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Vol. VIII, No. 3

J. S. WILLIAMS, Editor

February, 1934

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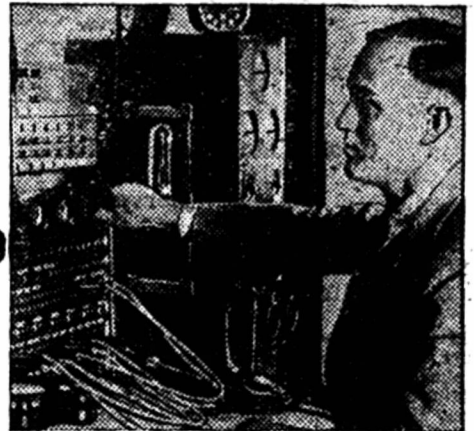
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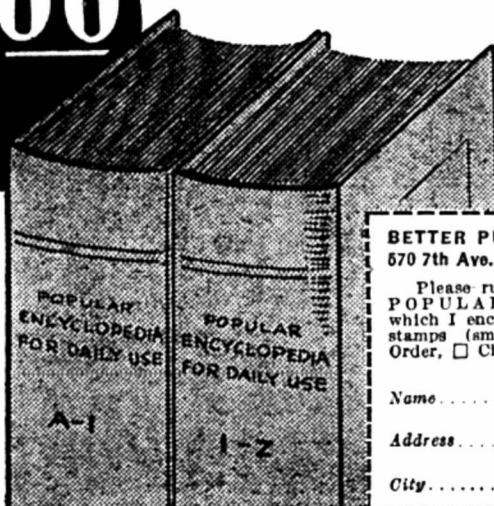
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30x5.00-20		2.55	1.05	32x4 1/2	3.45	1.15	
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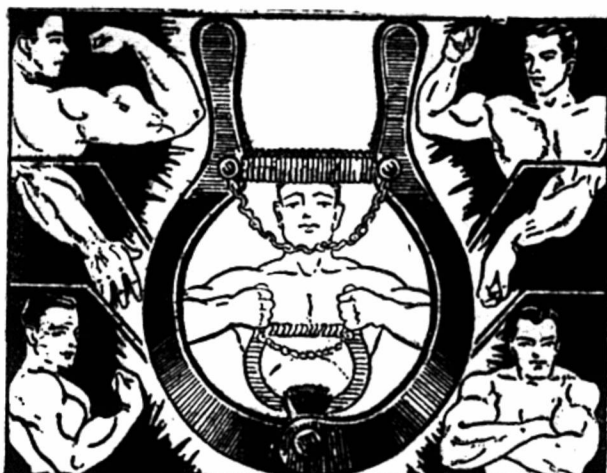
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CHAPTER I
Sinister Scream

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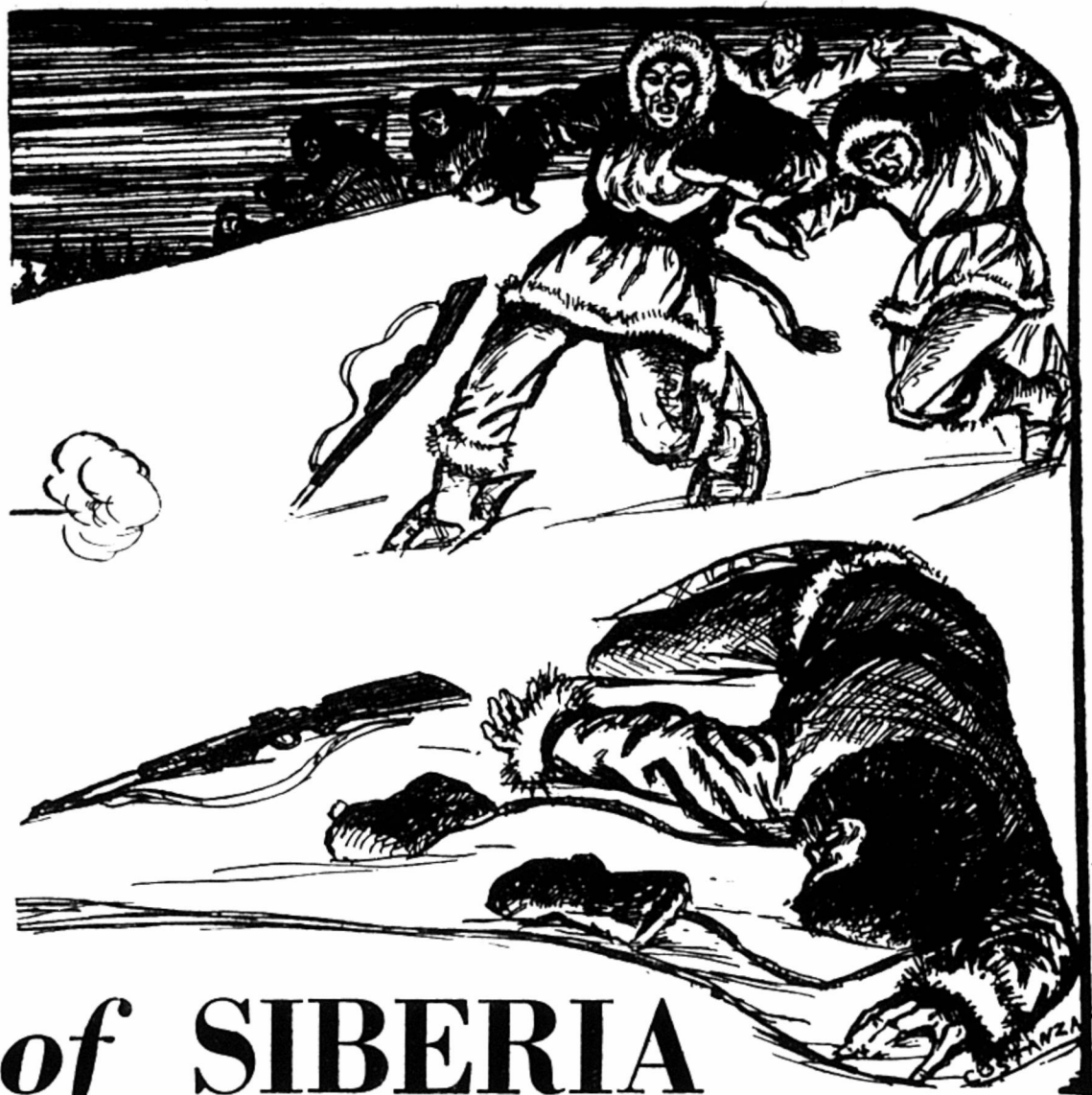
Author of "Hell Bent for Glory,"

