. Utah was yelling like a Comanche each time he triggered, and Nevada used his own voice as he emptied one gun and flung it into the face of a shadow looming near him. "Shut up, Utah!" he rapped. "Want every sidewinder here tuh spot you?"

Somebody stepped on his hand just then. He clutched an ankle and yanked. In the same movement he brought forth his second gun and swung the long barrel down on a skull. Bone crunched sickeningly, followed by a deep sigh. "Like breakin' aiggs into a fryin' pan!" he chuckled to himself.

Again he whipped his gun sidewise and took a snap shot at a figure trying to steal through the doorway. That was the end of it, or at least Nevada thought so. But just then both of them heard a sound that brought them swiftly to their feet. It was the coughing roar of an airplane motor coming to life.

"Two of the skunks got out through the door," Utah yelled, "whilst I had my hands full with a couple more. But they ain't got away yet. Come on!"

"I'm way ahead of you!" Nevada shouted as he hurdled the body of the last man he had triggered. His long legs pumped him swiftly into the living room. He took a glance at Dan Conover and went to him. The mine owner was dying. Blood welling from the wound in his chest

now stained his entire shirt and pooled on the floor. He was slipping fast, but on sight of the outlaw, he urged him close.

Utah came panting up. "Looks like they punched Dan's ticket sure," he commented, taking a look at Conover's bloodless face. "The dirty lowdown scuts—triggerin' a man that couldn't nowise defend hisself!"

"Get goin' outside!" Nevada bit out. "Wing that sky-buggy afore she gits offen the ground, or we'll have a hell of a time follerin' its train on hoss-back. Watch yore step, Utah. Them jiggers is plumb bad!"

McClatchey jumped for the door, gray hair flying out like a mane behind his shoulders. Nevada leaped to the side of the old mine owner, and for a rough and ready hellion with no more scruples than a mangy coyote, he was strangely gentle about untying the gag still in Dan Conover's mouth, and bringing him a big slug of whiskey from a bottle of old Square-face in a corner cupboard. He had sloshed a tin-cup half full, and Dan Conover gulped it down like water.

Nevada looked at the empty cup. "You might of saved me a swig," he said morosely. "That's all there was in the bottle!"

A ghost of a smile crossed Conover's face. He looked pleased at seeing the old-time outlaws. At least the three of them spoke the same language.

Outside, the plane motor was rising into a crescendo of sound that almost drowned the savage barking of Utah McClatchey's Colt. Then a shadow passed across a lighted window. Nevada didn't need to hear Utah's sulphurous curses to know he had failed to halt the plane's flight. McClatchey did not immediately reappear, and for a few minutes Nevada Jim had his hands too full to wonder where the old lobo had gone.

For as soon as the plane roar got out of his ears, he became aware that Conover was speaking his name in a halting, gasping voice. "James. Jim, bend closer. I ain't got long to be here, but while I am, I want to tell you what I can. You're a pesky outlaw, and yuh come here to rob me, but I'd a sight rather have seen you get my gold than them pesky greasers, and furriners that have got it now. I—

I didn't know they'd come back to the bunk-room or I'd a-warned yuh."

Nevada Jim sat down on the arm of Conover's chair, and propped his head so the blood coming into his throat wouldn't choke him. But he saw, even as he did so, that Dan Conover had spoken just about his last words. Only a supreme effort brought another mumbling phrase from his lips.

"*El Sierra del Luna, Jim. Tres Cruces. The Mountains of the Moon. Three Crosses.*"

HIS head fell forward on muscles gone suddenly slack. Gently, Nevada Jim let the old man drop forward across the table. He was not a praying man, was Nevada Jim James, but he prayed right then that the Good Lord would let him line his sights on Dan Conover's killer.

Utah McClatchey came stumbling in from outside.

Nevada looked up. "Where you been?"

For a moment, Utah McClatchey didn't answer him. He stared somberly at Dan Conover. When he raised his eyes they were black and hard as obsidian.

"They's twelve fresh graves out alongside the bunkhouse," he said slowly. "Dan'l will fill the thirteenth. Jim, them twelve graves are kinda shaller. Looks like the hombres who dug 'em got tired in a hurry. Mebbe they didn't give a damn if the coyotes come down from the hills and dug out the corpses, and made a meal off of 'em. Which they done. Every last one of the dozen, Jim, was shot in the back of the head like you'd shoot a steer. From the look of things, they had just about as much chance as a hog of defendin' themselves. Now there ain't nobody accused me of bein' an angel, but I'll be damned right straight tuh Purgatory if I ever shot a man when he warn't lookin' at me!"

He was silent a moment while he punched spent shells from his two Colts, and thumbed in fresh loads, taken from the well-filled belt about his thin waist. Then he spoke again, while Nevada Jim was still digesting the information already given him.

"That flyin' chariot got clean away," Utah went on gloomily, "and the gold with it, I'll bet you that. Away as clean

as a whistle, and me already havin' figured out ways and means of spendin' it. I guess we'll jest have to hunt ourselves up a bank to bust, afore we skip to Chihuahua."

"We will like hell!" Suppressed violence filled Nevada's voice. "Dan'l got out enough to tell me where them hombre" took the *dinero*."

"He did!" Utah McClatchey came around the table, his eyes lighting.

But the light went out of them in a hurry when Nevada said, "Yeah. *Tres Cruces* in the *Sierra del Luna*, across the border."

"An' you think we're goin' traipsin' into that country?" Utah squalled out the words like a cougar missing a kill. "Why hell on a shovel, I wouldn't go into those del Luna mountains for all the gold in Arizony. Son, you're younger than me, and you ain't seen as much of the world as I have. Leastways you ain't never been in the del Lunas. I have, and I ain't hankerin' to go there ag'in. That's where the *Penitentes* hang out, in *Tres Cruces*. They got three crosses stuck up on a hill, and their idee of fun is to ketch a white man, strip him, cut him tuh doll rags with cactus whips, then hang him tuh one of these here crosses! Nope, Jim, we ain't goin' to *Tres Cruces*. We don't need gold that bad!"

Utah McClatchey was just talking. He was as perverse as a Missouri mule. Nevada knew that nothing short of boot-hill could keep his old partner from jaunting to the *Sierra del Luna*. The gold was just a part of it now. There were thirteen white men who had died ignominiously, and somebody was going to pay for that.

Nevada had gone on into the bedroom. There were three dead men on the floor. He eyed them with a pleased expression on his hook-nosed, hatchet-thin face. "I tally four, all told," he called out to Utah. "That pays double for ol' Dan'l, and one of them fellers the coyotes chawed up."

Then he fell silent. Two of the dead men on the floor were Mexicans. They were dressed in dark business suits, smooth-skinned, slick looking fellows. Nevada didn't like the type when they were alive. He liked them no better

when they were dead. His hooked nose wrinkled with disgust. Long, blue-barreled automatic pistols were lying near each of the men. They had funny looking gadgets attached to the muzzles. Nevada guessed they were silencers, but they were the first he had ever seen. It made him like the Mexicans no better, for he personally liked nothing more than the business-like boom of a Colt Peacemaker.

The third man on the floor also wore a dark business suit. The two Mexicans were not big, but this man was smaller yet. He lay there on his back, and lead from one of their guns had smashed into his skull just above the bridge of his nose.

McCLATCHEY was staring at a red corner of something that had evidently fallen from an inside pocket of the foreigner's coat, and now was half-hidden by his body. On impulse, he pushed out one leg and rolled the foreigner's inert body over.

A small red book bound in red leather lay exposed. He stooped down and picked it up, and handed it to Nevada Jim. "Yo're the readin' member of this team," Utah grunted sententiously. "I been too busy dodgin' bullets durin' most-a my life to git any book larnin'."

Nevada opened the little book, and an odd pulse of excitement beat through his rawboned frame. It was not what he read in the book that made his pulses leap. It was what he couldn't read.

The writing on some of the pages looked like hen-tracks. On other pages were written names in good, clear English, with numbers that might be addresses beside each name. Nevada read off a few to Utah, and showed him the hen-track writing.

"It don't make sense," McClatchey grunted. "Jim, them danged hen-tracks cain't be writin' in no civilized tongue."

Nevada, grinned wryly. "That there talk we heard when we wuz shootin' it out with these gents don't make sense neither," he grunted. He stuck the thin, leather-bound book in his hip pocket and forgot it.

At least he forgot it temporarily, for as they moved through the bunkroom door

into the main room, a dry voice said. "Get your hands up!"

THE voice was dry, cold, and authoritative, and Nevada Jim James knew even as he got his first glimpse of the man who had uttered the words that he was looking at a lawman. There wasn't a sign of a badge about him. He didn't need any. His hard, piercing blue eyes and the flat automatic in his hand was authority enough.

The stranger was not a big man, but he was well put together. He reminded Nevada of a sleek greyhound. He had the same cool, competent look about him, from the natty black boots he wore to the open-necked white shirt turned outside the collar of his coat. The clothes made him look like a dude, but the hard, straight line of his mouth and square chin was enough to change anybody's mind. He was standing just inside the front door, and for the first time in his life Nevada got the impression of a single gun covering two men at the same time.

"Get those hands up," the man repeated. "I'd hate to have to kill you like you killed Conover!" His voice scorched them like a whip.

Utah McClatchey said explosively, "Take 'er easy, young feller! Don't you start accusin' us of murder. We've done our share of killin', but killin' and murder are hosses of a different color."

A chill smile that Nevada Jim James didn't like touched the stranger's face. "You can tell that to Judge Evans in Tombstone," he clipped. His direct gaze studied the pards a little more closely. "Seems like I recognize you boys," he added coolly. "Aren't you those famous Hellers from Helldorado who've got all the sheriffs chasin' their tails?"

Nevada Jim had his hands shoulder high, palm outward. He had obeyed orders to the letter, because the stranger acted just cool enough to kill him if he didn't. But he had kept walking forward. Now only some eight feet separated him from the lawman.

"Stop right there," the cold-eyed man said.

Nevada Jim stopped obligingly. Utah did the same, though Nevada could see that his old pard was just about ready to

spring sidewise behind the table and make his desperate gamble for freedom. He shook his head ever so slightly at McClatchey. If his guess was right they were up against no ordinary lawman.

He had started to grin when the stranger ordered them to halt. It was a crooked, ironic grin that would have irritated anybody. The lawman was no exception.

"What's funny?" he snapped.

"Nothin'," Nevada drawled. "Nothin' at all. I was just wonderin' if mebbe you'd like to have one of our tombstones fer a souvenir? Where you're takin' us, we won't be havin' much use for 'em."

The stranger looked interested. It was apparent to Nevada that the fellow was a little surprised at the ease with which he had made his capture. He could imagine the hell-fire and brimstone stories the Tucson sheriff had told him regarding their toughness. Being presented with one of their famous calling cards would be quite a feather in his cap. Watching the man, Nevada could visualize those thoughts passing through his mind.

"I always carry a couple in my pocket," he went on. "If you'll let me drap one hand and undo my gunbelt, I'll haul one out for you."

The stranger nodded. "Make it slow and easy, amigo," he said crisply. "If you don't I'll let you have it right where it'll hurt worst."

Nevada Jim looked at the lawman, and that saintly, almost righteous expression crossed his deeply tanned visage. "You know I think you would at that," he said thoughtfully.

Slowly he dropped his right hand to the hammered silver buckle of his wide double gunbelt from which both his heavy guns were suspended, butt forward in their moulded holsters. Nevada unlatched his belts and let them fall at his feet. Still moving carefully, he started his fingers into the pocket of his Levis.

"I hope for your sake that you haven't got a sneak-gun in there," the man said.

"I haven't," Nevada answered. His hatchet face was completely innocent as he brought his hand from his pocket. He opened his fingers. A harmless looking replica of a tombstone a scant two and one half inches high, by an inch and a

quarter wide and thick, lay in his palm. The wood was polished until it shone like satin.

Involuntarily the stranger started to step forward, and as his foot lifted, Nevada Jim's loose wrist flipped like the popper on the end of a bull-whip. The Heller's calling card left his hand like a bullet. Even as it struck the lawman between the eyes, Nevada was hurling himself sidewise and down. The automatic coughed twice, gouging splinters from the floor where he had been standing. Then the whole room shook as the stranger caved at the knees, and fell forward on top of his smoking gun.

With the speed of a tophand bulldogging a steer, Utah jerked piggin' strings from his pocket, and leaped astride the unconscious man's back. In ten seconds the lawman was trussed hand and foot.

Nevada was just finishing buckling on his gunbelt when the stranger opened his blue eyes. There was a lump the size of an egg right between them. Clearly his head ached fiendishly, but there was still something almost like admiration in his gaze as he stared up at the two, tall outlaws.

Nevada scratched his neck with a corner of the little tombstone, and grinned ironically at the lawman, wrinkles closing his pale eyes to the merest slits. He looked as ornery as everybody claimed him to be.

"You're pretty smart," the lawman said. "I suppose that tombstone's loaded with lead."

Nevada grinned. "Quicksilver," he said, "it's heavier."

"You took a chance," the lawman said conversationally. "If you'd missed, friend, I'd have killed you on the spot for trying to resist arrest."

"If you'd practiced flippin' that thing as much as I have," Nevada drawled, "you wouldn't worry about missin'. Mister, I can knock flies off a wall at twenty feet!"

Utah McClatchey thrust his ugly, leathery face forward. "Quit yore braggin', Jim," he snapped. "Listen to me, fella," he addressed the man on the floor at their feet, "we wanta know who you are, and after we find that out, I'm aimin' to put you straight on a few things you ought to

know about this murder bizness. We—"

That as as far as he got, for Nevada Jim, moving like a cat, had stepped to the open front door. Moonlight lit the plateau with a clear radiance. And out there some four hundred yards away were a half dozen horsemen, black dots in the moonlight. Through narrowed eyes Nevada studied them. His ears, tuned to hear the scamper of a pack-rat across a floor, had caught the drum-beat of those horses' hoofs a moment before.

Now he swung back to Utah's side, answering the old outlaw's enquiring stare. "Jess Cloud, an' a posse," he said calmly. "Comin' hell-bent for election."

Utah grunted his disdain of all sheriffs. He addressed the hog-tied lawman. "You tell that old pot-bellied Siwash to drop in on us down *Tres Cruces* way if he wants tuh see us soon. Sorry we ain't got more time tuh make yore acquaintance, young feller," he ended. "Right sorry. If you weren't on the wrong side of the fence I bet we could make a fair tuh middlin' owlhooter outa you!"

Nevada reached in his pocket. His hand came out with another of those small tombstones. "Hyar's that souvenir I promised yuh," he drawled. He stooped and laid it directly in the center of the helpless lawman's chest.

Then his catlike walk carried him back to the front door again. He raked one gun from leather, levelled it and fired six times as fast as he could cock and trigger. As rapidly as it had appeared, the gun slipped back into its holster, and his other Colt came free. Again six shots sped out into the night, rolling like the rat-a-tat-tat of a snare drum.

Grinning evilly, Nevada watched the effect of his shots on Sheriff Cloud's posse. They were still well beyond effective short-gun range, but it didn't matter. The shots sent them scattering for cover like a covey of quail taking wing.

He swung back into the room. "Folks is gittin' soft, Utah," he complained. "Danged if I don't think you could scatter 'em nowadays if you said 'boo'!"

SOME could be scattered that easily, and some couldn't. The Hellers found that out almost a week later. They were deep in the *Sierra del Lunas* now,

that high, virtually unexplored range of mountains cutting deep into Chihuahua. Tumbled peaks rose all about them, gashing the pale blue of the Mexican sky. Cauldron-like heat filled the deep blue canyons, and icy winds played about the sparse pines on the rimrock crests. It was a country shunned even by the Mexicans themselves, for some of the weird tales that came out of those hills were sometimes more truth than fiction. At least there were few who had the courage to prove any of them false.

Most of the stories concerned the *Penitente* brotherhood, and the cruel religious rites they practiced on themselves as well as on any unbelievers unfortunate enough to fall into their hands. Utah McClatchey had not been exaggerating when he had said all the gold in Arizona was not worth a visit to *Tres Cruces*.

A grimmer errand was bringing them here now, one compounded of pride, and the realization that a hangnose was all that waited them back in the States.

They were angling along a slanting trail now that clung like a thread on a wall to the side of a barren peak that towered to a needle-point crest a good five thousand feet above them. Directly ahead, though, was the thing that interested Nevada Jim James.

He could see that for once in his life Utah hadn't been exaggerating things. The plateau with *Tres Cruces* atop it sprang out from the flank of another high peak, like a vast, flying buttress. It towered a good two thousand feet above the trail they were on now, a vertical, somber cliff that was enough to take a man's breath away with sheer awe. He could even see the trail they would have to climb. It looked hardly fit for a mountain goat to use, let alone horses and a pack mule.

The pack-mule was Nevada Jim's idea. They had stolen it and miner's gear from an old prospector on the border. It had been necessary to knock him over the head to get the outfit, but Nevada, with a curse for his own soft-heartedness, had left a handful of greenbacks to pillow the old gent until he woke up. Of course they had stolen the greenbacks, but that didn't matter. Nevada still figured he was going soft.

They had needed the mule, however. "If we mosey into that country lookin' and actin' like a couple of crazy ol' desert rats," he had pointed out to Utah, "we may get further than if we sashay down thar with blood in our eye."

So now the pack mule plodded along between them, as they rode single-file up the slanting, mountain trail. Utah was leading the way because he had been here before. Nevada brought up the rear, a loose, slouching figure who had let roan whiskers grow for a week on his usually clean-shaven cheeks. He looked mean and ugly enough without whiskers. Now he looked worse. Heat, and a stinging dust storm they'd ridden through out on the desert had reddened the whites of his eyes until he had all the appearance of a man recovering from a week-long drunk.

Utah McClatchey, hipped around in his kak, had been studying his younger pard. Now he chuckled. "You look so bad," he said, "that even the penitentes wouldn't have nothin' to do with you!"

"You're not so handsome yoreself," Nevada grinned back, and then he caught an expression in Utah's eyes that made him twist around in his own saddle to scan their back-trail. McClatchey had seen something. Nevada saw what it was as he got turned.

THE man behind them was a good two miles away, but in the clear atmosphere he was easily visible from flop-brimmed sombrero to sandals. A donkey trudged along behind the ragged peon, his pack-saddle piled so high with a load of crooked chaparral limbs that he looked like an animated wood-pile.

McClatchey grunted, his words floating back to Nevada. "Guess that hombre's nothin' to git our wind up about. Looks like a' old charcoal burner to me."

From their position on the trail, the flop-hatted Mexican could not see them. Nevada Jim studied the man behind them speculatively, then he looked at his partner.

"If it wasn't for me, you'd a been in boothill years ago," he pointed out. "You're always willin' to take chances when it ain't necessary. Now that gent back there looks a leetle *too* harmless. He cain't see us, so what you say we duck off the trail into that nest of boul-

ders and chaparral up thar ahead and wait for him to come past. It won't do any harm to let him climb that mesa trail ahead of us. We got plenty of time."

"'Ceptin' I was plannin' on cookin' up a mess of bacon and beans a little farther on," Utah grumbled. "My belly's gallin' me right now."

Nevada reached into one of the saddlebags behind his saddle and pulled out a strip of jerky. He gnawed a chunk off it with his strong white teeth, and tossed the rest forward to McClatchey. "I'd shore hate to have you die hungry!" he remarked.

THEY were still gnawing on the leathery jerky a half hour later when the rattle of hoofs on stone brought them from their reclining positions against a big boulder, some fifty feet below the edge of the trail.

Nevada led the way to peepholes they'd already prepared in a copse of chaparral. He had barely settled himself when a chill that felt like icy water running down his back, prickled the length of his spine. He felt Utah stiffen beside him.

"Leapin' blue blazes," he whispered, "weren't you the hombre who claimed you could scatter these modern lawdogs with a boo?"

Nevada Jim James was the one who had claimed that all right, and now to himself, he admitted his mistake. Some lawmen had little stomach for facing the half ounce slugs good old-fashioned Peace-makers packed, but the young, hard-faced, blue-eyed man who had faced them at the Bronco was evidently not one of that kind. For that was who trod the trail above them. Nevada felt certain that he was not mistaken.

A man couldn't help but recognize those eyes which were as direct and straight as the barrel of a forty-five. The stranger was right above them now. Except for those eyes, he would pass for a Mexican anywhere. His disguise was perfect, and whoever had dyed his skin a chocolate brown, had known how to do it.

"Phew!" Utah McClatchey wiped his brow when the stranger passed on out of sight. "I swear that hombre was lookin' straight at us. Jim, that young cuss is sure enough one tough jiggero. You

suppose he's come down here trailin' us?"

For once in his life Nevada Jim didn't know what to think. "That cuss ain't no ordinary lawman, Utah," he pointed out, "on account of they stay on their own side of the Line. Course he could of slipped across. That could account for his disguise."

"He must figger he's one skookum hombre if he thinks he can take us single-handed," Utah grunted.

Nevada made no answer. He was just easing from the chaparral to go and get their mounts and mule tethered behind the nest of boulders where they had hidden, when a sound alien to these peaks sent his long body diving back to cover.

It was the roar of an airplane motor, an ear-shattering sound that echoed back from the iron peaks like the thunder of a mammoth blast. He had barely time to settle himself, when both of them saw the low-winged, silver monoplane sail out from the edge of the plateau, and start climbing into the clear blue sky.

Utah watched it with an expression of disgust twisting his seamed face. "Looks like a danged overgrown trout, 'ceptin' it's got wings, and a trout ain't. Why in hell we hidin' here in the brush?" he demanded acidly. "If any of 'em in that airplane are lookin' this way they'll see our cayuses. Dang it, yuh got to crawl in a hole and pull it in after yuh to keep one of them critters from spottin' you!"

Nevada crawled from the chaparral, and brushed twigs from his shirt and pants after watching the airplane all but disappear into the blue above them. Shading his eyes, he saw it level off finally, and streak away, a silver flash in the afternoon sunlight, toward the Arizona border. He reached for his bandanna, and his hand touched the thin, leather book he had been carrying since finding it beneath the body of the dead foreigner in Dan Conover's bunk-room. Thoughtfully he pulled the book from his pocket and stared at it.

"What you lookin' at that danged thing for?" Utah queried irascibly. "Figger to find the answers to why that thar plane's headin' back to Arizony?"

Nevada put the little red book back in his pocket sheepishly. "I was just thinkin'," he explained as they went for their

horses, "that mebbe that sky-buggy is headin' back to Dan'l's to look for this thing. They shore as heck ain't pyroootin' off in that direction for nothing."

"You got more imagination than good sense, Jim," Utah grumbled. "But dang it all, I suppose yore guess is good as mine. There's only one thing I'll lay you odds on," his creaky voice turned grimly serious for a moment, "and that is that us two hellers from Helldorado have got to do all the plain and fancy hellin' we're going to afore that flyin' chariot gits back here. They saw our hosses, that's a lead-pipe cinch, and they didn't see us, which is goin' to make 'em mighty suspicious. We're goin' to have a fine time now convincin' anybody that we're just a couple of harmless ol' prospectors!"

THE charcoal burner was a good half mile ahead of them by the time they gained the trail again, but the shadows were thickening so rapidly now along this flank of the mountain that they did not think the disguised lawman would notice them.

But in that surmise they were wrong. They had barely lined out single file again when a harsh curse from McClatchey in the lead made Nevada lift in his stirrups and crane his neck to see what had brought on the exclamation.

The answer was simple. The woodcutter had halted his burro. He was leaning negligently against the animal's rump looking back at them. Then he waved.

Utah cursed again, heartily. "I'll lay you my last centavo," he growled back to Nevada, "that that hombre knew we were hidin' in the brush here all the time. An' if he ain't standin' there laughin' at us, I'll eat that straw sombrero he's wearin'. Jim, we been out-smarted by that hombre! If he knew we were down here in the bresh, why in Hades didn't he cut loose at us with that fancy smoke-pole he's packin'?"

Nevada Jim shook his head, and his thin, hatchet-face turned sour. "There ain't but one answer tuh that," he grunted as disgustedly as Utah.

McClatchey's black eyes widened. "You mean he ain't here lookin' for us?"

Nevada nodded. "You guessed it the fust time," he answered dryly.

"Then what in blue blazes is he here fer?" Utah demanded.

"If we knew that," Nevada drawled, "and a few other things, mebbe we wouldn't have to foller the gent to *Tres Cruces!*"

Dusk was touching the plateau on which the *Penitente* town, Three Crosses, had been built, by the time the Hellers reached the top of the precipice trail. The charcoal burner had crossed the rim a good ten minutes before them.

"Let's you and me be smarter'n that gent," Utah remarked with one of his ugly grins, that showed his broken, tobacco-stained teeth, "and take a look for ourselves afore we stick our necks in a noose."

Nevada nodded. Keen excitement stirred through him as he dismounted. Adventure such as this was meat and drink to the pards, and beneath that feeling coursing through him was another, deeper feeling that he could not analyze. He felt like a man on the threshold of some great discovery, for certainly there were forces at work here that neither of them could understand.

He was right behind Utah as the old outlaw dropped to his stomach and inched the remaining way to the rim, but he was as unprepared as his partner for the sight that met them.

Shimmering like lace in the last rays of sunlight striking the plateau, was a high steel-wire fence surrounding *Tres Cruces*. A single gate at the end of the trail in front of them was the only means that Nevada Jim could see of entering the town. And that was guarded by two Mexican sentries standing by their rifles on either side of it. The Mexicans appeared to be wearing some kind of military uniform.

Utah McClatchey, always the more vocal of the outlaw duo, was already voicing his surprise in a low, excited monotone. "Hang me for a hoss thief," he exclaimed vociferously, "I never counted on seein' a sight like this. Why that town's done up tighter'n a dogie in a loadin' chute!"

Nevada had been thinking fast. Now he voiced his thoughts as he watched the pseudo woodcutter approach the wire barrier, hat brim flopping down to partially

hide his face. "You can knock boards off a loadin' chute, Utah," he answered, "an' I got a pair of wire-cutters in my war-bag that'll slice a hunk outa that fence like you'd open a can of sardines. Tonight—"

The words stuck in Nevada's throat. For a moment both of them were too stupefied to speak. They lay there with their mouths open. One of the sentries had moved a little nearer the gate he guarded, and as he stepped forward, his movement startled a mother hen and brood of chickens busily scratching in the dust near his feet. Eyes bugging, they saw the startled hen rush against the steel fence, saw its feathers appear to puff out all over its body, and then it fell, a limp, shapeless think against the dust.

"So yuh want tuh ram a pair of wire-cutters ag'in that fence, eh?" Utah's eyes were still bulging with surprise. "Jim, I dunno much about electricity, but I heard somewhere that metal sorta takes it from here tuh there. If you stick pinchers again that wire yo're goin' to look wuss than that thar chicken. Least-ways they can throw *it* in the stew pot!"

Nevada had no answer for that. His faded, blood-shot eyes were watching the charcoal burner never waver in his march on the guarded gate, and his busy brain was full of calculations.

He spoke swiftly out of the corner of his mouth to McClatchey. "That wood-choppin' hombre is a heap sight smarter than we are, Utah. He must figger he knows a way to get them entries to open up that gate for him, or he'd be layin' back here like us, lookin' things over. Watch him close. If we're ever going to get inside Tres Cruces, it'll have to be the same way!"

"I see now," Utah responded, "why we ain't met none of them *Penitentes* out huntin' or snoopin' around. Jim, I'll give you odds them jiggeros are prisoners in their own town! We—"

Nevada's hard fingers bit into the old outlaw's arm and stopped him. His eyes were watching the psuedo wood-chopper's every move and gesture, for some signal that might make those gates swing open. The signal came as he studied the strange lawman. The man's right arm shot skyward in some kind of stiff-arm salute.

The sentries answered it smartly. Then one of them pressed a button on a panel board alongside the small, adobe sentry house a few feet inside the fence. At his move, the gates swung open.

The charcoal burner, leading his donkey, passed through. Nevada watched the gates swing silently shut again, and then his eyes were shuttling to the sentry house. Six men in those same black uniforms came marching from the house. Nevada heard an order barked in some nasal-sounding, unintelligible tongue, by a small, mustached man who seemed to be the leader of the platoon of Mexican soldiers. Instantly they surrounded the wood-chopper and his burro.

NEVADA felt Utah's arm jerk. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the lifting sheen of metal, and only his quick move saved trouble for them right then. His fingers clamped McClatchey's wrist.

"Let go, dammit," Utah snapped. "That danged wood-cutter's a white man, and I ain't goin' to see him handled rough by no furriner and a bunch o' greasers. I may be an outlaw, but—"

"You'll be a dead outlaw if you unlimber that smoke wagon!" Nevada cut him short.

The sound of a shot snapped his attention back to the tableau within the electrified gates of *Tres Cruces*. He hadn't seen the gun appear, but now there was a long-barreled, ugly-looking automatic in the hand of the small leader of the sentry-house platoon. Laughter, that sounded more like the hiss of a desert sidewinder, was coming from the man's throat. He stood there looking down at the inoffensive burro. The little animal was dead.

"That dirty, low-down skunk!" Utah was muttering. "Jim, get yore hands off me. Jest give me one shot. Only one. That jack needs company!"

It was more than the psuedo lawman could stand, too. Perhaps, Nevada realized with sudden insight, that had been the little foreigner's reason for shooting the burro. The man probably knew that any red-blooded American couldn't stand the sight of seeing animals mistreated needlessly. And he was right.

THE ragged charcoal burner, who had been standing humbly beside his burro, suddenly became a raging whirlwind of a man. Nevada nodded admiringly as he saw the lawman knock two Mex heads together, drop them like discarded sacks, and make his spring at the little foreigner with the gun. Before the man could so much as lift the weapon, a pistoning fist plowed straight into his face. Blood spurted from the man's nose like geysering water as he stumbled backward. But the fight was too one-sided to last. Sheer weight of numbers carried the nameless lawman to the ground.

"I'm goin' in there!" Utah raged. "Jim, whar's yore sportin' blood? We cain't let them kill that gent, even if he would like tuh see us behind bars."

"They won't kill him," Nevada said grimly. "They want somethin' from him. Notice the way they're going through his clothes?"

For a few minutes they watched in silence as the strange lawman was thoroughly searched. Then four of the Mexicans picked up the unconscious American. "Good gosh a-mighty," Utah groaned. "They're takin' the pore devil to the Castle of No Return!"

"The Castle of No Return? I don't savy, amigo?"

Utah relaxed like a spent runner and gestured at the town. Nevada followed his pointing arm. For the first time since they had reached the rim he was really getting a chance to look over *Tres Cruces*. The town covered, perhaps, a square mile of the wide plateau. Crooked alleys wandered between the houses. There seemed to be only one straight street in the whole village, and that ran from the gate in front of them straight toward twin hillocks around which *Tres Cruces* was built like the spokes around the hub of a wheel. The hills were low, rising barely a hundred feet above the tile roofs of the town's adobes. Three great, ironwood crosses stood on one of the hills, stark against the dusk. A grim reminder to the *Penitentes* that their creed demanded crucifixion.

Nevada turned his pale eyes to the other hillock. Sprawled across the summit of it was a great stone and adobe building, that made the huts squatting in

the village below it look meaner by contrast.

"The Castle of No Return," Utah McClatchey was saying, "on account of plenty hombres who git inside never come out again. Even the *Penitentes* ain't got much use for the place!"

Nevada was listening to his partner with only half of his attention. His eyes were on the two tall stone towers rising from either end of the great hacienda. Wires were strung between them. He could just make them out through the gathering dark.

"I've heard it said," McClatchey was going on, "that parts of the castle was built clean back in Aztec times. The *Penitentes* have added to it since. The boss *Penitente* hangs out thar and some of the things I've heard it said they do thar would curl yore hair. They go clean back tuh Bible times for a lot of their notions."

"And right up to date for the rest of 'em," Nevada cut in. "Those wires strung between them towers are one of these here aerials, which means they got a rad-io in one of the towers. And I'll betcha on a outfit that size they can send out stuff as well as git it in. Fella, yore *Penitentes* didn't put up that rad-io. It's the work of them damned furriners."

Utah nodded. "Yo're right there, Jim. Makes my toes itch to tromp them side-winders. An' now," he added gloomily, as they watched the platoon of soldiers carrying the psuedo wood-cutter's figure up the hill toward the castle, "we got to figger out a way to get inside that gate, grab that hombre they've done pulverized, git our gold which is bound to be in that danged castle, and the hombres responsible for killin' ol' Dan Conover, and then get them and us back out to the Border."

Nevada chuckled. "Let's just concentrate on getting inside that fence," he said dryly.

He had hardly spoken the words when a far-off drone, like a bumble bee buzzing, came to them. Utah jerked. "Leapin' blue blazes," he exclaimed hoarsely, "it's that danged airyplane comin' back." Then his canny old eyes surveyed the darkening plateau, and he relaxed a little. "They won't see us here, at that," he chuckled comfortably. "It's gittin' too dark."

"Yeah?" Nevada drawled sarcastically. As he spoke, a brilliant light flooded the plateau, for floodlamps half-buried in the sandy topsoil of the mesa came suddenly alight.

The radiance was blinding for a moment. Utah blinked like an old owl. "An' now," he growled, "we stand out like a wart on a sore thumb! Jim, we cain't stay here, and there ain't no dangd sense in goin' back. What in hell are we goin' to do?"

Nevada Jim looked at his old partner. There was a flaring, ugly gleam suddenly in his pale eyes. "When you can't go back, feller, you got to go forward. Climb yore cayuse, and don't forget that toy soldier salute." He fixed Utah with his eyes, and said sternly: "Don't open that ugly trap of yores, and don't look surprised at anything I say." He pulled the little red notebook from his hip pocket again. "Mebbe this here souvenir will be a sort of passport through the gate."

Utah blinked at the book. "That thing will more'n likely be a passport tuh hell," he said gloomily.

MOUNTED, and riding again, as though they were just reaching the end of the steep, precipitous trail, Nevada led the way toward the sentry-gate. Through eyes that appeared not to notice such things, he watched the sentries jerk to attention, grips tightening on their rifles, and then they relaxed as Nevada Jim shot his arm skyward in that stiff-arm salute.

Lounging carelessly in his saddle, Nevada leaned forward, and his hand brought the red-leather book from his pocket. One sentry dropped his rifle at sight of it. The other paled, like a man about ready to faint.

"Found this down in the canyon," Nevada said in Spanish masking his surprise at the sensation the notebook caused, "after that old charcoal burner passed by. We were doin' a little prospectin', and by the time we picked up this here book, he was too far ahead to catch. Looked like he was comin' up here, so we figured to bring it to him."

"*Si, si señor,*" one of the sentries stutered. "*Andale, Ramon,*" he addressed

the other sentry, "press the button. Let these señores enter."

Nevada watched the wire portals swing wide. In the air above, the drone of the silver monoplane had increased to a roar. The plane would soon be landing, and before that happened, they had to find some hiding place.

He pushed his mount through the gate with Utah close at his heels, heard it clank shut behind them. And as it did, Nevada Jim James saw that they had made a mistake.

A sneering grin parted the lips of the Mexican by the control board.

"You are verree smart, señores," he said in English, "but you make one leetle mistake. Thees is not the first time you have visited *Tres Cruces*. For if you have not been here before, how would two desert rats like you hombres know the Commandante's own salute?"

Utah McClatchey started to bluster out something, and then both of them saw it was too late to talk.

The Mex sentries were jerking up their rifles, but they didn't know they were facing the Hellers from Helldorado, men who could spot a man to the draw and beat him to the shoot.

Nevada's gun seemed to leap into his hand of its own accord, but fast as he was, old Utah's Peacemaker was the first to roar. His shot caught the sentry who had never learned to shoot first and talk afterward right in the teeth. Nevada dropped the other with a bullet through the forehead, before his rifle could speak.

"That'll teach them hombres not to shoot jackasses and gringos," Utah chuckled as he pouched his smoking gun.

"And us to quit being so smart about salutin'," Nevada said grimly. "Take a look," he gestured with his Colt, at the closed gate behind them, then at twisting alleys out in front of them. The very thing was happening that they had hoped to avoid. Alleys were filling with people—Mexicans in those black uniforms, *Penitentes* in ragged cotton drawers and dirty blouses. The shots had brought them out.

Utah cursed. "We got about as much chance now of hidin' out till we see what's goin' on here as we have of climbin' golden stairs tuh Heaven."

Nevada Jim's eyes were sparkling suddenly. He laughed harshly, and gestured at the Castle of No Return. "One of them towers," he called, "would make a mucho fine fort. *Andale, amigo.*"

He struck spurs to his mount, and dropped the reins along the big animal's neck. Hunched low in the saddle, with a flaming gun in each hand, he pounded away up the straight street toward the castle. Utah came racing along right behind him, whooping each time he let go a shot at a head poking from a hut.

"Like old times," he yelled. "I recollect oncet when we shot up Tombstone when we were pups!"

Darkness aided them in their flight once they were past the spread of floodlights marking out the landing field. Above the roar of their guns, Nevada heard the plane coming in. He grinned. Somebody was going to be a mighty sore jasper when he reached town and saw what had happened to a pair of his tin soldiers.

Lead was beginning to shower about them now, and from somewhere behind them came the sudden onimous rat-a-tatt-tatt-ing of a machine gun. But that single burst of fire was all that came from the gun. Nevada jerked around in his saddle to see why. It was dark, and he was riding fast, but he caught an impression of white shapes, and black, too, writhing in the dust of the street. The machine gun had taken a toll of *Penitentes* and their own men!

THE castle loomed ahead of their racing mounts. One of the great stone towers, that were a good forty feet high from base to top, faced them. Nevada saw a domed, iron-banded oak door swing open. Another of the black-clad men leaped into view. Light from behind outlined him. He had a stubby-barreled machine gun in his hands.

Utah's lead knocked him back into the tower. "Peacemaker's is still best when you use 'em fust," he chuckled.

Side by side they left their mounts. Nevada risked a glance back down the hill as he passed through the tower door. A confused mass of yelling, raving mankind was filling the street from side to side. He slammed the door, noting the

solidness of it with satisfaction, as he dropped a heavy bar in the iron slots that locked it.

He was conscious suddenly of a strange hum filtering down from above. Utah was already heading for a flight of stairs leading up to a hole in the heavily beamed ceiling.

"Come runnin', Jim," he yelled across his shoulder. "We might just as well raise as much hell as possible. We ain't ever goin' to get outa this danged town alive now!"

Nevada, for once in his life, was prone to agree with one of Utah's gloomy prophesies. Three steps at a time, he followed McClatchey, but before he reached the second floor he heard a crash and the humming noise stopped. Nevada saw why as he reached the second tower room. Utah had found himself an iron bar somewhere, and his powerful old arms were laying it here and there into every mechanical device that filled this room.

The old Heller grinned at Nevada, gesturing at the tangled mass of machinery and wires that he was demolishing with each swing of his bar. "Reminds me of a nest o' rattlesnakes, Jim, an' I always tromp 'em."

Nevada stared at the wreckage, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Feller, there ain't no tellin' what we'll run into before we're through here. Let's keep movin', until we locate that gringo lawdog."

Utah eyed the destruction he'd wrought. "Nobody's goin' to fix this outfit very soon," he said with satisfaction. "I jest hope there's more of these contraptions in the room above this'n."

Nevada's Peacemaker punctuated his partner's words with a roar, echoed almost instantly by the sharper explosion of an automatic. Utah turned just in time to see a figure that seemed to be all arms and legs come tumbling down from another tower room above them.

Nevada leaped forward. He kicked an ugly looking automatic from the man's fingers. "This hombre," he explained casually to McClatchey, "tried to pull a sneak on us."

"You only hit him in the laig," Utah remarked. "Yo're slippin', Jim,"

"Hell!" Nevada exclaimed, "all I could

see was his foot and gunhand. I had to sort of aim around the corner."

Some sort of battering ram had been brought to bear on the heavy door downstairs. The sound of the ram against the solid oak sounded like the boom of an ancient Aztec drum.

The man on the floor heard it, too. He showed his gold-filled teeth and snarled at Nevada Jim's ugly, beard-stubbed face above him. "You will pay for this, mister!" He spoke English with a clipped, Oriental accent.

Nevada bent over him, smiling evilly. "I'm shore glad you can talk English," he drawled. "On account there's some-thin' we wanta know."

"I will tell you nothing!" the man snapped. "When The Commandante captures you, you will pay for this with your life."

"My life ain't wuth a tinker's damn, right now," Nevada grinned. "So I got nothin' to lose, amigo, by taking you with me when I go." He twirled one of his big Colts on a finger, and looked speculatively at the little Oriental. "All you got to do is tell me where they took the gringo dressed up like a Mex woodchopper, and I'll leave you here for yore pards to find when they git this far."

The saffron-faced man stared fascinatedly at the big gun in Nevada's hands. It looked very much to him as though the lanky, ugly American would just as leave shoot him as look at him. He decided that life was very sweet.

"The man you speak of is in the other tower," he said sullenly, "in The Commandante's office."

A crash from the room above punctuated the man's statement. Nevada saw him wince. "That's my pard," he explained dryly. "His life ain't wuth a tinker's damn either, but he's havin' a hell of a lot of fun while it lasts!"

He left the wounded foreigner, whose leg was broken, and took the stairs to the third story.

"This is wuss'n rattlesnakes," Utah greeted him.

Nevada's gray eyes encompassed this highest tower room. Control boards with dials on them covered most of the available wall space. Here, he realized was the real pulse of this strange old castle

the Aztecs had built. Here was proof, if they needed it, that they had stumbled onto something a lot bigger than themselves. It made him feel humble suddenly, and then he jerked himself back to the realities of the moment.

"That law-dog is in the other tower," he said to Utah. "Mebbyso we can climb across the roof from here tuh there."

McClatchey wiped his brow. "We can try!" he grunted.

Nevada Jim had already moved to one of the modern windows that had been set into the walls of this control room. Pushing it open, he stepped through. The roof, covering this section of the castle, was flat, with a built-up parapet, pueblo style.

Utah followed him, but as he slipped from the window a howl from the flagstoned plaza told that they had been discovered. Instantly, lead started chipping stone from the parapet at their side, as they dropped to their knees.

"A man ain't got no privacy around this place, Jim," Utah grumbled.

Nevada grinned as he led the way along the flat roof on all fours. Utah was enjoying himself, or he wouldn't complain so much. They had been in some tight spots during their lives, but nothing such as this where every loophole of escape appeared closed.

Voices lifted from the courtyard again, as the *Penitentes* and foreigners there saw Nevada Jim's lathy figure lift and smash open a window of the Commandante's office with the butt of his six-gun. Like a jack-in-a-box he popped through the opening before the guns below could fire. McClatchey dove after him, struck the floor on hands and knees.

"This is more sport than dodgin' posses," he drawled. "How's the law-dog?" he added as he scrambled to his feet and with the old-gleam of destruction in his eye, started behind the biggest, shiniest desk he had ever seen. There was a row of buttons along one edge of the desk. Utah reached out a hand for them.

"The law-dog is all right," the blue-eyed stranger answered, "but he won't be if you press those buttons. One of them will electrocute me. The rest will just make this seat uncomfortably hot!" He

was strapped in a big metal chair in front of the desk.

Nevada had already started to unbuckle the straps holding him. "Feller," he drawled. "I'm goin' to feel like lettin' you set here if you don't tell us what you know about this place, pronto!"

"My name," the steely-eyed man answered, "is Dick Tarrant. I am an Inspector for the United States, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Utah looked up from behind the desk. "I mighta knowed it," he growled. "Yo're one of these here watch-dogs of de-mock-cracy, I've heerd so much about."

Tarrant nodded, smiling through lips that had been beaten almost to a pulp. "Yes," he said, "and you boys may *not* know it, but you're better watch-dogs than I am!"

"How so, amigo?" Nevada Jim asked quietly.

"This is the headquarters of a Fifth Columnist organization whose aim may sound fantastic to you, but I assure you it isn't. Their plan is to foment unrest here in Mexico, and in the U. S. with the idea of making an undercover attempt to invade and capture the Western States!"

"Phew—" Nevada Jim James sounded like a teakettle about to boil over. "I'd a-guessed most anything but that."

Tarrant stopped him with a quick gesture. "I want to finish," he explained swiftly, "while there's time. The only name anyone knows the leader of this organization by is The Commandante. It is known, however, that he is one of the most dangerous men alive. A genius at organizing coups such as they are planning here. He has participated in the downfall of other great nations lately. We had lost track of him until I come across you boys out at Dan Conover's mine in the Chiricahuas, and you gave me the lead I needed by mentioning *Tres Cruces*. Incidentally, I went there that night to supervise the loading of the gold Dan had in his possession, and your friend the Tucson sheriff and his deputies were coming to guard it on the return journey to Tombstone."

"But these here danged Fifth Columnists beat us to the punch and stole it!" McClatchey raved from behind the desk,

where he was busily engaged. "Why the low-down, ornery pups!"

Dick Tarrant's blue eyes sparkled mischievously. "But you were planning on stealing it yourselves," he pointed out.

"Hell," Nevada cut in, "that's different!"

"That money," Tarrant rapped, "plus one other thing, means more than you boys may realize." His face looked strained suddenly. "The theft, and the presence of The Commandante, means they are just about set to start their uprising. One of us has got to escape and carry word to loyal Mexican troops and their air force of the plot, or God knows what will happen."

"We got about as much chance of doin' that," Utah groaned mournfully, "as we have to crawlin' backwards through a knothole."

AND as though to prove the prophesy of his words, a voice winged up to them from the base of the tower. A voice filled with imperious authority. "This is The Commandante speaking! If you two American outlaws will deliver the Government man you have with you into my hands, unharmed, I will guarantee the two of you safe passage to the border."

McClatchey was leaping for the window, old gun upraised, even as Tarrant caught him by the arm. "Don't do that," he said hoarsely. "The Commandante will be surrounded by at least a half dozen men who look exactly like him. You'd never get the right man. It's been tried before!"

"The thing to do," he went on earnestly, "is give me up. You'll be able to carry word to the Tucson sheriff. He'll know how to set the wheels in action."

Nevada Jim grinned. "Yeah," he drawled, "he shore will. He'll slap us behind bars so fast it'd make your head swim. Mebbe you're forgettin' we're wanted in every danged State this side o' the Rockies. Not to mention," he added dryly, "that this here Commandante would have us shot in the back soon as he got his hands on you. Nope, gents, we got to think of something else." He fell silent as he stepped to one of the tall windows that let light into the tower.

Looking down, Nevada studied the

teeming courtyard below. In the darkness, men were eddying about the plaza like chips in a whirlpool. A handful of the black-clad Mexican guardsmen, some armed with rifles, and others with those wicked, small, machine guns moved about the crowd of white-clad *Penitentes*. They were keeping the crowd back from seven men who stood in a group near the base of the tower. Nevada had to admit this Commandante was a clever jasper. Through the gloom, those seven Oriental faces peering upward looked exactly alike. Each of the men was wearing a black uniform with gold buttons, and a gold belt he'd heard called a Sam Browne. One of those seven was all set to tear hell out of the greatest nation in the world!

"They ain't goin' to git away with it!" Nevada said fiercely. Then he fell silent again, studying the eddying throng with a keen attentiveness.

The *Penitentes*, he knew, were a queer bunch of hombres. They would cut themselves to ribbons with a cactus whip, crucify their own people, practice all sorts of torture rites in parts of this grim old castle. A proud, mysterious sect, they would do all this to themselves, but to a man they would rise and kill an outsider who mistreated one of their strange clan.

The Commandante, and the *Penitentes* he had duped into siding his cause of treachery and anarchy were few. Nevada could see that much from the number of uniformed men who were patrolling the courtyard. And, suddenly, it came to him why that patrol was in action. A picture crossed his mind. He remembered the sight of dead *Penitentes* sprawling in the street behind them when he and Utah fled to the Castle. A nervous guardsman had used a machine-gun to try and cut them down, and had succeeded in killing some of his own people. That was why the *Penitentes* were being watched now. The Commandante was afraid of the strange sect! Afraid they might rise and drive his Fifth Columnists from *Tres Cruces*.

On the thought, he turned. "We're goin' back the way we came, Utah," Nevada said quietly. "The three of us."

"She's nothin' but a death walk," Utah grumbled.

"Since when you been afraid to gamble

with yore worthless life?" Nevada demanded.

"What do you plan?" Tarrant cut in.

Nevada's thin face lit with excitement as he explained his deductions. He finished: "If we can show that Commandante up for the stuffed shirt that he is by pullin' another sneak on him mebbe the *Penitentes* will rear right up on their hind laigs and smash the whole danged bunch. And while they're doin' it," he added with a grin, "we'll slip out and they'll never miss us!"

Tarrant had caught some of Nevada's excitement. "It's worth tryin'," he said eagerly. Quickly he stepped to a gun-case in a corner and selected one of those ugly sub-machine guns. "Lead off," he said grimly.