KARA SEA and the Arctic had given birth to that wind; though Rand's sheepskin jacket was three-quarters of an inch thick, it stabbed through like a knife cut. He ploughed through the knee-deep snow, a dozen feet behind "Swede." The long, narrow street was deserted—and desolate with the peculiar air of space and loneliness which characterizes Siberia.

At the end of the street, Rand

could see the yellow lights of Tomi-noff's *traktir*. Warm there, at least, and raw vodka has its virtues. He kept his eyes on it—and his mind almost pleasantly occupied cursing the smooth-talking Russian in Constantinople who had convinced them of the glorious opportunities offered American airmen by the Soviet authorities in Siberia. In a moment of

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"Avenger of Lo Chang," etc.

madness, they had taken him seriously.

Cursing the Russian was some satisfaction—and it helped to pass the time away. Rand did it fluently and thoroughly. He ran out, eventually, of cuss words in English, French and Malay, and was making fairly good progress in Boer Dutch, when Swede O'Hara's bulky figure came to a halt. Rand bumped into him,

wiped the ice out of his eyes and inquired profanely what was the matter. "I thought," said Swede, "we were the only two nuts in Siberia out in the open."

"Well?"

"Look—to your left."

Blurs, darker shadows in the semi-darkness of the alley a bit ahead and to the left of them. Men—perhaps a dozen of them. Rand strained his eyes, crouching forward.

He could not make out precisely what they were doing, but there was sinister significance in the abrupt, vi-

in the Frozen Wastelands of Russia



Rand

cious crack of a revolver.

Swede's eyes, red-rimmed from the bitter wind, questioned him eagerly.

"It *might* be interestin'."

Rand shrugged.

"Curiosity isn't a healthy habit. But—let's investigate."

SWEDE began crossing the street—and suddenly broke into a run. From the blurs in the alley came a scream.

A woman's scream—high-pitched, hysterical. It ceased abruptly.

Rand followed, slipping off his right mitten. Whoever the men might be, they were up to some deviltry.

He yanked out his big .45 automatic, jammed it into the side pocket of his sheepskin. Easier to get to it there; and he'd seen times when that split fraction of a second meant the difference between life and death.

It did then. Swede had entered the mouth of the alley—perhaps a dozen feet ahead of Rand. The man who leaped upon him had been crouching against the wall. A niche there of a sort, for neither had noticed him.

And Swede would have never noticed him. Or anything else—had that knife reached its mark. The three things happened almost simultaneously. The black figure leaping

out. A powerfully-built man, fully as big as Swede. A huge knife in his right hand, uplifted, some unseen light reflected on the polished steel.

Swede turning,

having heard the movement behind him. The knife swooping upward still higher, and then—downward. And a sickening feeling in the pit of Rand's stomach that Swede couldn't make it. That he could not possibly evade that sure, swift lunge of the knife.

And then Rand pressing the trigger of the automatic. No time to take aim. No time even to bring up the gun. A desperate yank, then two shots. Blind shooting. A race whether the slug would reach the man before that ten-inch blade had buried itself in Swede's back.

The man with the knife froze. A statue of stone, for a fraction of a second. He collapsed abruptly—on his knees, then flat on his face. Swede grinned. He waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Good shootin', kid!"

"Behind you, palooka!" Rand yelled, leaping forward.

Another man, also appearing abruptly out of the darkness, hurled himself at Swede. Knife in hand, murderous blade driving downward. But now the blond giant was ready. Smoothly, his magnificent body swung into action.

A sidestep, perfectly timed. The knife passed beneath his armpit. A hoarse scream of pain as Swede caught the man's wrist. The knife thudded softly on the snow. Another sharp wrench, and the man's feet left the ground.

SWEDE slammed him against the wall. His right fist created a short arc. The sharp crack of bone striking bone—and Rand knew that the man with the knife would be indifferent to his surroundings for a while. Men generally were—when Swede's big fist connected.

Someone further in the alley, one of the group, shouted hoarsely in Russian.



Swede

"Petrov! Son of a dog, for what are you waiting?"

An orange flash stabbed the darkness. Rand recognized the report—a high-powered rifle. And the rifleman knew his business. The bullet struck the wall an inch from Rand's face. It ricocheted off with a vicious whine.

"Down, Swede!" he shouted. "I'll take care of that baby!"

Swede dropped flat on the snow, rolled over toward the wall. Rand raised the automatic to the level of his eyes, waited. The tattle-tale flash of the rifleman's next shot would seal his death warrant.

AS he crouched there against the wall, he cursed Swede's suggestion. The men might be members of G. P. U., the dreaded Soviet secret police. Making an arrest, perhaps. When Swede and he had burst upon the scene, they probably assumed it was a rescue party. Which meant that the two of them would never get out of Siberia alive. For one of the men was already dead—dead from a .45 slug of his automatic.

It had been a question of Swede's life or the other man's—of course. Only a bullet would have stopped that knife from entering Swede's back. But Rand knew perfectly well what weight his plea of self-defense would have in a Soviet court. If it ever got to a court.

"So damn stupid," he muttered. "Mixing into something which has nothing to do with us. Killing and getting killed maybe—and without the faintest idea what the hell it's all about."

He shrugged. Too late to retreat now. A rifleman out there in the darkness, alert, waiting for some betraying sign from him. To veer away from the protecting darkness of the wall meant swift death.

A minute dragged. Another. Then

another orange flash. Rand gently squeezed the trigger. There came a high-pitched, screaming curse of a man mortally wounded. For a second it lingered, suspended in the darkness. Choked off.

"Got him, kid!" Rand heard Swede's voice.

"It isn't a compliment!" he snapped back. "Stay where you are!"

His eyes tried to pierce the darkness. Black silence. He sensed, rather than saw movement—darker shadows among the shadows. Too vague for accurate shooting, though. And Rand had no desire for further killing. He waited, crouching forward. Nothing else to do.

A woman's voice came suddenly from the darkness—low, tense.

"Don't shoot. They're gone. I'm going to strike a match."

"Very well," Rand replied in Russian. He added, under his breath, to Swede, "Start creeping forward, big boy. May be a trap."

THE black blotch on the snow that was Swede moved slowly, like a huge snake. Rand followed, shoulder scraping the wall, automatic ready. Foot by foot, they advanced. Then—a scraping sound, and the tiny flare of a match. Rand jerked away from the wall. Again the woman's voice, a bit frightened now.

"Don't shoot! Please!"

She was on her knees, one hand holding the match, the other supporting the head of a man;



Vera



Gurin

no one else, so far as Rand could see, within twenty feet at least. He heard movement at his left—Swede getting up.

"Stick to the wall!" he said sharply. "A shadow there. Step out in the middle of the alley—and you'll be a swell target."

A low, relieved laugh from the woman. A touch of hysteria in it.

"You are English?" She spoke in English.

"Americans," said Rand.

"Thank God!" she whispered fervently, lapsing back into Russian.

The match went out. Complete darkness again.

"Say," Swede complained, "I'm gettin' tired o' this. Looks like to me those birds are gone."

"They are gone!" the woman said, speaking almost perfect English. "But," she added bitterly, "they'll be back."

"One moment," Rand said coldly. "These men I had in mind wouldn't have left so conveniently. Those boys don't quit easily. Something damn funny here; and I am suspicious of things I don't understand."

"But," the woman insisted, "they have gone."

"HOW do you know?" Rand snapped. "You can't see through the dark. Who were they, anyway?"

"Don't ask me now—please! It's a long story, and time may be precious. My father is hurt. Will you help me carry him up to our room. You've done so much; won't you do a little more?"

There was a pause.

"Well," Swede said truculently, "what you hesitatin' about?"

"Don't be a sap all your life!" Rand replied impatiently. "We may be in one hell of a jam right now. We ought to scram out of here—and pronto! Before we get in any deeper."

"But there's no harm helpin' the woman."

Rand shook his head. "I don't like it. It's very nice to be a gentleman—sure; but a Russian prison doesn't appeal to me right now, and a wooden kimono even less. Come on; let's get out of here."

The woman said abruptly, "Yes, I think you'd better. I'm sufficiently grateful to you as it is. I suppose I'll manage somehow. He isn't very heavy, and it's only one flight of stairs."

"I'm goin' to help her carry her old man up," Swede growled. "If you ain't got the guts to come along, I'll meet you at Tominoff's."

Rand laughed shortly. "You're reacting exactly as the lady figured a big boob like you would. When it gets through your thick skull that you owe me an apology, I'll take it. All right, pick him up. I'll trail along with this automatic here."

"The door is behind me," the woman said quietly. "The stairs are at the left."

Swede stood still.

"Well?" Rand snapped.

"I'm thinking," said Swede. "It comes hard. I'm generally wrong when it comes to using my head. If you still wanna scram—well, I'm ready."

Rand grinned in the darkness. "Ever read 'Service,' big boy? He made a crack: 'A promise made is a debt unpaid.' You may as well go through with it now. I'm kind of beginning to get curious as to what this is all about. Go on—pick the old guy up!"

CHAPTER II

Black Silence

THE woman led the way up the narrow, ill-smelling stairs. Swede followed, easily carrying the unconscious man in his big



A shallow gash ran across the right side of his forehead

arms. Rand brought up the rear, half-crouching, automatic ready, every sense alert. A trap, maybe, cleverly arranged by the woman; but he meant to make every shot in his automatic count before he went down beneath some murderous knife or bullet.

The silence—the dead, black silence of the house—was oppressive, sinister. Either no one lived there, or bitter experience had taught the occupants to mind their own business. Rand found himself wishing he had adopted a similar philosophy. One lived longer thus—and kept out of trouble.

"A turn here," the woman said softly. "Be very careful please."

A metallic sound—evidently she was fumbling with her keys, then the squeaking of rusty hinges as she opened the door.

"Better let me go in first, kid," Rand said quickly.

Swede stepped aside. Rand brushed by him. His left hand reached out, caught the woman's shoulder.

"We'll go in together, if you don't mind," he said coolly.

"You don't trust me?"

"No!" Rand replied bluntly.

His hand on her shoulder, they

entered the room. With an abrupt gesture, Rand jerked his left arm over, then around her body. He swung her close to him, moved to the left. He felt his back touch the wall. Her body tensed, but she offered no resistance.

"Okay, Swede. Now do just what I say. Lay the guy down first."

"These precautionary measures aren't necessary," said the woman, a tinge of contempt in her voice.

"Maybe not," Rand agreed. "But I'm alive today because I seldom forget them. You put him down, Swede?"

"Yeah."

"Close the door. You ought to be standing near it."

A SHORT pause, then the squeaking of the hinges again.

"Okay, Larry."

"Put your back to it."

"Right."

Rand raised the automatic.

"All right, strike a match!"

Another pause. Swede's big body abruptly leaped into relief as he struck a match. He raised it over his head. Rand's eyes searched the room. A glance was sufficient. A small, bare room. A bed along one wall, a washstand in the corner, an old bureau, with a smashed glass, to the right of it. Nothing else.

"Satisfied?" asked the woman.

"Yes," said Rand.

He released her. Swede lighted another match. She ran across the room to the bureau. An oil lamp stood on its scarred top. She lighted it quickly, turned down the wick, replaced the glass chimney. Grace in her movements; quick efficiency.