Utah was not so optimistic as they moved toward the window through which they had entered this tower room. "If they took our hosses, we're goners," he pointed out. "And I ain't so sure but what I'd rather land in this furriner's hands than in the grip of them *Penitentes*."

But for all his grumbling, he was agile as a fox and as quick as he slipped through the open window to the roof. Nevada pushed Tarrant after his partner. But he was cut off himself, for they had been seen.

A MACHINE gun started its hellish song, spraying the roof with screaming lead. It did not come for long. Mustaches whipped back on his leathery jowls, Utah lifted cautiously. He shoved his old Peacemaker over the parapet, braving death for his partner. The Colt spoke once and the machine gun down there cut out abruptly.

Utah dropped back, beckoning. Nevada gathered his muscles. He went through the window in a flat dive, as lead from another machine gun screamed upward.

Yells, and more yells from down below almost drowned the sound of the second Thompson. Something was happening down there, Nevada knew, as he crawled swiftly along after Utah and Tarrant, but he dared not risk lifting his head to see if his hunch concerning the *Penitentes* reaction to their defiance of the Commandante was working as he hoped.

The answer to that would come later.

One danger was past, and then another, for Nevada had more than half expected death to come searching for them from the tower they had first entered, but the old oak door had evidently withstood all attempts to batter it down.

Utah McClatchey was the first to dive through the window they had left open in the tower. Swiftly Tarrant followed, and then Nevada.

The F.B.I. man's blue eyes widened at sight of the destruction Utah had wrought here. "This was the radio room!" he exclaimed. "We've been trying for a long time to trace the source of the powerful, short-wave station that's been bombarding the States with propaganda. They won't be using it again very soon, though," he added grimly. "Thanks to you."

"So I done a good job, eh?" Utah drawled. He glanced at his hard-bitten partner. "You see," he said, "I tole you this place was wuss than a den of side-winders."

"You've done a wonderful piece of work for your country," Tarrant said, deep warmth in his voice.

"If this here mutual admiration society is ready tuh disband now," Nevada Jim said with an exaggerated drawl, "I'd suggest we git downstairs and make a run for it before everybody figgers out that's what we're aimin' to do." Briefly, he looked to his two guns as he led the way down the stairs to the second floor.

The wounded radio man was still lying where they had left him. "So it's you again!" he spat out the words.

Nevada looked at him, smiling, though his pale eyes were like ice. "Yeah, it's us," he said pleasantly. "And I'm shore as hell sorry you got a broken laig. If you didn't have, I'd work you over proper. Any gent tryin' to wreck a country like our'n is lower than scum on stagnant water!"

He passed on down the stairs, the other two following. A glance showed him the thick, stout oak had withstood all assaults. Quietly as possible, he lifted the bar from its notches. Tarrant, right behind him, reached for the wall switch to turn out the lights. Nevada caught his wrist. "Nada," he said softly. "You want to tell the bunch waitin' for us that we're comin' out?"

"You think of everything," Tarrant answered.

"I think we're headin' straight for hell in a basket," Nevada Jim said casually.

"A gent's gotta die sometime," Utah growled. "But I'm aimin' tuh take that Commandante with me."

Tarrant's penetrating gaze turned on the old Heller. "We'll all try to do that," he said, and couched the Thompson under his arm.

Nevada nodded. He cast one last glance at his guns, at the strained faces of his two companions. "Let's go," he said quietly.

HELL was in the air when Nevada flung the oak door wide and cat-footed through it. A machine gun's wicked rattle was filling the night, but the bullets were not for them. For a moment Nevada had to blink to adjust his eyes to the darkness, and the surprise that met them. For horsemen were tearing into the plaza!

Wild horsemen, young *Penitentes*, howl-ink like demons from hell, as they stormed the Commandante's black-uniformed guards. Men who had been waiting out in the hills behind the plateau, their smoldering hatred of the foreign interlopers gathering until now they had no fear of modern guns. Utah McClatchey, Nevada realized instantly, had given them their chance to come in, by destroying the power plant on the second floor of the tower behind them. For even from here, looking down the hill over the town, he could see where a great gap had been torn in the once-electrified fence. A gap through which those wild young horsemen were still streaming.

But they were dying almost as fast as they came! The machine guns were taking a terrible toll. Nevada made a leap for a riderless horse as it raced past, caught the bridle reins, and swung to leather. Tarrant and Utah were also mounted in minutes. They came together at the base of the tower.

Above the roar of battle filling the castle courtyard, Utah howled: "Ain't nobody payin' attention to us. We can ride right out!"

Nevada Jim James laughed ringingly.

"You danged old coot," he yelled, "you know we ain't goin' to do that."

"I know we oughter," Utah growled, "but these *Penitentes* are fightin' our fight, and I guess we better help 'em."

Tarrant seemed to be in complete sympathy with them, though he was wasting no time on words. His Thompson was already cracking out a steady stream of death at the Commandante's black-shirted gunners.

Old Utah's Colt boomed as they struck spurs to their mounts, racing them around the inner edge of the plaza to get behind the machine-gunners. Nevada's guns were echoing his partner's, and this was one time he had no compunctions about shooting men in the back. Men who were dying before they had time to know what hit them.

They were half around the square, where broad steps led up to a wide, arcaded verandah looking out over the plaza, when Nevada caught the glimpse of a golden Sam Browne lighted by muzzle flame coming from there.

Utah saw it, too. "They're up thar!" he shouted. "That danged Commandante and all them hombres who look like him. Pard, what we waitin' fer?"

Nevada met McClatchey's challenge by whirling his mount up steps worn smooth by countless generations of sandaled feet. A saffron-hued face, high-lighted by the muzzle blast of an automatic, loomed before him as his mount hit the tiles of the verandah. He felt lead sear his arm, as his Colt spoke. Red film covered that face immediately. Another man leaped toward the bridle reins. Nevada reared his mount. Iron-shod hoofs pawed out. The man met death screaming, his skull smashed by those striking hoofs.

It was a wicked way to kill, but he had no mercy for any of them. Men bent on destroying a nation by violence deserved this or worse. Lead creased his ribs from the shadows to the left. Nevada wing-shot the man, dropping him in a huddled heap to mingle with the shadows.

Only one of the seven who had taken refuge here on the porch was escaping. Nevada saw him leap down the steps, and race toward those waves of horsemen, and white-clad *Penitente* men out there in the plaza. Utah was beside him as

they whirled their mounts down the stairs after him, and then he reined in as Tarrant drew up alongside them. The Government man's face was bloody from a bullet crease, but he was smiling grimly, as the three of them watched a veritable wave of those yelling horsemen and white-clad townsmen seem to engulf the man.

"And that finishes things!" Utah howled. "I allus say yuh should git all the peas in a pod—and we shore got 'em this time!"

TWO hours later, with bloody *Tres Cruces* far behind them, Tarrant reined in, glancing at Nevada Jim's blood-soaked shirt. "We ought to be far enough away now to take time out to bandage your wounds," he said quietly. "It's a sorry man, I am," he went on, "that I can't take you back to Arizona with me, to collect the reward the Government has offered for the capture or death of the man known as The Commandante. Boys," emotion had crept into his voice, "the United States owes you a debt it will never be able to pay."

"Hell," Utah cut in, "the U. S. don't owe us nothin', Dick. We'd be a coupla danged pore Americans if we had to get paid for doin' our country a good turn!"

"There's some sheriffs and a governor or two who will hear of what you've done," Tarrant said earnestly, "I can promise that much."

Nevada Jim turned his ironic gaze on McClatchey. "Nobody's goin' tuh pardon a coupla old owlhooters like us, Dick," he drawled. "We been hellin' around too long, thumbin' our noses at sheriffs and posses, to ever have any peace across the Line. You can collect that thar ree-ward yuh mentioned, though, in our names, if you want to do us a favor, and give it to ol' Dan Conover's widder. She'll need it now a lot wuss than us. Hyar, I'll give yuh an order, tuh make it legal, if you got a pencil."

But Dick Tarrant seemed not to have heard him. His blue eyes were bulging from his head, as he stared at the little red leather notebook Nevada had pulled from his hip pocket. Then a yell that echoed across the canyon down which they were traveling sped from the F.B.I. man's lips. He grabbed the notebook

from Nevada Jim's hands and leafed rapidly through it.

"Good gosh, Jim," he said hoarsely at last, "is there anything *else* you can do for your country? Next to liquidating the Commandante, this book will do more to break the hold of the Fifth Columnists on the U. S. than anything else. We've been trying since the start of the war in Europe to lay our hands on this book, which we knew existed. It contains the key to the secret Fifth Column code, the locations of other radio stations in the U. S., and the names and addresses of their State and District leaders."

"Seems like that ought to be enough fer one book!" Utah drawled. "We found it underneath one of them danged fur-riners we shot at Dan's. Which brings up the p'int, Jim," he looked at Nevada, "that we didn't lay hands on nobody who could prove tuh this here lawdog that we weren't the ones who salivated Conover."

Laughter shook Dick Tarrant's shoulders. "Was that what you came all the way here to disprove?" he demanded. "Why, boys, you were cleared of that charge within an hour after you pulled out! The bullet that killed Conover was from an automatic, not one of those old cannons you boys still carry."

Utah's mouth fell open. "Gosh-a-mighty, then we made this hull danged trip tuh *Tres Cruces* fer nothin' but Dan'l's gold!"

"Which we didn't get none of," Nevada put in dryly. "Fact is, we didn't get nothin' outa this jaunt, Utah, 'cept a couple of bullet-scraped ribs, and a pair of hosses not as good as the ones we had to leave behind. And on top of that, I got a thirst that it's goin' to take least-ways a keg of beer to drown!"

Tarrant was reaching for a money belt, hidden beneath his shirt. "Boys," he said earnestly, "I haven't got much, but it's yours—"

"Naw," Utah waved grandly. "We ain't got no right tuh honest money.

We're gittin' jist what we deserve for bein' ornery owlhooters. No glory. No dinero. No nothin'. Feller, you get that hoss of yores movin' while we stick here awhile just to make sure no trouble comes traipsin' along the back-trail."

"But—" Tarrant started to argue.

Utah's old mustache bristled fiercely. His spurred heel kicked out, caught Tarrant's moult in the rump. Squealing, the animal buck-jumped down the trail, and for the first time since they had escaped from *Tres Cruces*, Nevada saw his old partner straighten fully in his kak.

His eyes were gleaming as he reached inside the front of his shirt. "I jest had to get rid of that lawdog, Jim," he drawled, "afore this stuff fell out all over the trail."

"Wh—" Nevada started to say, and then he halted, and a grin started on his lips. For Utah was pulling packets of green, American money from inside his shirt. "I dunno jest how much I got here, pard," he said apologetically, "but a drawer of that thar Commandante's desk was full of this stuff, and I helped myself, figgering turn about wuz fair play. He stole the gold we wuz goin' tuh lift, so I figger it was all hunky dory for us tuh lift some of his dinero. They's enough here tuh pay for a good beer bust when we hit the nearest town whar the Rurales ain't too nosey."

Nevada caught a packet of the money as his partner passed it to him, and even in the darkness he could read the thousand-dollar mark on the top bill. "Yeah," he said dryly. "I guess there is. 'Course, knowin' you had this wouldn't have influenced that thar noble gesture about not acceptin' the reward for salivatin' the Commandante, would it?"

Utah McClatchey's parched old face looked hurt, as only a man who had ridden the owlhoot trails for forty years could look. "Why Jim," he said gently, "that thar kid lawdog figgers you and me for heroes. You know we couldn't spoil his de-lusions!"

RED DECKS

By Ted Roscoe



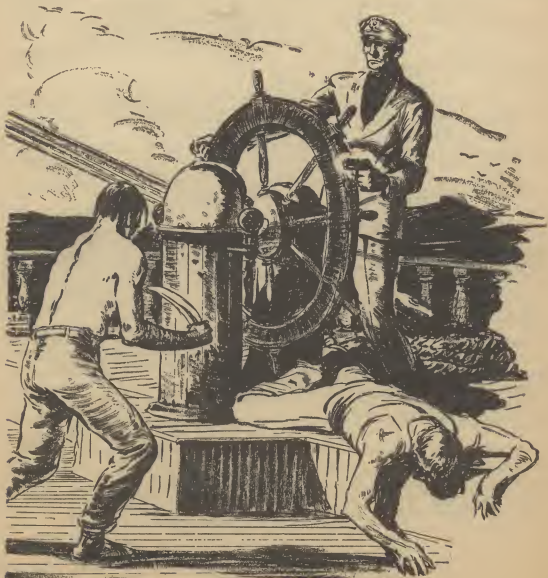
The *Asian Witch* was a hell-ship, manned by a carrion crew. Her decks ran red when Blood Bamber hatched his devil-plot that was spawned in loot and mutiny . . .

THIS is a story about a mutiny and ears. The mutiny burst below decks aboard the schooner *Asian Witch* carrying cargo of tobacco, silk and caoutchouc to Toulon from Saigon. The ears first enter the story by way of a song that roared from the thick red necks of a bully gang plotting deviltry down at Waterfront Willy's *Starboard Light Rum Palace*.

No church, nor yet a Sunday-school, was that wharf-rat nest of Waterfront Willy's. Through its matting door beneath the poisonous red glow of the ship's lantern that gave the place its name lurched the chaff of a thrashed humanity.

There were Frenchmen whose dark skins betrayed native blood, natives whose light skins told of French ancestry, traders from Anam, Irish mariners, veiny-nosed and the belligerent, Hindus, Greeks, Turks, doped Chinese, Dutch sailors, almond eyes and British chins. Here was butcherman, beggarman, thief. Gin and sin dripped from the smothered ceilings, murder sometimes gibbered in the hallways, crime ever plotted over the speckled tables.

Crime was plotting, now, over a speckled table in an alcove room. Waterfront Willy had rigorous orders to keep the matting door closed and his ear to the



Steadily, unwaveringly, his gun commanded them.

door. But he could not hear anything, because the man talking always talked from the corner of his mouth.

"When we gets five days out, we strikes!" The words twisted from the contorted lips. "An' we strikes hard, see? No slip ups nor nothin' The guy we're playin' with is double tough. He may be donkey-lookin', but he shoots t' kill. So we hits hard, at mid-watch. Then we takes th' carcasses an' dumps 'em overboard, an' sails th' craft to France by ourselves. I can get rid th' cargo, all right, an' we splits th' profits among us."

Profits and the splitting thereof interested the listeners mightily. Six faces alive with greed glistened through the weltering smoke fog. Six humpy backs hunched taut over the table top.

"We with you for sure, ha!" agreed one, a big Gascon with a face like a decaying ham between two huge brass earrings. "Oui! But what after cargo is sold?"

"Wot'll we do wiv 'er after?" chorused a pock-marked little villain with the stamp of Limehouse on his dotted cheeks. "I ain't darin' t' 'ole up in no Western ports fer long."

"Wot'll we do with her?" The big speaker's voice was caustic. "You're a thick pop! Don't suppose we'd let 'er go, do yer? That's th' cheese o' th' plan. We sails her back into these waters, see? An' spends th' rest o' our days in runnin' opium from Cambodia into Siam. That's th' whole plan."

"An' yer killin' the skipper?"

"He ain't th' first one!"

"An' th' Scowegeian bos'n?"

"No more ner less. Th' bos'n an' th' skipper has been shippin' t'gether on that floatin' trash heap fer ten years. I'd be a howlin' fool to go approachin' th' bos'n with a plan like this. He'd squeak to th' Ole Man an' we'd be doin' a yard-arm dance right sudden. We're killin' off th' bos'n an' taking no chances. An' here's another thing, gents!"

A prodigious arm, blue with tattooing, reached through the smoke. A tremendous fist, knotted ominously, thumped the table; the mouth squirmed in fierce grimace. "Th' guy who opens his blab an' gums this scheme is gonna get whittled so's his own lovin' mommer wouldn't

know him from a nigger! You guys all heard of my carvin'? I takes it you has, one an' all. Carvin' is one o' th' best things I do!"

HE looked as if it was, that mate of the schooner *Asian Witch*, and he grinned as his crew whined allegiance. A red-haired, purple-jowled man, the mate, with loose blue lips and tiny yellowing eyes that blinkered from a face of mottled leather. He could not for the life of him have named a Book of the Bible, but he knew more ways to kill a man than one, and Infamy was his favorite brother. No dainty philosophy of life had won him the highly descriptive sobriquet of Blood. Blood Bamber, mate of the *Asian Witch*.

"An' so," he concluded, "we're all took care of save Bobo. Bobo's an 'ole pal o' mine, he is. Count on him t' th' last knife. He's with us. I sent him back t' see definite when we sails. Soon as he comes we're ready to go. Grog all around, then, nuggers, an' th' devil on our side!"

Pushing the sometime white sea-cap from his scarlet forehead, Blood Bamber lifted a slopping jug to the roof; was about to split the sizzling atmosphere with a song when the door was swished open.

"Bobo!"

"Oui! Yas, Mist' Blood. Him skipper tell ship sailin' five bell."

French, British and two hundred and forty pounds of Senegambian slipped into the room to stand like an emissary from hell at the mate's elbow. Naked black shoulders seemed to fill the whole corner. A terrific white-toothed grin bit into the gray fog.

"Bobo is my right-hand helper," announced the mate, poking a thumb at the ebony giant. "He's a good helper, lads, th' one as learnt me knife-play."

Bobo chuckled. The crew regarded him with approval. He would make a splendid ally. Faint aroma crept out into the smoke, and for the first time they noticed. Around the African's throat hung a necklace, a gruesome little decoration never seen in Boston drawing-rooms, a lengthy string of dried ears.

"They puts me in mind," bubbled the mate, "of a song. We all knows it. Every sailor knows it. It's gonna be our special

little tune, see? For our special little job!" He raised the 'jug and started the song. Heads swinging, the sailors joined in. The song bawled out into Waterfront Willy's *Starboard Light Rum Palace*, wafted an alcoholic wave into the street. Other clients of the *Starboard Light* caught up the refrain, stamped their feet, bellowed, and the roach-sprinkled walls rocked with the chant.

"O, I sailed th' seas fer thirty years—
 "Fer thirty years or more—
 "But I never saw a cabbage head—
 "With ears on it before—"

Blood Bamber turned to the negro at his side, plucked at the Senegambian's gruesome string.

"There'll be a fresh pair on 'er before long," he promised.

NONE on the seven seas knew the skipper's real name, but all knew him as Cabbagehead. Up from the smells and pots and cuffs that are a mess-boy's lot, he had come, and the name had come with him.

To have seen him standing on the schooner's poop as she slipped through peach-colored dawn to steal down the placid, meandering river out of Saigon, one might have thought him a missionary retreating from Cambodia's lethal heats. So madly drawn the long face crowned with silvery wisps that peeped from beneath his cap. So benevolent the smile. So reverent the hands clasped behind him.

The skipper, however, was neither benevolent, reverent, nor mild, as any of his crews could have sworn. Let the helmsman drop a point off course, and the mild face would blacken to the darkest of frowns. Let the schooner falter in a gale and the benevolent smile would utter lessons in profanity. Let a man start trouble and the hands, reverent no more, would snap to a bulge under his faded coat. It was a hefty automatic that marked the bulge. A hefty automatic apt to fire first and enquire last. That was what the bulge under the faded coat meant.

And the gaunt frame around which the duck suiting flapped so loosely was

not lean from anemia. More like a weatherbeaten copper wire, the skipper, and hard. Crinkly blue eyes gleamed from the nut-brown face; smiled warning; told of the Yankee temper breathed into him by New Bedford birth. The nervous, long-fingered hands spelled warning, too. Curled around the black automatic they had earned him a fame as a gun-fighter that was respectfully whispered from the San Francisco Hotel in Tampico to the Phoenix House in Manila.

Only this potent automatic held respect for him, offsetting another characteristic for which he was less deferentially known. Lending his face an almost serio-comic mien, two tremendous, fan-like ears protruded straight out from either side of his head. In the dawn they seemed larger than ever, two huge moths poised for flight. Rumor told of them twitching when Cabbagehead was mad.

Those ears on the skipper's cranium were jerking as the *Asian Witch* slid down to the mouth of the Mekong.

"You mean to stand there tellin' me,"—he was snapping through a grin—"that there's trouble hanging over this craft o' mine? Is that what you're meanin' to tell me?"

Jensen, the little brown bos'n whose right eye had been flicked out by an umbrella in a New York rainy day mob, nodded cautiously.

"Ready an' rarin' to start, Skipper," he advised, finger to forelock. "I been watchin' th' crew. Already I knocks over two sassy ones, yet. An' all these men brung aboard by th' new mate is armed. Armed full up an' even t' th' gills, an' you may split me open if they ain't. Trouble, I say."

"All right then, Jensen. An' then suppose I say they *won't* be trouble aboard my craft! I won't have it! What then?"

"Aye, sir."

"No there won't! You know me, bos'n, Reckon you know," raising a strident tone for the benefit of the pock-scarred little man at the wheel—"reckon you know what a light-headed gey I am when it comes to th' handlin' o' shootin'-irons! I been know'n to shoot sailors dead for not answerin' sudden enough. Reckon I shot my share o' seamen, too. Go call all hands, bos'n. They ain't met me."

ALL hands on deck. Six shuffling sea-dogs hunched along the rail amidships. Aft, Bamber, the mate, took the wheel at the skipper's bidding, and cursed silently to the skies. Cabbagehead strolled up to lounge, hands lazily in pockets, before his crew. His crew dropped a furtive eye, stood on its other foot; tried to leer defiance.

"Where's the cook?"

"Comin', sir!"

Jensen scurried away, to return followed by a lumbering knot of black muscled clad in dungarees and a curious neck-lace that emitted a peculiar aroma.

"Now," began the skipper in his meekest tone, "I'm th' master o' this vessel, an' my name is Cabbagehead. I ain't a hard-drivin' skipper, as skippers go, but here ag'in, as skippers go, I got a couple flowery ears and a mighty mean temper. A ornery, quick temper that don't stop t' ask questions. Allus sorry afterwards, I am, but that don't compensat a corpse." He paused sadly.

"Last sailor I shot down—he was way up on a spanker cross-tree an' me on th' foc'stle head, but I got him. Last sailor didn't do nothin' wrong at all. But he was so far away I mistook him for a sailor who'd been paintin' an' leavin' holidays, so I shot him anyhow. Tough. Somehow I don't never miss." His voice trailed off. He sighed; became business-like. "All of which ain't got nothin' what-so-ever to do with you lads. Nothin' what-so-ever! I wouldn't draw on one o' you chaps fer th' world, see? Ner neither do I want one o' you poppin'—by accident, o' course—at me. Them things happen, an' they ain't fair. I don't like burials at sea: they're too damn spooky. I seen too many of 'em. So just line up before th' bos'n, an' drop all firearms on th' deck!"

Like thunder after rain, a sullen murmur breathed from the men at the rail. Aft, the mate's face was livid as he strove to keep his eye on the binnacle.

"I said drop them guns!"

A mere gesture in his jacket, a stern chunk of steel in his fist, an iron rasp in his voice. Bobo, who was watching them, saw the great ears working.

Produced as if by conjury, six assorted weapons clanked to the deck. A per-

nicious collection of toys. The Arab's sash gave up a derringer with ivory handle. From the ham-faced Gascon dropped a gleaming nickle six-shooter. From the ratty Russian with Chinese eyes, a pearl-mounted pistol. From the pock-marked Limehouse lad, an army automatic. The skinny Malay with bony knees gave over a Colt .45. The bow-legged Portuguese topped the pile with a horse-pistol that should have come from the Wild West.

"Dip me deep, now," admired the skipper. "If that ain't th' primest exhibit o' ordnance ever seen. You guys wasn't expectin' a pirate attack, was you? Never saw so many guns in all my life. Cough up, black boy. I ain't seen your'n yet."

Bobo shook his head.

"He ain't got but a knife," explained Jensen, running a hand over the cook's belt, and extracting as vicious a *kris* as ever sliced a throat.

The skipper grinned. "Leave him keep it. Ain't no use friskin' these guys o' knives, they're full of 'em. Allus like to leave my crew keep knives, anyhow, so's they can cut their own throats. Now, lads, we're almost through house-cleanin'. Git for'ard, an' go to hell. Pick up them guns, bos'n, an' stow 'em in my cabin. Cook, don't let me see nor smell that thing around yer neck, again. Git for'ard!"

Angrily they shuffled away. Cabbagehead watched them with a grim smile; then turned to his mate at the wheel.

"Bamber," he said evenly, "I hear as how your nickname is Blood. You know navigatin'. You know yer job as mate. But it's blood you'll be if you don't know how t' be good. I asks you to bring me a crew, an' you fetches aboard a artill'ry corps. So. But you're my mate. I'll leave you have yer gat. Any time you think you can shoot it out with me, remember I'm ready an' willin' to oblige. Gimme th' wheel. See them clouds abaft th' port bow, there? Maybe they's rain in them clouds. Go look to tarpaulins. Crew's up for'ard."

Bamber touched his cap, an injured expression on his face. "Skipper you're makin' a mistake if you think—"

"Perhaps it won't rain."

"You're makin' a mistake if—"

"But we'll stretch tarpaulins, anyways."

"You're makin' a mistake," muttered

Bamber, and his injured tone lowered to a snarl as he walked forward saying to himself, "You're makin' a mistake if you think you got me stopped. We won't wait five days, we'll strike tonight. Two knives apiece, an' I got my own gat. Two knives apiece. We strikes tonight."

THEY caught Jensen, the little brown bos'n, coming amidships, and hacked him to pieces. But not before the diminutive Norwegian could give a good account of himself. Solitary eye a-fire, he yelled and fought mightily to draw his guns, kicking at the circle of grinning masks that skipped to cut him down. One boot he landed on the Russian's jaw, and there was a pop like an explosion. He dug a finger into a Portuguese eye and beat a fist to a Gascon mouth. His hands were clamping on the Malay's throat when the Arab's knife cleft his neck. The heaving deck rang to the clash of battle, was alive with a tangle of sweating bodies as the bos'n went under.

A big, round orange moon wheeled up out of the Gulf of Siam; its somber glow glistened on blood-wet planking, on the animal faces of the mutineers, on the scribbled countenance that had been Jensen.

And the mutiny might have won right then had not Bamber been so close he missed his shot.

When Jensen shrieked, Cabbagehead bounded from his bunk in his cabin aft, snatched automatic and bullet-belt and sprang through the open hatch. Red flame spurted in his face, a thunderclap clashed in his ears as scalding lead tore across his cheek to go winging skyward. The mate had missed.

Flinging about, the skipper fell like a fury on the crouching mate. Wound in strangling embrace, the fighting men rolled across the deck, breath whining from their teeth, fingers clawing to kill. Bamber managed to fire twice. Both bullets whistled into rigging. Cabbagehead pounded with his gun-barrel, and the mate shrieked aloud. With the schooner's heave they rolled again, the skipper cracking his skull against a chuck. Bamber, wrenching loose, fired frantically. Cabbagehead kicked away, booting the mate into a coiled cable. Bamber scrambled to his

knees, gained his feet, fled amidships, the skipper at his heels. And the skipper's Yankee temper was bursting free.

Like a madman he whipped into that gang of mutinying devils; a shooting, kicking whirlwind that caught those men in a flailing vortex and swept them to the foc'stle. He was invincible. He was the soul of War. He was one against eight, and he beat them from 'midship to bow. They saw, that struggling crew, a face washed scarlet bearing down on them between two curling ears. They heard a gun that roared incessant doom, spat crimson, volcanic streaks. They ran. Blood Bamber, his face a red smear in the darkness, led them. Stumbling, yowling, they rushed to gain the booby hatch. Five reached the foc'stle. A leaden hail closed foc'stle door.

Panting, sick, Cabbagehead stopped his charge. Leaping to the body of the dead Russian, he tumbled it down the companion ladder where it wedged against the closed foc'stle door.

"One," he gasped.

A pair of bony knees were poking up out of deep shadow near a battened hatch. Darting to them, the skipper dragged the Malay into moonlight.

"Shot through th' stomach. Two," he counted; dumping the body down the ladder.

Lying face up in the scuppers where he had fallen, the bow-legged Portuguese stared at the orange moon with sightless interest. He was shot straight through the heart.

Grunting, the skipper pulled the body to the companion, and flung it atop the others.

"Three," he groaned, "an' they'll hold that door a second. Now th' wheel—"

Reeling to the poop, he staggered past the after hatch, clutched at the wheel, and swung the helm to head the schooner for the Malay coast. Blood dripped on his hands as he lashed the wheel, gibbering jargon sang in his ears, his bullet-ripped face seemed a-flame. But he cursed grandly, and held on breathing hard. The blackness passed from his eyes. Life came to his sick legs. He knotted his fists, and swung his gun.

The men in the foc'stle were yelling and trying to batter their way out again.

Sending a bullet burning down to the booby hatch, he laughed. Clicking metals, that laugh.

Mutiny for the minute was over.

ONLY for a minute. Smashing in the foc'stle told of the mutineers breaking free. A silence followed by a shot that suddenly came whining aft announced renewed attack. The skipper had taken a position on the poop, crouching behind a barricade of kegs and coiled hawser. His was the advantage in bullets and guns. Theirs the advantage in number. Let one of Bamber's bullets find the mark, and all would be over. Bamber would shoot carefully, too.

Firing random forays to keep them in the hatch, the skipper surveyed his position. Amidships, the blood-splattered deck was clear and moonlit. To win the wheel the mutineers must cross that stretch of open deck. Cabbagehead grinned and spat more blood. If he could hold the crew behind that bare spot, dawn would see the schooner safe in harbor. If he could hold the crew. Stiff breeze was heeling the *Asian Witch* at a steady gait. Daybreak should show the coast of Malaya. If he could hold the deck.

Silence, unbroken save by rhythmic washing of water, twing of sheets, cry of straining hull, descended like a mantle over the schooner. Tense, trying to forget the pain of his ribboned cheek, the skipper waited. Gray-green clouds crawled over the moon.

A flurried barking of shots. Red flame-tongues cutting the shadow. Lead murmuring through rigging, plunking into the stout staves of a keg.

The skipper's automatic heated in his fingers. The mutineers charged, Bamber at their head, holding the bodies of the dead sailors to protect their own hides. Cabbagehead's gun swept the patch of bare deck. The running huddle of men faltered, fell apart, dropped their gruesome shields and raced for the safety of the bows. One of their number sprawled, then doubled up convulsively. His Arab face was fixed in a set, sad smile. Two little blue holes spotted his forehead. Perhaps he was seeing Paradise.

"Four left!" The skipper chuckled feebly. "They won't try that ag'in!"

Thick silence, again. Silence bathed in dismal light as the moon slipped from behind the smoky clouds. Cabbagehead wished the moon would stay clear, and the blood from his wounded cheek would not seep into his throat. A wild sight, the skipper, crouching there behind his barricade, gun in fist, crimson dribbling over his shirt and shoes. A wild sight he made; and his grimace was even wilder when the crew in the foc'stle, finding rum, started to sing. Bawly, defiant voices carried aft. Words of the song came clear—

"O, I sailed th' seas fer thirty years—

"Fer thirty years or more—

"But I never saw a cabbage head—

"With ears on it before—"

The skipper muttered to himself. "That song's fer me. I got a swell pair of ears, myself."

Alcohol rioting in their veins, the mutineers struck again. Again bullets and screams tore across the moonlit deck. Again the skipper's valiant eye and barking gun held them checked. Again they fled back to the bow, leaving another squirming hulk behind to roll into the scuppers.

The skipper swore with joy.

"Leavin' only three. I got th' big nigger that time!" Coughs rattled in his throat. His head reeled. "I'm losin' too much blood from my damned face. I'll be gettin' weak, an' them devils of sin. . . . Th' mate must be gettin' low on bullets, though. But I'm losin' blood—"

Staring with fevered eyes, the skipper guarded the deck before him. Rocked in a swell, the *Asian Witch* careened. Dislodged from the scuppers by the roll, Bobo's black carcass slid to the middle of the deck. Moonlight gleamed on the massive negroid face. Watching it, the skipper grimaced. The drunken mutineers were singing again. As they sang, a wry smile crossed Cabbagehead's blooded features. He laughed. Creeping from behind his barricade he wormed his way across the poop, and made a sudden dash amidships.

Bullets dug splinters around him, but before the amazed mate could charge, the skipper was behind the cook's body, and sheltered by the giant's frame, was

dragging it aft. The corpse he stretched across the top of his barricade. Kneeling behind this new barrier, he fired a warning shot at the foc'stle, brushed blood from his lips; then, keeping well in the protection of shadows, he darted for the after hatch, and scrambled down to the lazaret below decks where the galley provisions were stored.

He was humming the song of the mutineers.

FEATURES twitching nervously, Blood Bamber peeped out of the booby hatch. Glaring aft he could just make out the outline of Bobo's body draped across the barricade, and looking over the giant shoulder a head with fan-like ears on either side.

"Is 'e still a-watchin'?" The Limehouse sailor's voice was hoarse. "Is 'e still there?"

Mists of sweat shone on the mate's red forehead.

"Yas, damn him! Still there!"

Desperation trembled in the other's whimper.

"Try ag'in! Shoot another! Git 'im 'fore daylight, fer Gawd's sake! Y' cyn't miss 'im this pop!"

"Try again! Can't miss him!" Bamber snarled savagely. Opening a wet palm, he disclosed a tiny handful of shells. "Them's all's left! Them's all! We got to hit him this time!"

Carefully he loaded his revolver. Carefully he drew elaborate aim. Carefully he fired. The head ducked out of sight. The little sailor gestured eagerly.

"Ya git 'im that time? Ya git 'im?"

"Couldn't a missed that shot," Bamber exulted. "Got a good straight aim." He peered from the hatch. "Hell!" His voice was weak in his throat. Fear widened his eyes. "Th' skipper's there again!

Here, smallpox! Take this gun quick. See if *you* can hit that damned head—"

Breathing hard, the little sailor aimed. In full view, outlined in shadow, the head and ears were watching over the dead negro's shoulder. A Limehouse curse snapped from the sailor's teeth. Resting elbow on the ladder-step, he fired. The head vanished.

"I hit him!" he screamed. "I hit him!" With a triumphant yell he started from the companionway. A shot crackled from the poop. The little sailor screeched, held his arm, and toppled back down the ladder.

"Yass!" sneered the mate. "I'll say you killed him! Gimme that gun! Only three more bullets! Blast me to the devil—Look at that sky! If that's sunrise we're damned well done fer. Quick, they're ain't—"

Words died in his mouth. Color left his face. His hands fumbled with the gun. He had heard the skipper's frantic hail. He heard answering shouts. Surprised wells. More yells. Creak of approaching dories and the chug of a motor. Gear rattled, and tramping feet sounded on the deck.

The little sailor's pock-scarred face was ghastly in the morning light. Sitting on the ladder, bleeding arm clutched in white fingers, he was rocking back and forth, moaning.

"We be caught, Bamber. We're caught."

ROUGH men with rough voices and rougher hands strapped them up, clicked irons on their wrists, kicked them up the ladder. And Blood Bamber, who had been the toughest mate in the Asiatics, might have endured his death sentence stoically, but for the final incident. Dragged amidships, he was held at the port rail while his captors made ready to heave him in the boat below, and his eyes glanced toward the poop.

Against the spanker mast, hands lazily in pockets, cheek bandaged and silvery hair blowing about his protruberant ears, lounged the skipper. A smile of good humor was on his lips, a twinkle to his eye.

Seeing the mate, he nodded genially, jerked a thumb to point at the body of the Senegambian giant gracefully draped over the barricade. Perched on the epony shoulder, the skipper's cap placed rakishly atop, sat a fat cabbage. And pinned to either side of the fine, green vegetable were the decorations that gave it a surprisingly life-like aspect in the light of dawn; decorations filched from the necklace of the giant Bobo; a pair of splendid ears.

ZERO FLIGHT

By JOHN STARR

Aboard the westward-winging air-liner were America's wealthiest men.
And with them rode another, vastly more unwelcome passenger—death!

THE silvery Douglas taxied slowly up to the exit gate of the airdrome and stopped. Mechanics wheeled up the portable gangway, and a uniformed attendant opened the door and stood smartly as twelve passengers stepped out. Following the passengers came a dapper young man.

His navy blues were an immaculate background for his youthful, red-cheeked face. Their military cut set well with the masterful alertness which he seemed determined to radiate. The cap on his head, with its slouch crown too white for any airplane cockpit, informed the world that he was Assistant Pilot.

"What kind of weather did you have, Percy?" Al Clark, assistant manager of the Coast Air Line, inquired. For the sake of discipline Clark seldom addressed the flight personnel or mechanics by their first names, but for Percy Filbert he made an exception.

"Terrible weather, Mr. Clark," the Mate said, nodding farewell to one of the lady passengers who agitated a handkerchief from the window of the parting bus, "I hit low clouds out of Midville. Couldn't get under them through Clyde Creek Pass so I had to go clear back to the Gap."

"Well," a voice drawled, back of them, "I'm much obliged for the ride, Percy."

Both men turned. A tall figure in worn flying boots, grease-streaked breeches and leather jerkin, seated himself on the cabin step while he gave the last lick to a home-made cigarette and applied a match. The match snapped whistling through the air as he tilted his head back and spouted smoke alternately from his nose and mouth.

"Yes, sir," he said, dragging a greasy duplicate of Filbert's cap from his jacket pocket, "I'm much obliged to you for lettin' me right in the pilot house while you tried to get through at Clyde Creek and while you went back to the Gap." He

placed the rumpled cap at an insulting angle on his head. "And now, Percival," he said his voice losing its soft drawl, "you take my log books and trot in and write up the flight report."

DAN GILBERT brushed back the peak of his cap revealing the word "Pilot" above the visor. "Funny," he observed, watching the departing youth, "how these kids will try to shove us old-timers out of the cockpit. We used to recognize them because they always wore shiny new boots. Now it's a fancy uniform."

Clark's lips tightened. "Gilbert," he said, "that cap you're wearing is a disgrace to the Line."

Dan Gilbert removed the offending cap and looked at it curiously. "That's what I always said," he nodded. "I made a kick just as soon as you got out that order for us flyers to wear a fancy uniform and cap. But it didn't do no good, except that you didn't make me wear the fancy uniform."

Clark swallowed. "Gilbert," he said in a tense voice, "you old-timers never will learn that flying is past the stage of boots and leather coats. There's none of that old romance of mail-flying days in it now. We're running our planes in a businesslike manner, just the same as the stage companies run their buses. You're—" Clark hesitated, "you're nothing more or less than a well paid bus driver."

Gilbert yawned. "O' course," he observed, "the bus driver don't have a road under him that's one way today and another way tomorrow—a road that can't be seen. And o' course, if he gets lost he can pull up at the side of the road an' he knows that a sixty-mile gale won't be blowin' him into the next state or over the ocean."

"If he's any good he can see his way about," the assistant manager snapped.



"You don't have to tell me about flying. I'm a flyer myself."

Gilbert nodded. "I know," he said, in a voice that was a little tired. "I know what kind of a flyer you are—ten hours in clear air. Get in the fog or snow and try to see." He paused. "Well, what're you going to do about it, Clark?"

Clark's eyes were blazing. "You're going to wear the uniform, cap and all, and keep it decent, or I'm going to see that you get fired. And another thing. Filbert tells me you have an automatic cached away in the cockpit. You can get that wild and woolly idea out of your head, too. I'm going to run this company right if I have to fire all you old-timers and use the assistants in your place. You're all of you too independent to suit me."

He turned to leave. "Be down here to take a special out tomorrow," he snapped, and strode away.

Dan Gilbert got up and stretched. "Guess I'd better put in for the mail," he mused. "I'll be darned if I'm going to dress up like a rear admiral just to fly a ship."

HE stopped on his way toward his car. "What ship is this?" he asked a mechanic who was swabbing off the lean sides of a strange monoplane.

The mechanic spat out a mouthful of tobacco juice. "The *Hornet*," he replied shortly, looking with contempt at the cap on Gilbert's head.

"Sure it's the *Hornet*," Gilbert said, impatience in his voice, "I can read that painted on the side. It's got a sweet motor, too." He looked admiringly at the graceful curves of its gleaming fuselage and wing. "I'll bet it's faster than a pursuit," he said. "Who owns it?"

"How'd I know?" the mechanic snapped, "I'm only working here."

"What a sweet dispositioned greaseball you are," Dan drawled, with insulting deliberation.

The mechanic had been carrying a small box of wrenches. This clattered to the ground and he was facing the flyer. "Take that little tin-soldier cap off your knob," he snarled, "an' I'll show you some of that disposition."

"A man after me own heart," Dan chuckled, a lilt of exultation in his voice. He removed the crumpled cap and swished

it smartly across the other's twisted face.

He foresaw the first blow, for the mechanic's right had been twitching at his side. More than that he had fought too many battles not to be able to read advance intention in his opponent's eyes. But he was not prepared for a one-two blow with the left following the right. He jerked his head back but too late to avoid having the left catch him on the base of his throat. He had the choking sensation of a man who has swallowed a mouthful of acid.

He covered, with elbows close to his sides and his face protected by his fists. For a moment it seemed as though he never would be able to swallow again. But the mechanic was too eager for his victory.

Dan Gilbert's hands dropped, it seemed, from sheer exhaustion and he half reeled to the right. The mechanic stepped forward with a drawn left. Gilbert's body suddenly tightened and swung to the left, his right fist landing on the other's jaw with all the force of his hard, lean arm and all the weight of his muscled body. The mechanic toppled and lay still.

Gilbert stood over the fallen man, feeling gingerly at his own throat. He commended with himself thusly: "Dan Gilbert, you old fool, as long as you've been fightin' you oughta be able to size up another fighter. An' you oughta know by this time that a good fighter ain't goin' to lead with his best mitt. This man's a southpaw. Yep, and by gosh he's a regular guy."

He stooped down to loosen the other's collar band, and his movements were careful and as tender as a woman's.

"First time I've ever seen Red licked," came a dry, amused comment.

DAN GILBERT glanced up sharply to see a young man leaning up against the *Hornet's* propeller. The man continued: "Usually Red gets 'em by the surprise of that southpaw one-two blow. But he's not a flash fighter," he continued hurriedly, as though to defend the other's reputation. "I've seen him carry a fight into the tenth round with some good scrapers and then knock them over the ropes."

"Do you know him?" Gilbert inquired.

"Oh, just slightly," the other said. Gilbert couldn't see the man's face in the dark of the hangar but he felt that he knew the mechanic better than he was willing to admit. The man turned and walked away as though his merely idle curiosity had been satisfied.

"That looks fishy," Gilbert commented. The mechanic was beginning to recover.

"Do you know a guy about medium size who wears a cap?" the flyer asked, realizing after he made the inquiry that it was stupidly vague.

"Is his name Smith?" the mechanic growled, a grin twitching at his lips.

Gilbert chuckled: "You go to the devil," he said.

"I'm thinkin' the devil landed on me," the mechanic remarked, rubbing his jaw. "What'd you hit me with?"

The flyer grinned. "That's my business," he said. "Maybe I'll have to use it on you some other time. You've got a mean pair of fists yourself."

The mechanic stuck out a grimy hand. "Shake, partner," he invited. "The only excuse I've got is that tin-soldier cap you was wearin'. It fooled me completely."

Gilbert grasped the proffered hand. "Don't mention it," he said. "The darned thing baffles me, too, sometimes. I'll have to be wanderin' along now if I'm going to get to the boarding house before that furniture salesman gets all the grub."

Dan Gilbert knew that it was only a matter of days before he would have to leave the Coast Air Line planes. When an assistant manager decides to get rid of a flyer the trick is easily accomplished.

But this knowledge troubled him not at all. As a matter of fact his last thoughts before sinking into slumber that night were of the strange, skyblue *Hornet* that had rested its lean, grayhound lines in the darkened hangar. He wanted to fly that plane.

THE next morning the hangar that housed the monoplane was padlocked. While he was looking for the watchman to see if he could inspect the machine, the regular southbound plane of the Coast Air Line lifted its huge bulk off of the field. Immediately another Skyliner took its place on the line and mechanics started the two motors. Gil-

bert had to get into his flying clothes.

Instead of coming out in the regular limousine the second load of passengers was hauled to the field in the smartest cars that the company could muster. Two cameramen placed their machines at vantage points.

"Are these the brass collars that the newspapers have been raving about?" Gilbert inquired of a mechanic.

"Suckers," the mechanic replied. "Millionaires gettin' the trip down to Frisco and back for nothing—nothin' but a few hundred thousand or so of the company's stock that they'll probably buy."

Gilbert shrugged. "That's business," he said, "an' I guess it's a good enough investment. I hear that Arthur Dailey is going to be along. His old man's the big railroad magnate."

"They're motioning for you to come out and have your picture took," the mechanic said. Railroad magnates were nothing in his life.

"Let 'em motion," Gilbert replied, hauling a sack of tobacco from his pocket and starting to build a smoke, "I signed up here as a flyer, not as a movie hero. Percival E. Gilbert will be glad enough not to have me spoilin' the effect. Clark, too, for that matter."

The passengers posed along the side of the fuselage. Gilbert smiled in a lofty manner. Cameras clicked and reporters bustled about verifying names.

Then Gilbert strolled over and climbed into the pilot house. There were ten passengers so he took only twenty lifting turns on the stabilizer adjustment. He twisted the control wheel so that the centering band showed his ailerons to be neutral. He adjusted his altimeter to show a hundred feet above sea level, examined the gas valves and gauges and checked the switches.

Filbert took his seat and for some reason, known only to himself, reversed his cap so the visor was to the rear. This gave him a jaunty, rakish look. He passed the weather report over to Gilbert.

"High pressure area here today," Gilbert remarked before opening the report.

"How did you know?" Filbert inquired.

"Altimeter showed two hundred feet below sea level," Gilbert smiled. "If you'd forget about that blamed cap and those

women back in the cabin you might learn something that they didn't teach you in that two-bit flying school you graduated from." He nodded to the mechanics and released the brakes.

TWO hours later, while the ship was being serviced at Midville, Filbert seemed to have arrived at some conclusions regarding the flyer's remark.

"Anyway," he said, as though the words had only been dropped a few minutes before. "I'll be flying this plane within a month or so."

"No doubt you're right," Gilbert nodded, "and after you and some more punks level all the trees between here and Frisco they'll be wanting to hire back some of the old-timers." Then he grinned with a return of good humor.

"Forget it, kid. You don't know and I don't know what this flying game is heading for. Maybe they can get away with men who've had less than a thousand hours. Personally I don't like this kind of flying. I'd like a job where a man goes here and yonder like we did in the old barnstormin' days."

He repeated this thought the next morning when they were leaving Mills Field. "Yesterday we flew down here," he remarked, "and today we fly back. Every day the same except when we have bad weather and then it's worse. Seems to me the old ship's kinda loggy today." He handed the controls over to Filbert.

He wagged his head and frowned as he was landing the plane at Midville. "Something funny back there," he grunted.

Filbert watched him with an amused smile as he went back to examine the stabilizer. He leaned through the door that separated the cabin from the pilot house. There was a man of medium size, clothed in a gray golfing outfit, and back of him a girl of stunning appearance. Filbert talked to the man.

"Old stick-in-the-mud back there thinks the stabilizer is about to fall off." He chuckled. "These old-timers get the idea that they can tell within an ounce of how much weight their ship is carrying."

The young man nodded, with scarcely a smile, drummed on the window with his finger tips and appeared not at all interested. But Filbert could see that the

young lady was impressed. He wondered how it would feel to have a date with a girl whose father owned half the standing timber in two states. There must be a way, he thought, for him to get acquainted with the girl before they landed at Portland. He was annoyed when Gilbert entered and slammed the door back of him.

"Seems to be all right back there," Gilbert muttered, pushing the starter buttons.

"Of course, it is," Filbert snapped, "if there was anything wrong I would have felt it on the controls."

Dan Gilbert smiled in an exasperating manner. "Son, there could be a man back there in the tail and you wouldn't know it," he said.

Filbert was uneasy in his seat. He wanted to go back there in the cabin. Once there he could show the young lady some points of interest and could sound her out. They were in the air now on the last lap loosening his safety belt. Gilbert nodded and he slipped back through the door.

"That's Mount McLouden," he said, pausing by the girl's chair and pointing out of the window.

She lifted an eager face. "Oh," she said. Then, as though to fill an awkward pause, "When will we be in Portland?"

He smiled down into her eyes where amusement was thinly veiled. "I hope not for a long time," he said, lowering his voice.

He felt a hard object jammed into his ribs with uncomfortable abruptness. "You get your wish, son," a voice said.

FILBERT lifted a startled gaze. A man with a black mask over his eyes was standing very close to him. All the passengers were staring at them and at another masked man further back in the cabin.

"Search this kid, Jerry," the first man commanded, removing the gun from Filbert's ribs and swinging it to cover the passengers.

"Make no fuss," he said, "an' there'll be no trouble. But the first person to make a move gets plugged. An' I don't mean maybe." He squatted down in the fore part of the cabin so that the pilot could not see him should he look around.