Rand suddenly found himself wondering what she looked like. Hitherto, while she was a threat, a possible danger, he hadn't given her personality a thought.

She turned away from the bureau,

holding the lamp in her right hand. Rand caught his breath. He forgot Swede. Forgot the man on the floor. The fight a few minutes ago. Himself. Forgot everything except the flaming beauty of the girl facing him.

She held the lamp at the level of her shoulder, the yellow light accentuating her face as a cameo. An exquisite cameo. A dark, proud face. Beauty there—and yet more. Character, breeding. The rough peasant clothes she wore failed as a disguise. She was an aristocrat. Born so—and would ever remain so.

She spoke to Swede.

"Will you please put him on the bed?"

It broke the spell. Rand frowned, annoyed at his absorption. Women had left him two souvenirs: gray hair on the temples and a memory. He intended it to remain—a memory.

"Well," he said sharply, "you heard what she asked you to do."

The blond giant shook his head. He picked up the unconscious man, carried him to the bed. His eyes never left the girl's face.

"Hell," Rand said to himself, half-grinning, "this is getting serious."

He strolled to the bed. A glance convinced him that on one point at least the girl spoke the truth. The old man on the bed was her father. No doubt about it. The same features, the same proud expression. A handsome old man, though privations and suffering had left their marks on his face.

A SHALLOW gash ran across the right side of his forehead. Blood still trickled at the lower end. The girl, returning from the washstand with a wet cloth, bathed the wound. Almost immediately the old man showed signs of returning consciousness.

"Won't be long now," said Rand

"And if he isn't hurt anywhere else, you've got nothing to worry about."

The girl smiled bitterly.

"Nothing to worry about, eh?"

"Implying," said Rand—"what?"

She did not have time to answer. Swede, standing ten feet away, suddenly threw himself in a flying tackle. His shoulder hit Rand on the hip. Two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind it. Rand crashed into the girl. Both slid a dozen feet across the room.

A PERFECTLY-TIMED, beautifully-executed muscular reaction. A tenth of a second, perhaps—but it was sufficient. A man outside the window had jerked the trigger of the revolver a tenth of a second too late. A mad splintering of glass. A slapping sound as the bullet buried itself in the plaster wall—in the precise spot against which Rand's body had been.

The man on the ladder outside the window cursed hoarsely. With a single vicious blow of the revolver's barrel he smashed the remainder of the glass.

Rand saw that bearded, animal face turn in his direction. Slanted, pig-gish little eyes, venomous with hatred, glittering with blood lust. The barrel of the revolver swinging around. Swiftly, surely. Another fraction of a second, and it would be spitting swift death.

Desperately, Rand reached for his automatic, back in his shoulder holster, beneath the sheepskin.

"Won't make it," he said to himself. "Can't!"

The barrel of the revolver swung around. The target only fifteen feet away. Rand's hand now on the butt of the automatic. He rolled over convulsively, half-sick with the conviction he couldn't make it. The other would get in one shot at least.

The shot came. Crack! Something hot—like the burning tip of a cigarette—touched Rand's left ear. And then the automatic in his hand roared its message of death. The man outside the window threw up his arms. For a moment he seemed suspended in midair, mouth open, twisted to one side. His body toppled backward. A scream, choked off abruptly.

Rand leaped to his feet. He ran to the window. Below, a black blotch on the snow. Arms and legs sprawling out. Like a big black spider. As he watched, other figures materialized from the darkness.

Rand's thin lips twisted grimly. He ignored the hot blood trickling down the left side of his neck. The automatic made a short arc. Centered. Then spurted flame. One of the figures below twisted around like a mad dervish. The others scurried away like rats. Two blotches on the snow now. Two big black spiders.

"Damn 'em!" Rand said under his breath.

HE leaned further out of the window. He thought he saw movement in a doorway at the very mouth of the alley. Savagely he aimed at the center of the door. He did not have an opportunity to squeeze the trigger. Steel fingers gripped his shoulders, swinging him around and away from the window. Swede's bronzed face towered over him.

"Let me go!" Rand said coldly. "Damn you, *will* you let me go?"

The giant shook his head.

"Easy, kid! I know you, when you get started that way. You don't scare me."

The devil was on Rand's thin, dark face. He said slowly, dropping the words out of the corner of his mouth: "For the last time, palooka—let go!"

Swede picked him up, shook him

like a terrier might shake a rat. He kept it up. The girl watched him, wide-eyed. He lowered him.

"Thanks," said Rand. "I'm all right now." The killer's look had gone out of his eyes.

"**H**ANGIN' out the window the way you was," Swede said apologetically, "you coulda been popped off like that." He snapped his fingers. "Besides, I thought you oughta go easy on the few shells left in that gat o' yours. They might come in handy gettin' outa here. For once, I kinda used my head. Brother," he added, grinning, "you're the most cold-bloodedly cautious guy I ever seen, but when you go haywire—" He shook his head.

Rand touched the side of his neck. His fingers came away moist, sticky. The girl approached him, holding a white cloth. She gestured for him to lower his head. Rand obeyed indifferently.

The emotional reaction had left him weak, cold. He was glad it didn't happen often—that snap in his brain when he turned killer: cold-blooded, merciless killer. Some day, he knew, it would cost him his life. For the chances he took during those moments were suicidal.

The girl bandaged his head. As he straightened, he caught fear in her eyes. Fear of himself. It annoyed him.

"I am all right now," he said sharply. "How is your father?"

The girl's eyes widened. She whirled to the bed. The old man, forgotten during the murderous interruption, was sitting up, his back against the head of the bed. He was smoking a long Russian cigarette, and seemed extraordinarily cool and composed.

He gestured carelessly with the cigarette.

"I am also quite normal—thank

you." Like the girl, he spoke perfect English. "That was excellent shooting, my friend."

Rand grinned. The old man's coolness was genuine; Rand liked him instantly.

"Had to be—accurate. The gentleman lost because his wasn't—by perhaps a quarter of an inch."

"I appreciate that. I assume that you're also the gentleman who did that magnificent shooting in the alley. I lost consciousness a few seconds after you directed a bullet through Petrov's filthy carcass. It saved the situation—temporarily, at least—for myself and my daughter, I am very grateful to you."