Filbert was searched in a businesslike manner and his arms were bound behind

him. He was surprised when the bandit replaced his watch and a gold cigarette case. "Isn't this a robbery?" he inquired.

"That," said the bandit, seating him in a rear chair by the simple expedient of shoving him in the face, "is none of your damned business."

The other passengers were searched and bound in the same manner as the assistant pilot. Filbert noticed that in every case the bandit retained all the money but returned all other articles regardless of their value or possibility of being traced. It seemed, to the assistant, that these men knew their business pretty thoroughly and were calmly following out a plan that had been worked out with great care.

The man called Jerry nodded when his operations were completed. "All right, Slag," he said, "do your stuff."

Filbert saw the first bandit open the door and, bracing himself against its jamb, touch the pilot on the shoulder. Gilbert looked down at the gun without a flicker of an eyelash.

"What'll you have?" he asked, as though the matter was of little concern to him.

The bandit gave him a tight smile. "You're a cool head," he commented. "Swing her to the east and head between those three humps and that other peak."

Gilbert nodded and the plane swung in a wide arc. "Maybe," he said, "you wouldn't mind tellin' me how you two rode back there in the rear fuselage without the ship being tail heavy?"

"You'd think of that," the bandit nodded. "I don't mind tellin' you. The stabilizer adjustment shaft runs through there. You adjusted for ten passengers. I added enough for twelve and enough more to make up for our location in the ship."

"This is partly an inside job then," Gilbert stated, rather than questioned.

"Nope." Slag said. "None of your mechanics told me how. I worked it out on one of these ships that's on another line."

"Good work," Gilbert commended. "I couldn't tell except that the ship was sluggish in her climb and landed too fast. Where're we headed for?"

"I'll show you," the bandit promised. "You've crossed the Cascades now so you can begin to lose altitude."

THEY were flying over the eastern foothills of the Cascades. A desolate country with rolling hills sinking down beneath them and flattening out, far ahead, into the dry prairie land of eastern Oregon.

"There you are," the bandit said, after an interval of flying. "See that gully over there with the clump of junipers at the west end?"

A white landing T made an appearance as they approached.

"You have some men on the ground?" Again Gilbert's question was put in the form of a statement.

"Five of them," the bandit said frankly. He seemed to be ready to discuss any detail of the situation. "That's a deserted homesteader's field. Twenty-five hundred feet of clear, hard ground with about a three per cent slope up the gully. Put your wheels down on the T."

"You're a flyer?" Gilbert asked, cutting his motors.

"Not exactly, but I know the flying game."

"I'll have to have somebody on the brake. You'd better let my assistant come up here."

"Don't worry," the bandit said, "I've sat in these things before."

Dan Gilbert twisted his stabilizer to make the ship tail-heavy. He came down into the mouth of the gully in a slight forward slip and set the wheels down on the white canvas. The instant he had passed over it two men ran out and it was whisked from sight. The plane lost headway and stopped two-thirds of the way from the clump of junipers.

"Taxi up slowly," the bandit ordered.

Gilbert saw, with surprise, that what had appeared to be juniper trees was in reality a small, fast biplane concealed under a mass of juniper boughs. Before his motors had stopped he felt men on the tail of his plane, shoving it around so that it faced down the gully, ready for a take-off. Others started the work of servicing the plane, pumping gasoline from barrels that were rolled out from the concealment of the junipers.

"Am I going to have to fly this again?" he inquired of the bandit.

"Not today."

"You'd better let me go out and see

that they do the job right," Gilbert suggested.

The other hesitated as though he thought the idea a good one but feared to trust the flyer. Gilbert stood up and raised his hands.

"Shake me down now," he invited, "and then you'll know I haven't a gun on me."

The bandit delved into his pockets. "I must say you're taking this pretty good, partner," he said, half gratefully, "some fools would start to buck and paw around and then we'd have to mash their mugs for 'em. You're clean of guns. Come on, now."

For an instant the bandit turned his instant Dan Gilbert's hand went quickly and surely to a secret compartment in the wing. When the bandit turned and motioned him to lead the way out Gilbert was loosening his flying jacket and removing the red woolen muffler from about his neck.

HE stepped back into the cabin and as he did so the young man in the golfing clothes lurched from his seat and sprawled on the floor. Without thinking, Gilbert stooped to help the bound man back into his seat.

"You may know how to fight a south-paw," came a hurried whisper from the man, "but don't fool yourself about these fellows. They talk nice but they're devils. I saw you conceal the gun. Keep it there until—"

"Here, leave that bird where he is," the bandit snarled with a sudden change of character. He eyed the flyer sharply and there was unfathomable menace in his eyes.

"You're either a wise man or a damn fool," he said, "but even a fool can learn, though it may take a forty-five slug between the eyes to learn him."

Gilbert knew that he was dealing with a man who was as quick and as deadly as a mountain rattler.

As he supervised the servicing of the plane and listened to the guarded talk of the workers he learned more of their plans. The more he learned the greater respect he had for the man, the bandit known as Slag, who had planned the coup. For days the newspapers had been running publicity about the group of ten plutocrats

who were making the trip to San Francisco and back.

Even before that time Slag had worked his way into an air line as an assistant pilot, though he had had so little time in the air that he was unable to fly the three-place biplane into the bandit's airdrome. Another flyer, spoken of as Lumpy Davis, was the only real pilot in the gang, but even he was incapable of flying the huge transport.

What the future plans were none of them seemed to know or else they were afraid to discuss them.

Slag and the man called Jerry took charge of the prisoners while the remaining five worked on the plane. It was completely serviced and, under the directions of Dan Gilbert and Lumpy Davis, the motors were cleaned, and the magnetos and spark plugs checked. Two of the outlaws piled juniper boughs over the huge machine until, from the air, it would present the same innocent appearance as the biplane that nestled beside it—the appearance of a clump of juniper trees.

Gilbert looked at his watch. They were almost three hours overdue in Portland. Searching planes would be scouring the country in all directions with less chance of finding them than of finding the proverbial needle in the haystack. That night headlines would scream across the front pages of the evening newspapers, telegrams would be speeded in all directions and special trains would be chartered.

Gilbert knew that Arthur Dailey, son of Clyde Dailey, one of the biggest railroad operators in the country, was among his passengers. He tried to imagine the tremendous resources that would be brought to bear by the father in searching for his boy. With every device of modern civilization at his command he would be helpless. Like a blinded lion he would tear up the whole country while seven outlaws held his son and eleven other people captive in a deserted homestead not more than two air hours from the heart of a great Western city.

"Can you ride?" Lumpy Davis inquired, leading a horse over. The others, having completed their work, were mounted.

"After a fashion," Gilbert said, mounting the cayuse. The party ambled up toward the deserted homestead buildings,

Gilbert in the lead. He chuckled, thinking of the railroads, the clicking telegraphs, the flaring headlines. He half hoped that the master mind of Slag would triumph over this complacent thing, this civilization that made pilots wear silly white-crowned caps.

THE thing that he saw on entering the main cabin changed his attitude in a flash. The prisoners were seated about a long table and their staring eyes directed his attention to the central figures. He was shoved into a chair and watched with horrified fascination as the bandit, still masked, tightened a cord about the forehead of one of the prisoners. His words, his whole bearing, as he applied the cruel torture, were absolutely without emotion.

"Write what I say," he calmly directed, manipulating the cord. "You have no idea where you are. That's the truth. You are being slowly tortured to insanity. That's the truth."

"Your attorney is to convert all your property that can be so converted into unmarked, thousand-dollar bills. This money is to be turned over to a responsible agent who will act for all the prisoners. When we have obtained this money from the agent, in the manner that I have already explained to you, you will be released at a point within easy walking distance of a railroad.

"Otherwise—" he tightened the cord abruptly, wrenching a scream of pain from his victim. "I presume," the fiend purred, "that you place the value of sanity and a whole body above mere money. I assure you in any case that you will not be *killed*." The last word carried a dreadful meaning.

THE whole scene created within the flyer a sickening revulsion. Then, as each prisoner took his turn in the torture chair, his mind reasserted itself. Next to him sat the man in gray. Looking at him with preoccupied eyes, a picture flashed across his mind; the picture of a man of his build leaning against the *Hornet's* propeller.

He remembered the man's words, while captive in the plane, about fighting south-paws. Undoubtedly it was he who had observed the fight between himself and the mechanic an evening previous. He

saw that the man's legs were not bound.

"Who are you?" Gilbert asked in an undertone, without bending his head or moving his lips.

"Art Dailey," the other replied, in the same fashion. "I'm the prize catch."

"Do as Slag says," Gilbert counseled. "Stay near me when they put us away to-night."

The other nodded and Gilbert felt in his back pocket for the portion of a hacksaw blade that he had managed to conceal there while the others were working. He had no doubt that he would be bound that night but he hoped, with some intelligent aid, to be able to use the blade.

There were eight men and two women among the passengers. The men were stubborn or not stubborn, according to their natures, in complying with the bandit's wishes but one and all they succumbed to the tightening cord about their foreheads. Dailey, Gilbert was glad to see, did not write until he had withstood some slight pain. For him to comply too readily might arouse suspicion.

Gilbert had wondered, with some uneasiness, how the women would be treated. Apparently the bandit disregarded the matter of sex. The first, a matronly woman, was placed in the chair in exactly the same manner as the men.

"I'll write what you ask," she promised, in a low, husky voice, before the cord had encircled her forehead.

Miss Clifford, the girl, tried to maintain her composure and even affect a degree of bravado. "I have always had an intense dislike for stub pens," she said, as she wrote, "and I wouldn't be surprised if this increased my feeling against them—especially these steel pens."

Gilbert was relieved that she took that attitude. He had wondered what he would do if he had to sit and watch the cord tighten a furrow in her smooth, white forehead. With his left elbow he could feel the hard lump of the gun concealed beneath his tunic but he knew that in all likelihood he would be dead before he could get it clear for shooting. He had been concerned in too many gun fights to imagine that one man could shoot it out with seven and come out with any satisfaction to himself.

The gruesome ceremony was hardly

completed when the attention of all was arrested by the drone of an airplane motor overhead. Instantly, with one movement of his arm, the leader had knocked over and extinguished the three candles which furnished light for the cabin.

"Cover those windows," he barked. "I'll shoot the first prisoner to move, man or woman."

DAN GILBERT reached out a steely hand and gripped Dailey's wrist. The other followed him without question as he glided toward the doorway. Gilbert knew that there was a man on guard there although he could not see him in the inky blackness.

As he approached the door he strained his ears for a movement on the part of the guard. Any instant now the outlaws might get the windows covered and relight the candles. The moment the cabin was lighted—

He heard the rasp of heavy breathing before him and, as though a trigger had been touched, his body hurled forward. The outlaw slumped down under his first crushing blow, probably without knowing what had struck him. For a breathless instant Dan Gilbert hoped that what little noise his attack had made would go unnoticed in the general confusion.

"Open the door," he whispered in Dailey's ear, holding the bandit before him as a guard, should the outlaws open fire. His expectations were fully realized.

At the first creak of the rust-encrusted hinges a fusillade of shots rang out, thunderous in the confines of the cabin. The next moment Gilbert had followed Dailey through the opening, dragging the outlaw with him and slamming the door. He felt in the man's pockets and found a long clasp knife which he used to slash the rope that bound his companion.

"Come!" he ordered, but Dailey stooped over the outlaw before following him to the corner of the cabin. Evidently he was trying to get the man's gun, but in attempting to do so, he lost his freedom.

The door was opened violently and the two men were dragged within the cabin, Dailey fighting like a madman. Gilbert stood at the corner of the cabin, his gun poised, but it was impossible in the darkness to locate his target and he feared that

a shot from him might be fatal to his ally. He ran to the big transport and switched on the lights, hoping to reveal his pursuers.

Now that he had his freedom Gilbert was momentarily at a loss as to what to do with it. He could stand in concealment in hope that the bandits might charge out to capture him. But after a few moments, during which he did some clear thinking, he knew that this was not at all likely to happen. A man with the cunning of this Slag was not apt to send his followers out into such an obvious ambush.

On the other hand he was very likely to be ambushed himself if he did not make some definite move toward a more secure position. There were openings from the cabin other than the door and, even as that thought occurred to him, he heard a crunching sound, instantly quieted. Someone was prying up the window on the opposite side of the cabin.

Keeping the corner between himself and the door, he started a cautious retreat. Carelessly he overlooked the fact that the darkness without was not as intense as the darkness within the cabin and that there was a window on both sides of the structure. A spurt of flame stabbed from the dark patch of the window.

INSTINCTIVELY he sent two shots crashing into the window, then cursed himself for his folly as he dove for cover. Now he had only six shots left and the bandits had been notified of the fact that, in some manner, he had obtained possession of a gun.

"Which just shows," he mumbled to himself, as he wriggled through the tall grass toward some stunted pines, "how the fat will collect around a fellow's head when he doesn't use it for a year or so."

When he reached the clump of pines he stood up and removed his leather jacket. Pulling up the sleeve of his flannel shirt he examined a deep groove in the muscle of his left arm. With his teeth and right hand he managed to knot a handkerchief around the wound. "It'll be stiff as a poker in the morning," he growled. Then he pulled up his shirt tail and with exploring fingers felt gingerly for the cause of the burning streak on his left side just below the short ribs.

"Just as I thought," he said disgustedly, "the smaller they are the more they burn." He tucked his shirt tail in.

Cautiously he reconnoitered the small outbuildings surrounding the homesteader's cabin. One of them he could not reach without exposing himself to fire from the cabin, but apparently it was nothing more than an unused chicken house.

He saw a dark shadow detach itself from the cabin and work its way cautiously around to the back. Another shadow started around the cabin in the opposite direction. He chuckled, thinking of what his position would now be, had he remained at the corner waiting for someone to emerge from the door.

Ten minutes later the two men returned to the window and evidently reported to the leader within. Then one of them, keeping always against the dark background of the brush, worked his way down toward the airplanes.

Gilbert nodded to himself. "They're the keys to the situation," he muttered, "and Slag's goin' to see that no one gets near them. I wonder now what I would do if I was in Slag's shoes?"

FORTHWITH he betook himself to a spot further up the gully where a lighted match would not be visible to the bandits, and with the same composure that he would have exhibited in the confines of his home hangar, pulled out a sack of tobacco and some crumpled papers. He rolled the pill with meticulous care, applied a match and let the smoke dribble from his nostrils.

"Now," he reasoned, "I've got ten wealthy people that I'm holding for ransom, well hidden, but right under the nose of the law." He gathered up a handful of pebbles and snapped them one by one against the boulder in front of him. "Of course, he doesn't count one way or the other," he said. Evidently he was thinking of the assistant pilot.

"And," he mused, "there's a dark horse out in the pasture some place with a gun, and there's two airplanes. The dark horse might stick around and try to capture seven men single-handed but, not havin' shown himself to be a complete fool, he'll more'n likely gallop off and notify old John Law."

Gilbert mused over this for a while and

then nodded his head with satisfaction. "So," he decided, "the dark horse'll just stick around and cool his doggies—which is something that Slag won't figure on."

"Now," he continued—he had assumed Slag's character completely, "tomorrow at dawn I'll send Lumpy Davis, the only flyer I've got out to fly over the prairie land. The dark horse can't gallop far between now and dawn and when one of my men, flying with Lumpy, spots this dark horse there's just goin' to be a horse funeral, that's all."

Having finished his cigarette and his line of reasoning at approximately the same time, Gilbert selected a spot of concealment about two hundred yards from the airplanes and overlooking them. He eased himself down under the brush and lay on his back for a time, looking upward at the stars that twinkled roguishly from the dark vault overhead.

"All I need now," he sighed happily, "is to have a pintail crunchin' the grass, contented like, near me and hear the jingle of his hobbles as he crow-hops from one clump of grass to another.

"I wonder if Al Clark has ever laid on his back like this and looked up at the stars for any length of time?" His eyes closed drowsily. "No, I guess he hasn't," he decided, turning over on his right side. The next instant he was asleep.

When he half roused himself it was daylight and the sound of a motor warming up came to his ears. He had been dreaming about a skyblue monoplane powered with a deep-throated, true-hearted motor and he clung to the dream, hoping, in his half-awake, half-asleep state, that he would have a chance to loop it and roll it before reality shattered the dream to nothing.

He sat up in disgust finally and watched the outlaws remove the concealing boughs from the wings of the small plane. Lumpy Davis crowded his short fatness into the rear cockpit and another man, with an automatic rifle, took the front cockpit. Gilbert yawned. "Now they're goin' out to shoot me down like a dog," he grinned. "One notch on my gun butt for old slantmouth in the front cockpit and another 'un for that fathead flyer." He watched them depart, then yawned, settled into a more comfortable position and resumed his sleep.

TWO hours later the motor again awakened him. From their gestures he knew that the sky-men were describing the country they had covered and were reporting no game. This situation now called for finer reasoning on his part.

"Yesterday Slag frisked me for a gun," he muttered knotting his brow. "He didn't find no gat and from then on until he heard me shoot, it never crossed his mind that I might have a gun. His brains works that way. So, havin' decided that I'll head out to notify the law, it's not goin' to enter his mind that maybe I didn't do nothin' of the sort.

"Three people are goin' to leave these diggin's right pronto," he decided, sure now of his reasoning. "Dailey is the richest prospect for ransom, so he'll be one. Slag is the brains, so he'll be the other. And they'll have to have a pilot, which'll be Lumpy Davis, naturally.

"The others'll scatter to the hills on their nags and leave nine passengers and one puppy pilot tied up and locked in the cabin to starve to death. Pretty tough on the passengers," he mused, "only," he drew his forty-five from his shirt and cocked it, "*the dark horse didn't gallop away.*"

He took cool aim steadying the barrel on the bend of his left wrist. The gun cracked, hopping upward from his wrist with its rebound, and the man with the automatic rifle spun slowly around, his knees bending under him as he turned. Once again the pistol coughed its slug of lead and the chunky flyer pitched forward.

Gilbert uncocked his gun and replaced it in his shirt. His tanned cheeks were unnaturally pale. "I don't like to do a thing like that," he said, as though explaining his action to an unseen Presence, "only there are two women up there in that cabin."

The gun play brought immediate action from the outlaws. Slag, who had been dragging Dailey toward the biplane, took refuge behind him, and, shoving him along as a shield, made his way back to the cabin. The other outlaws sought shelter behind rocks and trees and opened fire in the general direction from which the pistol shots had come. Gilbert faced the unpleasant prospect of being converted into a human sieve.

A SHARP order from the cabin, however, held the outlaws' fire. There was a long, sullen silence. Then Gilbert did a strange thing. Pressing the magazine release of his gun, he thumbed the shells into his palm.

"Two in the magazine and one in the barrel," he muttered, replacing the shells and snapping the magazine back into the gun. "Three slugs and at least four outlaws, maybe five, if that bird who was guarding the door wasn't croaked last night. You might kill two birds with one stone but it's unlikely that you'll kill five outlaws with three bullets.

"It occurs to me that Slag will be very careful with the life of one Dan Gilbert, since he is the only pilot around here to fly him and his prisoners away to safety. That bein' the case—" he raised his gun and sent two bullets crashing into the main tank of the biplane and one into the reserve tank, "this pilot prefers flyin' the transport job."

He turned over on his back then and stared dreamily up at the low strata of clouds overhead. "Maybe there's a ceiling west of the mountains and maybe there ain't," he mused. He drew the weather report from his jacket and with a stub of pencil, pausing often to wet its point on his tongue, he lettered a message on the blank back of the report.

Then he took his red woolen muffler and tied a rock, half the size of his fist, in one end of it. The message was also attached to the weighted end of the muffler and on the other end he tied his white handkerchief. He wound the muffler around his neck, cunningly concealing the bulk of the pebble and the message in the hollow of his throat.

An hour and a half later three of the outlaws, after a tortuous and cautious advance, found their quarry sound asleep, his head pillowed on a flat rock. Not knowing about the skyblue *Hornet* they wondered at the sweet smile of contentment that wreathed his lips.

They searched him violently, threw his emptied gun in the brush and walked him down to the cabin. As he entered he got a brief glance of Dailey. That young man's mouth was parted in a wide grin of admiration and his shoulders quivered with mirth. Gilbert's heart warmed to this

lean, tan-cheeked son of a railroad magnate. It came to him with force that he would want no better man at his back in a hard-fought free-for-all.

"Well," Slag said, his teeth clipping the words off shortly, "you've interfered with some well-laid plans, Gilbert." He was sitting at the head of the table, his chin cradled in his two hands.

"It is too bad," he continued, evidently enjoying the situation, "that you could not have come under my training while you were younger. You have nerve, you handle yourself like a prizefighter and you shoot like the very devil himself. But—you're just a little slow in the head." The last words were pronounced deliberately.

GILBERT'S hands and forehead were moist with cold sweat, for he knew what was coming next and he knew the stabbing pain which he must endure to allay any stray suspicions that might lurk in the bandit's head. The whole success of the next venture depended entirely on getting the brain activity of the man who faced him started on its one-track course.

"I suppose," he continued slowly, "that you thought I could fly that biplane and that by disabling it you would shut off all chances for our escape. Perhaps it will annoy you to know that I haven't that ability. Your lead might have been used to better advantage."

Gilbert feigned a most convincing expression of surprise and chagrin. As a matter of fact a fit of trembling had assailed his body. No man likes to face the prospect of cold torture.

"Come here," Slag ordered, indicating a chair.

Gilbert seated himself and the cord was looped deftly about his forehead. It tightened.

"You know," the cold voice went on, "it occurs to me that, in your blundering way, you have done me a great favor. This morning I was prepared to carry only one prisoner away for ransom. Now—the cord grew tighter, "I shall take, not only all of the prisoners, but also the remainder of my own men."

A dull pain throughout his whole head had come with the first tightening of the cord. This separated into sharp stabs that seemed to concentrate near the backs of his ears.

The flyer gritted his teeth to hold back the choking groans that rose to his lips. His throat muscles stood out like whiplashes and his whole body seemed to shrivel to nothing. Before him was the face of Dailey, his eyes wide and staring and his lips twitching.

The voice continued, a lustful note jarring its brittle chill. "Of course, there is only one way for so many to leave this place. That is by the transport. I ask you pleasantly, as one gentleman to another: *Will you fly that ship?* Answer!" He tightened the cord.

Gilbert waited an instant. The pain was almost unendurable. "No!" he gritted. Blood was oozing from his forehead, dripping down over his face. He could taste its saltiness on his swollen lips.

"I ask you," the voice repeated; and ever came a tightening of the cord, "will you fly that ship?"

"No!" the answer shuddered from his pain-wracked mouth. He slumped forward and rolled from the chair.

"Really," the bandit purred, "I didn't expect a man like this to faint so soon. Perhaps the pain was greater than I thought."

He would have been surprised to know how far Dan Gilbert was from fainting.

AFTER a moment or so the flyer stirred, groaned and sat up, but seeing the figure of Slag bending over him, he cringed with terror. "I'll fly it!" he screamed. "I'll fly it!"

The bandit's mouth parted in a thin smile. "So," he nodded, "you're not quite as brave as you thought you were."

Gilbert saw a shade of disappointment in Dailey's face but the next instant a bundle of feminine fury hurled against the sneering bandit. "You beast!" the girl hissed, "as though you, or any of you," she whirled to face them, "could stand half the pain." Her arms were still bound behind her but she knelt beside the flyer and laid her cheek against his. The feel of her soft hair and its fragrance tugged at his heart.

"Do as he says," she sobbed, "my dad'll pay. Don't let them hurt you any more for the sake of these fatties around here."

His lips were against her ear. "Don't worry, honey," he said, in a low whisper,

"it didn't hurt so much and *I want to fly that ship*, but if he knew that, I wouldn't have a chance to do what I'm going to try."

A pause and then, for a delicious instant, her soft lips brushed his.

"Enough of this," Slag said, contemptuously, "get up!"

Gilbert jerked to his feet like a scared rabbit.

"You'll do," the man decided, "that is, if you still have even enough nerve to fly." He turned and barked orders to the other bandits.

Gilbert was herded down to the big ship. Back of him were the other passengers and the assistant pilot, who wore a dazed expression on his face. Gilbert had difficulty in suppressing a chuckle, for the cap, the badge of Filbert's dignity, was cocked awkwardly, *sidewise on his head*. There were only four outlaws in the group that followed them to the plane so Gilbert knew that the man who had guarded the door on the previous night had been killed by the bullets intended for himself and Dailey.

The concealing shrubbery was removed from the air-liner and its silvery bulk shone dully in the sodden light that filtered through the layer of clouds above. Gilbert took his place in the cockpit and examined the gasoline gauges. His tanks were full. He switched on the two inside tanks and primed the motors.

"If you don't mind," he faltered, "someone will have to set the brakes while I warm the motors."

Slag squeezed into the other pilot seat and grasped the brake handle. He watched as the pilot fussed with the compensating chamber of the compass. Watching his hand he failed to notice the compass card *creep slowly around, ninety degrees* as Gilbert manipulated the magnetized bars within the chamber.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"Sluggish," the pilot replied, taking a long chance on the other's knowledge of a compass, "I have to liven it up."

Slag seemed to be satisfied with this explanation.

"Now," he said, "you're going to fly south. I leave it to your judgment to avoid other planes. If your judgment proves faulty and we see any—" he brought

his gun into view, "Lord help you."

GILBERT nodded. "The only thing for us to do, then," he said, "is to get up through these clouds and fly above them. They're probably five thousand feet thick and we'll have to fly blind through them."

As the oil temperature gauges climbed he slowly advanced the throttles until the motors were turning up to quarter speed. At last he retarded all the throttles and then, singly, revved the motors up to their top speed, checking the switches.

This done to his satisfaction, he opened the two motors wide and nodded to the outlaw to release the brake. They lumbered down the uneven field, gained momentum, and the wheels lifted clear. For a stretch of minutes he flew straight ahead. The bandit, looking below at the advancing prairie land, detected the fact that he was flying eastward.

"I told you to fly south," he hissed in the pilot's ear.

They were just entering the cloud layer. Gilbert shrugged. "I can't do that until I get a little altitude," he protested, "flying blind we might ram into a mountain."

Slag relaxed somewhat but the flyer noticed that he was watching the compass.

Flying blind is a ticklish business. Even the best instrument flyers must concentrate every faculty on their indicator. A moment's let-up from this concentration and his brain is reeling. In the white vapor a man's natural senses of balance are worthless. His brain may tell him that he is swerving to the left but he must glue his eyes to the gyroscopic turn indicator and *believe it* if the hand is pointing to the right.

For a moment Gilbert held the plane on that course, then read the compass card. It showed east of south. Again he applied rudder, this time for a shorter interval, and again he flew steady for a moment, watching the turn-and-bank.

This time, when he read the compass, it pointed almost due south. He noted, with satisfaction, that Slag had relaxed in his seat. His own muscles grew less taut and a slight, mocking smile curved his lips for a moment. The compass showed south, so, according to the bandit's reasoning, they were traveling southward. "The

single track mind," Dan Gilbert murmured.

ABOVE them the fog started to grow lighter but Gilbert still kept his attention on the truthful instruments. He knew the folly of disregarding them until they were completely above the cloud strata. A shaft of sunlight entered the skylight, the windows of the pilot house lightened and the flyer glanced up. They were climbing through the last thin wisps of the vapor.

Above them was a pale blue, unflecked sky, beneath them a polar field of matchless white, to their right could be seen the complete circle of a rainbow and exactly in the center of this the tee-shaped shadow of their plane.

Gilbert relaxed in his seat, and without appearing to do so, studied the relation of the mountain peaks that extended upward through the clouds. To his right was Mount Hood, further to the right and a little ahead were the twin bulks of Mounts St. Helens and Adams. Slag was looking at the south-pointing compass with amusing complacency.

For almost an hour they droned steadily ahead. Then, in front of them, the clouds bulged upward slightly and the whiteness of their surface was marred by a dingy gray. The outlaws would have been utterly incredulous had they been told that beneath them *lay the city of Portland*. Gilbert nudged the rudder and Slag looked up questioningly as the ship skidded. Gilbert's face wore a puzzled frown.

"Something wrong here!" he shouted as the plane careened on its side and started turning in a dizzy circle. He looked frantically at all the exposed control cables, twanging them as a harpist twangs his strings. And the plane continued its crazy circling.

Gilbert cut the motors and nosed down. Then he opened them full throttle, but apparently to no effect.

"See if anybody's monkeying with the control wires aft," he ordered in a harsh voice.

Slag opened the door and raced to the rear of the cabin and as he did so Gilbert remove the muffler from about his throat, folded its length accordion fashion and shot it from the pilot's window, a scarlet streak that disappeared into the clouds below. "Here's hopin'," he breathed fer-

vently, "that somebody sees it who'll have sense enough to take it to the sheriff's office in a hurry. Now I wonder how long before Slag's one-track mind jumps the rails?"

After some time the bandit returned. "It's all right back there," he said, terror creeping into his voice.

"Maybe some of that brush caught in the rudder. Look out of the windows on each side.

Another interval passed and again the bandit appeared. "Everything seems to be all right," he reported. There was a hint of suspicion in his eyes now. Gilbert knew that the next few minutes would be the most ticklish in his life.

HE headed the plane toward Mount St. Helens and throttled the motors. "We'd better land," he said quietly, "before the whole tail end drops off." For a full ten seconds, by sheer will power, he held his eyes to meet the challenging suspicion in Slag's. The other relaxed.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "Where do you figure we'll be when we get under the clouds?"

Gilbert evaded the question. "I'm not even sure that the clouds aren't right on the ground—fog!"

And, as a matter of honest truth, he wasn't.

It was a desperate gamble, gliding down through that deathly whiteness and hoping there was a ceiling beneath. He looked back in the cabin. He saw Dailey, his hands bound behind his back, working his body up and down with a peculiar, sawing motion. This movement puzzled him for a moment and then he knew that the young man had found an exposed screw head or nail and was working up and down against it to free his bound hands.

The altimeter showed three thousand feet, twenty-five hundred, then two thousand. Gilbert knew that it couldn't be relied on too closely, for working on the barometric principle, any change in the atmospheric conditions since he had last set it would result in a change of its reading of altitude above sea level. If a low-pressure area existed in that region they might crash into the ground while the altimeter read a thousand feet above the level of the sea.

The hand slipped down from nine hundred toward the eight hundred mark. Gilbert set his jaws for the crash that must surely come within the next few seconds.

Then below them the fog darkened. Faint objects wavered and grew distinct. A freshly shingled house stood out, a sharply-outlined yellow square not fifty feet below them. He leveled the ship.

Slag was peering below in all directions. His movements reminded the flyer unpleasantly of the darting head of a serpent. "What river is that?" he demanded, pointing to the right.

"The Umpqua," Gilbert lied, recognizing the Willamette and the turn that led into the city airport. A fast landing, he decided, would be safest for the passengers. The other outlaws, more stupid than their leader, would be slower to grasp the situation, though he doubted if they would open fire on those in the cabin, since it would gain them nothing.

AS for himself, he knew that he would be a dead man the instant the wheels struck the ground. There would be a blinding report, a small round hole in the front of his head and in the back—he wondered what Clark would say to that.

He jerked the ship up on one wing and kicked upper rudder.

Down the huge plane went in a terrific, nose-high sideslip. Then he whirled the control wheel, leveling the plane but leaving on full rudder.

Then the plane straightened and its wheels touched. The door behind him was wrenched open just before a pistol shot crashed, like thunder, in his ears.

He found, very much to his surprise, that he was still alive. That the gun, leveled at his head, had been deflected a split second before it had exploded and that the bullet had splintered through the windshield.

It was necessary for him to watch the ship until it had rolled to a stop. Then he turned, with much gusto, to the assistance of Art Dailey, who was driving straight rights and lefts into the face and stomach of the man called Slag. Evidently Dailey had managed to saw through his bonds and reached the cockpit in time to save the flyer from cold-blooded murder.

"In close quarters," Gilbert remarked,

"a hook has a straight beat four ways." He demonstrated his theory by crooking his hard right fist up under the outlaw's chin.

"That's what the coach at college used to tell me," Dailey said ruefully, "but I always was slow to learn. Maybe you'll teach me," he said hurriedly, for armed men were piling into the cabin and taking charge of things.

A man with a pencil and pad of paper interrupted the flyer's reply:

"Let me get this straight," he begged. "My paper was going to press when they heard the sound of your motors over the city. They held it up when our man telephoned in from the sheriff's office and said that a note had been found on the end of a red neck-muffler that had come sailing down through the clouds. Pretty clever work, I call that. Howja' write that note with this fellow sitting beside you with a gun?"

"I didn't," Gilbert replied, grinning at Dailey. "I wrote it and got it all ready to drop this morning, over in eastern Oregon, while I was hidin' back of some brush waitin' for some guys to slip up and capture me."

The reporter looked doubtful. "My paper is holding up its front page forms," he said. "I'd sure like to get this story—and get it right. How'd you know this morning that you'd have a chance to fly over Portland and land here?"

GILBERT shrugged. "How do I know that I'm going to have a squabble with one Al Clark, assistant manager of this line, and quit my job before I leave the field? I don't. But knowin' something of Al Clark's type of mind, and that knowin' a little bit about my own, I'd say that that's just what's going to happen.

"The same with this case we're talkin' of," he continued. "I knew, as soon as Slag ordered his men to quit shootin' at me this morning, that he wanted to keep me alive. What for? To fly this ship, of course.

"And I knew that if I agreed too easily to fly it that Slag would distrust my motives and wouldn't let me get out of sight of ground. I had to get it into his mind—" Gilbert motioned to the red groove around his forehead, "that I didn't want to fly

the ship and that by flying it I felt I *would be carrying him to a place of temporary safety* at least.

"I had to stand a little pain to get that thought in his mind, and I had to fix a compass so it would point about south when I was flying northwest. But once that idea was planted it took the sight of these hangars and this landing field to jar it out of his mind.

"The rest of the story," Dan Gilbert said, "you can learn from my worthy assistant, who was somewhere around there all the time."

Dan Gilbert sauntered out of the cabin, followed by Arthur Dailey.

A young woman, who was still rubbing her wrists to restore the circulation, stopped him.

She seemed to have something very definite to say, but hesitated as to the way of expressing it. "Wouldn't it be silly?" she finally asked, "if I were to tell you that I think you were splendid and that I like your looks and want to see you again?"

Dan Gilbert smiled down at her and was very embarrassed.

"Yes, it would," she answered herself, meeting his eyes bravely. "You seem to know a lot about what's in the other fellow's mind—tell me about mine."

"I can't," he said, rubbing his finger lightly over her upturned cheek. "I only know that I have the same sentiments toward you as you have just expressed to me and—you'd better forget all about this flyer."

With that he turned abruptly and strode on toward the office.

He emerged, a few minutes later, and started toward his car. But he stopped before leaving the row of hangars. The black bulk of a Hornet motor sat aggressively on the lean body of a skyblue monoplane. He looked at it for a moment, seemingly lost in pleasant contemplation.

"Well, were you right about Al Clark?"

DAN GILBERT turned and grinned at Arthur Dailey who had just stepped out from the hangar. He nodded.

"Al said that this whole thing was my fault. He said that just as soon as he got off the ground he would have known that those outlaws were stowed away in the rear fuselage and would have gone back and landed."

A glad light was dawning in the young man's eyes. "Didja quit?" he asked. "I notice you haven't got your cap any more."

"That's right," Dan Gilbert said, touching his bare head to reassure himself. His grin broadened. "I jammed the cap over Clark's knob so hard that the crown of it busted and it went down around his neck. Then I resigned real quick before he could fire me." They both chuckled heartily over the picture.

"Listen," Dailey said, "do you like the looks of this plane?"

"Do I!" The pilot's tone left no doubt as to his feelings toward the machine.

"Well, it's mine," Dailey went on, his words piling one onto the other in his eagerness, "and it's a slick job, take it from me. And the mechanic, Red, would go to the ends of the earth with me. And that's where we're going—to the ends or the middle or any other place where there are things doing. But I need a pilot. No, damn it, I need more than a pilot. I need Dan Gilbert. Wha'd yuh say, Dan? Stick with us?"

Dan Gilbert looked toward the bulky transport where a girl stood, her soft, dark, wavy hair framing a wistful face. He thought, with a pang of longing, of those soft lips that had brushed his own, of her gallant stand back there in the deserted homestead cabin and of the words she had just spoken to him.

Then into his mind crept the image of a dark, velvety sky, studded with blinking stars; the sound of a horse contentedly munching at bunch grass; the tangy smell of sagebrush after a summer's rain; the keen bite of salty ocean spray—

"Put it there, Art," he said, clasping the other's hand. "I guess that once a rover always a rover. You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

*Staggering under his burden, he stumbled
toward the waiting car.*



*Illustrated by
George Wert*



SENORITA SIX-GUN

by Walt Coburn

From peaceful Ensenada to the riot range of Santa Tomas Davis trailed the gringo coward he'd sworn to protect . . . the stirring story of one man's shame and another's glory, and the gun-swift girl who loved them both.

ENSENADA, the quiet. Ensenada, the peaceful. . . . The lazy Pacific slaps at the curving shore line, quiet as a mill pond. From the sky a little

whispering breeze blows, serene and placid. The sweep of the land is quiet and glowing under the white eye of the moon.

Yet beneath that surface of calm—

Walk down to that shadowed side street close to the bay where Quo Wong's 'dobe cantina squats. Pause at the weather-warped swinging doors and listen. Breathe in the squalid place. See if you miss the sinister seething of unrest and intrigue that lives there.

It was a dingy place, badly lit. Behind the shabby bar, a slant-eyed, half-caste wiped his pock-marked face with the bar towel. The film of stale smoke that hung in the dead air held the peculiar, sweetish odor of marijuana.

In a corner, at a table, with a Mexican girl, sat an American in soiled white drill that hinted of Hong Kong, rather than Lower California. His skin showed milk white above the brown of a well trimmed Vandyke. His eyes, once cold blue, were bleared a bit by too much liquor. His hair, neatly trimmed and parted, was sleek and smooth, rich brown in color save where it showed white about the temples. White hair that did not belong there, for the man could not have been thirty-five.

"*Salud!*" drawled the man, and drank. The girl smiled as her glass touched her red lips. But she barely tasted her liquor.

"There will be more money soon, *chiquita?*" she asked in a low tone.

"Soon, Rosita. The gov'nor'll be kicking through with the monthly remittance about tomorrow. Where the devil do you spend it all, here in this damn' hole? No shows, no parties, no nothing except—this."

"You have drink all that *tequila* since supper?" She held the all but empty bottle against the light.

"Why not? The smoke, please?" His tone was defiant.

"And now, marijuana, eh?" She shook her head. "I have no such cigarets, Señor Dick Smith."

"The hell you haven't!" he sneered, and with a quick movement that sent the bottle crashing to the floor, grabbed her wrist and slowly, deliberately, pulled her, struggling, across the liquor stained table.

The girl squealed shrilly and clawed like a cat at the man's face. He was searching in her bead bag now, holding her at a distance, with one arm. He seemed surprisingly strong for a man so slender.

"Whoa there, pardner!"

Unhurried, soft drawled, yet with a cer-

tain indefinable force that caused the half-caste bartender to take his hand from the hilt of an ugly knife, the voice came from a tall man in the doorway. A man in boots, army breeches, and wide-brimmed Stetson.

Tanned to a saddle color, lean, powerful of build, he bulked against the short swinging doors, thumbs in the waistband of his breeches, scowling at the man whom the Mexican girl had called Dick Smith.

"In my country, mister," he went on, "we don't manhandle our women folks. This floor needs moppin' bad, and those white clothes of yours, filled with your carcass, would make a shore purty mop. Let go of the girl and try your luck on a man!"

The man of the Vandyke pushed the Mexican girl back into her chair and got to his feet. He was breathing heavily with suppressed emotion.

A SWIFT kick sent his chair splintering into a corner. A rush and swift struck blows put both men in the center of the floor. They fought with the cool precision of men who knew the art of self defense.

The Mexican who had played the guitar laid aside the musical instrument and a knife appeared in his grimy hand. The toe of the soft-spoken man's boot shot upward and simultaneously there came the crack of a broken wrist bone.

"That lets you out, hombre!" was the unruffled comment of the man for whom the ugly blade was intended. Then to the man in the white clothes, "You seem to be among friends, Whiskers."

"Naturally." Smith punctuated the word with a left swing that was cleverly countered. "I—spend my money here!"

"I see. Block this one!" and the man in riding breeches stepped inside the other's guard and lifted an uppercut to the pit of Smith's stomach. The half-caste's knife sped like a silver streak and ripped a gash in the high crowned Stetson. Smith lay doubled up on the floor, gasping for wind.

"Protecting your moneyed trade, eh?" And the big man vaulted the bar and landed on the shoulders of the half-caste who was slipping the safety catch on an automatic. A short swing sent the slant-

eyed combatant into oblivion. The white man, now swinging the heavy automatic, faced three Mexicans who, at a glimpse of the weapon, began crowding backward. Then a well-dressed white man, accompanied by a Mexican policeman, burst into the saloon. The man in the riding breeches leaped across the bar and handed the weapon butt first, to the astonished law officer.

"It belongs," he said in perfect Spanish, "to the Chino. He got sort of tired holding it."

"Who the devil," gasped the white man who accompanied the policeman, "are you?"

"I am not at liberty to state, pardner," came the even reply. "If you must have a label for me, call me Jones. Bein' somewhat of a maverick, I don't pack a brand, if you get what I mean."

"Tejano," muttered the policeman.

"A Texan?" questioned his white companion in a low tone.

"Si."

"My friend here, the officer, says you're a Texan," said the man.

"Which fact don't carry any crime that I know of. What's the odds, mister?"

"I didn't mean to be insulting," apologized the man a bit uneasily. "Being from that state gives one certain prestige here in Mexico. It's an asset."

"A man needs assets here. Am I to understand that I'm pinched for threshin' a—*Listen, lady!*"

The Texan had suddenly whirled and caught a swift-descending blade in the tiny hand of the Mexican girl who had leaped from her chair. He grinned good naturedly and handed the knife to the policeman.

"Stick around a spell," he told the gaping officer, "and we'll gather enough hardware to arm the whole police force."

THE man in white drill was sitting up now, scowling at the big Texan. Then he looked up at the white man who had come in with the policeman.

"Hullo, Briggs. Time you were showin'. Have that meddler thrown in the can, will you? He's bothersome. Bring any dinero?"

"Your usual allowance, Herbert, I—"

"Chuck that name, can't you?" snapped Smith. "They dubbed me Dick Smith

here and it's as good a name as any. How's the gov'nor?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"Don't thank me, Briggs. Kick through with the money. I owe Quo Wong a bar bill. Give me the cash and clear out. The sight of you gives me the Willies. And take that bird with you. Give him thirty days, Briggs. Thirty days in the *cuartel*, see? With trimmings. The money?"

The man who had come with the policeman handed over a roll of bills held together with a wide rubber band.

"A thousand dollars, Herber—beg pardon, Smith. Better count it."

"You make enough off the gov'nor without short changin' me," sneered the other. "Now take your black and tan cop, the pugilist in the five gallon hat, and my blessing, and clear out pronto."

Briggs nodded to the Texan to come along and with the policeman bringing up the rear, the trio left the cantina. Outside, Briggs turned to the Texan.

"Jones," he said gravely. "Unless I'm mistaken, you are the man I've been looking for. You would not be averse to making say, five thousand dollars?"

"Depends, pardner, on a manner whereby this dough is earned. I'm not rearin' to break any Mexican laws."

"A matter of conscience, Jones?" put in Briggs, his lips widening in a smile that was not pleasant.

"Rather, pardner, a matter of good, plain hoss sense. It takes a long time to get out of a Mexican hoosegow."

"Or a United States prison, friend, if the charge be grave." Briggs still smiled but there was a hidden meaning in the sentence that did not pass the man for whom it was intended. Jones chuckled.

"Meanin', I reckon, that you have a hunch that I'm on the dodge and you're holdin' it over my head as a weapon, no?"

Briggs nodded. "To be frank, I am. I need a man of your type badly, understand. A man who can handle his fists, face a gun or knife without getting seasick, and is not too squeamish about breaking laws if the means justify the end. Which, I assure you, they do. But this is no place to talk. Let's go to a quiet room at a better cantina where we can discuss details over a good cigar and a bottle of Scotch."

"Suits me. Does the cop ride herd on us?"

"He'll stay here. Come, *Mister Zackary Davis!*"

Jones stepped back, his hand covering the reassuring butt of an army automatic under his armpit.

"You just made a funny crack, friend Briggs. My name is Jones."

"I was putting one of my cards on the table—*Jones*. I have a faculty for remembering faces. The day I left San Francisco, I saw a picture in the paper. The picture of a chap named Zackary Davis, taken when he was captain of cavalry. The Davis fellow, so it seems, is wanted in the States for grand larceny."

"And just what, my blackmailing compadre, do you intend doing about it?" came the soft reply.

"A great deal depends on the outcome of our little conference. Apropos of nothing, I may say that I saw a friend of mine half an hour ago. A lieutenant of detectives, Stanley by name, who is blessed with the powers of a human ferret. He was talking to the chief of Ensenada police. I thought I caught the name Davis. The present president of Mexico has made it easier than it once was to extradite a criminal. If any of this meaningless patter is of value to you *Mister Jones*, I'm glad to have been of some slight assistance."

"You play a damned clever game, Briggs. There's no use denying that I'm Zack Davis. But let me tell you something while my jaws are wagging. Your detective acquaintance and his friends will find it ain't all beer and skittles when they jump me. So you might as well leave all threats of blackmail out of this, pardner. You won't get far on the tack you've taken."

"Quite so," agreed Briggs. "I agree with you. My mistake. We'll go at it from another angle."

II

IN the back room of a Mexican cantina they seated themselves. A bottle of imported whiskey and a box of cigars stood on the table. In the better light, the two men eyed each other openly.

"Satisfied, Davis?"

"Jones," corrected the other. "I'll say this much, Briggs, you don't look like a crook."

"Thanks," smiled Briggs. "My card may enlighten you."

The younger man glanced at the card and grinned. "I didn't know, sir, that you were *the* Briggs. One doesn't expect to meet celebrated criminal lawyers in Ensenada."

Briggs nodded. "True. You will understand now, that while this proposition I am about to lay before you smacks of lawlessness, its motive is big enough to justify the breaking of any Mexican law. The motive, however, is something I am bound by honor not to reveal. You must go at it blindly, take your chances, and my name must not be mentioned in connection with it."

"Sounds interesting."

"It is," came the dry reply. "And dangerous."

"Let's have it, sir."

"Very well. Sometime before daylight, you will, if you accept the job, kidnap the young man who calls himself Dick Smith. There will be a high powered car parked a block down the street from Quo Wong's. There may be a fight to prevent the kidnaping but I think you can take care of them. The car will take you to a spot below Santa Tomás. There you will find a man with saddle horses, pack mules, and camp equipment. You will have an accurate map of the country and will travel into the interior, anywhere you choose, so long as you do not go near any settlement however small. You will allow no liquor or drugs in camp. You have no doubt guessed that this Dick Smith is a marijuana addict and a drunkard. One of the objects of this kidnaping is to cure him of this weakness and separate him from the degrading friends he has acquired. Quo Wong and this Mexican girl among others."

"I sabe."

"They're a hard crowd and won't hesitate to kill you if they can. You may have to use a gun. In the event that you kill one of these beasts, you'll have the protection of the law. That much I can do for you, by a devious channel. Insofar as I am able, I will give you all the assistance I can, in every way possible. You will,

of course, be violating a law of Mexico by this kidnaping."

"This Dick Smith gent will not take kindly to the idea?"

"He will not. You'll have to treat him a bit roughly, I'm afraid. You'll find him no mean antagonist, once he's sober. He's handy with his fists."

"You've outlined plenty of trouble, sir. Are there any good sides to the thing?"

"You'll be paid five thousand in cash tonight. You'll receive a salary of five hundred dollars per month. Upon your return with your companion to Ensenada, one year from tonight, you receive ten thousand more as a bonus if you have accompanied the object of the trip."

"You mean if I've cured this gent of the drug and *tequila* thirst?"

"Partly that. Partly something else that only Dick Smith himself can tell you. If he tells you, you'll know you've earned the bonus."

"Clear as an adobe wall."

"Exactly. I'm sorry I can't explain further. Don't forget to take this fact into consideration also. You'll be going into a country where it will be difficult for any snooping detective to follow you. You'll really be getting well paid for hiding yourself from the United States authorities."

"That's a fact," admitted Davis. "Does it occur to you, Mister Briggs, that you're trusting a wanted man with a mission that, so it seems to me, demands a lot of square shooting on my part? What's to prevent me from double-crossing you?"

"Nothing, if you happen to be a scoundrel. On the other hand, if I'm judging you rightly, everything. You'll give me your word to carry out your end. That will be sufficient."

"I didn't expect that, sir. I don't reckon you know how much it means to have a man like you trust me after—"

Briggs laid a hand on the younger man's arm. "Zack Davis, I've spent the past thirty-five years studying criminals. I think I'm able to size a man up fairly well. If you're a crook, I'm a Mohammedan. You'll take the job?"

"Yes, sir."

Briggs put out a well-kept hand that Davis gripped hard.

"There will come a time before long,

my boy," said Briggs earnestly, "when you'll probably curse me for a blackguard. Don't smile, I know whereof I speak. When that time comes, try to remember me not as Crittendon Briggs, the attorney, but as a man who has passed the prime of life and who is doing his utmost to repair a grave wrong."

Zack Davis, looking at the great criminal defender, saw lines on the clean shaven face that he had not before noticed. There was a look in the older man's eyes that spoke of sorrow. Briggs poured two drinks.

"I drink to the success of your expedition," he smiled.

Their glasses touched. Through the closed door filtered the strains of music from a Mexican orchestra. Soft, plaintive, *muy dulce*.

"The Mexican 'Aloha,'" said Zack. "The song of farewell."

AGAIN they shook hands. Briggs shook off whatever feeling of sadness had come over him. Then he took a thick bill-fold from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"The five thousand," he explained. "Want to count it?"

"I'll take your word for it, sir," grinned Zack, picking it up carelessly.

Briggs nodded. "I'll go out first. If there are any of your detective friends about, I'll steer them across the street. Give me five minutes, then go to Quo Wong's. The car will be there from midnight on. Good-bye and good luck."

"Adios."

The door closed behind Briggs and Zack Davis was left alone. As he shoved the bill-fold into his pocket, something dropped from it to the floor. Carelessly Zack picked it up and examined it. He saw an oval bit of ivory and painted on its surface the picture of a girl with bronze hair and large dark eyes. It was beautifully done and if the girl were one tenth as lovely as the miniature—

"What a girl!" breathed Zack. "A dream! A girl that a man would go through hell and high water to serve. Great Pete's ghost, what a face. It must have been in Briggs's pocket and got fastened somehow in the bill-fold."

Five minutes passed unnoticed and still

he gazed raptly at the miniature. He did not see the knob of the door turning slowly, cautiously. He was still staring at the face on the bit of ivory when the door swung quickly open.

"Keep your hands in sight, Davis!" snapped a dangerous voice.

Zack froze to immobility, his eyes fixed on the gimlet-eyed face of the cleverest plain clothes man on the Pacific coast. "Weasel" Stanley.

"The pleasure's all yours, Stanley," said Zack easily, once he recovered from his first shock of astonishment. "How'd you locate me?"

"Saw you come in with Crittendon Briggs. Clever of you to get him down here to talk over your case. It'll take some law sharp to clear you, Davis."

"No doubt about it. Drink?" Smoke?"

"Pleasure after business. I'll do my playing when I've landed you in the *cuartel*. Mitts in the air while I frisk you."

Still holding the miniature, Zack raised his hands. The detective relieved him of his automatic and the bill-fold. The latter brought a chuckle from him.

"Must be some grands in it, eh? Fifty thousand bucks takes up room. Now the bracelets."

Zack put out his hands and the shining handcuffs clicked about his wrists.

"You bank guys just can't stand lookin' at so much loose money, can you?" Stanley commented. He looked at the miniature. "Some jane. I'd steal for her myself. No wonder you went wrong. You can keep the picture."

"It is a temptation, Stanley. This is good liquor. One shot before we stroll over to the hoosegow. I'll need it."

"Just one, then," agreed the detective, jubilant over such an easy capture.

With his manacled hands, Zack poured two drinks. Then he took his well filled glass in both hands.

"Damned awkward, 'cuffed like this. 'May you always be as lucky as you are tonight, Stanley!"

"You're a good sport for a bank teller, sonny," conceded the detective magnanimously. "Here's—Hell!"

Zack's glass of whiskey had shot squarely into the law officer's eyes. Simultaneously, the gun was kicked from his hand and the heavy handcuffs crashed into

his face as the fugitive's lithe frame met his with a force that sent them both to the floor. Again the 'cuffs thudded against the officer's head and he went limp.

A moment and Zack had the key and had freed his hands. Recovering his gun and wallet, he handcuffed Stanley with his hand behind his back and bound his ankles with his necktie. Then he fixed a rude gag and seated himself in the chair. Presently Stanley squirmed and opened his eyes. Zack grinned.

He said quietly.

"Sorry I had to muss you up, pardner. Had to do it, though. Never drink durin' business hours. Bad habit. By steady work, you might slip that hoggin' string from around your legs before daybreak. I've tied two-year-old bulls with that knot and they couldn't get loose. However, you're a brainy cuss and might be able to get loose before the swamper cleans the cuspidors in the mornin'. By then I'll be a long time gone, amigo. Mister Weasel Stanley, I bid you a fond farewell."

On his way out, Zack stopped at the bar.

"In the back room is a *muy loco* hombre who is sleeping off too much *tequila*." He handed the Mexican bartender a green-back. "Do not let anyone disturb him, if you please."

"*Si, si, señor*," came the grinning reply.

Zack winked and sauntered out into the dimly lit street. He guessed that the Ensenada chief would be combing the Chinese district for him. He would have to use the utmost caution.

From across the bay, a ship's bell told him it was midnight.

WITH an air of detachment, Zack sauntered along the shadow of the ramshackle buildings that lined the side street. Here and there, by the light of kerosene lamps, Mexicans sat about tables in the living-rooms that opened onto the street. Rooms that had no outer wall and the mean interior naked to the gaze of the passerby. The cry of a waking baby—a snatch of drunken song—the grunt of a scavenger pig disturbed by the stumbling foot of a peon—such were the voices of night in Ensenada.

Then, bulking strangely large in the half light, a long black touring car, its

side curtains buttoned tight, parked along the curb. Zack's pulse quickened a beat. This would be the car that, if the gods were so disposed, would soon be carrying him and his prisoner away from Ensenada. He slackened his pace and without seeming to do so, scrutinized the car with utmost care. A motionless figure sprawled in the front seat.

"Hope he ain't drunk," was Zack's mental comment as he moved on.

He was approaching Quo Wong's place now. A block up the street, the guard in front of the *cuartel* barked a challenge to someone. Zack shrugged away the desire to shiver. The inside of that prison was not inviting in any sense of the word. He could hear voices, Chinese and Mexican, in Quo Wong's, as he leaned against the outer wall beside the short swinging doors.

Zack loosened the automatic in its holster and, glanced up and down the deserted street. He thought he saw someone move in the shadow of a doorway across from Quo Wong's. A long minute of close watching, however, detected no further movement. Zack stepped inside the swinging doors.

A Chinaman was the first to see him. Zack saw a parchment-colored face, mask-like in its lack of expression, with the features of a white man and the slit eyes of the Oriental. A thin cigaret drooped from a pair of cruel lips. He was clad in heavy silk Chinese clothes. A skull cap hid his close-clipped white hair. A man of sixty-five, perhaps—Quo Wong, whose soul was as black as the wing of a buzzard. It was said that his father had been an English remittance man of blue-blooded ancestry and black-leg habits. The only Chinaman in Ensenada whose word was not as good as his bond. He talked like a Britisher.

"Well, I'll be damned!" smiled Dick Smith nastily from farther down the bar. "It's the chap I had the row with, Quo Wong."

"Ah!" The soft-spoken monosyllable carried a sinister note. A yellow hand slid up the cavernous depths of his silk coat sleeve. But the expression on Quo Wong's face did not alter an iota.

Zack stood his ground just inside the swinging doors. He grinned admiringly at the swollen jaw of the half-caste

bartender who eyed him malevolently.

"If I had one guess comin'," Zack addressed his words to the man in white clothes, "I'd say I wasn't welcome. My trade don't seem to be solicited.

Smith was swaying a bit on his feet and his eyes were red with liquor.

"I'm damn near blotto," he measured his words to his sluggish thoughts. "And in no condition to resume festivities. Another time, I'm willing to fight you for fun, money, or the drinks. You'll have to pardon me this evening, I'm afraid. Not feeling my old chipper self. No doubt you've noticed it if you're sober. You are sober, aren't you?"

"Plumb," admitted Zack. "And I didn't come back to fight unless some gent forced the issue. Could I see you alone, on a little personal matter?"

"We're among friends, shoot your piece, old chap. Eh, Quo Wong?"

"Quite so." Quo Wong was smiling and the change of expression gave the impression of a purring cat that plays with a captured mouse.

"The police," he went on, "are hunting a certain Americano. They were here half an hour ago. They described to me a man by the name of Davis, a bank teller who skipped with fifty thousand dollars. Such a man might pay well for the protection that Quo Wong can give, what?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he could," smiled Zack.

QUO WONG turned to Smith. "He is fortunate to have fallen among such friends as he finds here, eh, old top?"

"You're so damned mercenary, Wong," protested Smith. "Don't know about this chap making such a chummy drinking companion. He's a quarrelsome duffer. If you get to commercializing this place, Wong, you'll ruin the exclusiveness and perhaps lose my patronage." He turned to face Zack and the looseness about his lips had tightened into a twisted, bitter sneer.

"The damned, busybody gringos around here call me Dick Smith because I do my drinking without calling up every stew bum in the place to help me hoist a drink. We were getting along splendidly until you tried to put on an act of the Sir Gala-

had type some hours ago. We'll still get on well after you've bowed yourself out. I'm making my point clear, am I not?"

"Plumb clear, pardner." Zack's tone was getting dangerously soft. "And I'll go, Smith, when I get around to it."

Slowly, with the eyes of every person in the room following the lazy movement of his hand, Zack reached for the string of a tobacco sack that reposed in his shirt pocket. He drew forth the sack with careless nonchalance, grinning good naturedly at the American in white drill. He seemed to be hunting a cigaret paper now.

"I reckon I'll be movin' along, folks," he drawled easily, his hand still hunting the elusive paper. "And when I go I'll be *takin' you with me, Smith!*"

The heavy automatic had suddenly appeared in the cigaret paper hunting hand. It swung in a short arc that covered every person in the room. A quick stride put him beside Smith and his left hand gripped that astonished person by the shirt collar, twisting it so as to make the white clad man gasp for breath. Then Zack, dragging his man, backed slowly toward the door.

"I'll kill the first person that makes a bad move," he said. "Hands in the air, every damn one of you. Keep 'em there! Good night!"

A quick sideways leap put him outside. He swung the struggling Smith over his shoulder and raced for the waiting car. A shot ripped the quiet night and Zack heard the whine of a bullet past his head. In the dim light he made an elusive target. Smith was struggling now and Zack's gun thudded against his head. The struggling ceased. He heard the roar of a starting motor. A head leaned from the front seat of the waiting car. A hand swung open the rear door of the big car. Running feet from behind. A form leaped from a dark doorway, followed by two more shadowy figures.

A sharp cry of warning from the chauffeur. Zack dropped his human burden in the dust and braced himself to meet the triple attack.

The flash of knives! A sharp cry of pain as the big automatic smashed the hand that held a descending blade. Then a twisting, grunting pile of humanity that threshed about in the thick dust.

Seconds that seemed minutes. Then Zack, with a vicious kick that sent the last of the trio back into the dirt, grabbed his unconscious prisoner and leaped into the car.

The roar of a motor and the car jerked forward, swaying with the quick turn that swung it across the boardwalk and around a corner amid a fusillade of shots. Yells and excited pattering of feet. And above the clamor, the voice of an American that Zack knew belonged to Weasel Stanley.

He glanced at the driver who was doing a good fifty miles an hour down an uneven street without lights.

"Some driver!" he grinned. "A dog-goned kid, too, by the looks of his shoulders." Then he leaned forward to call in a low tone. "Give 'er hell! We got 'em faded!"

"Hurt?" came the hoarse reply.

"A scratch or so."

"And Smith?"

"Sleepin' the slumber of the drunk," Zack reported.

The headlights switched on and the car picked up speed. A rough, bumpy road ahead. Past the graveyard, away from the bay shore, and onto a wagon road. Mesquite limbs raked the car that bounced and careened over the twisting road. The headlights and two high-powered spotlights cut a hole in the black night, as the big car swayed and creaked ahead of the cloud of dust that surged from its wheels.

"Atta boy," called Zack encouragingly, "give 'er hell!"

BACK in Ensenada, in a dark doorway opposite Quo Wong's, Crittendon Briggs nodded to himself and quit his hiding place.

"So far," he muttered, "so good. The only fly in the ointment is that devil of a Stanley."

He slipped along the street, keeping well in the shadow. At the *cuartel* a bugle sounded. A car raced down the street, filled with dark-featured police. Briggs caught a glimpse of Stanley in the front seat beside the driver. He increased his speed and walked boldly along the main street past the statue of Hidalgo and along the road to the wharf. He climbed down a rope ladder to a motor boat.

"The yacht, sir?" asked a sailor in spotless white.

Briggs nodded. The motor roared and they sped across the quiet bay, purring to a halt alongside a yacht that rode at anchor.

"Good news?" called a deep voice from the rail.

"Excellent, Mr. Freuling. I located the exact man for the job. They're on the way."

"Good, Briggs. Gott, Briggs, I've valked der deck till I got blisters on my feet. Gott bless Queen Vihhemina! You are sure dot—"

"Absolutely. They've cleared the town. My man will do his job well.

Briggs was on deck now, facing a heavy-built man in yachting costume.

"We might as well lift the hook and shove off, now," said Briggs wearily. "Can't do anything by staying here. Where's Billy?"

"Wilhemena"—Freuling pronounced it Vihelmina—"Iss in her stateroom mit a bad headache.

"Good. Saw a girl going down the street that resembled her. A girl in a pair of overalls and a seaman's cap. Tourist, I suppose, of the flivver type. Shall we go below?"

"Ja. For a talk, you and I, Crittendon. Tonight a load has been lifted, *mein* friend. Gott, what a load!"

The captain approached and Freuling gave the order to hoist anchor.

"The course from here, sir?"

"North. San Francisco."

"Home," added Briggs with a tone of relief.

III

"I SAY there, Barney Oldfield," called Zack, as the car skidded across the road and zoomed into a steep canyon, "what do they call you on pay day?"

"Billy," came the terse reply.

"Billy what?"

Another sharp turn and the car slipped into second to negotiate a grade. "Billy," the driver called above the roar of the motor.

"Well, Billy," returned Zack, shouting to make himself heard, "I think our off hind tire has gone flat!"

"Damn!"

"Worse'n that, buddy. Stop when we hit the rim of this hill and we'll change 'er."

At the top of the grade, the big car lurched to a halt. Zack swung out of the car onto the ground.

"Where's the jack, Billy?"

"Jack?"

"Of course. Have to jack this wheel up. And toss me the lug wrench while you're about it."

"Lug wrench? What's a lug wrench?"

With a quick step Zack was alongside the driver's seat. His hand reached out, jerking off the driver's cap. Then he switched on a pocket flashlight he had picked up from the floor of the car. Its rays showed a flushed-cheeked, brown-eyed girl whose mop of bobbed hair fell about her oval face in entrancing disarray.

"I thought so," grunted Zack. "When you ran over that rabbit back on the mesa, you squealed."

His voice was harsh. As harsh as a man can make his voice when he is gazing for the first time at the most beautiful girl he has ever seen. It was the same girl whose miniature now reposed in his pocket.

"I'd—never run down a rabbit before," she tried to explain. "It's no disgrace to squeal. If it was a squeal, I think it was merely a—a sort of gasp." She tried to smile.

"We won't argue that: I'll take my—my patient and go on foot from here. You'll turn back and go on home. The flat tire gag was just a stall to get you stopped, you know."

"And you think, do you, that I'll be a good little girl and go on home? You have another guess coming, cowboy. I didn't do a mile swim, with these coveralls in a slicker on my back, get Hans drunk, then wait in this bus for half an hour while you parley vooed with Quo Wong, all for the sake of getting sent home from here. There's a second guess coming your direction, if you get what I mean. Toot, toot! All aboard! Hop on, or you get left!"

She slipped the car into gear and Zack barely had time to swing on the running board. Then the car was doing twenty miles an hour over roads that jolted him

back into his seat beside the unconscious Smith.

"Listen!" he called.

"Later!" came the laughing reply. "About breakfast time. Sit tight and don't annoy the driver or we'll be climbing a tree with this hack!"

Half angry, half elated, Zack sat back while the girl drove the car with reckless skill. Then he leaned forward, clinging to the robe rail as the car swayed onward dizzily.

"One question?" he shouted.

"Shoot!"

"Are you the wife of this bird?"

A long moment while the girl negotiated a bad bit of road, then she called over her shoulder:

"No."

"Or any other man's wife?" he persisted.

"You used up your one question."

"But are you?"

A FAINT laugh came from the driver. Zack grinned and swinging a leg over, deposited himself beside the girl.

"Are you?" he repeated.

"Am I what? Please move that spotlight so it throws farther ahead, will you?"

"Are you married?" he went on doggedly, feeling angry at himself because he knew his ears were hot. He thanked the fate that made the light so dim as to hide his flushed face.

"Married? Why not? It's done, you know, even in this modern age. Really, you bother me when you jiggle that spotlight like that. If you're nervous, for Pete's sake let the thing alone.

Zack grunted disgustedly.

"I didn't get your name," said Billy, still bent over the wheel as she drove at fair speed over the rocky road.

"I didn't mention it."

There followed an uneasy silence.

"I beg your pardon," she said earnestly. "It's really none of my business, of course."

Zack laughed and the girl started at the bitterness it held.

"I'd forgotten some things—until you asked my name. Reckon the moon and the strange country and all, made me forget what lay behind on the back trail. I'd rather not say who I am, if you don't

mind. Zack will do for a handle."

"Fair enough, Zack. Our acquaintance is a short one, you know. I turn back at the camp below Santa Tomás. But I saw you do a brave thing tonight. If you're in a jam of some sort and I can do something, I'd be glad to help. What you're doing means a lot to several people, myself included."

"I'm getting paid for it."

She nodded briefly. "But you aren't doing it just for the money. Even I, a girl, can see that you aren't mercenary."

"Thanks, Billy. But there are some mighty shrewd men who'll disagree with you on that point. But we won't spoil the night talking of that. It's splendid of you to offer help but I'm afraid I'm booked to scrap it out alone. You say you go back from the camp?"

"Back to Ensenada. From there to San Francisco. From there to Washington, D. C. to work."

"Work?"

"Yes. To resurrect a man who has been dead."

Only for the absolute sincerity of her tone, Zack would have thought she was fooling.

"I don't believe I quite savvy," he said in a puzzled tone.

"No. No, you wouldn't understand. If you did, you might hate me. You might turn back from here. I shouldn't have mentioned it. I'm sorry. Please forget it. Blame it on the moon—Zack. It's hard, at times, not to talk about forbidden things, not to exchange confidences with someone you feel might understand. Isn't it?"

"Yes," came Zack's scarcely audible reply. "Sometimes it's—it's hell!"

And as the car tore on into the night, Zack thought that the girl was crying softly to herself as she clung to the big steering wheel.

AS the first streaks of dawn lit the rock strewn hills, Billy swung the car off the main road and onto a trail that led them to a creek. Zack saw an orderly looking camp and over a fire, a man bent, frying pan in hand. The odor of coffee and bacon assailed their nostrils. As the man looked up, Zack saw he was a Chinaman.

"Mawling, Missy Billee," he greeted the driver.

"Morning, Ah Hell," called Billy.

"Ah Hell?" questioned Zack.

"His name is Ah Lou. I think it was Herb who first called him Ah Hell, some ten years ago. The name stuck."

The Chinaman had laid aside the skillet now and stood up. He was well over six feet and of muscular build. A .45 Colts showed above the waistband of his cotton trousers. He was eying Zack with an appraising brown eye.

"Ketchem bossy-man Herb?"

"In the tonneau of the car, Ah Hell."

"Mebbyso hurt?"

"Asleep. Too many *tequilas*."

"Too much Quo Wong Mexican hop, smokum. Blekfas' leady now."

"Fine. Let's wash up and tackle it, Zack." She turned to the Chinaman.

"This is Zack, Ah Hell. He's taking Herb away."

"Heap good. Thlee time now, men tly that. Each time bossy-man Herb and Quo Wong fight like devils. Mista Zack mebbysong fight like ten devils, ch?"

He twisted his face in a grin.

"You said it, Ah Hell," laughed Billy. "He cleaned house at that hop joint. Wish I could have seen it."

"Where Hans?"

"I bribed a man to get him lit on kum-mel. He's waking up about now with a bad head. He's a good driver but beyond that he's a blank. No zip to him."

While she was talking, Billy was washing her hands and face in a tin basin. She threw out the water and groped for the towel that hung on a mesquite limb. Her next words were hidden in its spotless fabric.

"You've camped before," guessed Zack aloud.

Billy laughed. "Tell him, Ah Hell."

"Many plenty time," said the Chinaman proudly. "Africa, South America, Mexico, Alaska. Ah Hell allee time cook. Plenty hunt. Plenty walk-hike. Plenty ride hoss, mule, elephant, camel, flivver. Missy Billee numba one top-potch camp man."

"Ah Hell's my press agent, Zack. Now wash off the dust and we'll surround this chuck."

They ate ravenously of a marvelous

breakfast while the Chinaman fussed over the unconscious Herb.

Zack, much as he tried, could not keep his eyes off this girl who was so different from any woman he had ever known. Despite her manner of devil-may-care good fellowship, he caught her more than once, with her eyes cloudy with tears. He felt that she was playing a part to hide some deep hurt. He named the drunken Herb as the cause. It was noticeable that she had not looked at the unconscious man once.

They had finished breakfast now and Zack had lit a cigaret.

"What's to keep Quo Wong from following us?" he mused aloud.

"Plenty, Zack. Remember the rocky pass we came through, a few miles this side of Ensenada? Well, there were two men waiting there watching for us. When we'd gone past, they rolled a ton or so of boulders into the pass. Nothing less than an airplane could negotiate that road now. You're safe for at least five hours."

"How will you get back?"

"Ah Hell and I will drive to the blockade and portage with mules to another car waiting with mules to another barrier. Hans will come after this machine next week when the road is clear. He'll know how to fix what I'll break on it to put it out of commission so our friend Wong can't use it."

"Hang it all, it worries me to have you go back alone."

"Ah Hell is good for that gang of sneaks. He's some scrapper."

"Why didn't he rescue friend Herb?"

"The rescue is simple enough. It's the months to come that will be the big battle. Ever see a drug addict cut off from his hop? No? Then you'll have a treat in store. Herb'll be practically insane for a time. You'll have to watch him like a cat with a captured mouse. He'll fight, lie, try to murder you, and little things like that. And the only thing that will make a sane man of him is the comradeship of a man of his own color who will talk to him. You've a mighty hard task ahead of you, but you'll win out. When you've won the battle of marijuana, Herb will open up and tell you a lot of things. He's like that, when he's at himself. That's when you'll curse Crittendon

Briggs and hate me for my part in this. But remember this. There will be some things that Herb does not know and I can't in honor, tell you. Things that will perhaps soften the bitterness you'll feel. Those things I will tell you some day. I know I speak in riddles, but you'll have to wait."

"You'll promise that I'll see you again?"

"When you bring Herb back to Ensenada."

IN reaching for a match, Zack's hand encountered the ivory miniature. Smiling faintly, he drew it out and held it across the dead campfire toward her.

He said softly.

"I don't reckon it'd be quite square to keep this when it ain't mine. It belongs to Mr. Briggs."

"Yes." Billy, the same look of sadness in her eyes that he had seen before, took the bit of painted ivory.

Ah Hell had gone to the creek for water, leaving Herb lying stretched out on a canvas cot beside the car.

Zack rose and squatted beside Billy.

"If you're in trouble, Billy, and there's anything I can do, just ask me, won't you? *Anything, savvy?*"

"You're doing it now, Zack." She was smiling again as she held the miniature toward him.

"Want it?"

"*Do I?*" Zack felt his ears getting hot again. As he took the picture, his hand closed over hers and she did not try to withdraw it. Neither spoke but in that silence each read the other's thoughts. Zack's heart was pounding like a trip hammer and he felt as if it were choking him. Billy's cheeks were pink with emotion. They forgot their surroundings as they held each other's gaze.

"Two little love birds, eh?" came a grating voice and the man and girl looked up to see Herb, a blue-barreled automatic in his hand standing beside the cot. There was a sneer on his bloodless face and his eyes looked green. The hand that held the gun was shaking badly and he swayed on his feet.

"Herb!" gasped Billy, fright in her voice.

"Steady," Zack muttered.

"It's rotten bad manners," said Herb

slowly, his voice trembling a bit in spite of a desperate effort to make it calm, "to move in on a hand-holding party. But when one of the said duo happens to be the fiancée of the party who's butting in, I feel that I'm acting within my rights. Move a little to one side, will you please, Billy. My aim's a bit shaky."

"Are you crazy, Herb?"

"Never saner in my life, my dear. Kindly move away a few steps. It's too bad to break up such a sociable little tête-à-tête, but this idiot is getting on my nerves."

There was no mistaking the intent stamped on the face of the drug-crazed man. The automatic was covering Zack, who still squatted by the dead fire.

"I'd hate to kill you, pardner," Zack said coldly, "but I sure will if you don't drop that gun. I've lived too long to be downed by a souse like you. . . . That's it, Ah Hell, *grab him—*"

Herb whirled to meet any rear attack. Before he recovered from the shock of seeing no one behind, Zack was on him. The automatic exploded harmlessly in the air, just as Ah Hell came running up from the creek. Zack tossed the weapon toward the Chinaman. He was astride the struggling Herb now, his knees firmly planted on the prostrate man's arms.

"I reckon I'll need a rope. Sorry to make a scene, Billy, but friend Herb brought it upon himself."

The Chinaman brought a rope and Zack bound Herb's arms and feet, then laid him on the cot.

Glassy-eyed with insane hate, Herb fought like a madman to free himself. Inarticulate, animal-like sounds came from his lips. His face, a ghastly white, was mottled in places with purplish spots.

Ah Hell shoved a hypodermic outfit into Zack's hand. Billy nodded.

"I think you'd better give him a hypo, Zack. Otherwise, you'll have a raving maniac on your hands. Ah Hell understands drugs. He'll tell you how to use the stuff, whatever it is."

"As you say," agreed Zack, and jabbed the needle into the arm of the struggling man.

"Bimeby, sleep," grunted Ah Hell, and explained the treatment that would tide Herb over the first period of separation

from drug addiction. Plainly, the Chinaman knew drugs.

HERB was already becoming more quiet. Zack stepped alongside the cot and looked down into the face that was no longer twitching. The eyes of the man were hollow and bloodshot, but normal. Billy stepped to Zack's side.

"Herb, old boy," she said pleadingly, "these are drastic measures but you don't thrive under any other sort."

"Chuck the preaching, Billy. You aren't the sort to jump a chap when he's down. What's the general idea of all this high-handed stuff? And what's this would-be Romeo trying to pull on me, anyhow? This round is his but when my time comes, he'll book one hell of a sweet losing, believe me. I'll teach him to make love to the girl I'm—"

"Herb!"

"Deny it if you can," sneered Herb. "Tell him I'm lying!"

"Nobody said you were lying, Herb," said Billy coldly. "But I never knew you'd be such a cad. I've overlooked a lot, from time to time. Women, booze, even the hop. Nobody has ever heard me whine about it, old boy. But this is the first time you've gone off on that tack. Really, Herb, it hardly comes under the head of common decency for you to criticize any action of mine. I only hope that you will be man enough to apologize the next time we meet. If there's a shred of manhood left in your makeup, Zack will bring it out in you. At present, you're about as low in the scale of humanity as a man can drop. I'm jumping on you when you're down, true enough, and it's not good sportsmanship. But on the other hand, while on that subject, don't forget what you've done to me. Sportsmanship? You don't know the meaning of the word, Herb. You're about as clean as bilge water."

Her hands clenched, eyes blazing coldly she looked squarely at him. Herb's face was still set in a sneer.

"For those sweet words, I thank you, Billy. If it's all out of your system, I bid you a fond farewell. Your boy friend seems nervous. Ask him where he spent the fifty thousand he stole from the bank up at San Francisco. If you had to choose

a companion for me, you and the meddlesome Briggs, why choose a petty thief? I admire a real stick-up man, but I can't say that I get much uplifting reaction from chumming about with a sneak thief. A he-version of Pollyanna."

He flopped over on the cot, his back to Zack and Billy.

Zack grinned at the girl and she made a brave attempt at smiling back. Then they walked away.

"It's mighty decent of you to take it like that, Zack."

"Not so darned decent, Billy. I'll get him back on his feet. Then, if I'm man enough, I'll make him eat a lot of that monologue. Surely you aren't engaged to that souse?"

"He wasn't always as you see him now, Zack. I'm sorry, I can't explain."

"There I go, hornin' into something that's not my business. And Herb was right about the bank business. I'm wanted for absconding."

"Did Crittendon Briggs know that when he hired you?"

"He sure did."

"Then I guess you aren't as black as you paint yourself. When Crittendon Briggs sizes a man up, he does a thorough job of it. Now I must be getting back. I ran away, you know, and they'll be combing the bay for me or searching Ensenada for my mangled remains. All set, Ah Hell?"

"You betcha. Dishy all wash. Glub all pack for Mista Ten Devil Zack. We go chop-chop now."

"Then good-bye, Zack. Good luck. And when that day comes that you'll wish you'd never met me—"

"But it won't come, Billy!" Zack cut in.

"When that day comes," she went on, smiling wistfully as he held her hand, "try not to be too hard on me."

IV

THERE was nothing plastic about the will of Weasel Stanley. His professional pride had been hurt. Now, as he took the trail of the man who had caused his humiliation, there was a steely glint in his eye and his jaws were clamped like a steel trap over the empty amber cigar holder in the corner of his tight-lipped

mouth. He rode beside the Mexican driver in a flivver that boiled and missed and blew out tires with monotonous regularity.

In his zeal, Stanley had left Ensenada without even a toothbrush by way of excess baggage. Black derbied, stiff colored, and wearing a pair of yellow oxfords that had worn raw places above each heel. His last cigar had been smoked and now, as the sun of a new day rose like a blazing brass ball in a cloudless sky, he cursed the fate that had sent him into such a country.

Half way up a long grade the flivver sputtered to a halt, a cloud of steam issuing from the radiator. Rumbling noises came from the steaming metal. With an agonized groan, Stanley leaped from the car, a fair-sized boulder clenched in his hand.

"Block the wheel!" screeched the youthful driver, jerking at the emergency brake that seemed to do no good. "Block the wheel of heem!"

"I am, you idiot!" came the muffled reply from somewhere behind the car. "What's gone blooey with the damn crate now?"

"Ees jus' tire out," came the indifferent reply, the boy feeling free to smoke now that the wheels were blocked against swift backward descent.

"Tire blown out?" echoed Stanley in an agonized tone of a man who is mentally classing himself with the proverbial camel upon whose hump the last straw is about to be laid.

"No, no. *Tire, savvy?*"

"Hell," came in a tone of utter relief. "Your tires are all right. You're goofy as hell."

"Si, señor. The tire of thees machina ees muy bueno. Ees jus' tire out. Tire from thees long climb, savvy?"

"Oh! Tired out."

"Si, señor. Ees need siesta, thees machina. *Mucha travajo.* Moch work, to climb thees heel, no?"

"Busted down?"

"No, no. Ees always do like thees on the heel. Ees get tire out queeck."

"Listen, guy," pleaded Stanley. "Just cut out that word 'tire.' It gives me pains in the back, see?"

He took off his collar and mopped his

red face with a sweat soaked handkerchief of purple silk.

"How much farther we go from thees place, señor?"

"Till we sight a big black touring car. We bin lost ever since we left Ensenada. First on one phoney road, then another. And them Ensenada bulls quittin' me because I ain't got papers for this Davis bird. How the hell can I tell 'em that Davis took the papers with him, eh? Dammit-all, you said you knew the road!"

"To Tia Juana, si. I thenk you want to go back to Tia Juana so I drive that way."

"I'll say you did. Ain't this tea kettle ready to percolate now?"

"No sabe, señor."

"Ain't this junk pile cooled off enough to make this hill?"

"Per'aps."

"Then move, kid. We ain't out to look at the scenery."

There followed ten minutes of spasmodic popping. Then the whirr of the starter that failed to get so much as a backfire from the motor. The boy examined the gas tank, shoving a measuring stick into its hollow sounding depths. The stick came forth showing a faint moist line two inches up the gauge. The boy nodded sagaciously.

"Ees jus' like I'm afraid she ees," was his unruffled verdict.

"What's wrong with the devilish thing now?" growled the detective, whose knowledge of motors was limited to distinguishing the make of car by reading the name on the radiator.

"The gas ees low."

"At forty cents a gallon? Quit kiddin' and let's go."

"Een the tank. We mus' go up thees heel backwards."

"My God!" Stanley sank to the running board and fanned himself with a dust-covered derby. "You don't mean we gotta go backwards from now on. What kind of a can is this?"

"Fleeer. Jus' on the heels, we go up backwards, señor. Down the heel ees go muy bueno. On the level ees also bueno. Ees jus' two gallon of gas lef' now, sabe?"

"And when that gives out?"

"*Quien sabe, señor.* Per'aps some hombre come by weeth the mule team. You

geeve to thees hombre ten pesos, American dinero, por take us back to Ensenada. Always, por those purpose, I carry the tow rope."

"You mean we're down to two gallons of gas and we gotta back up all the hills?"

He glanced at the rough country ahead. One hill after another. The prospect was uninviting. He turned to the Mexican boy, who seemed to have gone to sleep in the meager shade of a mesquite bush.

"For a plugged dime your own money, I'd shoot you and enjoy your death kicks, you idiot," he growled. "If you think I'm layin' out so much as a bum nickel to have you and that infernal man killer towed home, you're cuckoo. Get home any damn way you can. I'm goin' on afoot."

The boy's eyes opened, then closed again as he saw the gun in the American's hand. The gringo was very angry and it was not well to argue when angry gringos carried guns. The day was hot and he had not slept all night. Someone with a mule would come along some time. He was snoring when Stanley, giving the flivver a parting kick, labored his way up the grade.

UP hill and down for an hour. Ahead lay a narrow pass, a mile or so distant. Save for the calling of some quail, not a sound broke the quiet of the bright morning. Stanley's heels were raw and his hot face was streaked with yellow dust. Groaning, he sat down on a boulder and cursed in a monotone.

A large sand lizard scurried between his feet and he nearly fell off the rock in his frightened haste to avoid what he thought to be a poisonous reptile. The harmless lizard scurried on.

"My God, what a country! What next?" He painfully removed his yellow shoes to gaze sadly at the great holes in his near-silk socks.

Suddenly he stiffened. From somewhere in the hidden ravines between where he sat and the rocky pass, came the roar of a motor.

"Comin' this way, too," he mused in a tone of joyful relief. "A ride back to Ensenada in a real car!"

The the instinct of the man hunter wiped the smile from his face. A car on

this road meant but one thing. A clue to the whereabouts of the man he sought. There was much about the affair at Quo Wong's that he did not understand. Davis had taken a man, a white man, from the place. A confederate, maybe, who had got too drunk to travel. They had leaped into a car and come this way. To some remote hiding place, no doubt. Now the car was coming back.

Tired and discouraged as this city detective was, he was of the breed that will not give up so long as there is a clue of some sort to lead him on. It was a temptation to call the case off and go back home. Yet, if the car were returning so soon, this hiding place could not be far away. Perhaps, so he argued to himself, this place lay between him and the pass beyond. Hastily pulling on his shoes, Stanley slid into a brush patch and waited with drawn gun for the car that was coming up a grade now toward him. The motor was roaring up in second gear. Now it lurched into sight over the top of the ridge and as the driver shifted to high gear, it leaped toward him like some snorting monster. It was a long, rakish roadster, dark green with nickel trimmings. The numbers had been, by accident or evil intent, smeared with grease and the dust thus gathered hid them from recognition. Two people were in the car. A big-framed man and—

"The red-headed jane!" gasped Stanley as the car roared past and was hidden in the swirl of dust. "Davis' jane."

He was referring to the miniature he had seen in the back room where he and Zack had held their tilt.

His brain was working swiftly now. The trail was getting hot. It was better than he had dared hope. The old adage to "find the woman" was proving true. To the detective's manner of reasoning, this titian-haired girl had been deeply involved in Zack Davis' criminal activities. Stanley forgot the blisters on his feet as he started along the road at a jog trot. Then he slackened his pace and fifteen minutes later was scuffling along at a dogged walk. Despite his weariness, there was a grim look of satisfaction on his face.

A man accustomed to the country would not have been so sure of himself. Stan-

ley, however, reckoned not the dangers of thirst and hunger and the fact that he was a stranger in a strange land. He did not know a word of the Mexican language. His knowledge of the topography of the country was less than nothing. Thus, in his blissful ignorance, Weasel Stanley, man hunter, followed his fresh scent with all the ardor of his breed and training.

BETWEEN the abandoned flivver that was slowly cooling on the grade, and the *tequila* distillery just south of Ensenada, another car came at a leisurely pace along the uneven road that led to Zack's camp below Santa Tómas. In the car where Quo Wong, Rosita, and two Chinamen whom certain men of the underworld would have recognized as being gunmen with records that were well splattered with human blood.

They seemed in no hurry as they sat back in their car. Quo Wong drove, the girl beside him. The Chinaman sent her a sidelong glance.

"If you have got the wrong line of information on this, my dear," he smiled silkily at her, "it'll go bloody well hard with you, understand. I am much upset over the loss of our dear Herb, you know. Quite upset. I'd hate to see one of our compadres in the rear seat tighten the silken cord about your beautiful throat. Your many friends would mourn your loss."

The girl shrugged.

"I am not so much the fool, Quo Wong, as to let a drunk like that Hans put over something. Did I not live for ten years in the city of Los Angeles and meet some damn wise guys? I tell this world! The Hans hombre had on a crying jag and when I pet him ever so little, and let the big fish hold my hand, he spill the beans, no foolin'. He tell about the way this smart jane gets a bird to liquor him all up, see. Like the church on Sunday night, that hombre gets lit. And he says he will get that can tied on him, for sure Mike. The dame, whose name is Billy, takes his place, see. It is this Billy skirt that drives the car that carries off our dearest meal ticket."

"The young lady in question is the girl that dear old Herb was to have taken for

better or worse. You were aware of that, what?"

"Aware of it?" Rosita laughed. "Could I be so much of the dumbell as to forget it? Since that last Christmas Eve when Herb gets his nose wet with *tequila* and talks for two hours about this dame? He almost got the knife in between the ribs that night. Only for you, I'd have learned that boy that it is not the good idea to talk to the present sweetheart about that one who has give him the air. Wait till I get my hands on that sweet baby! You'll see her red hair fly, my friend!"

"I think not, my dear," purred Quo Wong. "No rough stuff. If this girl is as beautiful as you say, it will go damn bad with the foolish person who lays a hand on her. You say she is to come back by this road?"

"From where the road is blockaded," came the sulky reply. "With that big Chinaman that Herb calls Ah Hell."

"Ah Hell will be Ah Mud when we meet him," smiled Quo Wong. "And with this lady of the red hair and our two men, you and I go to seek your dear Herb. There is a place, on the edge of the Desierto Arenos, a village that is a stopping place for Chinamen who are being smuggled into the United States. In that village I have a friend who will put us up. From there, Rosita, we send that message to the honorable Crittendon Briggs that we have two birds in hand whose plumage is of rare value. The amount of the ransom that we shall demand will be more than plenty."

"What becomes of the birds of the gay feathers? Herb and this red head?"

"One never knows what lies written on the page ahead until one turns the page over, my dear. Do not let it slip your mind for one instant that Quo Wong and Rosita play a devil of a desperate game. After we have squeezed the Briggs person out of all we can obtain, we may be forced to quietly dispose of our dear old Herb and the young lady, in order to leave no trail when we leave Mexico for South America."

"But won't Briggs have men on our trail in a few hours, when the red head does not get back to Ensenada? The yacht came back at sunrise. I saw it in the bay and a little boat popping back and

forth like a flea, between the dock and the yacht."

QUO WONG smiled condescendingly. "I think not. Nobody save us two know that the red head took the place of this stupid Hans. I saw to it that Hans had an attack of throat trouble."

"What do you mean, throat trouble?"

"While staggering along a dark street, some sharp-edged instrument, a knife, let us say, passed across his jugular, cutting the flesh. By accident, the poor fellow's remains were thrown to some hogs that had not been fed lately."

"Dios!" Rosita's cheeks paled under the thick layer of rouge.

"A shame," sighed Quo Wong. "Also, one of my men told me that a girl had drowned last night, in an attempt to swim from the yacht to shore. The good fellow tried to rescue her but in vain. The girl had red hair. He reported it to the proper authorities, after his ignorant fashion, and after an unseemly delay, the news was carried to Crittendon Briggs aboard the yacht. The activity you noticed on the bay was caused by the frantic efforts of friend Briggs to get men with grappling irons. In a few days from now a Chinese fisherman will pull up the body of a girl that is somewhat decomposed by reason of the activity of certain scavenger fish that abound in the bay. But there will be traces, such as bits of hair of a reddish hue."

"Madre de Dios!" breathed the girl. "I do not understand!"

"Quite so. Let me explain further. The girl whose body will be found is, as you know, not the Billy lady. Far from it. Do you by any chance recall a dance hall girl from Tia Juana who was in the barroom early last evening? A girl with red hair who was a bit hysterical. She had no money and was several hours late for her customary shot in the arm? Well, it seems that the unfortunate lady in question overestimated the strength of her heart and died from an overdose of the drug. Pitiful case, what?"

"Dios! You devil!"

Quo Wong laughed softly. "You look badly, my dear. You are not used to so much sunlight, perhaps. Have you a

match? My cigaret seems to have gone out."

V

"STEADY, Herb, old man," advised Zack as he loosened the ropes that fastened the latter's feet under the belly on his horse. "Easy on the fidgetin' or I'll never get this knot untied. Beautiful night, ain't it? We got over considerable trail since we left camp. Some moon!"

"Are you trying to be humorous, Pollyana?" Herb's voice shook. He was trembling like a man with a bad chill despite the fact that the evening was not cold and he wore a sheepskin-lined coat and bull-hide chaps. His cheeks and eyes looked purple in their hollowness but he was still defiant despite the horrible suffering that one accustomed to drugs feels when he cannot satisfy the terrible craving.

"Not at all, pardner. Just sociable. You'll get a shot as soon as I get the pack mules unloaded and hobbled."

"What a sympathetic brute you turned out to be, Polly! Mules before humans!"

"The mules and saddle horses have done a day's work," explained Zack coldly. "All you've done is try to throw yourself off your mount. Where I come from, a man takes care of his horse before he looks to his own comfort. You'll do well to follow that rule in my camp."

"I'm glad there are only three mules and two horses. I'd be in a hell of a shape if we had dogs and cats and a few canaries to feed before I got any attention."

Zack unfastened the knot and dragging the weakened man from the saddle, stood him on his feet.

"Attention? Do you think I hired out to wait on you, feller? I reckon not. Hold out your arm."

Herb held out a bared forearm and the needle jabbed the flesh. Then Zack shoved the instrument into its case and pocketed it.

"Now that you've taken nourishment, go rustle some wood while I put the kyacks and beds in order.

Herb's nerves were steadying. For a long moment he stood with clenched fists, glaring at Zack. Then he sprang at his throat like a maniac.

A quick sidestep and a short arm jab

sent Herb rolling into a cactus patch. Zack smiled twistedly at the other man's sharp cry of pain as the cactus spines penetrated his clothing.

"Are you goin' after wood?"

"Yes." Herb picked the spines out of his trousers. "Cocky as hell, aren't you? Knocking a sick man down. I'm wondering why you didn't kick me in the face while I was down!"

"You're wonderin' nothing of the kind, pardner. Cut out your whining and go to work."

Herb brought wood and Zack made him split it, watching the while, that the ax wielder did not attack him with the thing. Herb, sensing the other man's suspicion, laughed harshly.

"Afraid I'll part your hair with the ax, Polly?"

"No, I'm afraid you might *try to*, if you get the difference. I hate to have to put handcuffs on you and treat you like a dangerous animal, but I will if you pull any such comical tricks. Act like a white man, and you'll be treated as such. Try pullin' any of the underhanded stuff you've learned from the Quo Wong outfit and I'll deal you plenty of misery, and I ain't bluffin'."

THEY ate supper in silence. Zack washed the dishes while Herb wielded the dish towel. Then they sat by the fire smoking. Herb was shaky and jumped at every slight sound. Zack watched him closely. Presently he rose and yawned.

"We'll lay 'em down now, pardner. Shed your clothes and I'll tuck you in."

"I'm not sleepy yet."

"But I am and I'm jiggerin' this pack-spread for a while yet. What I say, goes. Roll into bed and I'll give you your nightcap."

The "nightcap" consisted of a tin cup full of raw whiskey. The all-wise Ah Hell had included a small keg of the liquor in the camp equipment and Zack, knowing the insanity of delirium tremens that follows a prolonged liquor bout unless the patient can be "tapered off," now blessed the sagacious Chinaman for his violation of Briggs' rule against liquor and drugs. Herb thanked Zack with his eyes and gulped down the fiery stuff.

Zack took a lightweight cotton blanket

and twisting it into a sort of rope, made a sling that crossed the back of Herb's neck, over the front part of his shoulders, then under his armpits, the ends being fastened underneath the cot.

"That leaves your arms free, pardner, but it keeps you on your back in bed like a good boy. Learned that in the hospital and I've seen some huskies held that way. It'll be a waste of time to fight it. Still feel shaky?"

"The hooch helped like the devil. How about one more jolt?"

"No can do, pardner. That was enough to make the sleep come. Better grab some shut-eye. We're driftin' about sun-up for the next camp."

"Are the bulls after you that close?"

"I left a gent named Weasel Stanley tied up in an Ensenada saloon," admitted Zack easily. "He may be cold trailin' me."

"Likewise friend Quo Wong will be coming along," was Herb's half-smiling comment. "And he'll catch up, too. The best you'll get will be the worst of it, my high-handed amigo. He may kill you or he might turn you over to the Mexican authorities to face a charge of kidnaping a Mexican citizen. I am a citizen of this country, you know. Of the two forms of punishment, I'd prefer Quo Wong's knife to the *cuartel*."

"If you're tryin' to throw a scare into me, pardner, you're wastin' breath. Good night."

ZACK walked to his own bed and pulled off his boots.

"Do you happen to know why you're kidnaping me, Polly?" Herb's voice, a bit loose from the liquor, came to him across the dying campfire. Then, as Zack made no reply, Herb went on.

"Do you know that you're making yourself a party to as despicable a conspiracy as was ever pulled off? Do you know that if I am not in Ensenada four months from now, January first, I will lose an inheritance of one million dollars? Briggs didn't tell you that, did he? You're damn right he didn't! Do you know why Billy helped get me away? No? Well, my well meaning but addle brained idiot, she helped because it is she who gets the money if I'm not there to claim it! Laugh that off! They tried to break my grand-

father's will but he'd been too shrewd for 'em. Then they frame up this marriage between Billy and me so she'll get the dough in case I die. Damn crooks, the whole lot of 'em. That was before I came to Ensenada, understand. I didn't suspect 'em then. I was kidded into it, fool that I was. But we didn't get married. Billy gets cold feet and balks on 'em. What do they do then? Shanghai me, by God! That devil of an Ah Hell and Briggs! For six months I don't see a newspaper, set foot on land, or talk to a human except Ah Hell and the ship's crew that are in on the damned plot. That's the God's truth, I swear it, man!"

Herb's voice was almost hysterical, and he did not go on for some minutes. Zack lay on his bunk, wondering if the man spoke the truth. His wrought up condition seemed to be real enough. Zack began wondering if he were indeed a part of some scheme to beat this man out of a fortune. Then his hand touched Billy's miniature and he smiled away his fears. That girl could not be party to such an underhanded scheme. Still, she had told him that he would hate her. Herb was talking again, his voice more steady now.

"They put in at Ensenada for water one evening. I overpowered my guard and swam ashore. Quo Wong hid me for a week. Then he brought me a month-old newspaper. My picture was on the front page. I was accused of a damned crime of which I was innocent and was branded as an outlaw!

"I got drunk that night. I've been drunk ever since. Got to using hop to make me forget things. A damned outcast, hear me, Davis? An outcast! I'd lost my nerve by then. Didn't have the guts to kill myself. So I tried drinking myself to death. Tried to take an overdose of hop but Quo Wong and Rosita watched too close. It's hell when a man loses his nerve, Davis! It's hell! That's what Crittendon Briggs did for me!"

Herb's voice had risen until it became a thin scream. High pitched, hysterical, insane. Zack was beside the man's bunk now, trying to check the screaming blasphemy and meaningless words that now rent the night air.

"Herb!" Zack pleaded, as the screaming man threshed madly on the bunk.