Rand waved his hand.

"One of those mad impulses," he said coolly.

The old man flipped the ash off his cigarette.

"Exceedingly mad, if I may say so. I shall explain by introducing myself first. I am Feodor Vladimir Pavlov, Grand Duke, related by blood to the house of Romanoff. This is my daughter Vera. As my execution has already been commanded, your speaking to me now will alone probably earn for you indefinite lodging in our palatial Russian prisons."

"Interesting," Rand murmured.

"**Q**UITE," said the old man. "That, however, should be the least of your worries. The Government doesn't know my whereabouts. Others, who have nothing to do with the Government but who are, nevertheless, equally interested in my person, do know. I am referring to the rats in the alley—Gurin and his gang of cutthroats."

"And who, pray," said Rand, "is Mr. Gurin?"

"A crook—of international prominence. Being a clever devil, and realizing that further public dis-

turbance would probably bring the police, resulting in my arrest and ruination of his plans, he retreated. It wasn't, I assure you, cowardice."

"I am afraid," sighed Rand, "I still don't understand."

The old man nodded. "You shall—presently. First, I wish to acquaint you with the identity of the animal in the window. He is—was Kiok, brother of Agur. Agur is the chieftain of Kalmuck bandits who rove the plains a hundred miles north of here."

"The significance of which is—what?"

"That your lives," said the old nobleman, "aren't worth a kopeck. Agur will avenge the death of his brother. Sooner or later, you'll be kidnaped, tortured and, eventually, butchered."

"And I know precisely what I am saying. Messengers probably going to the chieftain this very moment. I am not a fatalist, but—my reason tells me to bow to the inevitable. Your life—the lives of everyone of us aren't worth a kopeck."

"How tremendously interesting!" Rand murmured.

CHAPTER III

Kalmuck Revenge

SILENCE for a while. Bitter cold seeped through the smashed window. The oil lamp began to splutter, running out of kerosene. Rand lighted a cigarette, puffed on it thoughtfully. The old man might have spoken the truth. But he could not see the story as a whole. Fragments here and there, weaving a fantastic pattern.

An internationally-known crook—Kalmuck bandits.—The old nobleman and his beautiful daughter. What were they doing in Northeastern Siberia, anyway?—Kalmuck revenge.

"You will be kidnaped, tortured and, eventually, butchered." Damn dramatic, but—

"Hooey," Rand said to himself.

On a sudden impulse, he strolled to the window. Looked down. He turned away with a frown. The two bodies were gone! It spoke of others—many others.

Swede's eyes met his. Questioning. Rand could not answer his questions. He turned to the old man.

"What are your plans?"

"I have none."

"Quitting?"

"Yes."

"And your daughter?"

"I know. But what can I do?" He sat up straighter. "Gurin is working hand-in-hand with the Kalmuck chieftain. Every exit from the town is watched—that I know. Should I venture out openly to seek outside help, someone will recognize me. It means—execution." He leaned forward. "Gentlemen, I'll make you a proposition."

He paused. Rand said nothing.

"WE'RE all in the same boat now, as you Americans would say. You too have got to get out of Siberia now. None of us probably will—but you, at least, are in a position to make an effort. I am stopped—on every side. Would you help us?"

"You said—a proposition," Rand drawled. There was hard suspicion in his eyes.

"Yes. The mouth of the Ob River, where it forms its Delta into the Gulf of Ob is only three hundred miles north from here. A Russian whaler, captain of which is an old friend of mine, is awaiting us there now. Get us to it, and it's liberty—life for all of us; and fifty thousand dollars apiece for you. That's my proposition."

"You mean," Swede cut in, in-

credulously, "you have all that money with you?"

"No. I should have explained. Two months ago, I realized I had to get out of Russia. My family has been for centuries one of the wealthiest in all Europe. I gathered our valuables—family heirlooms, mostly, and rather priceless paintings, the total easily amounting to several millions of dollars—placed them in a trunk and buried it near my country estate.

THE servant who had helped me fell into the hands of Gurin. Under torture, he revealed the secret, but died before he had a chance to describe the precise spot where the treasure was buried. That's what Gurin wants; I shall die before he gets it."

"I am beginning to understand," said Rand.

The old man smiled bitterly. "My original plans were excellent. I'd made arrangements with the captain of the whaler. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have many difficulties reaching the Coast. Terrible privations probably, but I'd make it.

"The whaler would bring me to some European port, I'd get in touch with some men I can trust in Russia, tell them the burial place of the treasure, and they'd smuggle it out of Russia to me. But—Gurin caught up with me here. You've seen what happened."

The girl spoke abruptly. "You'll help us? Oh, I know you will. We need you."

"Vera!" the old man said sharply.

"But we do!" she cried.

Swede touched Rand's arm.

"What do you say, kid?"

Rand rubbed the stubble of beard on his chin. He looked at the girl. He thought of the two bodies in the alley—removed. The old man *might* have framed the Kalmuck vengeance

story—as well as the treasure yarn—in order to get help, but Rand doubted it. He knew men.

"It looks to me, Swede," he said quietly, "we just have no other choice. We've got ourselves into a jam—and this seems to be the only way out." He turned to the old man. "All right, we'll see what we can do."

"My daughter and I thank you, gentlemen," the old man said with quiet dignity.

"Save it until we get you out," Rand said curtly. "We'll leave you now. For an hour, maybe. Don't believe that gang would be back so quickly. Anyway, it's a chance you'll have to take. Got a gun here?"

"Yes."

"Good. Use it. Come on, Swede."

"Brother," Swede murmured as they descended the narrow stairs, "you sure don't believe in wastin' time."

"We've got to work fast, if we're to get out of this damn country alive."

"She's a swell looking jane," Swede put in irrelevantly.

"That's not why I'm doing it," Rand snapped.

"No?"

"You go to hell!" said Rand.