"Stop it! Quit it, I say! It's all right, partner! I'll help you! Quit the infernal racket!"

For a moment he thought he had succeeded in quieting the raving man. Then he saw the look of fear that came into Herb's staring eyes.

"Don't kill me, Davis!" he shrieked. "My God, don't kill me here! Not here! Billy! Billy! Billy!"

"Crazy as a loon," panted Zack as he held down the man who seemed to possess the strength of ten giants. He managed to find the hypodermic outfit and the next moment the tiny needle shot home.

IT was half an hour, however, before Herb ceased his frantic fighting. Both men were bathed with perspiration. Finally Herb dropped into a moaning drug-induced slumber.

"Poor devil," muttered Zack. "Poor, luckless devil!"

He lit a cigaret and threw some twigs on the fire. Tired out as he was, he knew that Herb's tirade had upset all thoughts of sleep. For a long time he sat beside his fire, thinking and listening to Herb's disconnected muttering. Sometimes he looked long at the miniature of the girl who had so swiftly won his love. And into his dreams there stalked occasionally the vision of Weasel Stanley. Now and then he dozed and into his fitful dozing came a jumble of figures. Briggs, Quo Wong, Stanley. Then dawn came and he began the preparation of breakfast.

On the cot lay Herb, awake now and quiet. The lips of the drug addict had loosened into a simper and his eyes were dulled.

Zack stood looking down at him.

"Feeling better, Herb?" he asked, fighting off the fear that he was talking to a lunatic.

"You're Polly," came the giggling reply. "And I'm dead. Polly want a cracker? Polly! Hell of a name for a man! When you see Briggs, tell him that Ah Hell's a false alarm. A crook. Ever meet Ah Hell? If you haven't, don't. He'll give you hop. In your liquor, Polly. Some drug that makes you goofy as hell. Like putty in his damned yellow hands. But I fooled him. Poured my drinks out the porthole and swam ashore.

Now I'm dead and it don't matter. *Davis!*"

Herb screamed the name, struggling in vain to sit up. Zack, bending over him, saw the dullness fade from the sick man's eyes. He suddenly clutched Zack's arm tightly.

"Billy!" he whispered hoarsely, looking fearfully about. "She's with that damned Ah Hell! Save her, man! As you love the memory of your mother, save Billy from that devil!"

Zack paled. Herb's intensity sent a chill into his heart. He bent to stare into the sick man's eyes.

"What the devil are you saying?" he asked harshly. "What do you mean?"

"Applesauce," giggled Herb, again dull eyed and leering up at him. "Polly want a cracker?"

The breakfast grew cold as Zack worked over the delirious man, trying to bring back a flicker of sanity into the dull eyes. His labor was in vain. Zack, in an agony of fear, managed to swallow some food and fed Herb a meal of whiskey and raw eggs which Ah Hell had broken into a thermos bottle.

Then he buckled on a well-filled cartridge belt, took a carbine and saddled his horse.

Mounting, he rode up to Herb's bunk. He was greeted by an insane babbling. A strange jargon of Chinese, Spanish, and Dutch.

"Herb!" he snapped. The babbling ceased. The man on the bunk leered upward into his face.

"I'm going to get at the bottom of this, understand?"

"Righto! Bottoms up!"

"I'll be back if I'm still alive, by night."

"You can't come back, Pollyanna," came the tittering reply. "You're dead, like I am. Dead, and all hell can't bring you back. Billy tried to bring me back but they said I was dead! Get away from me, now, you and Briggs. Where's Briggs? Tell him Ah Hell's a double-crossing Chink that'd slit his mother's throat! Get away from me, damn you! I'm dead!"

More puzzled and worried than ever, Zack whirled his horse and rode along the back trail over which they had come the previous day.

THE rakish green roadster carrying Billy and Ah Hell was doing an easy forty miles an hour when it rounded a sharp curve on the twisting road. Some ten miles behind spluttered the flivver containing the Mexican boy who had driven Weasel Stanley. He had borrowed enough gasoline from the roadster to take him back to Ensenada.

"Look!" grunted Ah Hell, his hand pointing to a mesquite barrier across the road.

"Road blocked," muttered Billy, "hang on and we'll see what this bus can do!"

Boulders lined each side of the narrow road, making a detour impossible. The high-powered car shot forward, straight for the brush that was piled to a height of six feet across the right of way. Ah Hell, his brown eyes widening, crouched low. Billy drove squarely at the barrier.

A crash! Splintered glass as the windshield shattered to bits. The car plowed through for an instant, then lurched up and turned sideways with a sickening lurch that threw both occupants upward through the air. Then the car turned turtle, motor roaring wide open, wheels spinning as it crashed in a twisted, hissing heap.

Ten feet away lay Ah Hell, blood trickling from an ugly gash in his head. Billy was climbing slowly from the thick brush into which she had been catapulted. Her hand dropped to her side, then came slowly away from an empty revolver scabbard slung to the belt that was strapped about her waist. Before starting she had changed from coveralls to a riding habit that had been placed in the green car days before. Scratched by the brush, a bit dizzy from shock, she looked helplessly about. Then a cold, unemotional voice from the brush froze her in her tracks.

"A good hunter might have taken the barrier, but not a motor car. An unusually nery attempt, though, and I congratulate you, what?"

Quo Wong, idly swinging an automatic, stepped into the road. Two Chinamen leaped upon Ah Hell, binding him hand and foot with startling rapidity.

"Permit me," said the Chinese in a purring tone. "I am Quo Wong. I have long anticipated this meeting. Our mutual

friend Herbert Freuling has spoken of you so often. Feel as though we were old friends, and all that sort of thing. I'm sorry I can't offer you my car but the bally thing has balked. You won't mind riding a horse?"

"Talk turkey," said Billy coldly. "What's the big idea?" She was inwardly quaking but pride kept her from showing her fear to this half-caste.

Quo Wong bowed with a smirk. "The big idea, as you put it, seems to be along these lines. Your car has met with an accident. I am putting a horse at your disposal. More than that, you shall enjoy the company and protection of Quo Wong on your journey."

"The destination?"

"A little village on the edge of el Desierto Arenas."

"I thought as much." Billy's cheeks were white now. "Let me tell you something, you silky tongued beast! Lay so much as a finger on me and the United States will hunt you like the rat you are. I'm not afraid of you and I'm not afraid to die. And if I have to, I'll kill myself. But if I do, all your heathen gods won't be able to save you from death. I'm an American citizen. Stand aside you scheming slant-eyed half breed and let a lady pass!"

With a mocking bow, Quo Wong did her bidding. With a high flung head that belied her quaking heart, she stepped forward to go around the brush barrier and the wrecked car. Then she recoiled as if struck as a yellow-fanged, grinning celestial face poked itself from the brush. She caught the gleam of a knife blade. Then, from behind, something slipped about her throat and she felt the agony of strangulation.

"That will be sufficient," came the voice of Quo Wong, sounding faintly in the pounding ears of the half-unconscious girl. "Load her on her horse."

A FEW hours of steady riding had put Zack at the camp where he had parted from Billy and Ah Hell. From there he rode to the main road and followed the road to the blocked pass. In the brush beside the road was the black touring car, covered with a tarpaulin. No indication of anything wrong. No sign

of a struggle of any sort. Zack breathed more easily. Then he rode around the barrier and located where the roadster had been cached. Tire tracks led away from the place. Zack began to suspect that Herb's talk had been but the wild raving of a disordered brain. Surely, after long years of faithful service.

Zack pulled the saddle from his sweating horse and hobbled the animal to let it graze while he deliberated the matter of Ah Hell's faithfulness. He sat on his heels beside the road, smoking and thinking the matter out from different angles.

Back at camp, he had left a sick man whose life depended on him. Herb would be in bad shape by dark from lack of nourishment and the whiskey to quiet his jaded nerves. No doubt the man was suffering terribly during his absence. To go on to Ensenada meant possible death for Herb and he, Zack, would be his murderer.

On the other hand—

"Damn!" grunted Zack aloud.

"Damn who, Davis?" croaked a jubilant voice from the brush at his back. "Ease your mitt off that gat or I'll drop you where you sit!"

"Stanley!" gasped Zack, then grinned ruefully. "You win the jackpot, pardner. Take my chips."

"Stand up with your arms as high as they'll go toward the blue sky, Davis," came the command from Stanley, still hidden in the brush. "Now, with your *left* hand, unbuckle that belt and let your artillery drop. Make a bad move and your light goes out, brother, and I don't mean maybe! That's the ticket. Now step over to that tree and put your arms around the trunk."

ZACK obeyed. Then, from the brush, came the disheveled, limping Stanley, his dented derby cocked with unconscious rakishness over one eye. His clothes were torn from the brush, his sunburned face was scratched by catclaw limbs. But the light of victory burned in his eyes as he snapped a pair of shiny handcuffs about his prisoner's wrists. Zack, thus fastened to the sycamore sapling, grinned at the detective.

"Where did you go after you left the haberdasher's, Weasel? You look plumb mussed up."

"No fresh cracks outa you, young feller. Got a smoke on you?"

"The makin's, old sleuth. In my shirt pocket. I promise not to bite your ear off if you'll roll two while you got the materials. My, my, and the good old iron hat all dented up. Don't lose it, Stanley, or nobody will ever recognize you as a flat-foot. I bet you're hungry."

"You said it. Got any scoffin' near here? I ain't promisin' nothin' see, but get along nice with me and I'll do what I can when we get back to town."

"Thirsty, too, I'll bet?" Zack went on.

"Listen, guy, are you kiddin' me?" Stanley looked up from the clumsy looking cigaret he was rolling.

"None whatever, old timer. I'm about to proposition you. At my camp is grub, water, and a decent bed. And a man that'll die if I don't get back to him damn pronto. I'll lead you to it if you'll tell me one thing straight. It will in no way reflect on your duty."

"Shoot it."

"Did you see anything of a big Chinaman and a girl in a car?"

"The dame that you got the picture of?"

"Yes. You saw her?"

"Yesterday mornin'. Her and a guy that mighta been a Chink. They was drivin' like hell, the dame at the wheel. She was laughin', I could see that much, as they goes by me like a bat outa hell, Ensenada bound."

"Stanley," laughed Zack, immensely relieved. "If I wasn't attached to this tree, I'd hug you!"

"Not if I could swing a gat across your dome, you wouldn't," came the detective's grim reply. "How far to this camp of yours?"

"A few hours' ride. You can ride the horse and I'll go afoot. You can keep that lariat around my neck if you're afraid I'll bolt."

Stanley cast a doubtful glance at the grazing horse. "Does he bite or something? I never sat on one of the things in my life."

"Gentle as a street car, Weasel. Throw the saddle on him and we'll go."

"I'll let you saddle the beast, Davis. But if you try to slip anything over on me, you'll have some bad luck, see?" He unlocked the handcuffs.

Zack nodded cheerfully and slipped the hobbles from the horse's legs. Then he bridled and saddled the animal very carefully, drawing the cinch up tight. Stanley put the handcuffs back on his wrists and wagged his automatic.

"Don't forget that I'm a damn good shot and a bullet can catch you right now if you make a run for it, brother."

Clumsily, laboriously, Stanley mounted the horse. Zack watched him carefully, giving him instructions.

"Reins in the left hand, so you can keep your cannon trained on the enemy with that good old right member. That's it. How are the stirrups? Stand up in 'em, then sit back hard to see if you get the proper feel of the saddle. That's the stuff. *Ride 'im, cowhand!*"

The horse, as Stanley stood in the stirrups, then flopped heavily back into the seat, leaped into the air with a snort of fear, then landed stiff legged, head lowered. Again the horse left the ground and when his feet hit in a second slanting jump, Stanley catapulted through the air and landed on his neck and shoulders.

Like a flash, Zack was on the dazed officer. When he rose he had that gentleman's gun and was unlocking the handcuffs. Stanley sat up dizzily, rubbing a swelling lump on his head.

"Stick around while I catch the horse, Weasel," laughed Zack. "No use trying to get away, savvy, because you have to stick with me if you ever want to eat or swallow good water again. You're out of your element, Hawkshaw. Rest easy now while I catch the Chappo pony and take that cactus out of his saddle blanket. It was a dirty trick to play on him but I had to do it."

ZACK removed the bit of cactus that had caused Stanley's downfall. Then he persuaded the detective into mounting the now docile horse.

"All you have to do is sit tight and I'll lead the horse. If your feet are hurting, pull off those Broadway gunboats and give 'em air. We're off! Picture a good bait of frijole beans and quail for supper. And spring water to wash it down. Here we go, old sleuth, and don't take it so hard, for sunnier days will come. I'm afraid Herb sort of hates cops but he's a bit

of a pessimist about almost everything."

Firm now in his belief that all was well with Billy and that Herb was wrong in his opinion of Ah Hell, Zack trudged on with a light heart.

"So you had a pal down here, did you Davis?" asked Stanley.

"Sure thing," lied Zack cheerfully. "Herb's a great lad. You two will get along something grand. I'm lookin' forward to a great winter. We'll play three-handed poker in the evenings and you may win that fifty thousand off me. Herb is a good guy. He has one little fault though that may bother you some till you get used to him."

"What's that?"

"He's apt to try to murder you while you're sleepin'. Get's peevish as a child when he don't get his hop ration."

"Hop head?"

Zack nodded. "I hope you two boys will hit it off. It'll be a long winter and little differences of opinion make it sort of unpleasant. We're going into the interior, the three of us. Great outing for you, Weasel. You need a vacation."

Stanley groaned feebly. Alone in camp with two desperate criminals who hated law officers. One of these a drug addict with a mania for killing people. If ever a man wished himself elsewhere, it was Weasel Stanley.

"You might as well croak me here, Davis," he gritted.

"Croak you?" Zack spoke over his shoulder without looking around. "You misjudge me, Weasel. Why, hang it all, I really like you, old fox hound. You're as good as the comic section, honest. I'd rather go without a meal than see you hurt. Which reminds me, don't let Herb come close enough to bite you. I don't know how to treat rabies."

"Aw, go to hell!" Stanley exploded.

"That's the old fighting spirit. You may be a plumb pilgrim in a country like this but you're game. I'll be glad to see you get the reward money on my scalp, Weasel. Honest."

"What d'yuh mean, reward money?"

"I'm going back with you some day, Stanley. When I get around to it."

A snort of disbelief came from the outraged detective. They labored along the trail that led up a long ridge and through

a saddle. Mile after mile, uphill and down, and Stanley felt that every joint in his aching body was loosened beyond repair. Yet he did not complain. Dusk made his face ashen with suffering. Then they came into a clearing, dimly visible in the half light.

"Here we are, Stanley. Fall off while I take a squint at Herb."

Leaving the detective, Zack strode over toward the bunk.

"Herb!" he called, a vague premonition of evil making his voice harsh.

No reply from the bunk; with its dimly outlined confusion of blankets. With a quick stride Zack was beside the bunk.

"Empty!" he gasped aloud. "*Herb's gone!*"

ZACK glanced about at the surrounding shadows of brush. That brush might hide a dozen men. Quo Wong's men, perhaps, for Zack was positive that Herb could not have escaped without help. Then a square of white writing paper pinned to the blanket caught his eye. Risking a shot from the brush he struck a match and by its light read the scrawled message.

Ten Devil Zack damn' fool. You follow, you die.

AH HELL.

The match burned out. Zack, sick at heart, walked to where Stanley sat on the ground.

"Here." He handed the detective his automatic.

"What's the big idea?" gasped the surprised law officer.

"The idea is this, Stanley," said Zack in a dead voice. "You and I have a big job ahead of us. Somewhere in this damned wilderness a white man and a white girl are being held prisoner by a lot of inhuman fiends. Our quarrel can wait. Help me get those damned Chinks and you can take me where you please. I'm telling it straight."

Stanley was on his feet, holding his gun stupidly. "Do we eat before we start?"

"You're with me, Stanley?"

"Brother," said the detective. "I'd like to see you keep me back! Let me throw a feed of beans under my ribs and we'll make 'em think that Chinese New Year's has come early this year!"

VII

IT may have been five minutes or perhaps it was five hours that she had been unconscious. Billy, upon opening her heavy eyelids, had the uncanny feeling of having slept. Her head ached and her whole body felt numb. It seemed very hard to concentrate her thoughts.

Slowly, sluggishly, her brain grasped several things. She was riding on a horse to which she was tied. An evil looking Chinaman rode on either side of her and steadied her at times when she swayed in the saddle. Ahead—surely she must be in the throes of some wild nightmare!—rode Quo Wong and by his side jabbering amiably in Chinese, Ah Hell!

Billy suppressed a desire to call out. Her head ached terribly. She rightly guessed that she had been drugged. One of her guards, perceiving that she was conscious, called to Quo Wong in his own language. Quo Wong said something in a low tone to Ah Hell, then dropped back. The guard rode ahead with the big Chinaman and Billy looked into the smiling countenance of the half-caste.

"Accept my profound apology, my dear young lady, for the rather severe treatment you were forced to undergo. Give me your word that you will behave, and I'll unfasten those uncomfortable ropes, what?"

Billy did not reply. She was looking at the thick muscled back of Ah Hell, riding calmly ahead. Quo Wong, following her glance, smiled placidly.

"He is taking us to the spot where the good old Herb and his companion Davis are camped," he explained.

"You lie!"

Quo Wong, raising his voice somewhat, jabbered a short command in Chinese. Ah Hell dropped back. The big Chinaman's face was an inscrutable mask.

"You will kindly tell this young lady where we are going," said Quo Wong in English.

"Follow trail ketchem bossyman Herb, Ten Devil Zack. Ah Hell Tong blotha with Quo Wong. You savvy?"

"A fraternity whose ties bind men until death and beyond the grave," explained Quo Wong. "Ties that are far beyond the ken of whiter skinned men. Ties that

are thousands of years old and with traditions that make a puny thing of that which you call religion.

"Great chap, your Ah Hell. An excellent example of one who has an understanding of life. I wager that you never once suspected him of duplicity, what? Rather not. He's gone through the mill with you and all that. In a moment of derisive humor, you call him 'Ah Hell.' American humor. No doubt hurt the dear chap. The working of the Chinese mind will never get home to the white man. Pardon, Miss Freuling, I think we're getting close to the camp of the enemy. This Chinaman will take care of you. Sorry to be unable to offer you the company of one of your own sex but the young lady who started with us met with a sad accident. She started back for Ensenada to see the commandante. One of my men found her with a knife embedded to the hilt between her shapely shoulders. Au revoir."

Billy's guard had ridden alongside. Before she was aware of his intention, he had slipped a silken gag in her mouth and was leading her horse into some brush.

THERE followed half an hour of waiting. Then Quo Wong and Ah Hell came into sight along the trail. Quo Wong bore the body of an unconscious man in his arms.

"The dear old Herb," explained Quo Wong. "The poor chap seems to have gone insane. Had to give him an opiate to quiet the dear fellow. It will be days before the old playmate is himself."

"What of Zack?" asked Billy, when the gag was removed.

"Ten Devil Zack long time gone," volunteered Ah Hell. "No ketchem."

"We found Herb tied to a cot, nearly dead from thirst and lack of attention. Davis seems to have left for parts unknown."

"He's dead?" cried Billy, beside herself with fright and grief and suspecting that Quo Wong had killed him.

"Dead or on his way back to the United States. It seems that a gentleman named Stanley, a detective from San Francisco, is hot on his trail. Ah Hell is of the opinion that this Stanley chap has been successful in his quest. We'll trek on to the next camp now. Across that long

ridge to the springs east of Indios. We should make it by dusk."

Quo Wong and Ah Hell, the unconscious Herb in a canvas sling that hung between their horses, rode on ahead.

Billy, sick with discouragement, rode with her gunman guard. Dully she watched the two men ahead. Ah Hell had taken a long-bladed knife from its scabbard and was idly whetting the blade as he rode, talking to Quo Wong the while.

Occasionally the sun struck the naked steel and the reflection shot back into Billy's eyes. She frowned, then suddenly started. Those flashes came with an odd regularity.

Into the girl's memory flashed a picture of the South African jungle. Dense foliage and the method of heliograph used to communicate between camps. There was no doubt about it now. Ah Hell, with his knife blade, was flashing Billy a message in the International Code!

"O.K. O.K.," she spelled out. Then . . . ZAK. O.K."

The knife went back into its sheath. Billy's heart was pounding against her ribs so that she heard the sound of it. Ah Hell, turning sideways in his saddle to light a cigaret, met her tense gaze. Billy's left eye dropped in an almost imperceptible wink and a faint smile broke the unemotional mask of Ah Hell's face.

"Thank God!" breathed the girl, her head bowed in silent prayer.

She did not understand Ah Hell's scheme. She only knew that Zack lived and that with him alive, there was hope.

Then black, suspecting doubt came to torture her. Perhaps this signal was but another inhuman bit of trickery on the part of Ah Hell, who had broken faith. Mayhap it was but a ruse to keep her quiet?

Torn by these thoughts now, she rode into the shadows of the coming twilight.

"IF this Ah Hell bird was bent on snuffin' us out, Davis," frowned Stanley as they tightened the diamond hitch on the last pack mule, "why didn't he take our grub and the guns and ammunition."

"Maybe he did it to tease me on into a trap. Chinamen are queer birds that way. They go at things in a circle instead of a straight line. We'll feel our way

mighty careful, Stanley. They can't travel fast if Herb's sick and they have Billy for prisoner."

They mounted and rode along the trail, leading the pack horses.

"Say," said Stanley abruptly. "You look like a damn bright guy. How come you picked a hop head for a pal in this bank robbery?"

Briefly Zack explained about being hired for the kidnapping job. About Billy and Crittendon Briggs. About Herb and what Herb had told him. Stanley listened in silence.

"All this, understand, as man to man, Stanley, savvy? Your standing as an officer of the law not to enter into it. I'm telling you this because you are white enough to stand by me. Perhaps you can shed some light on it."

"Which I sure can, pal. Ever hear of Herbert Freuling?"

"The millionaire slacker? Who in the United States hasn't?"

"Well Davis, unless I'm a bum dick, this Herb friend of yours is Herbert Freuling, August Freuling's son. The night I got into Ensenada I sees old man Freuling's yacht layin' in the harbor and I seen Crittendon Briggs come ashore from 'er. Freuling has an adopted daughter that stuck to him through hell and high water in spite of the way people treated him. This girl you call Billy is no doubt Wilhelmina Freuling. Crittendon Briggs is an old friend of Freuling who ain't a bad egg. After the war he was turned loose again."

"How about this million dollars that's comin' to Herb from his grandfather's estate? And his marriage to Billy?"

"Listen, pal, I know the history of this case from the middle both ways. This young Freuling was havin' a hop head's dream when he spilled that. He was tryin' to get you to take him back to Ensenada. A hop head can lie till he believes his own lyin'. His old man's worth plenty of dough, see, but the kid gets only a monthly remittance. Briggs comes down on the yacht once a month and gives it to him and goes back. It's gone on like that for months."

"If you knew Herbert Freuling was here, why didn't you get him?" asked Zack. "Kidnap the damn slacker if there

was no other way of getting him out."

"Now there's where you asked a hard one, Davis. All I can tell you is that we gets orders to lay off him. There's something damn queer about it. I know this though. Freuling and his son ain't seen one another since the old man sent him on the yacht six months before the United States went to war at Pearl Harbor. Herbert Freuling goes off on a cruise, see. *Alone*. The old man musta had some inside dope on it and gives his dirty coward of a son a chance to light out before the draft grabs him. Nobody gets wise at the time. When the government does take a tumble, the papers are full of it. Freuling's yacht is boarded but the young slacker is either hid somewhere on board or else they've put him ashore. Next we locates him at this Quo Wong's place but we can't get to him on account of a dozen or two Chinks that guards him night and day. We learn he's hittin' the hooch and then on the hop. And about that time the chief calls us home and tells us to lay off."

"And he's engaged to Billy all this time?"

"They was to be married about the time the old man sends the kid on this world cruise. Invitations was out. Then something happens that splits it up. Briggs is mixed up in it some way but he's too slick to leave any sign. He's been making a hot trail between San Francisco and Washington, I know that. And he's quit his practice to work for August Freuling."

Zack gripped Stanley's arm. "Look yonder," he said.

"Looks like a bonfire on top of that peak that shows against the skyline. Hell, it's gone out. No it ain't."

"Shhh. Don't talk," cautioned Zack. "It's a signal. Somebody blanketing the blaze. Code." He paused, then spelled slowly aloud as the distant speck of blaze blotted off and on again.

"Z—A—K—O—"

Then the blaze darkened and although Zack waited fifteen impatient minutes, no light showed against the cold white moonlit sky.

"Whoever was signaling," said Zack, a tremor of excitement in his voice, "was spelling out another letter but never finished. I'd make a guess that the letter was 'K.'"

"Zakok" muttered Stanley. "Sounds like a hair tonic. What is it?"

"Zack," came the tense reply. "O.K."

"Somebody tippin' us off, eh?"

"Or somebody layin' a damn cute trap, Stanley. We'll know before long. Let's go. And keep your gun handy."

VIII

AS Zack and Stanley rode on in the dark, the former's brain was whirling with the revelations that the detective had laid bare. Herb Freuling the slacker. Billy engaged to him and using Zack for a tool to aid the coward. Somehow, despite Herb's lack of manliness, he had not impressed Zack as being a coward. And why did a brilliant man like Crittendon Briggs get mixed up in such a sordid mess? There must be something behind it. Something bigger than mere money. Billy's parting words still rang in Zack's ears. Her kiss still felt warm on his unshaven lips. He could not, in spite of what Stanley had told him, believe that the girl had lied when she kissed him.

"Damn!" he mused aloud.

"Uh?" from Stanley. "What's wrong?"

"Everything. Nothing. Just hooked my nose over a catclaw limb. I got a hunch we're getting on a warm trail, Stanley. We'll drop the pack mules here and go on a little scouting trip."

Leaving the pack animals hobbled in a clearing, they rode on. No word passed between them. They strained every nerve in an effort to locate any dangerous movement ahead. Every bush with its deep shadow, came in for close scrutiny. Then, from the blanket of shadows in a ravine below the point where they had seen the fire, came the startling nicker of a horse! Zack slid to the ground and Stanley followed suit.

"Follow behind me, Stanley," whispered Zack. "About ten feet behind."

The detective nodded. Zack, crouching, slipped cautiously along the trail. Seconds dragged like hours. Not a sound broke the silence, no movement could be detected in the shadow of the brush. Zack had the sensation of being watched from the brush. His grip on the heavy army automatic tightened. He paused for a moment, saw Stanley creeping along ten feet behind

him, and felt a bit easier for the detective's presence. He had not seen the detective for several minutes on account of the sharp turns in the brush flanked trail. Now, as the outline of Stanley's derby showed against the sky, he felt better. Sight of the ludicrous headpiece brought a faint grin to Zack's lips. He moved on.

A TWIG snapped behind him. Then a bulky something landed on his back. A heavy, ill-smelling sack dropped over his head and a cord tightened about his throat. All this in a second.

Zack's arms flung out as he whirled on his feet. His arms gripped a naked torso, slippery with grease, slid, then fastened about a corded neck. A sudden twist and the half-naked body shot over his head and he flung it with all his might, blinded by that thick sack with the odd, sickening odor that seemed to be choking him.

The swift-flung body crashed against a granite boulder with a sickening, crunching sound. Zack jerked the sack free and dropped to his knees just in time to avoid a body that hurled itself on him. He caught a quick glimpse of a derby on this man. Was Stanley crazy? A twisting leap and he was on the man who was regaining his balance. The face of a Chinaman under the detective's derby! Zack's gun barrel thudded against the shaven skull under the hard hat. Thudded with a force that crunched the bone like an egg-shell. He saw his first assailant lying in an unnatural heap against the boulder. Zack's quick examination told him that the Chinaman's neck was broken. His next thought was of Stanley. Swiftly as he dared move without making too much noise, he made his way back along the trail. Five minutes later he came upon the detective's motionless form in the trail. Over Stanley's head was a heavy felt sack that was knotted about his throat with a silken cord.

"Dead," was Zack's guess as he slit the cord with his pocket knife and jerked the sack free. "Some sort of ether or chloroform in the sack. Enough to kill a man in a damn short time. Poor old Stanley, he's out for—no he ain't! He's breathin'!"

He worked frantically over the unconscious Stanley, and used every first aid method he had ever learned. But to no

purpose. The detective had inhaled enough of the anæsthetic to keep him asleep for perhaps hours. Presently Zack hid the unconscious man in the bushes and moved on to meet whatever danger lay beyond. Alone now, against how many, he did not know.

HE crept along with the caution of an Indian. Now he was nearing the spot where he had been attacked. Suddenly he halted, his gun covering a man who bent over the two dead Chinamen.

He had made no sound, yet the stooping man seemed suddenly to sense his presence. The man straightened, a gray white form in the indistinct light. A gun swung in his right hand.

Its muzzle covered Zack.

"Why bless my black heart if it ain't Pollyanna!" croaked the voice of Herb Freuling.

"Hush, you idiot!" muttered Zack, stepping closer. "Where's Billy?"

"Just what I was about to ask you," said Herb.

Zack saw that Herb's face was drawn and white and that his white clothes were spattered with blood. Herb's left arm hung awkwardly at his side.

"You'll excuse my appearance, Polly. Got messed up a bit killing our friend Ah Hell. The big beast broke my arm, I think. Fought like a fiend for his worthless life. Seen anything of Quo Wong? He was with these two rats when I saw him last. Took Billy along. They thought I was sleeping and too damn weak to break loose from my ropes if I did wake up before they got back. Five more Chinks came from that smuggling station on the edge of the desert. They were running away from the Rurales for some reason. God, I wish I had a big drink!"

Zack passed him a silver flask.

"Brought it for emergencies like this. Hit it easy. I don't want a drunk on my hands."

"Don't worry, Polly. Here's happiness!"

The strong liquor put a trace of color in Herb's sunken cheeks.

"Who lit that fire on the peak?" asked Zack.

"Ah Hell. It was a trap he and Quo Wong set to catch you. The big beast was signaling when I jumped him. I put out

the fire with his filthy carcass. Then came down to the trail to lend you a hand. Too late. You'd done the trick. Devilish neat job of it too."

"We're wasting precious time," snapped Zack. "Got any idea where this Quo Wong would take Billy?"

"Meaning *Miss Freuling*?" Herb's lips were twisting in a sneer.

"Miss Freuling then, you damn slacker," gritted Zack. "This is no time to squabble over trifles. Talk sense, if you can."

"Fair enough, Mister Absconder," Herb bowed mockingly. "I'm very much afraid that Quo Wong has taken a couple of saddle horses and lit out for the Chinese village on the edge of El Desierto Arenas. Once there among his Chink friends, he's safe as a kid in its cradle. He'd simply disappear with Billy and you could hunt a year without finding them. I heard him and Ah Hell talking about it. They planned to hold me there with her for what ransom they could get out of the gov'nor. Then, when they got the money, they'd croak us. Ah Hell always hated me. That's why he double-crossed the gov'nor."

"Never mind that. Come on. We'll get horses and follow that Chink pardner of yours."

"Another drag at the flask then, Polly. This arm's giving me hell. Also I've got a couple of scratches from Ah Hell's butcher's knife. Just one pull at the old bottle, that's a good chap."

Zack passed over the flask.

"Take a drink, Freuling, you're getting goofy again."

"Thanks," Freuling gathered himself with a terrific effort. "My regards, Polly."

He drank and his fingers were noticeably steadier as he replaced the screw top on the flask. They rode so that their stirrups touched, as old friends might ride. Dawn was lighting the distant ridges with a pinkish glow. Herb stretched his arm toward a spot on a long ridge that lay a mile ahead.

"Do I see smoke?" he asked.

Zack, following his gaze stared hard at a thin spiral of blue smoke at the spot Herb had indicated.

"Quo Wong getting breakfast for himself and—"

"And Billy," added Herb as he leaned

forward, standing in his stirrups. His good arm, the slim white hand gripping a .45 that he had taken from a dead Chinaman, swung upward and crashed against Zack's temple!

Without even a groan, Zack fell limply to the ground. Herb was at his side the next instant, binding the unconscious man with his saddle rope.

"You won't get the chance to play hero this time," sneered Herb as he recovered the flask and took another drink. "It's my inning this time. You can keep your gun. May need it later. I'll pack what liquor is left—enough to carry me through. May your sweet dreams be undisturbed, amigo."

QUO WONG, placing a steaming pot of coffee to one side of the coals, turned to Billy who sat with her back against a sapling, her hands bound behind the slender tree trunk.

"That will be our old friend Herb," he smiled. "In his cups, by the sound of it. The rest of our party must be coming, what? The Davis chap is by now well on his way to his just reward. Ah Hell's signal must have worked. I got the idea when your faithful Ah Hell, as you so jocularly refer to him, flashed you the message with the knife blade. Poor fellow, he thought I did not see. He was quite put out when I questioned him regarding it. I then gave him the choice of decoying Davis further along the trail into my trap, or accepting the Tong punishment for his treachery to me. The death, as meted out to those who prove false to me, is neither sudden nor merciful. His body would be torn apart by two rather undersized mules pulling against one another. When this was explained, he saw my point and agreed to trap this Davis chap."

Billy, white lipped and shaking as if with a chill, closed her eyes to shut out the vision of Quo Wong's grinning face.

"And now the good old Herb has procured a bit of liquor and comes to us with a gay song on his lips, what? I fancy we'll have a delightful day, all in all. I am afraid, however, that your Ah Hell must be very quietly disposed of. He hates Herb, you know. It was he who introduced drugs to Herb. On the yacht. Because he thought you two were to be

married. In his zeal to serve Crittendon Briggs, who had years before saved him from the penitentiary, he overstepped his orders a bit. It was merely Briggs' wish that you and Herb were to be separated. Ah Hell, while in his employ of August Freuling, was taking his real orders from Briggs. Thinking, in his ignorant fashion, to get Herb to using drugs, then so manage that the dear chap took an ovedose some day, he put certain drugs in Herb's liquor and tobacco. No one, not even Briggs, should ever know of his crime. That, my dear Miss Freuling, is the Chinaman's method of thinking. But Herb, who is not such an ass as one might guess, suspected Ah Hell and with the cunning of the drug addict, avoided Ah Hell's overhoses of drug. This I learned from Herb. Now fearing that Herb and Ah Hell might not get on so well, and being of a highly sensitive nature that is apt to be terribly upset by any such discord, I take the simple and most humane way out of the difficulty. Ah Hell shall be quietly and humanely disposed of. You like your bacon crisp?"

BILLY choked back the sob in her throat. She could hear Herb's horse coming up the trail. The drunken rider was singing a rollicking song as he swayed in the saddle. Then he rode into the little clearing and swung to the ground.

"Good morning, Billy. Ah there, Quo Wong! What a day, eh?"

If Quo Wong was astonished at seeing Herb alone, he hid his feelings well.

"Just in time, Herb, for a bite and a cup of coffee."

Herb held up the silver flask. "This is my breakfast, thanks. Cheerio, old playmate. My regards, Billy!" He drained the flask and tossed it aside.

Quo Wong was smiling but his eyes narrowed to slits as he took in Herb's blood-stained clothes and broken arm.

"You've had an accident, Herb?" he asked. Billy, white with fright, watched them dazedly.

"Rather. I killed Ah Hell." Herb, with a seemingly careless movement, had drawn the .45 and was toying with it aimlessly. Its black muzzle, however, was covering the half-caste.

"Quite so, Herb," smiled Quo Wong.

"A ripping fine away to begin the day."

"Glad you see it in that light. Having gotten off to such a splendid start, I knocked Davis on the bean and came on."

"Davis? echoed Quo Wong.

"Davis. It was he who killed your two stranglers. You quite overestimated the prowess of those two birds. This Davis is a tough customer."

"Herb!" cried Billy. "You killed Zack?"

"Killed Pollyanna? Why not? He's no good, Billy. Just a damned fortune hunting bank thief. But I'll be getting sober if I keep on gabbing. Mustn't get sober. Quo Wong and I have a game to play, eh, old fellow?"

"Have we?"

"Absolutely. I forget the name of the delightful pastime. It is played with a silk scarf or handkerchief—and two sharp knives. I borrowed Ah Hell's for the occasion. You, Quo Wong, carry a knife of similar description. We each hold a corner of the handkerchief in our teeth. The one who lets go first, loses. You follow me, old chap?"

"Perfectly, my good old Herb. But I say, aren't you a bit maudlin?"

"On the contrary, I'm thinking quite clearly. As I was telling Pollyanna—Davis, you know—I rather hate to see you go. I shall miss your companionship. But under the circumstances, weighing your learned company against the good old chivalry that's supposed to lie within the bosom of Americans, even draft dodgers, the latter weighs the heavier. You made a grave error in forcing your company on a lady. I hope I won't have to ask you to toss aside your automatic."

Quo Wong bowed stiffly and tossed his automatic on the ground several feet away. Herb's gun followed.

"I'll need your scarf, Billy," said Herb as he took the bit of gray colored silk from where it lay near her. "Ready, Quo Wong?"

"Quite ready, Herb."

Herb twisted the scarf and held an end toward the half caste who took it in his teeth. Herb's teeth closed over the other end. Two long bladed knives shifted up from their right hands like twin sun streaks. Billy stifled a scream as the blades clashed. Sick with horror, she

stared at the two men, unable to believe what she saw.

Shifting, circling, eyes fixed on a death grip on each other, the two men fought in silence. The wicked blades darted in and out like long silver tongues. Quo Wong's blade was red at the tip now. The knives slashed, met, glanced off and met once more. Then Herb's blade ripped open the half-caste's cheek from temple to chin. The crimson stream spread across the silken scarf.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Billy's stiff lips moved in sobbing prayer. As they circled, she saw that Herb's white shirt was cut in shreds and his heaving chest was streaked with slowly widening red stains. The white man's eyes were bright with fever and excitement. His teeth, lips bared in the mirthless, ghastly grin, gripped the silk tightly. Quo Wong's face was a sinister yellow mask, half hidden in blood.

The half-caste's knife shot out and upward. Herb's quick sidestep saving him by a hair's breadth from disembowelment.

"Ahhh!" Herb's blade, like a streak of silver light, darted from the heaving chest of his enemy. The blade sank in the hairless yellow flesh, just as Quo Wong's knife shot under Herb's arm through the flesh and under the armpit.

For a moment they stood there, each swaying on his feet. Then the teeth of the half-caste let go their grip on the blood soaked scarf and he sank on his knees to pitch forward on his face. Herb's knife buried hilt deep in his murderous heart.

In Quo Wong's yellow hand was clutched his blood-stained knife.

Swaying drunkenly, Herb looked down at the dead man. Then he took the scarf from his teeth and held it against the wound under his armpit from which the blood came in great spurts.

"Sorry, Billy, to have ruined . . ."

His knees gave way and he sank to the ground across the dead body of the half-caste.

Billy had fainted some moments before.

IX

"ZACK!" Billy found herself crying.

"Zack! You're alive!"

"Of course I am. Better lie still. You've been through more than enough

to kill an ordinary girl. Take it easy."

"Where am I, Zack?"

"At my camp. You've been delirious for nearly twenty-four hours. Fever's gone now but you're bound to be mighty weak. Don't worry about a thing."

"Is Herb . . . dead?"

"Yes, Billy. Stanley took his body to Ensenada this morning. Poor chap. He'll go back home now."

"You know about his record, then?"

"Yes. The whole thing. Mr. Briggs told me last night. Told me how August Freuling had Herb put aboard the yacht and kept prisoner. How out of loyalty to the man who had given you a home and his name and treated you as his own daughter, you consented to marry Herb. Tell me, Billy, do you love old August Freuling?"

"No, Zack. He was not the sort of man that even his own daughter, had he one, could love. He was too stern, too domineering. I respected him, yes, but I did not love him, any more than Herb did.

"Then it won't hurt you terribly to know that August Freuling died suddenly of heart trouble a few days ago. Perhaps he and Herb are united again."

"Perhaps, Zack." Billy was sobbing softly. "Herb was very bitter. He was willing to fight for his country, you know. I was going to lay the whole story before the officials at Washington and get them to let Herb return. There is no record at all of him at the Capitol. It is as if he were dead. Forgotten, save when he tries to return to his country. Then he is kept out as an undesirable alien. A tragic punishment and a just one."

"Well, Billy!" Crittendon Briggs crossed from a small tent to the one where Billy and Zack were.

"Uncle Critt!" cried Billy, holding out her arms, laughing and sobbing at the same time. Briggs took her in his arms and held her for several minutes, kissing her hair and patting her in a fatherly fashion.

"Is it awful of me, Uncle Critt, to say I'm happy?"

"Good Lord, child, no!" He looked up at Zack, who was about to leave.

"Just a minute or two, Zack, my boy. Then I'll send you off to bed. He's been with you for twenty-four hours, Billy.

Couldn't make him leave the tent. A very obstinate young man. Held your hand, too. A very presumptuous thing to do. By the way, did he tell you the truth about that absconding thing he got into?"

"He did not."

"It was the day they found the body of a young woman in the bay. The day before Stanley's Mexican chauffeur told of seeing you captured. We were grief stricken, thinking it was you. I went to the radio room aboard ship to be all alone. San Francisco was broadcasting the news of a young bank teller who confessed to the theft of fifty thousand dollars. His room mate and chum of many years had shouldered the blame and skipped out. The bank officials were hunting Zachary Davis so that they could offer him his job back and properly reward a man whose loyalty to a friend was so great. Banks need loyal men. Being a large shareholder and member of the board of directors of that same bank, I feel safe in assuring this young rascal of prompt promotion when we get back. And that's that."

"Zack, I knew you were."

"Tell him later, my dear. With proper gestures. I'm holding the floor now."

"Many years ago, a struggling young attorney and his bride lived in a cheap rooming house in San Francisco's poorer section. There was a baby. That baby was you, Billy. I was the attorney."

"I . . . You're my daddy? Oh! I'm glad, Uncle Critt! Gladder than I can tell! I've loved you always!"

IT was some minutes before Crittendon Briggs could escape the entanglement of her arms and continue.

"I came home late one night to find my wife lying in bed, bound hand and foot, and so gagged that she had died of strangulation. Certain papers incriminating a crooked politician were missing.

"There was a brewer in the city who had employed me on minor cases. His name was August Freuling. To him I took my baby, after the funeral of my wife. To August Freuling, I gave my baby, making out the proper paper of adoption. Then I bought a revolver and went to find the man who had murdered the woman I loved.

"I killed him after he had shot at me

twice. Killed him fairly. His influential friends saw to it that I got a life sentence.

"Ten years later, August Freuling got me pardoned. But on the condition that so long as he lived and his son lived, I was not to claim you as my child.

"I saw his son grow into a hard drinking, reckless youth with indifferent morals. Long before August Freuling confided in me, I knew he would ask you to marry Herb and make a man of him. I fought it bitterly, as you may know. But always he held over me that threat of exposing me as an ex-convict, a man who had killed another man. He could show those old court records that reeked with false evidence against me. I was in his power. There were times when I was tempted to violence. Then August would plead as only the father of a scapegrace son can plead. I became the slave of this man because of my love for my daughter. I confess, Zack, that I held out little hope that you could ever make a man of him. I can't honestly say that I mourn his death or the death of his father. Their wealth goes to different charities. I've never taken a cent from Freuling, Billy, can you forgive me for the great wrong I've done you?"

"Daddy Critt," laughed Billy, "I have nothing to forgive, when it comes down to brass tacks. But since you give me an opening to threaten you, I'm going to make the most of it. I can see it in the eyes of friend Zack, that he's going to ask me to marry him. See him blush! And he's going to be awfully darn stubborn and say he won't take me till he can support me in the manner to which I've been accustomed. That's the usual old stuff. Now, my newly found grand old daddy, I want you to tell this stubborn young man that he's all wrong. You're a great lawyer. Do your stuff."

"Now listen—" Zack began, red with embarrassment.

"At him, dad! He's getting the first word!"

"Squash him?" smiled Briggs.

"Flat," nodded Billy grimly. "He's nothing but a cow puncher with a little book learnin'. Where's your big hat, cowboy?"

"Lost, ma'am."

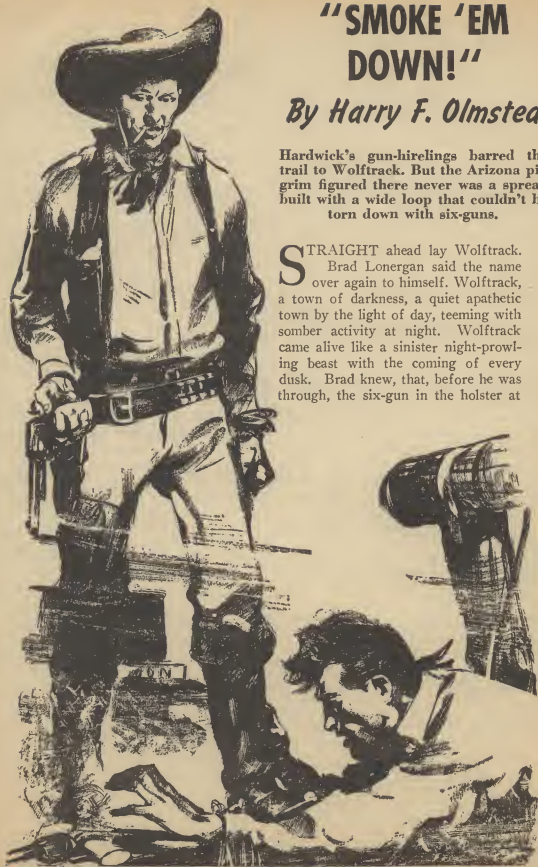
"You can leave us love birds now, dad. He's squashed!"

"SMOKE 'EM DOWN!"

By Harry F. Olmsted

Hardwick's gun-hirelings barred the trail to Wolftrack. But the Arizona pilgrim figured there never was a spread built with a wide loop that couldn't be torn down with six-guns.

STRAIGHT ahead lay Wolftrack. Brad Lonergan said the name over again to himself. Wolftrack, a town of darkness, a quiet apathetic town by the light of day, teeming with somber activity at night. Wolftrack came alive like a sinister night-prowling beast with the coming of every dusk. Brad knew, that, before he was through, the six-gun in the holster at



Deliberately, the killer brought his spurred heel grinding down on the dying man's wrist.

his side would be called upon to roar an answer to that dark challenge. It had been a long trail. It might prove to be the end of all long trails. . . .

As the wild goose migrates, a thousand miles separates the Nogales Gateway, where a hundred generations of warriors have been reared, from the rolling sweep of Black Wolf range, in Montana. But as Brad Lonergan traveled, it was half again as far and the time required infinitely greater. Anything can happen on a ride like that.

From the bold bluff overlooking Wolf Creek, this gaunt, silver-templed desert man sucked at a cold cigaret and looked back over the long, long trail. There was much to compensate its rigors. That Custer affair, for instance. In Custer, for no reason at all, Brad had thrown in his gun with that fire-eating, short-complected hairpin to cow four whiskey-crazed gunslammers, ranicky and on the mean. Shorty! Brad grinned. Mighty easy to partner with a feller like him. Just knowin' him had made succeeding miles seem shorter.

Brad snapped away his cigaret, and looked to his cinch, before undertaking the steep trail that fell away off the tableland. At a sound along the back-trail, he stiffened, jerked the latigo, dropped the stirrup and whirled to the swift approach of seven horsemen.

Brad crouched against his horse, his hand sliding to his Colt's. He was alive to the menace of the Black Wolf. His mouth was a hard line. His eyes were slitted gimlet points.

They came fast and were still fifty yards away when Brad relaxed, smiled, and leaped forward. In full stride, the leader of those seven hit dirt, bounded forward, laughing. They came together, gripping hands, pummeling each other.

"Hello, Arizona, yuh trigger-bendin', lead-swappin' so-and-so!"

"H'are yuh, Shorty? Howcome you doggin' my trail?"

"Doggin' hell! Thought yore gun wasn't fer hire."

"Which it ain't."

"Don't josh me, feller. No man shoves his bronc inter Black Wolf these days 'less he's peddlin' smoke. Hey, fellers!"

He turned to his idle fellows. "Here's the salty gent I was tellin' yuh about. Arizona shore saved my bacon in Custer."

THE boys swung down to pump Brad's hand. Upstanding youngsters, packing double, their eyes reflected their willingness to crack shells in lethal business. Their actions now proved it as a sudden hail wept up from below. A bullet screamed over them and the flat crack of a gun echoed it. Their eyes swung down. Four rifle-gripping horsemen knifed through the creek tangle, hit the trail and surged up. Shorty loosened his gun, scowled at Brad.

"Got a ticket inter this hell, Arizona?"

"Only this." Brad patted his holster.

Shorty shook his head. "Won't do! Nobody drifts inter Black Wolf now. Cut an' run, feller. We'll hold 'em off yore tail. You done me a good turn an' I won't stand fer 'em makin' you a peg tuh hang their boothill blanket on. Git!"

Brad beamed on him. "Who, me? My ears ain't cut the runnin' way uh the leather, Shorty. I'm headin' fer Wolf-track."

The two swapped glances as the rest hairpinned. Shorty saw unreasoning conviction in Brad's eyes, shrugged.

"It's you fer it, feller. But it won't be easy. Button yore lip an' pin back yore ears. Mebby I kin bluff 'er through."

The four riders roared onto the tableland, plowed to a jolty stop. Three were slouchy, sneering hybrids, with lax mouths and shifty, shoe-button eyes. The leader, a cadaverous, bow-legged gunman, regarded them with the keen scrutiny of yellow eyes. Every fibre of the man screamed the feline threat of claw and fang.

"Draggin' yore picket-pins, gents?" he hummed flatly.

"Habitual," grinned Shorty, "an' buck-in' our hobbles down yon slant if it kills."

"Which it may," said the leader softly.

"Business or pleasure?"

"Who wants tuh know?"

"Tiger Skeen!" rapped the cadaverous one. "Same bein' me—the segundo fer Senator Hardwick. You got a ticket?"

Shorty nodded and whipped a paper from his pocket. Skeen snatched it, raced

through its contents. His malevolent eyes tallied them.

"This here says seven," he snarled. "I count eight."

"It says I'm tuh fetch seven," corrected Shorty, bridling. "An' I brung 'em. Hell, can't I read? Don't come no hooraw on me, Tiger-man, or I'll jerk yore carcass off'n that jughead an' whup yuh down tuh house-cat size."

Skeen's fingers curled for the gun snatch and his glare scorched Shorty. Then he cooled, pocketed the sheet.

"One uh us is wrong," he said sullenly. "If it's you, yo're due fer a soon an' deep plantin'. C'mon!"

He led the way down the trail, the dust boiling under hoof as they all followed. At the bottom, they hit a wagon road and broke into a long lope. For a mile they rode silently, then Shorty reined beside Brad, spoke from the corner of his mouth.

"I can't savvy what'd bring a man here if not tuh sling iron. But whatever, Arizona, I figger tuh make this stick. We're hirin' out tuh Senator Hardwick, who owns Wolftrack an' hones tuh own Montana."

"A senator?"

"Hell, no. But aimin' thataway. Seems he's froze hisselt inter Wolftrack, which he aims tuh have changed to Hardwick. Likewise all uh Fergus County south uh Flatwillow an' the Snowys tuh Hardwick County. Senator Hardwick uh Hardwick County. Savvy?"

Brad nodded. "When a man tries tuh spread his shadder over too much range, Shorty, he sometimes piles up an' ain't got no shadder. Who pays his gunnies in that case?"

Shorty shrugged. "I'm a gambler—me. An' I got it figgered Hardwick's broad enough across the britches tuh cast a right smart shadder. He won't pile."

A cold grin froze on Brad's face. "Never was a spread built up with a wide loop that can't be tore down with a six-gun!"

Shorty flung him a sidelong look. "Cripes, feller! You ain't . . ."

What he thought went unsaid as Tiger Skeen dropped back.

"Through them willers is Wolftrack, boys," he announced. "Yonder a man's

only as good as his gunhand. Remember though, that the Senator don't c'ral no drunks or trouble makers. They're shore boothill snaggers."

"When do we eat?" broke in Shorty.

The Tiger glared at him. Already he disliked the runt, almost to the point of murder.

"You'll eat after yuh see the Senator," he rasped, "if yuh still got appetite. Here we are."

THEY splashed across the creek and rose to flat, high ground beyond. Before them was a drab scatteration of sod-roofed log structures, pine board shacks and bleached canvas. The place seemed dead. Sleepy dogs lifted their heads to bark half-heartedly at the intruders. A hip-shot Injun pony nickered from a hitchrack. In front of the general store a bearded prospector outfitted his jennies, and on the porch of a whiskey saloon a group of sleepy Tongue River Injun bucks reclined. Dead was right. Yet as Brad swung down before the imposing Buffalo Bull Saloon, he felt the weight of suspicious, prying eyes.

They all followed Tiger Skeen into the Buffalo Bull—an extraordinarily large log affair sprawling beneath the gnarled limbs of giant cottonwoods. One full side of the punchon-floored barroom was taken up by a long planked bar, faced with matched logs and backed with a fine mirror.

Along the other side were stained, scar-topped tables. And on all the walls save the rear where rooms fronted a balcony, hung magnificently mounted buffalo heads. The Buffalo Bull was "Senator" Hardwick's pride.

It was quite ornate.

Tiger Skeen wheeled them up to the bar, bought drinks.

"Senator up yet?" he asked the bar-keeper.

"Up?" sniffed the man. "Is he ever down? I never see such a feller, Tiger. If he sleeps, nobody knows when. Shore he's up, a-workin' in his office."

Skeen grunted, leveled a finger at Shirty.

"You, smart alick!" he sneered. "Come with me. Step light an' take off yore hat when yuh face the Senator. The rest uh

you gunnies wait here till yo're called."

He and Shorty ascended the stairs, rattled across the balcony, disappeared through a door. Ten minutes later Shorty came down, his face stiff, his eyes writhing. He favored Brad with a sly wink as Tiger Skeen called the second gunman. One by one, at five-minute intervals, the seven Custer gunmen went up to face the Wolf Creek boss. Brad was last to be called.

When he stepped across the threshold of Hardwick's office, Brad felt the hypnotic power of the man's eyes. For minutes that seemed hours, he met the stare of a large, splendidly proportioned man who would have been handsome save for chill amber eyes and a forbidding severity of the mouth. Something in Brad's level gaze moved the man. He motioned Tiger out.

"That's all, Skeen. They've all qualified. See that they're fed. Be where I can lay a hand on you."

Tiger grunted, and stepped out. Hardwick motioned Brad into a chair and when he spoke, it was with the practiced ease of an orator.

"Your name?"

"Lonergan. Arizona Lonergan!"

"From Arizona?"

"Right."

"And looking for gun employment. What is an Arizona man doing with this Custer crowd? You don't belong with them, Lonergan. You aren't of their stripe."

"They're my friends."

"Ha! A matter of friendship. A meaningless relationship, my friend. One should be choosy. The lobo don't make friends with the coyote. What brought you north?"

"I'm on the drift."

A drifter, eh? It don't fit you, my man. But let it pass. I can hire plenty like your friends, few like yourself. I need a man. One without fear, asking no odds in the game of guns. Someone unknown in the Black Wolf. Someone who will disappear when his work is done."

His amber eyes bored Brad and a chill tide of warning surged in the man from Arizona. But the deep strength of him kept his face like a mask.

"Trimmin' the cut, eh, Hardwick? Talk on, you interest me."

A rising echo of hoofbeats drew their eyes out the window. A score of granite-faced gunhawks swept away from the stable and up the valley. A thin smile played about the corners of Hardwick's lips.

"Mine, Lonergan," he said pridefully. "Body and soul, they're mine. They hate me, but work and die for me. Why? Leadership. To a man they are outlaws. I protect them, feed them and furnish their whiskey. Slaves! Serfs! But not one to be trusted with a special job. Now you. . . ."

HE broke off speaking to light a cigar.

"Why me?" puzzled Brad. "I might be dangerous to you."

"You are!" The boss blew smoke into the ceiling. "As far as any one man can be dangerous to Horner Hardwick. To lead, Lonergan, a man must possess something. In my case it is strength and judgment. I read you like a book. Smart. Ambitious. Dangerous. Without that last, I'd have no use for you. How does five thousand dollars sound?"

Brad blinked. "I'd look it over fer nits before crawlin' into it," he equivocated.

The Senator chuckled. "Humor becomes you, Lonergan. To earn that money will entail danger, excitement. You'll win easily—or die. If you fail, I'll bury you decently. If you win, I'll hand you five thousand dollars, and you'll leave Montana forever!"

"Astraddle of a hawss or a bullet?" Brad asked, coolly.

Hardwick's jaws twitched. "You will leave an outlaw. Once out of the Black Wolf, my responsibility ceases. After that . . . you gather the idea? Is it clear?"

"Clear as mud, gritted Brad. "Spread out the beddin'!"

Hardwick studied the glowing coal of his cigar.

"Up the valley," he began, "lies the Clawhammer Ranch. Once owned by Jeff Bradley, a stubborn old coot of vile temper. One of a group that have always bucked me. I wanted Jeff to pitch up and

quit, Lonergan. And what I want, I get. In his will, Bradley named. . . ."

"Will?" broke in Brad, and his eyes were suddenly chill. "Yuh mean this Jeff Bradley swallered a boothill bullet?"

The Senator nodded solemnly. "Yes, Lonergan. It was very sudden, very sad. Jeff had plenty enemies. One of them plastered him from the brush. His will named another enemy of mine as executor. Keno Savage. The last of a long list."

"Good at dodgin' lead, eh?"

Hardwick laughed softly, mirthlessly. "Keno's tough, and smart. But that hasn't saved him. He has a daughter."

"Oh!" breathed Brad, "a woman in it?"

"A girl," corrected the boss, "and I want her, Lonergan. More than I've ever wanted anything. What Horner Hardwick wants. . . ."

"He gets," finished Brad. "I get yuh, Senator. An' 'cause this gal don't like yore face, you want me tuh make love to her?"

An open anger burned sullenly in Hardwick.

"Forget that, Lonergan. I'll do my own lovmaking. Your job is to take her out of the Clawhammer Ranch house, where Keno and his men have holed up."

"I see," said Brad, frostily. "Walk right in on a bunch uh ringtailed catamounts, smoke 'em down an' snake out the gal. Ain't that nice? Ha. No can do, Senator."

"I'm telling you what you do, Lonergan," said Hardwick stiffly.

"An' I'm doin' as I damn please, savvy?"

"You'll do as I say, Arizona-man, or. . . ." The monarch shrugged. "Listen! From now on, you are, well, say Jeff Bradley's nephew—Lon Bradley, from Arizona. You appear at the Clawhammer Ranch and order Keno to vacate. He'll villify me and talk about fighting if it wasn't for the girl. You offer to take the lady to safety, to Lewiston. Insist, understand? Bring her to me, pocket your five thousand and ride out with the charge of murder on your head."

"Kill Savage, bring you his gal an' rabbit," translated Brad cynically.

He raised one eyebrow.

"I didn't say that," reproved Hardwick, almost gently. "Your job is to get me

the lady. Take it or leave it. And long life in the Black Wolf is not to the careful-minded."

Features frozen, Brad made a cigaret, laughing mirthlessly. An inner urge bade him rise, destroy this monster and fight to the last cartridge against his hirelings. But caution shoved out a new deck.

"It may work, Senator," he said at length, "but I doubt it. Why not tell this Keno that I've fetched a crew from Arizona. Then call in six-eight uh yore gunnies that he don't know. We'd have 'im in a split stick thataway."

Brad watched him closely.

Hardwick pondered that, puffing thoughtfully. Slow lights burned in his amber eyes.

"In some ways," he conceded, "the plan beats mine. It's worth trying. You can use these boys from Custer. Here's the way we'll work it. . . ."

FOR long minutes he talked, stressing his plan with a forefinger that beat a tattoo on his table. When he had finished, Brad rose, nodded, left the office. Just outside the Buffalo Bull, he found Tiger Skeen grinning like a cat.

"Make the riffle, feller?" he inquired.

"Cert. Headin' fer the Clawhammer now tuh make me a play. Hardwick wants tuh see you, now. Say!" Brad glanced along the racks. "Where's my bronc? I don't want ever' stray hairpin thumbin' that hawss."

"Nobody thumbed yore hawss, Arizona. I put him in a stall on the oats. See Pete Prentice, the stable boy, an' he'll rig yuh a fresh critter. We'll go eat right after I see the Senator."

Brad started for the stable and Tiger went direct to Hardwick's office. The monarch was staring fixedly at him.

"Well?"

"His hawss is branded Circle Dart under the mane," he explained. "He forks a rimfire Silver City saddle with a blanket roll. Nothin' in the roll but a slicker, a wore-out Bisley .44 an' two boxes uh shells."

Hardwick stroked his freshly shaven jowl. "Don't mean a thing, Tiger. How do you rate this one?"

Tiger Skeen swelled. "An old hand in the gun game, Senator. Prouder'n

a yearlin' bull, an' dangerous as a rattler. Over my sights, he shapes as a top gun hand."

"If you always keep him in your sights, Tiger," said Hardwick, dryly. "He's no drifter. But he's safe as long as he don't fool us. Watch him all the time. Keep him in our pincers. Send out that Custer crowd with him. They'll make a play to enter Clawhammer after dark. Tell the boys on guard to smoke up the play, plenty. And be set for trouble. That's all."

Tiger strolled out, made his way to the street. The Custer gunmen were just leaving the stable. They stopped as Brad met them. Shorty was feeling the effect to the whiskey he had drunk, and had sold his boys an idea.

"Arizona," he said, and his voice trembled with rage. "You like this lay-out?"

"Right smart," grinned Brad.

"Damned if I do," swore the half-pint. "Too much skunk oil here fer an honest gunhawk." His companions rumbled concurrence.

"What yuh figgerin' on doin'?" asked Brad, wondering about his plan.

"We're quittin'!"

"Hey, hairpins!" came a hail, and Tiger Skeen bowlegged toward them. "How about some chow at the Chink's?"

"Tuh hell with it!" snarled Shorty. "Like you said, I've lost my appetite. We're ridin' out, tuh where we kin eat honest food that don't smell uh skunk."

Tiger pulled up short, his eyes glittering. "Leavin' us flat, eh?"

"We don't owe you nothin'," Shorty rattled on. "We're hittin' the trail."

"Not out—you ain't," said Tiger, and his fingers writhed nervously.

Brad moved back a step to watch the tableau. When Shorty spoke again, his voice rasped with strain. His thick shoulders hunched and he moved toward Tiger Skeen.

"You figgerin' tuh stop us, yuh skin-dried stink lizard? One side, before I slap yuh windin'!"

Eyes slitted, Tiger took a step toward him, just as Slim, one of the Custer men, jerked Shorty back and stepped before him, his fists balled.

"Git back, Shorty. That wolf'll make

beef uh yore carcass. Come dancin' in, Tiger-man. Take on somebody near yore size."

A dry laugh rattled across the Tiger's lips and Brad felt the breath of death. With a flashing draw, Tiger hit holster. Caught foul, Slim made a try to match the killer, as did Brad and the rest. But Tiger was a slip-cock artist and his gun gushed before a man of them had the feel of his iron. Slim fell flat in the dusty road, his gun skidding some feet away. Gasping with the fearful effort, he crawled forward, with clawing, clutching fingers. Deliberately then, Tiger raised his spurred heel and brought it grinding down on the dying man's wrist. And there he held it until Slim was dead. Almost before Slim chinned the dust, doors slammed to disgorge men whose weapons menaced the Custer crowd. It was suicide to go through. One by one, they elevated. All but Brad. Nauseated, he turned blindly and entered the stable.

Behind him, Tiger Skeen was sneering something about, "Now, boys, where was it you said you was goin'?"

They stared at him stonily.

"Pouch the smoke," said Shorty, sullenly. "We ain't licked, but we shore savvy when we've lost our stacks. You win the augerment."

TIGER nodded with savage satisfaction, but made no move to reholster.

"Fork yore cayuses an' foller Arizona," he crisped. "An' if yuh have other funny notions, start 'em by crackin' shells. Git goin'!"

When they had turned and entered the stable, Tiger stared down at the huddled body of Slim. "I wonder," he mused. "Somebody's done talked with them hairpins. I wonder who?"

He motioned for a pair of onlookers to carry the body away, turned on his heel and headed for the restaurant. In the barn, Brad looked to the comfort of his *grulla*, and grinned wryly at the plain evidence that his roll had been tampered with. Pete Prentice, the stable boy, led Brad out a rangy bay horse. The kid's dark eyes were wide and his lips white at the corners.

"Gosh!" he murmured. "Wasn't that

awful. I was talkin' to that feller jest a minute before."

Brad glanced at the Custer gunmen, who were saddled and ready.

"Hey, Shorty," he called. "Ride on out west, 'travelin' slow. I'll ketch yuh." When they had clattered out, he turned to the kid. "So you was talkin' with Slim? Mebby you talked him into a dyin'."

The boy nodded sorrowfully. "Reckon I did, Mister. But I had tuh talk."

"Talk's dangerous in Wolftrack."

"Tuh hell with it!" Pete's voice lifted. "I'm fed up. A feller's better off dead than in this murder hole. Yo're ridin' to the Clawhammer, ain't yuh? Gawd, why do yuh crowd a man that-away? It ain't human. An' the buryin' grounds is crowdin' outa fence. . . ."

"Easy, son," Brad laid a cautioning hand on the kid's shoulder. He shook it off.

"My gal, she—" he choked. "Vona's out yonder, an' not a thing I kin do."

A stream of emotion raced through Brad. His eyes lit with compassion and understanding. One time, a long, long time ago. . . . Brad clamped down on his lip, jammed on his hat and rose to the saddle.

"Dog whines an' chin slobber never won a gal, kid," he said kindly. "Neither has a dead man. Bridle yore tongue. If yuh love this gal an' jest gotta get sucked into this, be at the Clawhammer come dark. Find Shorty an' his waddies. Tell 'em anything. But come heeled an' rearin' tuh sling a gun—fer Vona. Yuh got it?"

Pete had it. He straightened and youth leaped back into his eyes, and hope. He was laughing his thanks as Brad's pony surged from the stable.

WHERE the Black Wolf road dips out of the creek tangle, Brad, Shorty and five riders drew rein. Not voluntarily. But by invitation. The Clawhammer ranch house was just ahead. From its log wall a smoke plume had blossomed and a warning ball had sped over the heads of these invaders.

From his shirt pocket, Brad drew a tan neckerchief. Waving it before him, he broke into the open, the six Custer

men following. But if the first warning shot had been sudden, the volley that now broke from the valley borders was breath-taking. Guns roared from the high ground. Lead whispered and sang. Brad chuckled. Hardwick's men were playing their part well.

Shorty clutched at his breast and sagged across the horn. A companion caught his horse and turned it. The Custer men wheeled back and sought the shelter of the creek timber. Brad roweled through the leaden sleet and popped into the open door of a barn. The whole thing was part of the play to deceive those defenders of the cabin who watched the thing with puzzled eyes.

Roll of gunfire rattled into nothingness along the hill borders. An uncanny silence succeeded. In the barn, Brad lit down, slipped his cinches and patted the trembling neck of his horse. A short laugh tumbled across his bared teeth.

"Whee-ew. Mebbyso that was play actin', but if so, Brad Lonergan, you was never cut out fer an actor."

He was peering out. The cabin was hardly a hundred feet away. Brad fastened his neckerchief on a pitchfork and thrust it outside. For a moment silence, then. . . .

"Spill it!" came the cutting challenge. "An' if it don't sound right we take to the smoke. What yuh want?"

"I want inside," called back the Arizonian. "Tuh make some medicine."

The reply came hard on the tail of his words. Keno Savage, opined Brad, must be a man of lightning decision.

"Come ahead! Lift yore hands an' no tricks."

But Brad was already on his way, darting from his covert and racing for the cabin door. He was halfway across when the first bullet hummed past him. Roaring guns again echoed along the high ground, on either side of the valley. Lead was searing Brad's heels as he lurched through the suddenly opened door. Strong arms seized him, jerked away his .45 and patted him for hide-outs.

Brad's eyes were shining as he faced Keno Savage, a seamed veteran of the prairies. Nor was he in any doubt that this was Keno—this diminutive, steel-

eyed rawhide, whose lips were flattened with the rigors of hardship, persecution and the stubborn will to resist aggression.

"Say yore piece, feller," he said icily, "an' if yuh lie, I'll know it. Who are yuh?"

"I'm Brad Lonergan!"

"Brad Lonergan?" Keno started, and a mutter of surprised whispering ran around the grouped men. "Mebby so. Mebby not. Yore eyes are right. But Brad Lonergan would have some way uh provin' hisself."

Brad nodded and turned back his vest. On it glittered the gold and enamel badge of the Arizona Rangers. Keno laughed softly, stepped forward and gripped the Arizonian's hand.

"Can't say I'm glad tuh see yuh in this mess, Brad," he said simply. "'Cause I reckon we're all doomed. Still, in wormin' through Hardwick's blockade trail, you fetch us our first real hope. Here's the Clawhammer, such as it is. Wisht ol' Jeff Bradley was here tuh welcome yuh. I regret—"

"Never waste time regrettin' what yuh can't in no ways help," said Brad philosophically.

He ran his eyes over the five men who stood at different angles of the big room. What he saw was resignation to death and grim determination to fight to the bitter end. An instant later he knew the reason. She came through the door, slender, smiling, her brave brown eyes fixed upon Brad with quizzical intentness.

Brad bowed and smiled, as Keno introduced the girl. But almost at once his face was cast in the grim mold of the Nogales manhunter.

THROUGHOUT that slow, dragging day, the Clawhammer cabin echoed the buzz of talk as warriors planned.

In the first flat blackness succeeding the afterglow, a low whistle came from outside. The lamp was taken into another room, the door jerked open. Seven men filed in. The door closed, leaving them in blackness. A man fetched in the light. Shorty and the Custer men found themselves under the muzzles of as many rifles. With a soft laugh, Pete leaped to Vona's side. Brad stood grinning at Shorty.

"Hello, yuh sawed-off, hammered-down hunk uh hawss meat. How yuh like workin' fer the Senator?"

Shorty's doubtful eyes searched the Arizonian's face.

"What is this, Arizona? You orta know the only way I'd sling a gun fer that killin' skunk would be with a six-gun in my back. You needn't lay them irons on this outfit. Like we told yuh, whatever looks good tuh you in this, suits us."

"We're in a jam, feller," snorted one of the Custer men, "an' lookin' fer a out. We ain't forgot Slim."

"We're all in a jam, boys," said Brad, "an' oll lookin' fer the same out. We'll never find it, long as Senator Hardwick's shadder glooms the Black Wolf. Tonight we gun him loose from that shadder. I'm shore of yore help, myself. But Keno an' his boys kinda want tuh hear yuh say uncle."

"Uncle!" yelled Shorty, in the laugh that lifted. "I'm fer the Clawhammer from line camp tuh cattle cars. I'll see yuh through this till hell freezes ice, jest tuh slam hammers ag'in that murderin' Tiger Skeen!"

"Now, yo're shoutin'!"

"Run the damned kioats to their holes!"

All doubt was stampeded in the very venom of their loyalty. Guns lowered. Pete, tearing his hands from Vona's, surged forward.

"What we waitin' fer?" His voice was edged with hate.

"One minute, kid!" Brad rebuked him. "Back water. Keep yore hand on yore gun an' yore eyes skinned, but shut yore mouth. Stay with Vona. When we leave, take her into the willers an' lie low till yuh see how the wind blows. If we lose, try an' sneak her through tuh safety."

"But—" protested Pete.

"But—nothing! Them's orders, Keno, step in an' change tuh some uh Vona's rags. Yo're goin' with me. Shorty, you'll lead the hawssbackers into Wolf-track!"

Like gunshots, he snapped his orders. No one made protest. In him they recognized the leader they had lacked. In his disconnected demands they sensed the skeleton of a bold plan.

WOLFTRACK had come alive. From saloons and gaming hells came canned music, feminine laughter, man tones. The main stem, poorly lighted with smoky oil lamps, gave upon dark passageways, convenient places for villainy and murder, black lanes that led to little-used doors, crimson-lighted cribs, faithlessness. In one such alley Keno Savage tottered after Brad Lonergan.

"Hey," complained the Arizona man, "walk lady-like, an' graceful. Mince along."

"Mince, hell!" swore Keno. "Le's see you mince with a female skirt on an' a scatter-gun danglin' 'twixt yore hind laigs. Here—here's the door. Hardwick's hang-out. Wait! How yuh aimin' tuh work this?"

"Jest horn in an' talk to the polecat," said Brad. "Pull his stinger before he kin call up too much he'p."

"Fer, why, Brad? Le's shoot the kioat."

"Nope. I want tuh find out who killed Jeff Bradley."

"Huh. That ain't no secret. Tiger Skeen's bin braggin' about that job fer six months."

"Why didn't yuh say so?" snarled Brad, and he shouldered into a dark hall.

"Yuh never asked me," grumbled Keno. "On the dead thievin', Brad. You really figger tuh make a go uh this . . . lissen!"

From the street came echoing hoof-beats. An excited messenger hit dirt, bawling something about, "They're loose an' on the mean. Clawhammer's gun-hungry an' jerkin' triggers!"

Electric silence gripped Wolftrack. A woman screamed, shrilly. A rising murmur of frenzied man talk succeeded. And the scraping of many boots. And over all, like a thin threat, came the distant war cry of Shorty and his roweling Clawhammer crew.

"C'mon!" barked Brad. "We gotta dust, or we'll lose the Senator in the crowd."

He raced ahead, dragging the cursing Keno. Ahead, light poured from under a door. They shoved through it—into the barroom. It was empty, even the bartenders having rushed to the street. From somewhere came footsteps, the slamming of a door. Brad whirled to the balcony

—and looked up into the gray, enigmatic face of Senator Hardwick.

"Well, well Lonergan," he greeted them. "You made it. Come up!"

He motioned them to the stairs, turned back to his quarters. Brad, cool now as mountain water, felt Keno tremble with a great wrath, calmed him.

"Easy, ol' son. It won't be long now."

They hit the stairs and started up. Keno's clumping was anything but lady-like. Behind them the saloon doors swung in. Tiger Skeen stood blinking there, his sly gaze weighing the pair on the stairs.

"Hey—Senator!" he bawled, his hand snaking in the draw. "Skunk tracks! That ain't the Savage filly. We're tricked!"

Things happened then. Brad whirled, leaped to the floor. As he lit, his gun flashed out, roared—once. A slug smashed him just above the left armpit, skewing him. And as he fell he crumpled. But his instinctive hammerdraw had avenged the murder of Jeff Bradley. One ounce of lead had closed Tiger Skeen's eyes in death, had sealed his oronic lips forever.

From the staircase, lurid curses lifted as Keno struggled to emerge from the encumbering dress. When he made it, the fabric fouled the hammers of the scatter-gun. At last he swung up the deadly arm. On the balcony stood Senator Hardwick. Every inch a killer now, his lips were drawn flat, his eyes slitted with a hooded threat. The black snout of his pistol pitched down on the man he hated most.

"What a pleasure, Keno," he purred, "to have you come asking for it."

From the floor, Brad thumbed a slug at the voice. Brushed by bullet backwash, Hardwick flung down as a load of buck screamed over his head and smashed into the bracket lamp. Then the Senator was ducking into his quarters, with Keno stuffing shell and scrambling after him.

BRAD found his feet. Roar of guns, cries of men, pound of hoofs, made the night hideous as Shorty led his warriors along the main stem. Men broke into the Buffalo Bull. Brad ducked behind the stairs in a hail of lead. His three well-placed shots darkened the

saloon. Now Brad was on the balcony, feeling his way into Hardwick's black apartment. He found Keno venting curses as he fumbled a rope that dropped from the sill of an opened window.

"Damn rabbit," spot the rawhide. "Playin' his cards close to his belly. How kin yuh fan a man with buck when yuh can't ketch 'im?"

"Thisaway," gritted Brad, and eased down the rope. At the bottom, he tarried only to know that Keno followed, then leaped along a dark alley. Before him, three men ducked out of the bullet-scourged street, splashing shots at a pursuing horseman.

Brad eased ahead, and froze as a portal opened. Voices. A pang of fear stabbed the Arizona man. The voice was Vona's!

"Pete!" came the low command. "Come back in here. You don't know. . ."

"I'm findin' him, honey," came Pete's sullen retort. "This country ain't wuth a dime with Hardwick alive!"

From behind, and across the dark lane, a low, venomous chuckle lifted. Came a low, lipless challenge in the Senator's slurring tones.

"Lonerган!" it said. "You're under my sights. My finger is on the trigger. An ounce of pressure and you die!"

"What's stoppin' yuh?" asked Brad, icily.

"Ha!" laughed the mad dreamer of the Black Wolf, "that you may know the price of crossing Senator Hardwick. When your grave is forgotten, I will dominate these ranges. I rated you right. Ambition — brains — courage. But no honor. You failed me, Lonergan, and threw away life, wealth, power. As the false nephew of Jeff Bradley, you could have returned after the smoke had died down, returned to be a power in Montana."

Brad laughed. "Yo're mistaken, Senator. I *am* the nephew of Jeff Bradley. As boss of the Clawhammer, I'll live to wipe the last of yore spawnings from Black Wolf. What you want, you get,

eh? Well, you've wanted killing for a long time—and tonight you get it!"

Brad hurled himself forward, down. Hardwick's gun bellowed and the slug screamed off the wall where Brad had stood. As Brad fell, clawing at his iron, he was conscious of a timed gun-beat from the portal where Vona had spoken, of the two-tongued roar of Keno's buckshot gun.

And, suddenly, an uncanny silence was on Wolftrack. Firing had ceased. As has been the case since dawn of war, hireling warriors had fled when the going got rough. From the street came gruff commands, as Hardwick men were herded into a sullen, beaten pack.

As Brad rose, boots slogged through the darkness. Keno's yelp rang out.

"Seived 'im, Brad! He's deader'n a buzzard singed in the fires uh hell. His sixes was good but my jacks beat 'em. Cards?"

"This partic'lar hand is played out, Keno," said Brad, conscious of his throbbing wound. "Pete, yuh dang fool! Why'd yuh drag Vona here—in spite uh my orders?"

"Me . . . ?" Pete's weak voice came from the dark. "I . . ."

"Eemagine ary beardless jigger like Pete draggin' Vona any place," came Keno's laugh

Vona came to Brad with a rush. Her arms came up and she kissed him.

"Pete didn't drag me, Mister Lonergan. I fetched him to see the greatest man in Black Wolf. I figured it might help him—later. An' . . ." she pulled his head down, "an' we're namin' our first one . . . Brad!"

"Hey!" protested Pete, edging toward them. "Whatever she tells yuh about me, Brad, is her idee—not mine."

Brad pinched the girl's cheek, turned toward the street where Shorty bawled for the man from Arizona.

"Not bad ideas, son. Jest git yuh a nice new pair uh apron-strings an' hogtie yourself to 'em!"

Chant of the Devil Drums

By Arthur J. Burks

Makak! Like the unholy throb of his drums, the very name struck terror through Haiti's dark hills. And Special Agent Rein's orders were to bring him out from his voodoo kingdom, dead or alive!

“WHAT you are really trying to hire me to do, or bribe me to do,” said Gordon Rein, “is to kill a man!”

The ebon faces of the two Haitian officials did not change expression, but they shook their heads from side to side. Gordon Rein tried to read their minds, their beady eyes. They were important men, but they were afraid. They had the might of the Gendarmerie behind them, but they were still afraid. They were afraid of something far beyond and outside the normal ken of any foreigner, whatever the color of his skin.

“No, we do not wish him killed,” said Ceri Lal, the Delegate.

“No! No!” said Jean Jean, his chief assistant, also his brother, maybe even his twin, by the look of him. “Not killed, only persuaded.”

“Then why don't you persuade him yourself?” Gordon Rein, apparently preparing to turn a deaf ear to the entreaties of the frightened Haitians, nevertheless was filled with excitement. This whole thing might fit into his own plans. For somewhere down here in the south, somewhere in the West Indies, or South America, was a badly wanted man. And Gordon Rein, of the New York police, had been sent to find him. That man was Coke Ladue, and he had a few murders to pay for. That he had fled the United States with plenty of money in his bags, and the hope of losing himself beyond all possibility of retribution, was the belief both of New York and the F.B.I. And neither had told him how to do his job, but only to do it. How he found the man, how he got him back, was strictly up to Gordon Rein.

And where would a man like Coke Ladue head for, more quickly than for the

very sort of place into which Ceri Lal and Jean Jean were trying to send him? It was possible he might kill two birds with one stone. But he must never let them know their wishes coincided somewhat with his own. When he undertook a job he wanted to be paid for it, and if they knew, the price would go down, and there were many expenses to pay.

“There is no persuading him,” said Jean Jean softly, glancing over his shoulders, out into the darkness that had settled over Cap Hatien. “No offers can be made him, for he seems to know all things, and to reject them in advance.”

“How many men have you sent on this same journey?” said Gordon Rein.

“Five!” said Jean Jean.

“And all were murdered!” said Gordon Rein.

“We do not know that,” said Jean Jean, “but only that we never heard from them, once they moved into the Baiae Terrible.”

“They were Haitians?” asked Gordon Rein, more softly, knowing the answer before he got it.

“No. French. British. German. Dominican. Cuban.”

“Your own people will do nothing; why?”

“They fear him as they fear Satan.”

“He must,” said Gordon Rein, “be a tough character.”

Jean Jean nodded. So did Ceri Lal. “He is a very tough character. There are evil tales coming in about him, of the revival of ancient blood rites, of strange old incantations at midnight, of the walking dead, of weird sacrifices—and the *new drums!*”

“The new drums?” said Gordon Rein, starting. He'd never heard the expression before, but there was something eerie about it which stirred him, effected him like a



From somewhere a knife had slipped into Ladue's hand.

righthander to the pit of the stomach.

"The new drums," said Jean Jean. "Meaning—that the drums have a new, more dreadful voice, since the coming of Makak."

"The coming of Makak?" said Gordon Rein. "How long has he been pestering you, and what is he after?"

"Nobody knows just how long," said Ceri Lal, "but the last four months have been increasingly worse. The tales say that he has always been here, back in the Baiae Terrible. Only in the last four months has he been spreading utter terror among us. His intention is to take over the rule of Haiti. To crush flat our hard-earned civilization, take us back to barbarism."

"And that," said Gordon Rein softly, "is really why you call him The Club, instead of by whatever his true name is?"

"It is the only name we know for him," said Jean Jean humbly. "It came out of the jungles four months ago, and it must have come from him."

CAREFULLY Gordon Rein masked from them his growing excitement. Four months! Almost exactly the right length of time. Coke Ladue had skipped the United States six months before, as nearly as anyone could find out. Allow him two months to make new connections. . . . Yes, Coke Ladue might have a hand in it somewhere. At least it was worth a try. And the fact that Gordon Rein had never been in the jungles in his life, knew next to nothing of blacks, nothing whatever about Haitians, did not bother him at all. He was a afraid of nothing in Heaven, Hell, or the Earth. He never said so, but that was his reputation.

"How," he said, "do I find this Makak, and what does he look like?"

"You follow the drums, the *new* drums," said Jean Jean excitedly, "and you will find him. A far bigger man than yourself, he is, ugly as sin, and with a voice of thunder, and no heart whatever."

"I'll take the job," said Gordon Rein, "but I'll not kill him. I'll bring him in alive."

Both Haitian officials shook their heads. "He has thousands of followers who will protect him," said Ceri Lal. "He must be reached by guile. Once found and disposed of, his people will be numb with

catastrophe, and will obey their rulers again."

"And I'm to do something five other men have failed to do, every last one of whom probably knew more about jungles and Haitians than I'll have a chance to learn? And you sincerely believe it possible?"

"A marine officer, long ago," said Jean Jean, "slipped through and disposed of Charlemagne, and lived; and there were hundreds of his followers around him. You are a very clever man. You are famous, too."

"I wonder," said Gordon Rein, his lips twisting, "whether this Makak ever heard of me, and if he did, whether he was impressed?"

Gordon Rein rose. So did Jean Jean and Ceri Lal. Both Haitians looked apprehensively at the door of the Stromberg Hotel, where Gordon Rein was staying. They were plainly afraid of the night, and had stayed as long as they could, because they were afraid.

"I'll start tomorrow," said Gordon Rein. "Good night, gentlemen!"

It was Ceri Lal who stepped through the door first, onto the veranda, and it was Ceri Lal who got the bullet through the forehead. It came from far through the dark, and Gordon Rein heard the eggshell sound as the bullet struck before he heard the distant explosion. And he saw Ceri Lal sink limply down. He recognized, or thought he did, the bark of a Kragg. Jean Jean dropped, sobbing, beside the body of his brother. But only for a moment before remembering his own danger. He started scrambling back into the room, stumbled, and Gordon Rein yanked him back through the door, shut it.

"Did I say I was leaving tomorrow, Jean Jean?" he said softly. "I was mistaken. I am leaving now to get for you this Makak. Stay in my room until you collect your wits, arrange about your brother, and give me time to draw the attention of his murderer to myself. And this settles it, Jean Jean. If Makak is back of the murder of Ceri Lal, I won't hesitate to blast him."

Jean Jean could not even answer. Great tears rolled down his cheeks, and he was unashamed of them. It wasn't the first time Gordon Rein had seen Haitians cry, grown men, too. And their tears were a

tip-off about their mysterious ways. The oldest and toughest of them was a child, who could be handled by a man with a voice, and a modicum of cunning.

Dressed in shoes, leather leggins, whipcord trousers, khaki shirt and broadbrimmed hat, with an automatic in his holster against his right leg, and a .38 Smith & Wesson under his left arm-pit, Gordon Rein glanced at his wrist-watch as he stood under the last light in the town, before starting off into the night. It was eleven o'clock. Gordon Rein straightened to his full six feet of slim height, and his face was grim. He didn't like going alone, but knew it useless waste of time to try to get anyone to go with him. None would challenge Makak, ever so little. It was up to him. And even he wouldn't have considered it if it hadn't been for Coke Ladue.

Rein turned his wrist-watch so that its luminous dial was inside his wrist and, he fondly hoped, would not show. He hesitated, taking a deep breath like a diver on the high platform, and stepped out from under the light. He had a sense as of tense waiting, during the last second or two under the light. Waiting, as though someone were drawing a bead on him. Waiting; as though the ebon night itself were waiting. As though Cap Hatien were waiting, Haiti were waiting, the whole world were waiting, for him to move out of the light to face the unknown.

AND he was sure about it, when, a split second after he started, with just time enough to let the sound travel from its starting place to his ears, the drums began. No way of telling how far away they were, not for Gordon Rein to tell, anyway. They might be a hundred yards away, softly sounding, or miles away, sending forth mysterious thunder. But that they began when he moved out toward Makak, he was quite sure, and it didn't make him feel any too happy. "The night has a thousand eyes," might mean a lot more than that in Haiti. So much he guessed, without anyone/telling him so.

The throbbing of the drums did not cause him to hesitate. They simply increased a strange awareness in him. The sound came at him in waves, from all directions, as though they caught him up in a tide-rip. The waves flowed along the

ground like water, following the contour of the dark land. They came down from directly over him, spilling over his head like water from a shower. They came from everywhere and nowhere, and there were many things in them. Menace, derision, triumph, challenge, hate, avarice. But most of all there was menace. The drums were bidding him go back, if he valued his life. Why hadn't he been shot, when they had got Ceri Lal? It could so easily have been done. He had been a fair target as long as Ceri Lal had been.

"His death," decided Gordon Rein, "serves as a further cowing of the natives. Mine might have meant an international complication. I think Jean Jean and Ceri Lal must have the right idea. Makak plans conquest of Haiti, is looking ahead to recognition by the United States."

He broke off thinking about it. It sounded too absurd. Yet, it had happened before in Haiti, and Uncle Sam had recognized various black regimes down here. Maybe it wasn't so silly. On the other hand, if there were secret foreign schemes back of it; but no, the brothers had insisted there was nothing of the kind. Makak was out for himself. One of the tales told of him was that he said he was the great Cristophe, back again to finish his work, his grisly work. Yes, grisly, for under Cristophe many hundreds of blacks had been slain. Slain by pistol, knife, lash, to make them work. They'd built the Citadel, and Sans Souci. They had bowed their heads in the dirt to Cristophe. It had meant death, instant and inexorable, for one of Cristophe's followers to so much as raise eyes to him.

Gordon Rein shuddered, looked away to the right. He thought he caught a glimpse, eerie and spectral through the night, of the ponderous, empty Citadel of Cristophe, atop its hill toward Ennery, with black woods falling away from it like the black garments of a thousand funerals. And for just a moment he thought the drumbeats came from there, and turned toward the shadowy horror of a place, miles away. But even as he turned there was something new in the drumming, which said, "*No! No! This way, you white fool, if you insist on coming!*"

For a man who had never been in the jungles before, Gordon Rein seemed to

learn quickly. He could scarcely see his hands in front of his face, yet he moved without hesitation toward the sound of the drums. His feet found and kept the trail he had selected on leaving Cap Hatien, and his feet themselves almost had eyes. Now and again, through the dark, he made out the white boll of a *ceiba*, and thought how easily a man with a machete could hide behind one of them, step out and use it on him. His head could be severed from his body with a single stroke. He could imagine—how easy it was to imagine ghastly things in that almost Stygian darkness!—his body staggering on a few steps, blood spurting from the neck, before his knees let him down to cover the neck stump with the dust of the dim trail.

And yet, as he fought off the urge to carry his left arm with the elbow in front of his throat—after all, the blow might come from behind—he had the feeling that he had traveled jungle trails before, perhaps far back in some previous existence. He had the feeling of settling into an ancient, accustomed routine. And he blamed it on the drums, which seemed to be calling to him, getting in tune with him, as though adjusting their eerie vibrations to his own. There was something heady and dreadful about the drums.

"I've not much to fear from Makak," he thought, "or he would have shot me down when he got Ceri Lal, if that shot hadn't been intended for me. But Coke Ladue wouldn't care about keeping good relations with Uncle Sam, unless this whole thing were his idea. A hophead's dream."

Yet he knew it couldn't be that. Coke Ladue, in spite of his nickname, was no drug addict. Nor did he drink, smoke, or even swear. He was all the more deadly for his fastidiousness, as the police of a dozen countries knew. The nickname came from his fantastic schemes, some of which cost fortunes, some of which led men and women down the road to death. Murder, usually. And Coke Ladue was never to blame.

Coke Ladue, whatever this Makak might think about it, wouldn't care to have Gordon Rein on his doorstep. Rein had been on his doorstep before, and knew exactly what Coke Ladue thought of him. But did Ladue know he was even in Haiti? He doubted it. The blacks knew, knew even

that he was marching to make contact with Makak. But had anyone passed on the information to Ladue? The Kragg rifle was not a native weapon, Gordon knew, recalling the explosion he had heard when Ceri Lal was shot down. Yes, it was, too, *now*. The Gendarmes used Kraggs, and according to Ceri Lal and Jean Jean, many of the Gendarmes were in contact, in some mysterious fashion or other, with Makak. One of them might even have done the killing. If he had, tomorrow he would not even remember it, if Makak's hypnotic power were as great as the brothers had told him Gordon Rein.

"More than likely," said Gordon Rein to himself, "it was Ladue himself on that Kragg trigger!"

But he couldn't be sure of that. Ladue might even be in Argentina by now. He was doing a lot of guessing. Neither Ceri Lal nor Jean Jean had so much as mentioned a mysterious American having been seen or heard of in the Baïae Terrible. And yet . . . and yet. . . .

THE movements of Gordon Rein were increasingly confident. The jungles seemed to have called to something in him. Instinctively he dodged limbs that he could not have seen, that would have struck his face in the dark. He knew, for after his dodging, to test his instinct, he felt for the limbs, and they were always there. Instinctively he turned his head this way and that, picking up sounds. He was faster and faster on his feet, the further he progressed.

And that he learned rapidly—or *remembered!*—undoubtedly saved his life when, an hour later, he passed another *ceiba* tree. Or maybe it was his ears that saved him. Anyway, he heard the slightest of sounds. He jumped, ducked. He heard the blade whistle over his head. He whirled even as he heard it. His hands, still with no weapons in them, jumped to invisible objectives. His left hand fastened in an odorous, ragged blouse front. His right found the wrist of the hand which wielded the machete. He smelled the odor of native tobacco, of black man's sweat, and of too much *clarine*, that lye-like liquor of the Haitian hills. He twisted the wrist and the machete fell almost silently into the dust of the trail. He spun the silent black man,

and now his automatic was against the man's spine.

"Call out to whoever sent you," said Gordon Rein softly, in French. "Call out to him, or I'll send this bullet straight through you."

The man began to tremble. Gordon Rein could hear the chattering of his teeth. It was almost too much to hope for that the black could understand Parisian French, Haitian being a mixture of French and Congo dialects. The black chattered. And Gordon Rein caught the grim sound of a name, thrice repeated,

"*Makak! Makak! Makak!*"

It sounded, oddly, almost like a prayer for mercy. Nor could he get anything else out of the man who had tried to decapitate him. So, he took a chance, called softly into the night. He noticed that the drums had not changed the rhythm of their beat. He sensed from that that this was something about which the drummers knew nothing whatever.

"Ladue," he called. "I've got your man. Talk up, and talk sense, or I'll put a bullet in his spine! And I'm sure Makak won't like it!"

There was no answer in words, but he distinctly heard a rustling sound, ahead along the trail. And he caught vague odors which seemed to mean something. He thought he heard English words, but could not be sure. The Haitians would know no English. Maybe . . .

Suddenly, kicking the machete aside into the night, Gordon Rein flung the trembling black man away from him, against the boll of the *ceiba* tree. He heard the grunt as the man hit, the sigh as he slumped, the gentle thud as he struck the dust. But even as he heard, he was away, in full charge toward that rustling sound.

And he couldn't hear it go away from him. He had both his weapons out now, and his lips were skinned back from his teeth in a sort of wolf-snarl. He was getting set to do battle. He loved a fight, though he preferred to pick his own battleground.

He smashed into a man. This time the extra sense he was beginning to believe in had failed him. The man was bent double across the trail. Gordon Rein struck him with his knees, toppled over him. But he turned like a cat as he toppled, clinging to

his guns, going limp to prevent a nasty shock. And as he hit the ground they closed in on him, from all sides.

This might well be the end. He was on the point of letting fly with both guns, when he felt, not knives or machetes, but hands, fumbling for him. They were not fists, and he knew they belonged to men who knew little or nothing about fists. It was almost a shame to take the money. But he couldn't kill men who simply tried to grab and hold him; he *could* teach them a lesson. As he scrambled up through the midst of them, throwing them aside with his shoulders, he put his weapons back into his pocket and holster. Then, erect, with a half dozen clinging to him, and none of them saying a word, he got busy with his fists. He'd have them on the run in a jiffy, he was sure.

They were surprised, those first one or two he knocked loopy with his fists. They, the others who apparently could see, and dimly understand, even chattered a little. But they did not draw back. They might be afraid, but they were not quitting. They were simply trying to bring him down by sheer weight of numbers. He pushed men back, slugged men back, but always they came in. Men he knew he had knocked out; well, he heard them get to their feet and come back into the midst of the fight. And he began to tire, especially as it was plain that constant reinforcements were coming in from all sides.

It could have but one ending. His clothes were almost ripped off. His face was clawed and bleeding. His nose, eyes and mouth were filled with filthy dust from the trail, because he had gone down so many times under their weight. The Haitians took leaves from his book, toward the last and began closing their hands into fists, so that, battered and beaten, he finally went down, falling a thousand miles into starless oblivion.

WHEN he regained consciousness it was to the fiery bite of *clarine* in his throat. He opened his eyes to look into the unblinking eyes of a man he knew instantly to be the dreaded Club of Haiti, the black giant known as Makak.

Gordon Rein started to rise. The right hand of Makak shot out, rested on his shoulder. He could not move. He felt

completely the mighty power of the man.

And something that commanded respect. Gordon Rein was not one of those inconsequential persons to whom color made a difference. He cared nothing about a man's color. If the man himself were worth considering, were worth his respect, that man got it.

"Permit me to stand up, Makak?" he said softly.

His respect was in his voice, and he had sought permission, not arrogantly demanded it. And the face of the big black man changed on the instant, in a way that did strange things to the nerves of Gordon Rein. Makak stepped back and Gordon Rein got to his feet. Makak said, in fairly good English,

"Your weapons have not been taken, but you should not try to use them."

Rein was conscious of the rings of Haitians, the ring on ring, squatting around the great fire beside which he had gained consciousness. Hundreds of them, thousands of them. He would be helpless against them. Even so, if there had been none, he would not have drawn weapons against Makak.

"I am hurt that you even find it necessary to warn me, Makak," he said quietly. "And disappointed. I thought, the instant I saw you, that you would be able to read me better."

"Once," said Makak, "not so very long ago, I thought I could read another American. It seems that I was mistaken. My zeal is no excuse for being thus fooled. But I can avoid it happening again by not using my judgment."

"And this other American?" said Gordon Rein eagerly. "Is he a man about forty three years old, with raven black hair?"

"He is your fugitive, Ladue," said Makak, nodding, almost smiling. "And your coming to get him has placed me in a peculiar position. I did not realize it, either, until he duped one of my men into trying to kill you. Naturally, that man will himself be killed, soon."

Gordon Rein felt a cold streak along his spine.

"You mean the poor devil who tried to cut off my head?"

"Yes. If you like, since you were almost his victim, you may attend his execution,

even kill him yourself. By my code, it is your right."