CHAPTER IV

Somolov

RAND slid out of the door into the alley. He hugged the wall, moving along it. At his right, a swishing sound. Swede, making the same progress. No other sound, except the howling of the wind in the chimneys above. Darkness, silence.

If spies watched their movements, they were well concealed and knew their business. Rand strained his eyes, fingers gripping tightly the

automatic. No sign, no sound of life. They were alone in the alley, apparently.

Gradually, they worked their way to the mouth of it. Out on the street now. Rand relaxed. Replaced his automatic. The Kalmucks — Rand feared them now more than their Russian leader—seemed to favor the knife. In the middle of the street, comparatively light, back-stabbing was difficult.

"WHERE to now, kid?" asked Swede, catching up to him.

"Somolov. Let's find out if that plane arrived. If it did, we'll load on the old man and the girl, throw the damn mail out and bee-hive for the coast. It'll be a cinch."

"Yeah, but what if the plane didn't come? They've been promisin' it to us for the last three weeks."

Rand shrugged. "Then we'll have to hang around until it does. No other choice. Though I'll admit we'll be running a sweet chance of getting our skins perforated."

"Which same don't appeal to me."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?" Rand murmured.

Two men crossed the street ahead of them. Rand slipped his hand beneath the sheepskin, fingers caressing the butt of the automatic. The men disappeared in one of the houses. Rand relaxed. Swede grinned. "Jumpy, eh?"

"Cautious," Rand replied shortly.

They paused before one of the better houses. Somolov's home. Yellow light filtered through the curtained windows. The President of Workers Council of Kurlov was evidently at home.

Swede banged his fist against the massive door. Again. Footsteps within. Clanging sound of bolts drawn aside. The door swung open. An old woman looked out, one yellow hand at her throat clutching the folds of

an old Russian army overcoat. She stared at them with the dull apathy of a Russian peasant.

"Somolov," Swede growled. "We want to see Somolov. Tavarisch Somolov."

Still no sign of comprehension on the old woman's face. But she stepped aside. Swede swaggered in, Rand behind him. Anton Somolov sat writing behind a huge desk. He did not look up.

Swede scraped his feet, coughed. The fat Russian continued writing. Swede clenched his fist, then relaxed. Nothing left to do but wait—until the Russian deigned to recognize them.

Rand wasn't watching the commissar. Three soldiers sat on a bench along the right wall. One held a short carbine across his lap. The other two were armed with revolvers. The flaps of their holsters were pinned back.

A significant detail in itself—as well as their presence. Reason for it. The Russian had expected them to drop in that evening. Rand didn't like it. He tried to remember how many shots he had left in his automatic.

SOMOLOV lowered his pen with an important flourish, looked up.

"Ah, my American friends! I am glad you have come. I have news."

"Good!" said Rand. "You've got the plane?"

The Russian shook his head. "It is with much sorrow and regret that I must inform you of the message which I have received from the Executive Council at Tomsk. The plans for air mail have been changed. The War Department at Moscow is unable to spare the necessary airplanes."

"Is this final?"

"Unfortunately—yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Rand ex-

ploded. "We come six thousand miles upon the invitation of your Government. We're supposed to risk our necks flying air mail across Siberia for you birds—for a thousand a month. Your War Department suddenly changes its mind. What the hell are we supposed to do now? How're we to get back?"

"You may take up the finances for your return transportation with the Executive Council at Tomsk."

"But, damn it," Swede cut in savagely, "Tomsk is eight hundred miles from here."

The Russian smiled. "Americans—they are noted for their ingenuity. I repeat—I am sorry; the matter is now out of my hands."

"Oh, yeah?" Swede said grimly.

With two tigerish strides, he approached the desk, towered over the Russian.

"So it's outa your hands, eh? Why, you—"

"Look behind you, Swede," Rand interrupted quietly.

The three soldiers were on their feet. The carbine covered Swede. The revolver in the hand of another. The third had the ugly snout of a German Luger trained on Rand. And the expression on the faces of each unmistakable. They were merely awaiting a command from Somolov.

The Russian stood up. He pointed to the door.

"Get out!"

"May as well, big boy," said Rand. "We haven't got a chance."

AS the door slammed behind them, they heard the Russians laugh.

"The little fat pig!" Swede panted. "I shoulda pasted him one anyway."

"Yeah, and get a slug through you just about a second later. It wasn't worth it. After all he was probably just acting under orders."

They walked on a while, the soft snow crunching beneath their feet.

"Well," said Swede, "this kinda gums up your plans. What now?"

Rand shook his head. "Trust to luck, I guess. Big boy, now we are in a jam!"

Swede grinned. "It ain't the first time. How about Tominoff's joint. A drink generally helps."

"Lead the way, Sunshine," said Rand.

CHAPTER V

Fighting Giants

TOMINOFF'S *traktir* was low, long, dark, and saturated with the indescribable odor of unwashed bodies, cheap tobacco and alcoholic fumes of raw vodka. From a side table in the rear, Rand gave the orders to the fat proprietor. Tominoff waddled away.

"Another fat pig," Swede commented disgustedly. "I feel like punchin' him in the nose—just for the hell of it. Come to think of it, I'm in a kinda nose-punchin' mood."

"Yeah?" Rand grinned. "Well, lay off! Save those big mitts of yours until there'll be need for 'em. And I can promise you *that*."

He looked around. Men in various stages of drunkenness sat, leaned or slept at the dirty tables. Peasants, a sprinkling of soldiers. Here and there, a better dressed man — who might be anything.

At the two tables across the room from them, a number of Kalmucks. Broad, squat, powerful-looking little men. Dressed in roughly-sewn furs from their moccasins to the wolf caps. Brown, bearded faces, flat-nosed, a Mongolian slant to the eyes. Tough little devils.

They paid no attention to Rand. Or else were mighty good actors. The white man at the table at their immediate left did. A burly, red-headed man, with the fleshy face of a brute, long, gorilla-like arms, pow-

erful torso. He caught Rand's eye, stared. Then stood up jerkily.

Rand kicked Swede under the table.

"Here's where your mitts go to work," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "Got a hunch who this gent is. And he's got a mean look in his eyes."