"Am I to gather from that that his life is in my hands?"

"Yes."

"Then, it wasn't his fault. Release him to his friends and his family. Take him back yourself. Hold nothing against him."

"I agree," said Makak instantly, "but your goodness to Adan Tebo only increases the difficulty I now face in coming to a decision. You see, I promised sanctuary to this Ladue. I must give it."

"I am taking him in. That's a promise, too," said Gordon Rein quietly.

"And I'd have to kill you to prevent your keeping this promise to your superiors, and I cannot kill you since you have done nothing to me. Nor could you take him out if I said no. It is very difficult. But there is a solution to this problem, as there is always a solution if we seek it diligently."

"Who shot Ceri Lal?" snapped Gordon Rein.

"Have you authority from the Haitian government to make an investigation?" asked Makak. "Of the slaying of Ceri Lal, I mean?"

"No," admitted Rein. "I have no authority whatsoever."

"Then it does not concern you officially. Personally I must tell you that his death was the fault of your Ladue, which still does not release me from my promise to him."

"Haitian stalemate, I take it, Makak," said Gordon Rein. "And I can see it is quite useless for me to try to carry out the wishes of Jean Jean and Ceri Lal. I really can't persuade you to give over your plans?"

"I am Cristophe," said Makak calmly. "My people must be free again. That is my job. You have done all of your job can; unless, here and now, you draw a weapon and kill me. However, you can guess what will happen? My people would be just as loyal to my spirit as to myself. You would die, and you don't want that."

"That leaves only this: I've got to take Ladue back."

"And I have given him sanctuary. However, I have talked it over with him, and he has agreed to this. Both of you will be disarmed, stripped to the waist, and freed—deep in the Baiae Terrible. If Ladue

comes out, he returns to me. If you can manage him, you take him into Cap Hatien, or wherever you wish, to pay for his crimes. Do you agree?"

"I have no choice," said Gordon Rein promptly. "How about my guns?"

"If you reach Cap Hatien, either alone or with Ladue, they will be waiting for you at your hotel," said this strange Makak, who now held out his hand. Gordon Rein promptly tendered the weapons to Makak, who took them, did not glance at them, but passed them to a servant, who carried them out of the circle of light. "Now, Ladue!" he raised his voice.

And into the circle of light, with a black man on either side of him, already stripped to the waist, came Coke Ladue. His lips writhed in contempt. His head was back defiantly. He snarled at Gordon Rein.

"You're a gone duck, Rein!" he snapped. "I've been here long enough to know these hills. I'll finish you off before we've been in the hills twenty-four hours. You're a city dick. You'll be lost without pavement underfoot."

Rein glanced at Makak. There was the ghost of a smile on the face of the big man. Rein knew why. Makak knew that, in this much at least, Ladue was wrong. Makak said.

"This will be most interesting. I am moved to travel with you two gentlemen, giving aid to neither, however."

A thin scream that made ants crawl along the spine of Gordon Rein, exploded from the lips of Coke Ladue,

"Know what that means, Rein? Yes, you do! You're in on it. You and Makak have worked it out! He knows what the drums do to me!"

"Drums?" said Rein, puzzled.

"As if you didn't know! When he goes anywhere the drums tell the whole country. They never stop. I can't take it."

As though to emphasize his words the drums began, all around, beyond the circle of light. And the squatting blacks began to sway to right and left, and back again, chanting an ancient monotone. A sound that made the flesh crawl. That suggested dank swamps, and liana-hung jungles, blood rites, and primeval horror. Neither the drummers nor the chanters seemed conscious of Ladue. Gordon Rein glanced at

Makak. There was a still, waiting look on the face of the would-be master of Haiti that stirred Gordon Rein to his depths, though he did not understand it. His glance must have meant something to Ladue, for he screamed again, and attacked Rein with his bare fists.

REIN had fought too many battles in his life to be surprised at anything. He met the frenzied man's rush with a straight left. He crossed a right to the button as Ladue straightened, standing on his heels, and Ladue went down. And when he came out, from somewhere a knife had slipped into his hand. There was a gasp from Makak, and his hand shot out as though to stay the knife. But Rein said,

"My business, Makak!" his voice was harsh.

Ladue closed in. The drummers and the chanters paid no heed whatever. It was knife against fists, and Gordon Rein could afford to make no mistakes at all. His fists worked like triphammers. He ducked and dodged. But Ladue was good with a knife, and active on his feet. The point of the blade scored the left forearm of the detective. But it only calmed him the more, set him the more grimly to his task. Ducking, Gordon Rein fell flat on his back, and Ladue jumped high to come down on him, knife swinging down for a fatal stab. But Rein rolled aside, reached out a hand, got the wrist of the knife hand. He yanked Ladue toward him, and making use of the impetus, drove his right again to the man's jaw. This time Ladue was completely out. Gordon Rein glanced briefly at Makak, panting. Makak gave him no hint. Gordon looked around at the swaying chanters. He shuddered to the mysterious hammering of the drums. Then, his teeth on edge from the sound, he stooped, gathered Ladue in his arms, flung him over his shoulder, started away with him into the north, toward Cap Hatien.

Behind him as he went he could hear the soft footfalls of the giant, Makak. And all around him, beyond the circle of light, he could hear the rolling mutter of the drums, taking a tale to all Haiti that Makak, The Club, was on the move, and whither.

Half an hour later Ladue regained consciousness. Gordon Rein tied the man's

hands behind him with his own belt, pushed him ahead without a word. Ladue was sobbing. And several times he begged Gordon Rein to unfasten his bonds so that he could hammer that drum-sound out of his skull. And Gordon Rein could understand, for the thrumming was slowly eating into his own skull, where it echoed like a muted hammer on an anvil.

It was an endless age, a nightmare, that trek to Cap Hatien.

And when they came in sight of the town, Makak was still at Gordon Rein's heels. Rein spoke to him over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the sobbing Ladue.

"You'd better go back, Makak. This is enemy territory. They'll capture you."

"You promised either to kill me, talk me out of my plans, or bring me to Cap Hatien, didn't you? You didn't kill me, I won't change my plans, so there remains only this. You must keep your promise. So, I come into Cap Hatien with you!"

"But I don't feel responsible any more about Haiti," said Gordon Rein. "I was really after Ladue, all the time."

"Promises should be kept," said Makak calmly. "That should be the first rule of government. I regard you as a friend because you have freed me from the possibility of making a great mistake. Since you are my friend, then, I must help you to keep your promise."

"But the Gendarmes! The officials of Cap Hatien! They will destroy you."

"You forget the drums," said Makak slowly, "and what they say to my people."

"And what do they say?" asked Rein.

"They drive white men mad!" yelled Ladue, babbling thereafter sounds which might have been words, but did not make sense.

"They talk only to my people, and they understand," said Makak.

The drums seemed to fill the air with a hurricane as Rein, Makak and Ladue marched into the main street of Cap Hatien. There Gordon Rein stopped short, and Ladue cringed back toward Rein, as though for protection, almost sobbing.

"Get me out of this weird country! I'd rather feel the hot seat."

For nowhere in Cap Hatien could Gor-

don Rein see a single human being. Only himself, and Ladue, and Makak—and the unholy, savage, menacing tremors of the invisible drums, which covered Makak always with the terror of their sound. Makak marched boldly beside Rein, right up to the door of the hotel. There, smiling slightly, he raised his hand to his forehead in a kind of salute. Then he turned, while the drums picked up their throbbing, increasing the tempo, and calmly marched out of the town held by his enemies. And nobody moved to stop him. There was something abysmally grand about it.

Not until he got Ladue up to his room, did Gordon remember his automatic and pistol. But it didn't matter, when he recalled, for there they were, lying on his bed. Makak had kept his promises to the letter.

"I think, Ladue," said Rein, "that your stolen dough has done some good. It has started a great man on the march to power in Haiti; the kind of man his people will understand."

"Yeah?" said Ladue, sitting down heavily on the bed. "Well, let me tell you something: when he got out of me where the dough came from, he returned every cent I had given him. I think he must have kept it, intact, all this time, until he could find out whether it was good enough for him to use. So, my dough, as you say, did no good after all. Makak will have somehow put it in our stateroom, every last cent of it, before we've even gone in it, to start back to the States! He said restitution, complete, must be made!"

"I don't change anything, Ladue," said Gordon Rein. "You and I, rat, have just met that rarest of all human creatures—a great, good man, who overlooks not even the least of the decencies."

"He lets me go back to burn!" said Ladue.

"Well?" said Gordon Rein softly.

Ladue stared, shrugged philosophically, said, "Well, maybe you're right, at that. I don't know too much about the decencies, maybe. Still, if it is decent, according to Makak, that I should burn, you can doubtless understand my lack of appreciation! After all, I'm the one to burn!"

GUNS OF THE DAMNED

By L. P. HOLMES

Honest men were outlawed in Keystone—damned by the very law that had once protected them. And only bitter young Rhoutt Cohern dared augur that when man-made justice breaks, then stabbing Colts must swing the scales.

AT one of the poker tables in the Cascade, Rhoutt Cohern had been playing solitaire for the past three hours. Aside from Rhoutt the only other person in the saloon was Tip Sharpe, the bartender. The place was still, the only sounds being the slap of a card as Rhoutt made a play and the sleepy drone of a circling blue bottle fly.

The old alarm clock on the bottle shelf behind the bar showed just four o'clock when Tip Sharpe shoved aside the



Exultation, savage as fire, gripped the killer. He was getting there first!

week-old Keystone Gazette he had been reading and began mopping down the bar with restless, mechanical sweeps.

"Taking a devil of a long time to make up their minds ain't they, Cohern?" he growled.

Rhott Cohern leaned back in his chair and built a cigarette. "They should," he drawled quietly. "An awful lot rests on the way this case comes out."

"How do you figure that?" Sharpe demanded. "Either Dan Mountain or Simon Golbaugh wins, and that's that. Nothing about it to keep everybody holding their breath."

"I wish it was that simple," said Rhott Cohern. "But it isn't. Should Golbaugh win it will establish what Bert Lovelace will call a precedent—and one that reaches a long way."

Tip Sharpe waved an impatient hand. Sharpe had a round, bullet head which, as old Ben Bogue had one time said, served only one purpose, that of keeping his ears apart. "Put it in plain English. Bert Lovelace is always spouting them lawyer words and they don't make sense to me."

A hint of a slightly sardonic smile touched Rhott Cohern's strong, boldly cut features. "It is like this," he explained. "The real issue today isn't whether Dan Mountain loses his shirt. It is whether the title of the old Mobley grant is sound. If Dan Mountain wins, it means the title to the Mobley grant is sound. If he loses, well. . . ." Rhott shrugged.

"Go on—go on," grunted Sharpe. "I still don't get it."

Rhott Cohern inhaled deeply. "The Mobley grant takes in all of Ben Bogue's range. It takes in all of Chick Ireland's range. It takes in half of Luke Shore's range and it takes in my Bowie Creek meadows. All this country, in addition to Dan Mountain's range, is covered by the old Mobley grant. If Lovelace and Golbaugh can get Judge Hawkins to rule that Dan Mountain has no right to his range because the Mobley grant title was faulty, where in the name of Heaven does that leave Ben Bogue, Chick Ireland, Luke Shore and me?"

"It leaves you hanging by the ears to a mesquite bush," exclaimed Sharpe. "I

get it, now. It means that Si Golbaugh will be able to run you fellers off your ranges, too."

"It means that he'll probably try," drawled Rhott dryly.

The bartender flashed a look at Rhott, made as if to say something, then changed his mind. He circled the inner end of the bar, going to the door and looking out across Keystone's single street to where the old, white-painted courthouse stood shadow-mottled in its grove of cottonwoods. Even as he looked, men in two's and three's began filing out of the courthouse door.

"The cat has jumped one way or the other," Sharpe called over his shoulder. "Here they come."

RHOTT COHERN scooped up the cards, edged them in a neat, compact pile and shoved back his chair. He did not get to his feet, however. Instead he leaned back in his chair and sat very still, a remote, inscrutable mask slipping over his face.

Here it was, the thing he had been foreseeing from the very day Simon Golbaugh hit the Burnt Hills range, bought out Tom Jennings and set up his Ten Spot brand. He knew right now how the case had gone. Dan Mountain had lost. It was in the cards that Dan Mountain would lose. Everything in the past three years had shaped toward such an ending—and such a beginning. And all under the farcical heading of law and justice!

Blackie Costick and Bob Yontis came in, and with them was Pete Torres, Deputy Sheriff. Blackie Costick slapped an open palm on the bar and said, "This is on me. I guess the boss showed that old fossil of a Dan Mountain a thing or two today. Come on Cohern, I feel good enough about this to even buy one for you, today." He laughed aloud in high good humor.

Costick and Yontis rode for Simon Golbaugh. A hard-bitten, rough-and-ready pair. Rhott Cohern met Costick's glance with a slow, cool stare and shook his head. "Thanks."

Costick shrugged, turned back to the bar. Bob Yontis said, sneering, "The lone wolf of the Burnt Hills. Lives alone,

rides alone, drinks alone. Well, that suits me."

Pete Torres jerked his head suggestively. "Maybe he can see where his turn is coming one of these days. Like Dan Mountain—out!"

Rhoutt Cohern's lips thinned a trifle and way back in his tawny eyes a flicker of ice showed. But he said no further word nor made a move. Just sat as he was while the Cascade filled with men, thirsty from a three-hour session in the hot, stuffy courtroom. Tongues were clacking and the talk was all of Simon Golbaugh's victory. Dan Mountain was through, just as Rhoutt had known the old cattleman would be.

Chick Ireland and Ben Bogue came in. Chick had a fighting gleam in his blue eyes. Ben Bogue looked old and tired. They saw Rhoutt and came over to his table, pulled up chairs and sat down. Chick said—"I guess you know how it came out, Rhoutt."

Rhoutt nodded. "It was in the cards. Golbaugh hasn't spread himself the way he has for nothing. He hasn't chummed with Lovelace and put in so much time smoothing down the fur of Judge Hawkins just for the joy of it. Nor did he put up the money to keep alive that flea-bitten sheet which Zeke Hicks calls a newspaper, just because he likes to spend it. Nor has he been riding up and down the country yapping that Jack Yegley is the best sheriff west of the Mississippi for sheer exercise. This thing was written, boys—like I told you before."

"I know," nodded Ben Bogue. "You called the turn, Rhoutt. I should have guessed it myself. Yet, all along, I sort of hung on to the hope that Judge Hawkins wouldn't stand for black being called white."

"How did Dan Mountain take it?" asked Rhoutt.

"Like a man who couldn't believe his ears," said Chick Ireland. "Poor old Dan! It hurt me to look at him. He just sort of seemed to shrivel up. Of course, you realize where this leaves you and Ben and Luke Shore and me, Rhoutt?"

"I reckon," drawled Rhoutt. "Next in line to feed to the animals. What do you boys aim to do about it?"

"I don't rightly know, just yet,"

scowled Ireland. "I'm mad enough to knock a mountain down, but at the same time I've a sort of helpless feeling. Like as if I tried to fight I'd be hitting at a shadow, and sure to lose."

"Luke is scratching around to sell out—cheap," put in Ben Bogue. "Providing he can find a buyer, which I doubt. I got a notion to do the same. You ain't," he added, with a pathetic attempt at humor, "interested in buying a good ranch and brand cheap, are you, Rhoutt? I'm warning you in advance it will be stole from you after you buy it."

"If I thought you meant that, Ben," said Rhoutt coolly, "I'd say yes. I'll buy, if we can come to terms."

Ben goggled. "You ain't—you ain't talking serious, are you, Rhoutt?"

"I am if you are."

While Ben Bogue was trying to get hold of this astounding fact, Simon Golbaugh and Bert Lovelace came in. Simon Golbaugh was a man of medium height, slightly on the fleshy side, shoulders stooped and sloping. His head was small, his features had a pudgy, pushed-together look and deep in fleshy sockets his eyes seemed alight with a perpetual twinkle. Only, Rhoutt Cohern read them differently. He did not see that light as a twinkle. Instead it was the beady glitter of a bird of prey, insatiable, ruthless, crafty.

Bert Lovelace, spare of figure and sharp of feature was talking, as he always seemed to be, emphasizing his words with short, jerky motions of his restless hands.

They pushed through the crowd to the bar and Colbaugh called for everybody to drink on him. Ben Bogue started to get up, then dropped back into his chair when he saw that Rhoutt and Chick Ireland had not moved. And Rhoutt thought, Ben's old and frightened and desperate, ready to fawn on Golbaugh if by doing so he can save his skin. Don't judge him too harshly—he's old, and tired.

"He can afford to buy the drinks," murmured Chick Ireland bitterly. "Judge Hawkins just virtually made him a present of a chunk of range worth a cool twenty thousand dollars."

Ben Bogue stared down at the faded green baize of the table top, the leathery flesh of his face seeming to sag in folds.

Dan Mountain came in at a slow, awkward, high-heeled shuffle. Rhoutt Cohern was shocked at the change in the old cattleman. He had aged terrifyingly. His faded eyes held a dazed, blank look. He seemed to be moving in a world of his own, apart from all others. Rhoutt lifted a hand as though to beckon him over, but old Dan paid him no attention, going by unseeing, to swing in and stop at the inner end of the bar.

Tip Sharpe put bottle and glass in front of old Dan and said—"Golbaugh is buying this one, Dan."

The old cattle man poured a drink, thumbed a dollar from his pocket and dropped it on the bar. He did not have to say anything. The inference was plain. Dan Mountain was accepting no favors from Simon Golbaugh.

Dan Mountain lifted his glass, stared at it, as though he was making some silent toast to himself. Then he tossed the liquor down, dropped the glass on the floor, where it crashed to tinkling bits and shot his hand under the open end of the bar. When that hand licked back into view it was gripping Tip Sharpe's snub-nosed, bull dog bar gun. And Dan Mountain spoke for the first time since entering the Cascade.

"All right, Golbaugh. This is it! You win—but you lose!"

Dan Mountain stabbed the muzzle of the gun at Simon Golbaugh, who stood but a few paces up the bar, startled and frozen. The thunder of a single shot shook the room.

Dan Mountain shook all over under the impact of an invisible blow. The gun he held, wavered, then thudded on the bar top as it fell from his nerveless fingers. He took a single wavering step backward, then crumpled to the floor.

The round, blue ring of the muzzle of Pete Torres' gun peered over the edge of the bar, a wisp of acrid smoke curling up from it. And Torres said, "I had a hunch that old side winder was up to something. I been watching him close, ever since he came in."

RHOUTT COHERN knelt beside Dan Mountain. A single glance told him there was nothing he could do. The old cattleman was dead before he hit the floor.

Rhoutt was gently straightening the gaunt old figure out when somebody took him by the shoulder and tried to push him aside. It was Pete Torres and the Deputy Sheriff was saying, "Let be, Cohern—let be. He's my man."

Rhoutt got to his feet, spun Torres around and hit him as he had never hit a man before in his life. Not only physical power was behind that punch, but a dammed up tide of feeling which erupted and found outlet in one convulsive blast. The effect was almost deadly. Rhoutt felt the bones in Torres' jaw give and shatter under his knuckles and Torres turned almost completely over in the air before he hit the floor soddenly, as still and limp as Dan Mountain lay with a bullet through his heart.

Rhoutt looked around and the rest of the room was still and breathless. Then he said, "Chick, Ben—come on." And walked out into the street.

Outside, Rhoutt saw the Sheriff, Jack Yegley, come hurrying over from the courthouse, attracted by that single, rumbling shot. Yegley had apparently been talking to Judge Hawkins, who still stood in the shade of a cottonwood by the courthouse steps. And there was a slim, brown haired, feminine figure with the Judge.

Jack Yegley came clanking up at his awkward, bow legged run. "What the hell is going on?" he panted.

"Pete Torres just shot and killed Dan Mountain," said Rhoutt harshly. "And I took a shot at Torres with my fist. Had I a gun with me, I'd have used that."

Jack Yegley did not seem to hear this last. He plunged through the swinging doors of the Cascade, a lank and raw-boned man, with a hard, seamed face. Chick Ireland jogged Rhoutt's elbow. "What did you want me and Ben for?"

"Don't leave town until I have a chance to talk with you," said Rhoutt. "I got a proposition to make. Right now I want to say something to Judge Hawkins."

Rhoutt swung out into the dust of the street and crossed over, his face standing out harsh and bleak in the slanting rays of the descending sun. Ben Bogue said to Chick Ireland, "He's warrior breed, that boy. Did you ever see anybody hit like he laid into Torres?"

Rhoutt had heard that Judge Hawkins

had a niece visiting him and a couple of times before he had glimpsed the girl at a distance. Now, as he came up to them, Rhoutt noted that this niece of Judge Hawkins was a pretty girl in a reserved, erect, clear eyed sort of way. These impressions registered almost absently with Rhoutt, for his business was with Judge Hawkins and that business was burning inside him like livid fire.

JUDGE HAWKINS was a placid, slow moving man, a trifle on the fleshy side, an impeccable dresser and very proud of his neatly clipped white mustache and imperial. He affected a cavalry type white Stetson hat, for someone had once told him he reminded them of a Confederate Colonel. There was some concern in his manner as he faced Rhoutt.

"That shot just now. I hope nothing unpleasant has happened," he said.

"Depends," said Rhoutt harshly, "on what you call unpleasant. Pete Torres just shot Dan Mountain through the heart."

Rhoutt heard the girl gasp, saw the Judge's face go red, then slowly pale. "Mountain must have lost his head, and started trouble of some sort."

"I don't know about losing his head," said Rhoutt grimly. "He set out to kill Simon Golbaugh, for robbing him of his ranch. A perfectly normal desire, I'd call it. But Dan was old and a little slow, and Torres was laying for him."

Judge Hawkins seemed almost relieved. "I knew Torres must have had just cause. Yegley tells me that Torres is a good deputy."

Rhoutt's laugh was blunt and mirthless. "I disagree. Torres is a cheap, sneaking killer. But that is aside from the point. What I want to see you about, Judge, is this. Obviously the decision you rendered today was in favor of Golbaugh. In effect it tosses out the title to the old Mobley grant as useless. Where does that leave me and Ben Bogue and Chick Ireland and Luke Shore?"

The Judge rocked back and forth on heels and toes. "Why—ah—I don't believe any question regarding you or the others you mention has come up at all. Don't you think your question is somewhat premature, Cohern?"

"Not at all. I don't believe in letting a wolf creep up and make no move about stopping it until it is ready to spring at my throat. On the basis of what happened to Dan Mountain in your court, what is your decision going to be when Golbaugh gets around to claiming my Bowie Creek range, or Chick Ireland's layout, for instance?"

The Judge's laugh was almost benevolent. "My dear Cohern, don't you see how impossible your question is? How could I possibly foretell any decision of mine on a matter which has not even come up, nor gone through the due processes of law? How could . . .?"

"All right," broke in Rhoutt curtly. "I get it. One thing to remember, Judge. I hope you are all your office calls for you to be."

The Judge jerked his head back. His imperial and mustache bristled. "I hope I am mistaken about the meaning I read in your words, Cohern. Are you daring to impugn the honor of my court, sir?"

Rhoutt's tawny eyes bored coldly at the Judge. "I'll stand on what your own conscience tells you about your court, Judge Hawkins. And form my own opinion by the results. For whatever it rates."

The Judge became somewhat choleric and he began to sputter. Then the girl spoke, in an angry, indignant tone. "I don't know who you are, or care," she flared. "Perhaps if Uncle Hugh were younger you wouldn't dare speak such an insinuation."

Rhoutt swung his glance to her, met the fire in her brown eyes with grave remoteness. "Ma'am," he drawled. "I look forward to the day when I can come to your Uncle and apologize. I hope that day will be soon. But if any more things happen such as took place today, I'm afraid the apology will be a long time unspoken."

Rhoutt touched his hat and was turning away when Jack Yegley came charging back across the street. The sheriff was plainly upset and angry. "Cohern," he rasped, "I got a good notion to run you in."

Rhoutt said, "Get rid of the notion, Jack. You're not going to. Don't tell me I hit Torres hard enough to kill him. That would have been too much luck."

"You hit him hard enough to break his jaw in two places. I still don't believe you used just your fist on him."

Rhoutt laughed curtly. "And I don't care whether you believe it or not. Listen, Jack—when I get home today I'm going to buckle on my guns again."

The sheriff stared at Rhoutt with narrowing eyes. "You do," he said bluntly, "and I'll come out and take them away from you."

"A chore," murmured Rhoutt, "plumb out of your class, Jack. Just so we understand each other from here on out—any time you come at me with that idea in mind, you better come ashootin', Jack."

With this, Rhoutt Cohern turned his back and walked away, a tall, lean man with the deep, free fire of the sun burned into his harshly set features. He went straight to the hitch rail before Dee Milling's store, where Chick Ireland and Ben Bogue were waiting for him. The three of them sought broncs, swung into their saddles and joggled out of town.

JUDGE HAWKINS stared after Rhoutt Cohern and his bland eyes were puckered with an angry light. "Sheriff," he said, "That man is impertinent."

Jack Yegley barked a short laugh. "You put it mild, Judge. There's a better word. Tough! That's it, tough. He's a Cohern. His grandfather died in the Alamo. His father, while just a button, helped Sam Houston lick Santa Anna at San Jacinto and later fought with the Confederacy. His elder brother was killed helping round up Geronimo. A fighting breed, the Coherns. Rhoutt is the last of them, and the fightingest one of all."

"You wouldn't have me believe that you are afraid of the fellow, would you, Sheriff?"

Yegley shrugged. "Not exactly afraid, no. Neither am I blinding myself to facts. And I could put in a day naming men I'd rather bump up against than Rhoutt Cohern. A wise man," he ended drily, "never underestimates the other fellow."

"True," murmured the Judge. "True. Ah—am I to understand that Cohern struck your Deputy hard enough with his fist alone to break Torres' jaw?"

"So everybody in the Cascade claims,"

said Yegley. "Hard to believe, I know. But it seems to be a fact."

"What do you intend doing about that, Sheriff?"

Yegley shrugged. "Let it ride. It wouldn't be a popular move to act different, right now. After all, there are still quite a few people in the Burnt Hills besides Simon Golbaugh and his outfit. Besides, Pete had a gun. And in this country, when a man has that much edge and still can't keep himself from being punched in the jaw, that's his hard luck."

"Hm-m," mused the Judge. "I suppose you are right. Yet I would suggest that this Rhoutt Cohern not be allowed to presume too far."

Yegley gave that barking laugh of his again. "Rhoutt Cohern will travel any way he's of a mind to. Should that way bring him to a point where I have to lock horns with him, why then I intend to. But in the meantime I'm not going around patting him on the wrist and saying don't do this, don't do that. I'm not asking for trouble."

Two men came out of the Cascade, supporting between them the shambling, rubber legged figure of Pete Torres. The Deputy's face was swathed in a bar towel. The three were heading for Doc Parshal's office, across and down street. Jack Yegley hurried over to join them.

Judge Hawkins proffered his arm to his niece. "Come, my dear," he said. "I'm sorry that you should be spectator to even a small part of the rougher side of our community life."

Ardene Hawkins hesitated, took his arm and swung into stride with him. But her eyes were downcast, her face sober. And she had no word to say. It was as though she had glimpsed some faint shadow of the existence of a thing or condition she had not remotely dreamed. Like the first ugly crack in the fabric of an ideal.

LUKE SHORE scrubbed a stubbly chin with thumb and fore-finger. "I dunno," he said slowly. "I'd rather make a clean deal, even if I have to sell at a big loss. You put eight thousand on the line, Rhoutt, and you can have her, lock, stock and barrel."

"I haven't got eight thousand, nor any reasonable part of it," answered Rhoutt

Cohern grimly. "Nor has anybody else around here with the possible exception of Simon Golbaugh. And he won't give you that. Should you go to him with the offer to sell out to him, he'd laugh at you, figuring as he does to get your ranch for nothing, just like he got Dan Mountain's. Like he hopes and intends to get Ben's and Chick's and my Bowie Creek range. Every inch of range in these hills covered by the old Mobley grant, he's aiming to get his hooks on, and for nothing. I'm offering you a chance to hang on to your spread. It's a gamble either way, but my way at least promises some chance of coming out of this with at least your shirt."

Luke Shore was still stubborn. "I figure to find somebody with eight thousand who'll buy."

Rhott laughed curtly. "Then you still believe in Santy Claus. I admit that eight thousand is a rock bottom price for your spread. But not when the title to it isn't valid. And if Dan Mountain's title to his range wasn't sound, then yours isn't either."

"Who says my title ain't sound?" yelped old Luke.

"Judge Hawkins says so."

"Judge Hawkins is a damned old crook. Him and Yegley and all the rest of them boot lickers are playing Golbaugh's dirty game for him. But that don't prove my title ain't clean."

"It did with Dan Mountain. And do you think you can put up a better set of arguments than Dan Mountain did?"

Luke Shore chewed his lips. "But it's highway robbery," he squawled. "It ain't fair or right."

"I agree with you there, all the way. Yet, it has happened. Now, do you want my proposition, or don't you?"

"How do I know if you make your game stand up, I'll get my ranch back?" demanded Shore. "You might snap your fingers and tell me go whistle at the moon."

Rhott turned away. "Forget it," he said curtly. "Go ahead and take your licking, you thick headed, penny squeezing old fool. I offer to fight your fight for you, and you suggest I might turn crook. To hell with you!"

Luke Shore writhed in an agony of indecision. Now Ben Bogue spoke up.

"Better do as Rhott suggests, Luke. I'm going to. I just made up my mind. Rhott's right. His idea is our only chance. Chick thinks so, too. Else Golbaugh will cut us down, one by one. If we act fast on this, we can have everything set before Golbaugh makes his next move."

Ben's argument turned the trick. "All right," said Luke Shore. "If you and Chick are game for the gamble, I am. I reckon it's the only way we can stand a chance. When'll we do it?"

"Tonight," said Ben. "Quicker the sooner. Ain't that what you think, Rhott?"

Rhott nodded. "We'll ride to town and set young Jimmy Starr to work."

"That's settled," said Luke Shore. "I'll stir up a bite of supper before we leave."

The conference had been going on in Luke Shore's Lazy S ranchhouse. So now Luke got some food together, the four of them ate, then rode away through the night for Keystone.

YOUNG Jimmy Starr had brought to Keystone besides his shingle as Attorney At Law, high hopes and burning ambition. He still had the shingle and ambition. But hope was beginning to wane. For Bert Lovelace had gotten there first and this very day Bert Lovelace had whipped Jimmy Starr in Judge Hawkins' court. Jimmy had represented Dan Mountain, and had lost.

A stocky, clean cut youngster, he now sat in his office, deep sunk in moody thought. Almost before he had started he was through, it seemed. Common sense was telling him that the smart thing to do was move on to newer and greener pastures. And an inborn, stubborn, fighting tenacity urged him to stay and not quit under fire. It was a hard decision for a youngster in his early twenties to make.

He stirred only slightly at the knock on his door. "Come in," he called.

He straightened in his chair as Rhott Cohern, Ben Bogue, Luke Shore and Chick Ireland filed in and closed the door behind them. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

Rhott said, "Ben and Chick and Luke are selling out to me. We want you to draw up the papers all legal and right,"

Jimmy Starr gulped and stared. "You mean—you're buying out these three men after what happened to Dan Mountain, today?"

"That's just why I'm buying them out," said Rhoutt. "Let's get about it."

It did not take so very long, once they got down to it. And Jimmy Starr gulped in amazement several times more, especially when the price was named in each instance as a single dollar. Yet even the consideration of a single dollar made the transfers legal and binding. And now Jimmy Starr began to get some inkling of what was behind it all. He leaned back and grinned.

"Someone among you four is what I'd call a fast thinker," he said.

"It's Rhoutt's idea," grunted Luke Shore. "I hope it pans out."

"The smartest thing you could possibly have done," declared Jimmy. "It brings the whole thing into one common focus. It makes the case big enough to give pause to—er—certain smug and greasy fingered gentlemen."

"Then," said Rhoutt grimly, "you think that there was dirty work at the cross-roads in deciding on Dan Mountain's case?"

Jimmy Starr met Rhoutt's boring glance gravely. "If," he said, "if the title to the Mobley grant isn't sound, then there isn't a sound title to anything, anywhere. Today, under the heading of law and justice, an outright steal was put over. I'd stake my life on that."

"Good! You're hired to see this fight through' with me. Your first chore is to try and locate one of the Mobley heirs. The last I heard of old Jake Mobley was that he was somewhere down in the Mogollon country. You're going down there. I'll stake you to five hundred dollars expense money as a starter. Run down every Mobley you can find and see what you can scrape up in the way of proof of that title. Don't let any grass grow under your feet."

Jimmy Starr was not one to waste words. "You men just sign these papers and I'll witness them. Then I'll start packing. I'll catch the morning stage out. And see that you have these deeds recorded, first thing in the morning, Mr. Cohern."

"Not 'Mister', Jimmy," drawled Rhoutt Cohern. "Just Rhoutt."

They looked at each other and grinned. Both had youth, both were fighters, both loved a challenge to that youth and combat. Understanding came easy. "All right, Rhoutt," said Jimmy Starr.

THE next morning, as the stage carried Jimmy Starr out of Keystone, a long legged, light stepping sorrel bronc carried Rhoutt Cohern in. There was one addition to the person of Rhoutt Cohern which had not been there the previous day. Strapped about his saddle leaned hips were a pair of big, black, Colt .45 guns. Rhoutt went into the hashhouse and had breakfast, dawdling over his food to kill time until Eulace Winniger, the County Recorder, opened his office in the Court House for the day's business.

Dee Milling came in, took the stool at Rhoutt's left. He said, meaningly, after a glance at Rhoutt's guns, "You look like you might be expecting trouble, Rhoutt."

Rhoutt threw a veiled glance at the store keeper. "After yesterday, most anything can happen."

"Guess you're right," mumbled Milling. "Things sure ain't like they were."

After a moment, Milling said, "Guess that young lawyer, Jimmy Starr figured that after yesterday his chances of making a living in these parts were pretty thin. I saw him pulling out on the early stage this morning."

"Hum!" murmured Rhoutt. "Struck me as being a pretty nice sort. Too bad."

"Yeah," nodded Milling. "But I guess lawyering is like any other game. You got to be able to produce to hang on. I hear that Pete Torres is a pretty sick man."

"Pleasant news," said Rhoutt curtly. "I'd like it better if he was dead."

Dee Milling looked around uneasily. "None of my business," he mumbled. "But you watch yourself, Rhoutt. I've heard talk . . ."

"What kind of talk, and who by?" cut in Rhoutt.

Milling shook his head. "I don't know a thing besides what I've told you."

"Fair enough," said Rhoutt.

Rhoutt finished his meal, left the hash-

house and sauntered along the street in the bright flood of morning sunshine. As he passed the Cascade he saw Tip Sharpe, just finishing sweeping out. The saloon owner leaned on his broom and stared at the two guns Rhoutt was packing. "Ready for anything, eh, Rhoutt?" he said.

"Ready for anything, Tip," Rhoutt nodded.

"Don't know as I blame you," said Sharpe slowly. "I been thinking about yesterday. Pretty tough on old Dan Mountain. He was a harmless cuss. Never bothered a soul until he went after Simon Golbaugh. And you couldn't hardly blame him for that. I don't pose as being very smart, but some things get under a man's skin. Should you get thirsty, because of that wallop you handed Yegley's half breed deputy."

"Thanks, Tip," Rhoutt drawled. "Later, maybe."

Rhoutt saw that the door of Jack Yegley's office was open and in sudden decision turned that way and went in. The Sheriff was sitting behind his desk, fussing with some papers. His eyes hardened to narrow slits as he saw who his visitor was.

"Just so there won't be any misunderstanding, Jack," said Rhoutt softly. "I got my guns on, as you see. And I keep 'em on until things shape up again on this range so a decent, honest man can go on about his business without danger of being robbed or shot down by some gun hungry deputy of yours. If you got any real objections, now is the time to make 'em. It's your move."

For a long time their eyes locked and held. Yegley said, harshly—"Looking for trouble, maybe?"

"No. But not dodging it. When nobody else will protect a man's rights, then he can't be blamed for looking after them, himself."

"You ain't bluffing me a foot, Cohern."

Rhoutt shrugged. "Nor you me, Jack. Understand?"

"Let it stand," Yegley growled. "Now I'm busy."

Rhoutt smiled, a cold, tight lipped smile. Yegley's eyes dropped sullenly. Each of them knew who had won the tilt of will and courage. And it hadn't been Yegley. Rhoutt backed to the door and went out.

EULACE WINNIGER, County Recorder, was a little, mousey man, with a tight, pursy mouth, a pointed chin and a pinched look about the eyes which reminded Rhoutt Cohern of a ferret. Somehow Rhoutt sensed a vague hostility in Winniger's manner as the Recorder faced him across the office counter and said, in his thin, dusty way—"Well?"

Rhoutt laid three folded papers down. "I want these recorded," he drawled.

Winniger picked up the papers, unfolded them and glanced at them. His hunched shoulders jerked as though someone had stuck a pin into him. He read the papers more closely. His voice took on a shrill note. "I haven't any time for jokes, or foolishness, Cohern."

"No joke, no foolishness," murmured Rhoutt gently. "Just business. Get about it, Winniger. Record those deeds."

Winniger said, "These documents are ridiculous. They purport to show that Ireland, Bogue and Shore have sold their holdings to you for the consideration of one dollar in each case. On the face of them they are frauds." He flung the papers down and started to turn away.

Rhoutt shot out a long arm, caught Winniger by the shoulder, whirled him around and jerked him back against the counter so hard, Winniger gasped and winced.

"Listen!" Rhoutt said, his voice silky. "I had no idea how many coyotes had got loose on this range. But I'm finding out, and I got just one medicine for coyotes. Those deeds are legal and you know it. They are signed by Chick Ireland, by Ben Bogue, by Luke Shore. They are signed by me. And finally, they are attested to and witnessed by Jimmy Starr. It is none of your damned business whether I paid one dollar or one penny for those ranches. The deeds are still legal. Record them—now! Else I'll twist your miserable neck for you."

Eulace Winniger might have looked like a ferret, but he had no portion of the ferret's courage. Under the power of Rhoutt's grip and the chill in Rhoutt's eyes, Winniger quailed and shrunk. "Aw—All right," he gulped. "Let go of me."

Rhoutt let him go. Winniger shambled over to his case of records, hesitated a

moment, selected a brand new volume and prepared to write.

"Wait a minute," Rhoutt said. "Get the volume before that one. I want to see if it is plumb full of entries."

Winniger tried one last piece of bluster. "You trying to tell me how to run my office?"

Rhoutt did not answer. Instead he put a hand on the counter, vaulted lightly over and went to the record case himself, selected the previous volume and glanced through it. It was only half used.

"Thought so," said Rhoutt, and now a bleak and savage anger was in his tone. "You crooked, sneaking rat! You thought I was that simple. You thought you could take a fresh volume, record these deeds and then, soon as I was out of sight, destroy it. So that when the show down came you could blandly say I'd never recorded anything. I don't know who is paying you, or how much, Winniger, for this sort of thing. But I do know you're asking to get yourself strung on a slug." Rhoutt slid a gun from the leather. "I'm telling you just once more. Record those deeds—and in *this* volume. You won't dare destroy this one, because it is half full of other entries. Get at it!"

Winniger took one look at that gun and did as he was told. While he wrote, Rhoutt looked over his shoulder. "Put down the day, the hour, the minute," he ordered. "Put your stamp on the deeds and sign your John Henry. Good! Now try and wiggle out of it if you can."

Rhoutt pocketed the deeds when all was finished and prepared to leave. He said, almost wearily, "You've tied yourself to the tail of the wrong kite, Winniger. You're due to curse the day you ever saw Simon Golbaugh."

Eulace Winniger said nothing. He just stared down at his desk, knawing at his thin and bloodless lips.

When Rhoutt hit the street again he breathed deep, as though to rid his lungs of some taint of musty, unclean air. He got his horse and headed out of town and as he was passing the stage barns and corrals, saw Charley Justin standing there, staring out toward the hills. Rhoutt reined in. "What's on your mind, Charley? What you staring at that's so interesting?"

Charley waved a pudgy arm. "Darn a stubborn woman, anyhow," he sputtered. "Even if she is a young one and a pretty one. I'm going to be worried to fits every second until that girl gets back safe."

Rhoutt slouched in the saddle, building a cigarette. He grinned. "Go on," he drawled. "What's it all about?"

"That niece of Judge Hawkins," explained Charley. "She come down here, bright and pretty as a new dollar. She wanted to rent a bronc and a saddle to go for a ride. I tried to get her to take a good, steady pony, but nothing doing. She took a fancy to that buckskin I bought from Slim Dugan. It's a good bronc, that buckskin, but skittish and hard mouthed. It might even take it into its head to do a mite of pitching, now and then. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't listen. So she's out now on that buckskin and I'm worried. I'd feel mighty bad if she was to get tossed and maybe hurt, for she's a likely lass, even if she is a stubborn little monkey."

Rhoutt chuckled. "If you didn't have one thing to worry over, it would be something else, Charlie. I imagine the girl will be able to take care of herself. The mere fact that she picked out the buckskin shows she knows her horses. I wouldn't mind owning that bronc, myself."

"If the bronc does happen to toss and hurt that girl you can have the brute cheap, Rhoutt," vowed the fat, kindly stable owner. "Seeing as you're heading out of town, you might pick up her trail and sort of see that she's doing all right."

Rhoutt shook his head. "I'm afraid the lady might not care for that, Charley. Forget it. She'll be all right."

RHOUTT let his sorrel bronc pick its own pace, holding to the main road until he came to the Bowie Creek trail. As he turned into this he noted fresh hoof marks leading along it. He wondered about that and straightened in his saddle, eyes alert and wary. Full well he realized that from now on the old, care-free days were gone. He had accepted a gage of battle, here in these tawny Burnt Hills against a foe as powerful and unscrupulous as any man ever faced.

A foe which had corrupted the power and dignity of the law, a foe that had frightened off other men and left him virtually alone to carry on the fight.

Rhott had no illusions concerning this foe. He knew that dry-gulcher lead, a shot in the dark at almost any time and place, might be his portion. By this time it was dead certainty that Eulace Winniger had spread the news of his taking over Chick Ireland's ranch, and those of Ben Bogue and Luke Shore. Simon Golbaugh would realize that he was faced with a finish fight. And Simon Golbaugh was not the sort to halt at any means, foul or fair, to win that fight. A man who deliberately set out and succeeded in corrupting county officials to gain his ends, would hardly hesitate at any step to gain his way to further substance and power.

This was all perfectly clear in Rhott Cohern's mind. He had thought out and gauged all these angles before he had taken his present stand. In effect, it was one against the field. Rhott had weighed these odds and taken his course with his eyes open. Let come what might! But he wasn't going to be caught unawares by anybody.

Rhott played with these thoughts for several miles and was just breasting the slope of a ridge, beyond which lay Bowie Creek, when the patter of hoofs sounded and he looked up to see a buckskin bronc with empty saddle, heading his way at a run, reins trailing, stirrups flapping. And Charley Justin's fears struck Rhott with a bang.

The buckskin was plainly heading for town and the home stable and tried to swing by Rhott on the off side of the trail. But Rhott shot the sorrel out at an angle, headed the buckskin, forced it back against the steeper slope of the ridge, and swept up the trailing reins. Then, with the buckskin pounding along behind, Rhott crossed the ridge at a gallop.

Here were the cool, shaded reaches of Bowie Creek, winding through the hills, with a strip of green meadow land on either hand. Nothing living was in sight except a few restless cattle, restless because from up creek a ways sounded a deep, hoarse, rumbling bellow. Rhott knew that sound also, and its portent. It was

the voice of a range bull, truculent and threatening.

Rhott dug in the spurs and raced along the meadow, whipping past a point of alder and willow, where he took in the scene with one flashing glance.

The girl was on the bank above a long, deep pool, her brown hair loose and disheveled, her face white and all one side of her spanking new khaki riding outfit grass stained from a fall. And she was facing, at a distance of a few scant yards, a big, white faced bull. The animal had its huge head lowered threateningly, eyes rolling. From its partially opened mouth dripped slimy foam and from its throat rumbled that ominous bellow. Ponderously the brute pawed heavy hoofs at the torn sod.

Rhott knew the signs. He knew that while, as a rule, a bull could look and act meaner than it actually was, there were times when one of the big brutes could go "bad." And this one was definitely that way. In fact, even as Rhott watched, he saw the big haunches gather, saw the swinging head drop a little lower, and knew that the next moment would see the animal launch its ponderous bulk at that slim, white faced figure before it.

There was only one thing to do. Rhott had no time to swing the horses in ahead of the bull and turn the charge. But he did have time to draw a gun and drive a slug crashing in at the base of the bull's ear. It was as good a shot and as lucky a one as he had ever thrown in his life.

Caught in the very midst of a driving effort and killed stone dead by a brain shot, the bull whipped clear over to come down with an earth shaking thud. And while the echoes of the shot rumbled away the girl looked at Rhott, at the bull, then dropped in a little heap on the creek bank, covering her face with her hands.

RHOTT swung from the saddle and went over to her. Her slim shoulders were shaking with sobs. Rhott took off his hat and stood there uneasily. Finally he dropped a hand on her shoulder and said gently—"Everything is all right, ma'am. The bull is dead and I got your runaway bronc. Everything is all right."

She quieted presently, dabbed at her

eyes with a handkerchief the size of a postage stamp, or so it seemed to Rhoutt.

"I—I'm not usually a—a coward," she quavered defiantly. "B—but that big brute seemed so—savage and remorseless."

"Shucks!" Rhoutt drawled. "You had every right to be scared, ma'am. Had I been in your boots I'd have shook myself to pieces."

He squatted on his heels, built a smoke and waited. She fussed a bit with her hair in truly feminine concern, dabbed at her eyes again, then looked at him, her eyes bright and moist. "Of course, I—I thank you—greatly. If you hadn't shown up as you did I don't know—I don't know . . ." She shivered and gulped.

"Forget it," said Rhoutt quickly, to head off any more tears. "I'm glad I was handy. I ran into your bronc headed back for town just across the ridge and was looking for you. I knew where I'd find you when I heard that old bull belling. Suppose you tell me how it happened."

"I—I was just riding along, thinking what a lovely creek this was when there was a crashing in the willows and that bull burst out. It seemed to frighten my pony, which reared and began to pitch. I I was thrown and the pony ran away. When I got to my feet, there was that big beast, pawing the ground and bellowing. I backed up as far as the creek and it kept following me. That's all."

"A plenty tough experience," said Rhoutt. "You're no coward. Most women would have thrown a fit, about then. That fall didn't break any bones, did it?"

She shook her head. "Knocked the breath out of me, that's all. Oh, I expect I'll have a crop of bruises. It is my own fault. I should have listened to the man at the livery barn. He told me the buckskin was skittish."

"I aim to find out just how skittish," said Rhoutt dryly. "I ain't aiming to hurry you none, ma'am. But the quicker you get home and into a good hot bath, the less stove up you're going to be from that tumble. I'll swap saddles on the broncs. That sorrel of mine is a good, steady horse. I'll ride the buckskin back to town."

When Rhoutt finished this little chore and turned back to the girl, she was on

her feet again and staring at the dead bull. "That animal must have been worth a lot of money to its owner," she said gravely. "I've caused somebody a lot of expense."

"Don't let that worry you," fended Rhoutt. "Just a tough old mossy horn that was getting too mean to live. It would have to have been killed, anyhow." He could have told her that he had paid five hundred dollars for that bull a year previous.

"Such an awful lot of meat," said Ardene Hawkins. "Will it go to waste?"

Rhoutt grinned. "You couldn't give tough old bull beef away in this country. I'll come back and take the hide off it, later on."

"Oh! Then—you owned it?"

"Yeah. But don't let that worry you. Main thing is, you've come out of it with nothing worse than a scare and some bruises. That is all that counts."

She faced him gravely. "You are Rhoutt Cohern, of course. And I am Ardene Hawkins. I'm sorry I acted as I did, yesterday."

"Call it even," Rhoutt shrugged. "Now if you don't get home pronto and into that hot bath, you'll be so stove up you won't be able to wiggle. Let's go."

She limped a trifle as she tried to reach for the stirrup, so Rhoutt caught her by the elbows and tossed her easily into the saddle. She caught her breath, colored, looked away. Rhoutt forked the buckskin and when the bronc acted like it might start to pitch, giggered it sharply and let it know a master's hand was on the reins. The buckskin took the hint and quieted down.

They had little to say on the ride back to town. Once or twice Ardene Hawkins stole glances at Rhoutt, studying the lean, sun darkened power of his sharply etched features. She remembered what she had heard Sheriff Jack Yegley say to her Uncle, Judge Hawkins. That Rhoutt Cohern came from a fighting breed. The rest of her thoughts she kept securely locked behind a certain grave and brooding shadow in her eyes.

As they came up to the livery barn, fat Charlie Justin came waddling out. "Knew it," he wheezed. "Knew that cussed buckskin would cause you trouble,

lass. I'll curry that brute plenty with a hame strap."

Ardene Hawkins smiled. "You'll do nothing of the sort. It was my fault, not the pony's. Next time I'll take your advice."

Charley Justin seemed to remember something. He looked at Rhoutt soberly. "Cuff Yakima was around here not long ago, Rhoutt. Asking for you."

For a moment Rhoutt was very still. Then he nodded and said— "Thanks, Charley. Cuff Yakima, eh?" Then, softly to himself he added, "Eulace Winniger wasted no time spreading the news. And that is the way Simon Golbaugh wants it. He sends in Cuff Yakima."

The girl slipped down from her saddle, almost fell and grimaced with pain as she straightened up. Rhoutt dropped to earth himself. "Better let me give you an arm, ma'am, to get you home."

She shook her head. "Thanks. I can make it. And thanks again—for everything, Rhoutt Cohern."

"Yeah," drawled a thin and mocking voice from the corner of the livery barn. "Thanks for everything, Rhoutt Cohern. Thanks for saving me the trouble of running you down."

"Cuff Yakima!" gulped Charley Justin, with something almost like a whimper in his voice.

A LOT of things came to Rhoutt Cohern in that moment, thoughts as fast as flashing light, yet almost brittle in their clarity and detail. Cuff Yakima, who had come into the Burnt Hills a few months previous, who had hung around Keystone several days and then dropped from sight again. Cuff Yakima who had come up out of the Desolation Plains country with a reputation as murky and sinister as a picture of the devil against a backdrop of blood. Cuff Yakima, gunman and killer deluxe!

Yakima's reputation was such that Sheriff Jack Yegley and Deputy Pete Torres had walked as carefully around him as though he was a coiled rattlesnake while he was in Keystone. And then, when he had dropped from sight, all decent men had drawn a big sigh of relief.

All these facts ran past Rhoutt Cohern's consciousness now in the space of sec-

onds. And others followed them. Now it was apparent where Yakima had disappeared to so suddenly. Simon Golbaugh had contacted him, made a deal with him, hidden him out as a final sinister ace in the hole in case Golbaugh's plan of moving in on the old Mobley grant range struck a snag in the farce of gilding it as strictly legal through law and court procedure.

And now that Golbaugh had seen that Rhoutt Cohern was taking steps to put up a battle for the sacredness of the Mobley grant title, he had produced that ace in the hole, to settle Rhoutt, quick and sure. Golbaugh would be figuring that if Rhoutt went down under the smashing lead from Yakima's guns, all other possible opposition to his plan would crumble. Which was smart figuring, all right. Certainly Luke Shore and Ben Bogue wouldn't make any further fight of it. Chick Ireland might, but Chick was hot headed and no hand with a gun, a man easily pushed aside by one of Simon Golbaugh's slickery scheming.

So this was it! Right here, now! In the bright sunlight, here where the dust lay thick and warm by the gate of Charley Justin's livery corral.

So the thoughts and realizations of Rhoutt Cohern ran and faded out and left behind a cold, fatalistic, almost recklessly gay decision. After all, a man could die but once, and if he died fighting for the things he thought right and just—well, it would be a death with honor.

"Ardene," he said quietly, never conscious that it was the first time he had ever spoken the name—"Ardene, you run along."

But the girl could sense this thing which thickened the air and caught at the throat. She couldn't understand it, but she could sense it.

So she said, "No! I won't leave. Rhoutt—what is this? What madness—?"

"Charley," broke in Rhoutt, his eyes never leaving the mocking figure of Cuff Yakima, "Charley Justin—get her out of here!"

Charley Justin was wise in the ways of men and their minds and purposes. He knew that this thing was cast, that there was nothing he or the girl or anyone else could do about it. The finish would be

written one way or another in the flame and smoke and thunder of guns.

"All right, Rhoutt," he said simply. "I will. And good luck, boy."

"I'll remember that, Justin," mocked Yakima thinly. "Seems you ain't fond of me. So—I'll remember."

Charley Justin had a white spark shored up in that fat body of his. Now he let that spark blaze. "Just so you'll be sure, Yakima," he said coldly, "I figure you as low down, slimy snake that has long needed tromping on. And today you get it. I'm just as sure of that as I am that there is a sun in the sky. Do your damndest, you whelp!"

Rhoutt Cohern laughed, almost carelessly. "How did you know, Charley old hoss? Of course he gets it today—now! Like all the rest of his kind, he forgets that there is an end to everything. They get to thinking they're too good for any other man to match. And they die, wondering how come they made that mistake."

While Rhoutt was speaking he was moving in a trifle on Cuff Yakima, swinging a little to one side, so that Yakima could not dodge and use the corner of the stable as an advantage. Rhoutt's eyes were all one tawny gleam, now. And his faculties were keened as they never had been before.

He thought—he's good, awful good. Else he wouldn't be alive today. But he doesn't know how good I am. I don't know myself. Maybe I got the speed, maybe I haven't. But he can't guess and I won't know until the break comes. But I got to force the doubt on him. He's wondering, now. He's not as sure as he was. I didn't crawl, so he doesn't know. I can tell it by the look in his eyes. He's still smiling, but it's a stiff, set smile, now. And his eyes are veiled. He's wondering, guessing. Keep the pressure on him. Keep it on him, heavier and heavier! Watch his eyes, not his hands. The eyes always tell—always!

Charley Justin had Ardene Hawkins by the arm, was forcing her to come with him, backing along beside the corral fence and around the far corner of it, which put them well out of the line of fire.

The girl was shivering, as though in the grip of a chill, chill wind. In her eyes the world had gone grey and deadly.

Ghostly fear had her by the throat and she pressed at it with a slim, shaking hand. And she couldn't have looked away if she wanted to. So she watched Rhoutt Cohern, watched the tall, prowling alertness of him, marking the cast of his lean head, the loose and ready deftness of his swinging hands.

Cuff Yakima turned very slowly, keeping face to face with the circling Rhoutt. This wasn't what Yakima had expected. No man had ever acted this way toward him before. He had expected to see Rhoutt Cohern go stiff and clumsy with fear, as so many of his other victims had done. Once you had 'em that way, they were easy.

But Cohern wasn't afraid. He wasn't backing up, or down. He was circling, closing in, with a cool, reckless smile on his lips. Acting almost as though he enjoyed this. As though he was absolutely sure of the outcome. As though he might have a partner siding him!

This thought hit Yakima like a bomb shell. He wanted to look around, to be sure about it. But he dare not. He dare not look anywhere by this cool, sardonic young devil with the clear, tawny eyes. Maybe he had made a slip. Maybe he hadn't checked up on everything like he should. The doubt was on Yakima now, riding him hard! Unconsciously he ran the tip of his tongue over his suddenly dry lips.

It was the giveaway and Rhoutt Cohern laughed aloud. "So after all," he mocked, "underneath the wolf is just coyote. I had a hunch. Get at it, Yakima. You've dealt yourself the ace of spades!"

Cuff Yakima didn't want to make the break. But desperation swelled up inside him in a sudden, headlong tide, the desperation of fear and uncertainty. And he couldn't ride it out. He couldn't wait. He had to know! So Cuff Yakima made his draw, fast and flashing.

The guns came clear of the leather smoothly and surely. They were stabbing level. And exultation, savage as fire, gripped Yakima. He was getting there first! He was getting . . .

The blow which struck him was terrific, deep in the chest. And it leveled everything, halted everything, movement, senses, thought. Cuff Yakima lost the world.

And did not feel at all the second slug which took him, center and heart high.

RHOUTT COHERN looked down at the man he had killed. He knew no exultation. Only relief. That it was done with, over with. He felt incredibly weary, as though drained of every emotion. He had concentrated every faculty to such an extent that now, as he relaxed, he ached as though from some terrific physical effort.

Said Charley Justin behind him, "Knew it—knew it, by gum! Had a hunch. Boy, you were great!"

Rhott shook his head wearily. "Not great, just lucky, Charley."

Rhott looked past Charley, saw Ardene Hawkins staring at him, eyes wide and still, hand still at her throat. Her expression was beyond Rhott. Abruptly she turned and hurried away, almost running. And as she went she passed Jack Yegley and other men, hurrying, alarmed by the shots.

Yegley was the first to arrive. He saw the prone figure at the corner of the stable, saw Rhott Cohern just in the act of punching the empty shells from his guns and sliding reloads into the empty chambers.

"So!" barked Yegley. "You would strap on your guns, wouldn't you, Cohern. You wouldn't listen to me. Now you see what it has led to. You've put yourself out on a limb, young fellow."

Rhott looked at him. "Before you spill over too much, Jack, you better find out what you're talking about. Yeah, I would strap on my guns. If I hadn't, I'd been dead, right now. Go slow, before you make a fool of yourself."

"You bet!" wheezed Charley Justin. "You don't know the half of it, Yegley. Take a good look at that hombre there in the dust. That's Cuff Yakima, and he came looking for Rhott. He came asking for it, Yakima did. And Rhott handled a job you and Torres were either afraid to, or didn't want to, when Yakima was strutting his dirty bully-puss all over this town a while back."

Yegley dropped on his knees beside the dead man, turned him over. And in the crowd which had gathered a man ex-

claimed—"Cuff Yakima, by all that's holy! And too dead to skin! Well, that is good riddance."

Yegley got to his feet, smarting under the words Charley Justin had spoken. "You sure this was an even break, Cohern?" he growled,

Tip Sharpe, still in his white bar apron, his bald head shining in the sun, spat impatiently. "Don't be all damn fool, Jack. Look at Yakima's guns laying there. He had 'em both out. What more do you want to prove an even break?"

"For that matter," said Dee Milling, "who cares whether it was an even break or not, as long as Cuff Yakima is done for? That's all that counts. A rattle-snake, well stomped out. Rhott, I ain't a drinking man, but I'll join you in one today—and buy 'em."

"Nobody buys that one, Dee," said Tip Sharpe. "It will be on the house. Come on, everybody."

SHERIFF JACK YEGLEY was shrewder than he looked. He knew when to force a bet and when to walk warily. Now, as he looked over the little group of men gathered in Judge Hawkins' private chamber, he decided to speak his wariness.

"It won't work," he said bluntly. "In fact, it would be the worst kind of a fool play."

Simon Golbaugh turned his eyes on Yegley, those pale eyes which seemed to twinkle but which really glittered. "Why won't it work?" Golbaugh asked. "It forms an excuse to get Cohern into custody. That is all we want and need. We can develop matters from there."

"No," growled Yegley. "Nothing doing. If I tried to slap an arrest on Rhott Cohern for the murder of Cuff Yakima, I'd be laughed out of town. There is one place you've not got in touch with, Golbaugh. That place is with the people right here in town. After all, you don't appoint me to office. I get elected and right now I can see the danger signals lifting, all along the line. You weren't out there today when the crowd gathered after the shooting affair. I was. I heard what was said, read the feeling of the crowd. Every man jack in the bunch felt that it was good riddance to

be done with Yakima, whether by even break or not. Besides, it was an even break and nobody could prove it otherwise.

"Now get me right. I'm playing along, but I'm not making a complete jackass of of myself. Things have to seem legal, or I want nothing to do with them. Keep our moves at least looking legal and we can get by. Make 'em seem like open persecution and we'll set off a hornet nest full of buzzing hell. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

"All right," said Golbaugh—"What would you do?"

"Go at Cohern like we did after Dan Mountain. Contest his title to all this range he's taken over from Ireland, Bogue and Shore. Force his hand. Push him to an open break and make the responsibility of any rough play, his."

"All that takes time," said Golbaugh thinly, "and I can't afford to play with too much time. Something may break. If it does before I get possession, everything is blown up. And . . ."

"I think Yegley is right, Simon," broke in Bert Lovelace. "Too much speed is a greater danger than too little. With the precedent of the Dan Mountain case the other day to go by, it shouldn't take too long."

"Just a minute." It was Judge Hawkins who spoke. "You are overlooking something, Lovelace. I told you all that beyond the decision in the Mountain case, my position would be strictly neutral. That, Golbaugh, gave you an opening wedge. Which, you claimed, was all you wanted or needed."

Simon Golbaugh fixed his glittering eyes on the pompous Judge. He laughed harshly. "You'll do exactly what I tell you to do, from here on out, Hawkins. When I say jump, you'll jump."

The Judge flinched, then drew himself up in his best judicial manner. "What do you mean, sir? You can't talk to me that . . ."

"Listen, you hypocritical old rooster," snapped Golbaugh. "You've made one step, all that is necessary to put you over the road if I choose to let the word out, tell what I know. And I'll do that very thing if you try and go holy and righteous on me now. You're in this deal and you

stick, if you know what is good for you."

Judge Hawkins' face took on that choleric tinge, then went slowly pale, while he seemed to shrivel in some queer way. "Sir," he quavered, "You are a great rascal. You . . ."

Simon Golbaugh laughed. "Sure I am, and you're another. Likewise all the rest present. I make no bones about it. Don't any of the rest of you try. All I'm interested in is to get what I want. And that is the range taken in by the old Mobley grant. And if I have to publicly smash all of you to get that range, why I'll smash you. The blinders are off. We know just where we stand, all of us. With that understood, we can talk a little more to the point."

There was a long silence. Judge Hawkins was chewing his lips nervously. Eulace Winniger, County Recorder looked more like a pinched and hunted weasel than ever. Bert Lovelace was a little pale. Jack Yegley was sullen. "I could," he blurted out, "throw a gun on you, Golbaugh, and blow your heart out."

"You might, but you won't," said Golbaugh bluntly. "Not if you know what is good for you. I have issued certain orders to trustworthy men, and taken other precautions."

Bert Lovelace said, "This is getting us nowhere, quarreling among ourselves. If you want a quick solution to this thing, Simon—well, Cuff Yakima wasn't the only trigger man in the world. Rhoutt Cohern, with all his new properties, will have to do a deal of riding around. Now a couple of men, laying out along the trails with straight shooting rifles. Sooner or later one of them would be sure to get a good chance at Cohern. And that would be a simple, quick finish. Should there be any kick-back at all, Yegley's offices could confuse and cover matters up. How about that, Sheriff?"

Jack Yegley built a cigarette. "It could be done," he growled.

"I think your idea is the best, Lovelace," said Golbaugh. "I'm afraid the courage of some of these righteous servants of the people couldn't hold up under another court fight. And I got a couple of boys who are good with a Winchester. We'll give the idea a whirl."

Outside the rear door of the Judge's

chamber, a figure which had been listening there, moved softly and swiftly away.

RHOUTT COHERN rode the trail between his own headquarters and that of the Square I, where he had spent most of the morning talking things over with Chick Ireland. "You go right along about running the business, Chick," Rhoutt had said. "I've seen Ben and Luke. There's to be no change, of course. The only difference is that should Golbaugh try to move down on us as he did Dan Mountain, it means he has to fight us as one solid combine instead of four different layouts to be gobbled up one by one. We've taken our stand. The next move is up to him."

On his way home, Rhoutt's thoughts went back to the day previous, to those tremendous, explosive moments when he had faced Cuff Yakima in a life and death showdown. But his thought went past the actual shootout, to remember Ardene Hawkins as she had looked when the affair was over. How she stood there, staring at him with wide and fathomless eyes, one hand at her throat. And then how she had turned and hurried away, almost at a run, as though fleeing from something deadly and unclean.

It had been a tough thing for her to see, a girl fresh from a softer, quieter life. Yet, she shouldn't have looked at him as she had, like he was some feral animal with bloody claws. The thing had been forced upon him. There had been no other way out than to kill or be killed.

Again, he thought irritably, why should he give a whoop how she had looked at him? Virtual strangers, the two of them, and she the niece of Judge Hawkins. But, strangely enough, he did care, even though she could hardly be blamed.

The trail topped a ridge and as Rhoutt glanced down the slope beyond he saw two riders heading toward him at a gait faster than an ordinary working jog. One of them was Buster Towns, a likable kid who rode for Rhoutt. The other was Ardene Hawkins!

Soberly wondering, Rhoutt dropped down to meet them. Both Buster and the girl seemed relieved at sight of him. "Looking for you, boss," said Buster. "The lady came out to the ranch, looking for you. I told her you were over at the

Square I and she asked me if I wouldn't show her the way over. Seems she's got something to tell you, something which is kinda important. Now that you've got together, I'll skin along back home."

As Buster turned to leave the girl thanked him gravely and Buster answered with a nod and boyish grin. Then he spurred away. And Rhoutt, wondering, built a smoke while he waited for the girl to speak.

She didn't look too good, he decided. Her face was strained, with a white, but determined set to it. He decided he couldn't possibly guess what was in her mind.

She said, abruptly, "I've come to warn you, Rhoutt Coherne. They intend to— to drygulch you. That was the word they used. Men with rifles are to lay for you and shoot you without warning. Oh—it is—is despicable, terrible. And I'm sick with the shame of it."

She looked at him, her lips quivering, her eyes suddenly bright with tears.

Rhoutt said gently, "Who is it that is after my hide?"

"That terrible Simon Golbaugh, principally. But the others are in it, too. The Sheriff, that slick lawyer, Loveless. That ratty looking Eulace Winniger and— and . . ." She choked to a stop, as though she could not speak the last name.

Rhoutt waited. He knew of a sudden what that name would be, but he would not urge her to tell him. It was up to her. He saw her take a deep breath, get hold of herself. Then she said, very steadily, "And my Uncle, Judge Hawkins."

"Tell me all about it," drawled Rhoutt gravely.

"This morning it was," she said. "I went over to the Court House to see Uncle Hugh about something. I thought he would be in his private chamber. He—he was—and these others were with him. I was just going to knock on the rear door of the chamber when I heard voices and your name was mentioned. So, I listened. And I heard it all, all the hateful, vicious scheming. And," she added wearily, "I learned that a man whom I had looked up to all my life, a man I thought was the soul of honor and integrity, was just mean and scheming and crafty. I mean, my Uncle."

"I'm mighty sorry about that," said

Rhott. "Yet, up until Simon Golbaugh came along, Judge Hawkins had always been a good Judge and mighty well thought of. If he has made a mistake, well, there are mighty few men ever go through life without making one mistake. So I wouldn't hold it too much against him."

She stared away, brushed a hand across her eyes. "You—you are generous, Rhott Cohern. Far more generous than others have been and would be to you. But Golbaugh is going to hold Uncle Hugh to other things—more scheming. I heard him threaten Uncle Hugh of that."

"Well," said Rhott easily, "Maybe we can do something about that, too. Suppose we ride along, while I explain an idea which has just come to me."

They rode along, side by side and Rhott explained. When he finished, the girl faced him squarely. "That is a fine and good thing you suggest, Rhott Cohern. I'll—we'll do it, for Uncle Hugh's sake. Now, I'll be getting back to town before someone wonders about my absence. I'll be seeing you tonight?"

"Tonight," nodded Rhott. "In the meantime, I haven't thanked you for this warning you have brought me. And the other things you have told me which give me weapons Golbaugh doesn't dream of. And I'll ride wide and easy and keep an eye open for these drygulching pets of Golbaugh's."

IT was after eight that night when Rhott and Buster Towns rode up to Keystone. Each led a saddled horse behind him. Short of town a couple of hundred yards, Rhott handed his lead rope over to Buster. "You circle, kid, and come up in back of Judge Hawkins' cottage. Leave the horses out in the brush where nobody will stumble over them and then come in on foot close enough to get my signal. You may have a pretty lengthy wait, but the night is warm."

Buster grinned. "Don't you worry none about me, boss. I'll be johnny at the rat hole."

So, while Buster circled off in the darkness, leading the two extra brons, Rhott jogged on into town and tethered his horse toward the lower end of the street. There was a high point of alertness in him. Dry-

gulch lead did not necessarily have to come out on the range. It might come at any time of day or night, from any place. The mouth of a dark alley, through a window, a door, or out of any black pocket of shadow. And with the warning of Ardene Hawkins fresh and strong in his mind, Rhott was wary as a stalking wolf.

He moved back up town, avoiding the flares of light from window and door which splintered across the blackness of the street. He reached the store, where Dee Milling stood in the open doorway, puffing at his pipe.

"Evening, Dee," drawled Rhott. "How are things?"

"Slow," said Dee. "How are things out on the range?"

"Good enough. Cows go on having calves. Water in the creeks, grass on the hillsides. That is all any cowman can ask for."

"You're a cool customer, Rhott," said Dee. "I think you got Golbaugh worried."

Rhott chuckled softly. "I hope so, Dee, I sure hope so."

Along the street a door banged and the clump of bootheels on the warped planks of the old board sidewalk echoed. A figure evolved from the gloom and entered the fan of yellow lamp light which struck out from the door of the Cascade. It was Sheriff Jack Yegley. He had his head bent as though in deep thought.

In the middle of a stride he stopped as though he had run into a wall. In the blackness beyond the Cascade a thin pencil of flame speared and the flat rumble of a shot sounded.

Sheriff Jack Yegley seemed to shake his head in bewilderment. Twice he lifted his right foot as though trying to climb a stair. Each time the foot dropped straight back. Then, almost gently, Jack Yegley crumpled forward on his face.

For a moment breathless hush lay along the street. Then a yelling tide of men erupted from the Cascade. At Rhott's shoulder Dee Milling cursed and said, "That shot! It came from the alley by the old Wells Fargo office."

Rhott snapped. "Come on, Dee. We'll cork it up at the back end."

Dee jerked an old fashioned bulldog revolver from the hip pocket of his bib

overalls and raced after Rhoutt, who was charging back through the alley beside the store. They came out into the clear in back and sped along behind the Cascade.

"Watch yourself, Rhoutt," panted Dee Milling. "It's black as the pit of Hades and . . ."

There was the rustle of movement out ahead. A gun blared and Dee Milling yelped profanely as a slug nipped him slightly on the left leg, high up. And he and Rhoutt simultaneously slammed a couple of shots apiece at the gun flash out ahead, then closed in rapidly. There was no reply and they nearly fell over the crumpled figure on the ground.

"Got him!" exulted Dee. "Got the dirty, alley shooting whelp. Scratch a match, Rhoutt."

Rhoutt was on his knees, doing that very thing. The match sputtered, glowed, throwing its faint radiance, which disclosed a narrow, swarthy, venomous face, partly swathed in bandages.

Dee Milling said, his voice awe-struck, "Pete Torres! I will be damned . . . Rhoutt—did we make a mistake?"

"No mistake," growled Rhoutt. "Stay here while I go up front."

Rhoutt prowled along through the alley by the old Wells Fargo office. It was empty and at the mouth of it met some of the Cascade crowd.

"Dee Milling and I got the hombre who did it," said Rhoutt. "We saw the shot come from the mouth of this alley, circled and caught him out back."

"Who was it?" asked someone.

"Pete Torres," answered Rhoutt.

"Pete Torres!" There was a rush along the alley.

Out in the street, where the light of the Cascade lay, Rhoutt saw Doc Parshal bending over the figure of Jack Yegley. Rhoutt went over. "Done for, Doc?" he asked.

"Done for," nodded Doc. "Never knew what hit him, probably."

"Listen, Doc," said Rhoutt. "You been taking care of Pete Torres' broken jaw, haven't you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"He had any visitors in the past day or two?"

"Why, I don't know. I suppose so. I know that Simon Golbaugh was with Tor-

res when I dropped in at Torres' room right after lunch today to see how the jaw was coming."

"Ah!" breathed Rhoutt. "Thanks, Doc. You won't have to tend Torres any more. He was the one who killed Jack Yegley and Dee Milling and I got him."

Before the startled Doc could say anything more, Rhoutt went back down the alley. He heard Dee Milling talking angrily. "Don't be clunk headed fools, you guys. I'm telling you Rhoutt Cohern and me saw this thing from the door of my store. The shot came from the mouth of this alley. Rhoutt and me tore round back and run into Torres. We didn't know who it was. He threw a slug at us and it nipped me on the leg. Rhoutt and me shot back and got him. That's that!"

"Right!" echoed Rhoutt. "Anybody want to question it?"

"Not exactly," muttered somebody in the dark. "But it seems damned queer that Jack Yegley's own Deputy should have killed him. And Torres laid up with a busted jaw, besides."

"Supposed to be laid up, you mean," rasped Rhoutt. "What would he be doing hanging around in dark alleys if he wasn't up to some shady business?"

"Guess you're right," conceded the doubter. "This town and range has sure gone nuts."

FIFTEEN minutes later Rhoutt Cohern knocked on the door of Judge Hugh Hawkins' cottage. Ardene Hawkins opened the portal. She gave a queer little gasp and a touch of color came back into her pale face. "That shooting," she stammered. "I thought—I was afraid . . ."

"I'm glad," said Rhoutt softly, "That you were afraid. Your Uncle . . .?"

"In the living room. Come!"

Judge Hawkins had apparently been pacing the room. He looked rumped, disheveled, worried and nervous. At sight of Rhoutt he tried futilely to regain his dignity.

"What is it you want, sir?" he demanded stiffly.

"Listen, Judge," drawled Rhoutt. "Let's come right down to cases and face facts. Jack Yegley was just murdered by his own deputy. I know that Simon Gol-

baugh had been visiting with Torres today. It would seem that even Golbaugh's friends are not safe any more, particularly if they don't agree to do any more of Golbaugh's dirty work for him."

The Judge tried to draw himself up. "Are you hinting anything, Cohern?"

"Listen, Judge," said Rhoutt, almost wearily. "This country might forgive a man one mistake. But if he keeps on playing ball with a flock of coyotes, there is only one classification they can tag him with. That goes for you as well as everybody else."

The Judge's eyes turned desperate but there was still bluster in his manner. Then Ardene stepped in front of him. "Uncle Hugh," she said quietly. "I went over to the Court House this morning. I wanted to talk to you about something. I knew you'd be in your private chamber, and I came up to the rear door of it. I was about to knock when I heard voices. Yours, the Sheriff's, that lawyer, Bert Lovelace and Simon Golbaugh's. I listened. I heard everything. Rhoutt—Mr. Cohern, I've told him all about it. Now he's giving you another chance, Uncle Hugh."

The Judge stared at her. Then he seemed to shrivel. He dropped into a chair, dropped his face in his hands. "What—what do you want of me?" he groaned.

"Only this, Judge," said Rhoutt. "I want you and Ardene to come out to my ranch and stay there until Golbaugh has been smashed. For her safety and your own. Tonight Golbaugh had Jack Yegley removed from the picture. He's a damned wolf, Golbaugh is, covering up his trail. Next, it may be you. We'll go out to the ranch by the back way. No one will know where you are. I think you'd better come."

For a long minute the Judge did not answer. Then he nodded and said tonelessly. "Very well. Just as you say."

Rhoutt went to the back door of the cottage, opened it and whistled softly. From the darkness, Buster Towns answered.

IT was just breaking daylight when Rhoutt Cohern left his bronc just short of the crest of Round Top and went

the rest of the way on foot. Over one arm he carried a long barreled Winchester. In the other hand he held a pair of powerful field glasses. He selected a spot and hunkered down in the dew wet wild oats.

Round Top was the highest point in the Burnt Hills range. From its peak one could see miles in every direction. And as the gray dawn lightened and the east turned pearl then rose under the advance of the rising sun, Rhoutt focused the field glasses and began to use them. Particularly he studied the country to the east and north, where lay Simon Golbaugh's Ten Spot layout. Shortly after sun up, Rhoutt's vigilance was rewarded. By aid of the glasses, he picked up two pygmy figures of mounted men leaving the Ten Spot, heading west. At times they dropped from sight in the depths of gulches, then again loomed clear on the tops of ridges. And always they came closer, on a line which would bring them in below Round Top.

But they stopped, while still nearly half a mile away. They appeared to talk for a time, then separated, one cutting nearly due south, the other coming on toward Round Top. The south traveling one soon disappeared, but the other Rhoutt easily kept in view and soon, with the aid of the glasses, identified the fellow. It was Blackie Costick, one of Golbaugh's two pet riders.

Costick passed Round Top, struck a ridge, rode down it almost to the point, dismounted and left his ground reined horse below the crown of the ridge. Then, afoot and with the glitter of a rifle barrel in his arms, Costick sought the point of the ridge and settled down there.

Rhoutt went back to his horse, smiling grimly. The point of the ridge where Costick lay, overlooked the trail between Rhoutt's ranch headquarters and that of Chick Ireland's Square I. A perfect place to drygulch a man riding that trail.

Blackie Costick set himself for a lazy day. For his orders were to spend the whole day in that spot if necessary, waiting for a shot at Rhoutt Cohern. That shot, if it was a good one, would be worth just five hundred dollars. At least, that was what Simon Golbaugh had promised.

With the sun rising steadily, it soon

became warm and Costick sprawled at ease, half dozing, stirring now and then to take a look along the trail which wound below his point of vantage at some two hundred yards distance. Costick knew no qualms at the deed he contemplated. He was entirely engrossed in the thoughts of all the fleshy pleasures which five hundred dollars would buy for him. Costick yawned with anticipation.

But the next second he froze as a cold voice drawled behind him—"Waiting for somebody, Costick?"

Costick jerked his head around and found himself staring into the muzzle of a very steady rifle, held by Rhoutt Cohern. Costick made a move toward the rifle laying beside him and changed his mind.

"Wise," mocked Rhoutt. "Very wise, you dirty snake. Waiting for me to ride by, eh? Going to shoot me in the back. Too bad, Costick I'm going to do the shooting, right while you watch the muzzle of this gun. You won't be able to see the slug that kills you. It will be too fast for you. Yeah, I'm going to do the shooting—unless—"

Blackie Costick began to sweat. But his throat was dry as a cinder kiln. He swallowed convulsively. "Unless—what?" he croaked.

"Unless you're ready to talk."

"I—I'm saying nothing," Blackie blustered.

"Okay," said Rhoutt icily. "You had your chance."

The rifle muzzle was rocklike. No matter where Blackie looked it seemed the deadly muzzle was pointing squarely between his eyes. And beyond, he could see Rhoutt Cohern's finger begin to tighten about the trigger.

"Wait!" gasped Blackie. "I—I'll talk."

"Good! Golbaugh sent you out to dry-gulch me "

Blackie nodded.

"That was Bob Yontis who left you a while back. Where is he hiding out, hoping I'll come along?"

"P-Poker Rock," stuttered Costick.

"Keno! Now—down on your face. And don't move or I'll stomp your crooked heart out."

Costick did as he was told and felt his guns lifted away from him. Then his wrists were drawn behind him and tied

with a piggin string. After which, at the muzzle of Rhoutt's rifle, he slouched sullenly back to his horse, where Rhoutt boosted him into the saddle.

"We'll ride a bit, then you'll wait a bit, while I pay Mister Bob Yontis a little call," drawled Rhoutt. "And if you've lied, Blackie, and he ain't at Poker Rock, you'll wish you'd never been born."

"He's there," mumbled Blackie. "You'll see."

"Yeah. We'll see."

POKER ROCK overlooked a portion of the trail leading from Rhoutt's headquarters to town. Simon Golbaugh had figured close. If Rhoutt left the ranch at all that day, he would have to ride by either one or the other of the two dry-gulchers. So Golbaugh had figured and so, ordinarily would it have happened, had not Rhoutt been forewarned.

Poker Rock overlooked a portion of Bowie Creek also and after two hours atop it in the sun, Bob Yontis began to thirst and think of the cool, clear water flowing just a few hundred yards away. It seemed reasonable enough that he could make a hurry up trip to the creek, get a drink and be back and hidden on the rock without missing anything. So Yontis did it.

He scrambled clumsily off the rock, his spurs scratching and jangling. He led his horse into the open, mounted and spurred down the brushy slope to the creek. And when he dismounted and turned toward the water he saw Rhoutt Cohern standing watching him, from the other side of the creek. And the rifle Rhoutt held across his arm, lay with ominous steadiness toward Bob Yontis.

Rhoutt drawled, coolly—"Pretty hot, eh Bob, laying out on top of Poker Rock? Good place to hang out if you're expecting and hoping to drygulch a man riding along the Bowie Creek trail. But uncomfortable on a hot day."

Bob Yontis was hard—and tough, much harder and tougher than Blackie Costick. But he was startled and unsteady by the surprise of Rhoutt's appearance. "I don't know what you're driving at, Cohern," he growled. "Any reason why a man shouldn't stop at the creek for a drink?"

"Not ordinarily," drawled Rhoutt. "P6-day—yes. This is my range, you know. And today I don't care to have any skunk, particularly the two legged breed, drinking from this creek. I been expecting you down. Backlie Costick told me I'd find you on Poker Rock."

Bob Yontis' uncertainty grew. What was this talk about Blackie Costick? "You're loco," blurted Yontis. "What's Costick got to do with me getting a drink?"

"Listen, Yontis," broke in Rhoutt. "I was up early this morning and bedded down on Round Top with a pair of field glasses. You see, I'd heard that Golbaugh was going to put some drygulchers out on the range, waiting for me to come along. So I thought I'd kind of beat him to the punch. Well, from Round Top I saw you and Costick show. Costick settled down on the point of Thrifty Ridge where he could watch the trail between my place and the Square I. I saw you head off down this way somewhere. Well, Costick wasn't overly careful. I slipped up and got the drop on him and he was glad to talk—mighty glad. He admitted you and him had been sent out to drygulch me and he said you'd be on Poker Rock, watching the town trail. And so you were, Bob, so you were. You better reach, Bob—reach plenty!"

Behind the bleak and scowling curtain of his hard, cold eyes, Bob Yontis was weighing all things. Rhoutt Cohern was hitting the nail right on the head. He knew plenty. He might know a whole lot more. And Yontis couldn't guess how much. There was no use trying to bluff any longer, Yontis knew that. And Yontis knew also that in the eyes of any decent cattleman or cowhand, a drygulcher, real or would be, was rated several notches lower than a horse thief. To let himself be taken captive might mean a noosed rope and a strong tree to tie it to. And Yontis was just hard enough to take any desperate gamble against that.

The vaguest film of cunning passed over his eyes. "All right," he said sullenly. "You got me. Here are my guns."

And then Yontis threw himself to one side and to his knees, dragging frantically at his belt guns. He got them out, got a shot away, hurried and desperate and

a leafy twig, inches above Rhoutt Cohern's head, fluttered down, severed from the parent branch by the hurtling lead.

The muzzle of Rhoutt's rifle swung, steadied and spat snarling report. A convulsion of inward and outward force spun Bob Yontis around and sent him rolling down the sloping creek bank. And when he stopped, limp and still, his face was almost in the water he had come to drink, but never reached.

And Rhoutt Cohern, swinging the lever of his rifle back and forth, to jack a fresh cartridge into the reeking chamber of his weapon, swung his head wearily. "All this for your rotten greed, Simon Golbaugh," he muttered. "But it is working down to you. Before the game is played out, you'll have to do your own fighting, and in the open."

A WEEK worked its slow, strained way into history. The Burnt Hills range lay tawny and bland and smiling under the steady sunlight. But there was tension and uncertainty in the air, tension which kept men jumpy and ill at ease in town as well as out in the sweeping miles of the open country.

There was much to harrass the minds of men. There was the murder of Sheriff Jack Yegley, by his deputy, Pete Torres. And Torres would never tell why, for he was done for, also. Then there was the fact that Judge Hawkins and his pretty niece had disappeared mysteriously from their town cottage. And as if that were not enough, word had gotten out somehow that Bob Yontis and Blackie Costick of the Ten Spot had vanished into thin air.

Men in town wondered about Eulace Winniger, the County Recorder. Always a solitary, secretive sort he now had a look to him which suggested to the shrewder that Winniger was punishing a bottle on the sly. Bert Lovelace was jumpy and much of his too hearty, too effusive manner was missing.

Out at Rhoutt Cohern's Two Bar Cross headquarters it was a spirit of watchful waiting. Rhoutt's main concern was about Judge Hawkins, who had gone pretty much to pieces. And one day Ardene Hawkins came to Rhoutt.

"I'm worried about Uncle Hugh," she

said simply. "He's morbid and strange. I—I'm afraid he might have designs on his own life. After all, it was his one lapse in a lifetime of upright honor. I'm not excusing him, Rhoutt, but he is still my uncle."

"I understand," said Rhoutt gently. "I'll have a talk with him. I think I can change his view point to a healthy one again."

So Rhoutt sought out the aging Jurist in the room in the ranchhouse which had been set aside for him. The Judge, sunk in a chair, hardly looked up as Rhoutt came in. Rhoutt wasted no time beating around the bush.

"Listen, Judge," he said. "If every man who ever made a mistake was to curl up and quit, there'd be damn few of us left in the world. Every man who ever drew breath has had his moment of weaknesses. It is just a matter of luck if he gets by without giving in to that weakness. You've made a mistake. Throw that part out. You'll never be able to forget it, of course. But you can profit by it.

"As a Judge you represent something. You represent the majesty of the law. The welfare of men depends on how much or how little they respect that law. You owe a great deal to the law and to those who look to it for guidance and control. So you can't let either the law down, or the people. If for no other reason than that, you've got to keep your head up and carry on. Only a very few of us know the whole truth of what has happened. But the rest would be bound to know if you were to crack up completely. So, as punishment to yourself, from now on give the Burnt Hills country the kind of law it wants to have. Keep the dignity and righteousness of it strong and clean in the eyes of all men. This present shadow will pass. Justice can still be done and the greater number of the Burnt Hills people will follow and stand behind that justice. And by dedicating yourself to the fulfilment of that justice you will regain your self respect. Think it over, Judge, and remember that you owe all this to the law, to the people, to yourself. And last, but by no means least, you owe it to your niece."

The Judge's hands trembled a little as

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he clasped them in his lap. "If—if I thought there was a chance—" he mumbled.

"Chance! Of course there is a chance. It is dead certainty, if you'll play the hand out. Think it over, Judge."

Rhott saw, as he left the room, that the Judge's head had lifted a trifle, that the dullness in his eyes was not quite so pronounced.

That evening, shortly after dusk, a buckboard came rattling into the yard. Out of this jumped young Jimmy Starr and he wrung Rhott's hand enthusiastically. "I got it," he exclaimed. "I got plenty. Jake Mobley is still alive. Spry as a cricket. Ran across him in Pinedale in the shadow of the Mogollons. Told him what I was after and the old tiger was all for coming back with me and shooting up anyone who dared say his title to his former holdings in the Burnt Hills wasn't sound. I persuaded him not to, but he's ready to come up here and testify in court if we want him to. Best of all, he dug up some old documents of proof and let me bring them along with me. Rhott, we got Simon Golbaugh and the rest of those crooks tied to the stake. Let's go after them!"

Rhott smiled grimly at the young lawyer's enthusiasm. "Let's at least wait until after supper, Jimmy," he drawled. "Then I'll go you."

AN hour later Jimmy Starr drove his buckboard back to town and Rhott Cobern jogged along side of it. And over the miles Rhott told Jimmy of all that had happened since he left. By the time they reached town, their future plans were set. They called for direct and immediate action. And so, Rhott and Jimmy paid two calls. One was to Eulace Winniger's room in the hotel. Winniger was half drunk, but not too drunk to understand. And he was cold sober by the time his visitors left. And hardly had the door closed behind them than Eulace Winniger was packing a musty old carpet bag.

The next port of call was the office of Bert Lovelace, where a light was burning. Lovelace moistened his lips with his tongue as he saw who his visitors were. Rhott went bluntly to the point.

"Jimmy just got back from a talk with Jake Mobley, Lovelace. He has documents which Jake let him have. And old Jake is ready to come back here and testify in court if we send for him. In case you think we're bluffing, take a look at these." Rhoutt laid the documents on Lovelace's desk.

Lovelace hardly glanced at them. He laughed harshly. "So what? Expect me to break down in tears, maybe?"

Rhoutt shrugged. "There was Jack Yegley," he drawled. "Playing ball with Simon Golbaugh. And Jack was murdered. I know that Golbaugh paid a visit to Pete Torres the afternoon before Torres killed Yegley. I understand that Eulace Winniger is leaving town. He was quite a friend of Golbaugh's, too. And Judge Hawkins—where is he, Lovelace? It would seem that to have anything to do with Simon Golbaugh demands a price, Lovelace—a big price. Like fooling with a rattlesnake. You're liable to be poisoned, fatally."

Lovelace raised his shoulders. "I got nothing to worry about. Any lawyer has a perfect right to look after his client's interests."

"That's right," agreed Rhoutt. "He has. But if he guesses wrong and ends up finding he has sacrificed his reputation and good name, his chances of earning a living in that special community aren't so good, from then on. Besides, Golbaugh seems to have a nasty habit of disposing of those who know too much of his affairs, like he did Jack Yegley."

This last made Lovelace lick his lips again. He had, apparently, thought of this before. He still tried to keep up the act. "Anybody would think you were trying to suggest something to me," he sneered.

Rhoutt regained the documents, handed them to Jimmy Starr, then moved toward the door. "Use your own judgment, Lovelace. It's your funeral."

As soon as Rhoutt and Jimmy had gone, Lovelace forgot his act. He began stripping his desk and files of all papers, stuffing a few into a couple of brief cases, burning the rest in the heating stove which stood in a corner of the office. Within half an hour after Rhoutt and

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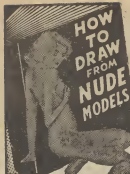
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Jimmy had gone, Bert Lovelace let himself out of his office and headed for the livery barn.

Watching, from the darkness across the street, Rhoutt Cohern chuckled softly. "He's on his way, Jimmy. That's what a guilty conscience can do to a man. And now—"

"Yeah," said Jimmy. "And now—?"

"The big he-snake, Simon Golbaugh," said Rhoutt and a harsh, rough note came into his voice.

"But how, Rhoutt—how? If we get him in court, what can we prove beyond the fact that he's out of luck as far as the Mobley grant range is concerned? We can't pin anything else on him."

"He's not going to get as far as court," said Rhoutt savagely. "He forced me into gun action against Cuff Yakima, and Pete Torres and Bob Yontis, gun action I never wanted or wished for. But I got one more good fight left in me. I'm going to force his hand. I got one plan. If it don't work I'll try another. But, one at a time. You can run along now and get some rest. This I have in mind may take a long wait."

THE Cascade was pretty well filled. Rhoutt Cohern leaned on the bar and talked to Tip Sharpe, talked loud, like he was liquored up a trifle. He boasted, saying that he'd got something on Bert Lovelace and that Lovelace was ready to spill plenty of important facts regarding Simon Golbaugh's plans and greedy, crooked schemes. Yes sir, the world was going to know all about Simon Golbaugh by the time Lovelace got through talking.

Tip Sharpe looked uneasy, until Rhoutt dropped him a sly wink. Then Tip played up. And presently he jerked his head to indicate a waspy looking little puncher who was just slipping through the door out into the street.

"Skid Harlan," mumbled Tip a little later. "He took on at the Ten Spot the other day. Before long Golbaugh will be hearing all that you said, Rhoutt. And that is what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Just that, Tip," murmured Rhoutt. "I can taper off the act, now."

A little later Rhoutt left the Cascade and took to the black shadows of the

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night. He went first down to the livery barn where he found fat Charley Justin just about to turn in for the night. "Business pretty good, Charley?" asked Rhoutt.

"Too damned good," wheezed Charley. "What's going on, anyhow? Rented two teams and buckboards tonight with drivers, to Carrville and back. Who do you think was traveling?"

"Couldn't guess," drawled Rhoutt blandly. "Who?"

"Bert Lovelace and Eulace Winniger, by jings! Looked like they were going to stay a spell, too, wherever they were going."

Rhoutt grinned harshly in the dark. "Guess we can get along without them for a while."

"A while! Hell! If they never came back, I wouldn't miss 'em. Don't like either of them jiggers. Got a bad eye, the pair of them, if you ask me."

Rhoutt drifted away again, having learned all he wanted to. He went back to where Bert Lovelace's office stood dark and silent, found himself a good pocket of black shadow and settled down for the wait. Bert Lovelace usually slept in a room out back of his office. But he wasn't there tonight. He was heading for Carrville and all points beyond.

Tirelessly Rhoutt Cohern waited. This was getting close to the end of the trail. He knew now that there could only be one end. And he was prepared and determined to make that end.

He saw the height of the evening pass, saw the hitch rails empty as riders headed back for their spreads. He saw the lights go out, one by one until only the Cascade, the Domino and the High Five showed light and life. And presently these also grew dark and still, and the town of Keystone slept. Midnight had passed and the small, cold hours of a new day passed under the waiting stars.

And then a solitary rider came into town, holding his mount to a walk, at which pace the shuffling hoofs made virtually no noise in the thick dust of the street. The rider pulled to a halt and sat his saddle for a long minute, utterly still, as though testing the night and what it might hold.



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Saddle girths creaked softly as the rider dismounted and spur chains clinked, ever so faintly. Rhoutt's eyes, attuned to the dark from his long wait, could distinguish enough of the rider's shadowy outline to mark the stooped, sloping shoulders and the small head. Rhoutt flexed his hands and moved quietly out into the street.

"No use knocking, Golbaugh," he drawled evenly. "Lovelace isn't there. You're too late to gun him in his sleep and close his mouth. Yeah—too late, Golbaugh."

The shadowy figure spun to face the quiet voice, poised wary and desperate and somehow, deadly dangerous. "Who is it?" droned Golbaugh.

"Rhoutt Cohern! That ought to be enough."

There was finality in Rhoutt's tone and words. And Simon Golbaugh, weighing all things and reading the answer, made his play.

It was too dark for Rhoutt to catch all of Golbaugh's movements and only the fact that he took a swift and instinctive step to one side saved his life. For at the same moment gun flame lanced and a gun blared to shatter the silence of the sleeping town. The impact of the slug threw Rhoutt's left arm back like a straw tossed in the wind and the shock spun him half around.

But his right arm and hand were strong and flashing fast and sure and his first shot was there ahead of Golbaugh's second, which flew wide. And Rhoutt rolled his gun empty in measured, staccato, pounding reports.

The gun snapped empty and hung still in Rhoutt's grasp. And that hunched, sloping shouldered shadow was down and lost in the blacker shadows near the earth. Somehow Rhoutt knew there was no need to look or follow this thing farther. He holstered that empty gun, gripped his left arm with his right hand and turned down street toward Doc Parshal's place.

A light or two came into being. Somewhere a man shouted an alarm. Rhoutt could feel the blood welling from his left arm and running down over the gripping fingers of his hand.

IT was after sun up the next morning that Rhoutt Cohern rode up to the home headquarters. His left arm was swathed in bandages and carried in a sling. Beneath the deep tan of his face a hint of pallor lay. He was drawn about the lips and eyes and he rode like a man stiff with weariness.

As he climbed the steps to the veranda there was a queer little cry from inside and the door swung wide and Ardene Hawkins ran out to him. "Rhoutt! You've been hurt! Rhoutt—what happened?"

"The finish," said Rhoutt slowly, "was written last night. I killed Simon Golbaugh. It was a fair shake, and I got him. Where is your Uncle?"

"Waiting for you, Rhoutt. He's changed. He is his old and even better self. I—I think—you'll be pleased."

The moment Rhoutt saw Judge Hawkins he knew that the change had come to stay. There was a new dignity about the Judge, a quieter, finer, more genuine dignity.

"I have taken your advice, Cohern," he said. "Given the chance, I will atone."

"The chance is there, Judge," said Rhoutt. "Golbaugh is done. One way or another I forced his hand. I made him come into the open and quit hiding behind the backs to other men. And when he came, he did not carry enough. There was straighter lead in my gun. Lovelace and Winniger have left town. They won't come back. Yes, the chance is there. Get one of the boys to drive you back to town."

Rhoutt went on past the Judge, along a hall and into his own room. With his single hand he unbuckled his guns and let them drop. Then he stretched out on his bunk and closed his eyes. He was very tired and very empty of all emotion.

Back in the living room, Judge Hawkins stared at the hall door. And then he said, very softly, "Jack Yegley was right. Rhoutt Cohern is of the warrior breed, my dear."

Rhoutt fell into a strange doze, not asleep yet not wholly awake. His wounded arm throbbed with a heavy, steady pain. He did not know how long this doze lasted, but a faint stir beside

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him brought him out of it and made him open his eyes. Ardene Hawkins stood beside him, looking down at him with strange and fathomless scrutiny.

"I thought," he mumbled a little stupidly, "I thought you'd gone back to town with your uncle."

"No," she said. "Of course I didn't go with him. You need nursing. I—I couldn't leave you, this way." Her voice trembled and threatened to break.

"I didn't want to bother you," said Rhoutt. "One of the boys could—"

"No one can—but me," she broke in. She sat on the edge of the bunk. She put out a slim hand and brushed the tousled hair back from his forehead. The touch of her hand was very soft and cool and soothing. A smile softened the grim lines about Rhoutt's mouth.

"I'm glad," he said. "I wanted you to stay. Don't go away."

"I won't," she promised.

Rhoutt sighed, closed his eyes and fell into a real sleep.

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