Swede grinned happily.

The red-headed Russian reached their table. Towered over it—a great bulk of a man. A brutish twist to the side of his mouth, cold menace in his eyes.

"I believe," he said slowly, in English, "I've — er — encountered you gentlemen before."

"Possible," Rand murmured.

"An hour ago, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"In," the Russian added softly, "a certain alley?"

Rand lowered his glass. His eyes interlocked with the Russian's.

"Yes—Mr. Gurin."

Silence for a moment—hot, tense.

"Meddlers," said the Russian, "generally get in trouble. Serious trouble, sometimes. Trouble which might cost them their necks."

RAND sensed the Russian's body tensing. Saw the Kalmucks, across the room rise. A dozen of them maybe. Anticipation already in their eyes. Hands already reaching for their knives. Savages about to be in on a kill. A pack of wolves closing in on its prey.

Rand smiled at the Russian.

"A warning?" he asked gently.

"A prediction," said the Russian.

Rand lunged to the right. Gurin was a fraction of a second too late. He'd thrown his body against the table, hoping to pin Rand to the wall. The table crashed over. Rand tried to straighten. Slipped. He fell in the arms of a drunken peasant at a neighboring table.

The man awoke with a frightened grunt. He sat up—and sighed suddenly.

Something resembling a big black wasp appeared square in the center of his forehead. A bullet—intended for Rand.

THE peasant collapsed, sliding sideways out of the chair. Rand rolled over desperately, but the second shot did not come. Swede had gone into action. Head down, hard fists hammering. A magnificent fighting machine.

A smashing uppercut sent Gurin staggering backward. Swede lived because the Russian dropped the revolver. No time to pick it up, for Swede was upon him. A right, a left, a right again. Another man would have gone down; the Russian merely shook his head. He came weaving in, gorilla-like arms outstretched, fingers hooked talon-wise.

The two giants had the floor. The Kalmucks stood back, their eyes glittering. Rand got up, crouched against the wall. A touch of the trigger of his automatic—and Gurin would have gone down with a bullet through his heart. But that which held the Kalmucks from leaping with the long knives kept Rand from firing.

The thrill of contest. Who was the better man? The blond, broad-shouldered giant or the great Russian bear? Again and again Swede's big fists found the Russian's face, his body. Blows which could be heard clear across the room. Bone striking bone. Again and again, they snapped the Russian's head back. Sent him staggering backward, an animal-like rumble in his throat.

Swede fighting coolly, scientifically, a contemptuous smile on his lips. Making each blow count. Wearing the Russian down. Playing with him. Gurin's face becoming a bloody hor-

ror. And still, in the dead silence, he came boring in.

Swede—as everyone else in that room — knew Gurin's object. The Russian was a wrestler. Once he got his gorilla arms around Swede, the blond giant—big as he was—would die with a broken back. But Swede demonstrated another science—new to that savage audience. The science of boxing.

His big body was a melody of grace as he leaped in and out. On the balls of his feet, half-crouching—and big fists ever punishing. Cutting the skin, bruising the flesh; gradually forcing the inevitable.

IT came abruptly. Crack! A long right-cross, two hundred pounds of bone and muscle behind it. It landed behind and below Gurin's ear. The Russian's head snapped sideways. For a moment, his big body tottered—like a tree undercut by a woodsman's ax. His knees stiff, he fell flat on his face.

And then hell broke loose. A savage yell from the Kalmucks. Long knives glittering. Wild faces, further distorted with bloodlust. Fur-clad bodies leaping forward. Kill, kill, kill!

No time to think. To plan action. The little brown men were upon Rand. The first died with a bullet through his skull.

A sidestep, as the ten-inch blade in the hand of the second sought Rand's throat. The man wielding the knife crumpled. Blood clung to the butt of Rand's automatic. The force with which he had brought the gun down on the Kalmuck's skull almost sprained his shoulder.

He leaped forward to meet the third man. Swung out with the heavy butt. Missed. The Kalmuck came up. A flash of steel. The razor-like edge made a clean slit in Rand's sheepskin. His left hand

flashed out, caught the other's knife wrist. Swiftly, he jerked up the gun. And then the Kalmuck's free hand caught *his* wrist.

So they stood there, panting, glaring at each other; cold gray eyes, slanted black eyes.

Swede's voice rose above the bedlam.

"All right, you rats! Come 'n' get it!"

Rand risked a glance over his shoulder. The giant had swung up a heavy wooden table. He whirled it over his head, and then in a great circle at the level of his waist. In his hands, it was a terrible weapon. Men went down screaming. Broken bones. Smashed skulls.

"The crazy palooka!" burst from Rand's lips.

Swede had cleared a circle. But he wasn't content with that. He leaped forward. Another step. Still another. And over the table swinging, smashing everything in its path. The Kalmucks scattered like rats.

AND then Rand's mind jerked to the man before him. For he felt the knife wrist slipping out of his fingers. Oil on the Kalmuck's body. As he tried to wrench the automatic loose. Realizing he could not hold on much longer to the slippery wrist, the Kalmuck brought up his knee. Jabbed it just below Rand's belt—a vicious, experienced blow. A red glare danced before Rand's eyes.

He suddenly realized that his left hand no longer held the knife wrist. And then saw the knife. Saw those ten inches of steel going up and back—the backward swing of the pendulum which would end in his death. Triumph in the slanted black eyes. The look of an animal about to kill.

Another Kalmuck at his left. Another knife, plunging forward. But not at himself. For a moment, Rand

thought he went mad. For the second Kalmuck had buried the knife in the heart of his tribesman.

It wasn't an accident. Done deliberately. The Kalmuck flashed his white teeth. Rand looked down stupidly at the man at his feet. When he looked up again, the Kalmuck who had averted the death blow had disappeared.

Swede loomed up before him, still clinging to the gory table.

"Come on!" he panted. "Follow me!"

RAND'S head cleared. He followed Swede, automatic ready to flame death. It wasn't necessary. No one tried to stop them. In thirty seconds, they were outside. Out in the clean, cold air.

"Well," Swede said exultantly, "I call that a scrap!"

"It isn't over yet," Rand snapped back, jerking around with the automatic.

The Kalmuck running toward them waved his arms wildly. Rand lowered the automatic.

"That's right!" said Swede. "Save him for Mrs. O'Hara's son."

"Lay off!" Rand replied. "That hombre saved my life two minutes ago. Though," he added with a frown, "I'll be damned if I can figure out why."

The man approached them, the palms of his hands raised in midair.

"Friend," he said in the odd Russian used by the Kalmucks.

Rand nodded. "Of that," he replied in Russian, "I have had proof."

He saw now that the Kalmuck was an old man, though he still retained the vigor of youth.

"I am Kusslo. You are my friend."

"Good," said Rand. "But why am I your friend?"

"You have killed Kiok," the Kalmuck said simply. "Kiok killed my son. You are my friend."

"That's three times you're his friend, Larry," grinned Swede, who understood enough Russian to follow the conversation.

"At one time," the Kalmuck continued with quiet dignity, "I was chief of the tribe. I go to the great war. When I come back, my people do not welcome me. Agur and his brother Kiok poison the minds of my people. Into the back of my first born Kiok stabbed with his knife. Ay, into the back. For my son was a great warrior. You have avenged him. Kusslo is grateful."

Rand looked thoughtfully at the old man. His mind raced. The Kalmuck spoke the truth. No doubt about it. Hence he could be trusted. But would he do it? Would he risk his neck—out of gratitude?

"You have paid your debt of gratitude, Kusslo," Rand said gravely. "But will you do even more?"

"Speak," said the Kalmuck.

"I desire a sled and ponies. Of these can you provide?"

"Ay, that I can," Kusslo replied promptly.

"I desire a driver who knows the country, for I wish to reach the waters which never freeze." Rand pointed north.

"It is Agur's country—and you have killed his brother," the old man said significantly.

"That it is," said Rand. "And Agur may seek to stop us. And even so, Agur may die."

The old Kalmuck's eyes glittered.

"Then again I shall be chief, and my son after me, and the son of my son."

Rand nodded.

"I SHALL do it!" the Kalmuck said slowly. "Yes, I shall do it. My son will help me. My years are many; if die I must, it is good to die so. When do you wish the sled and ponies?"

"We have no time to lose," said Rand.

"And that we shall not. You will come with me?"

"Yes," said Rand. He turned to Swede. "Get our trunk, kid. Haul it up to the girl's room. It's only a little ways, and they won't take any action until Gurin comes to, at least. Which won't be for a while yet. Break out a couple boxes of these .45 slugs, and put our Winchester together. Come on, brother; move! We'll give those hombres a run for their money."

CHAPTER VI

Snow Trail

LIKE still white death were the Siberian steppes, locked in the grip of winter. Smooth white surface, so far as the eyes could see. Snow, ice. And God-forsaken loneliness equalled only by the Great Barrens of Northern Canada.

The Kalmuck, Pavlov and his daughter rode in the square sled. The Kalmuck stood upright, almost constantly cracking the twenty-foot whip. The old man and the girl sat in the bottom of the sled, wrapped in furs. Swede, Rand and a younger Kalmuck followed, running easily on wide-webbed Kalmuck snowshoes.

Far to the south, gray Arctic dawn was breaking. Already six hours on the trail, yet none of the running men showed fatigue. Swede O'Hara's body did not know the meaning of the word; Rand's slim body was as tough as old hickory, and he'd spent years on Northern trails; the Kalmuck had been doing it all his life. And the three shaggy little Siberian ponies had the endurance of the gray wolf.

No one spoke. The great silence discouraged it—and breath was precious. One by one, miles slipped by.

Occasionally, Rand would glance

over his shoulder. No doubt in his mind that Gurin and the Kalmucks were on their trail—a trail on the soft snow that a child might have followed.

No attempt had been made to stop them when leaving the town, but slanted eyes had watched them go. Fur-clad figures running to report even before they'd gone out of sight—

On the trail, running men can out-distance horses. Constantly able to take advantage of short cuts. Occasional snow-covered dunes, too steep for the ponies to drag the sled over, yet, which the Kalmucks could easily cross. Thus ever gaining, closing in.

And the shaggy little ponies, though tireless, had to plough through snow fully a foot deep in places before their hoofs reached the under-crust.

Only a matter of time. Then it would be a running fight—clear to the coast. Facing odds of perhaps ten to one. Bandits to whom fighting was second nature. Fierce little devils who could not be bluffed, who'd fight until their last breath. Clear to the coast—if they ever reached it—

RAND shrugged. Within the next few hours, hell would break loose. They might be lucky—

More hours dragged by. The runners of the sled sang on the snow. The sled creaked. Bullet-like reports of the twenty-foot whip in the old Kalmuck's hands. The ponies snorting, waving their bushy tails, tossing their manes. The snow scrunching softly beneath the snowshoes. And the great silence hemming them in. A silence one could hear. When the sun was high in the sky, marking the half-passage of the short Arctic day, Kusslo stopped the ponies.

"We rest," he said to Rand. "We eat. The trail is long."

Rand nodded. He approached the Kalmuck again as he squatted over the tiny fire.

"You are sure you know the place he spoke of?" He pointed to Pavlov, tramping about on the snow, stretching his cramped limbs.

Kusslo smiled. "When boy, I speared the walrus there. Ay, my friend, I know it well."

"Good," said Rand.

HE walked away. He was restless, uneasy. Glancing back over their trail, the white emptiness failed to reassure him. Swede's big body loomed up alongside of him.

"What's the matter, kid?"

"Nothing," Rand said shortly. "But I've got a hunch. In fact—"

He gripped Swede's arm, pointed. The wise old Kalmuck had stopped the sled at the top of a long incline. From there they had visibility of several miles. Far away, almost on the horizon, tiny black specks now dotted the white. The pursuit was drawing near.

"Won't be long now," Rand said grimly.

Swede tried the bolt of his Winchester.

"Oh, what the hell!" he grinned. "It'll break the monotony, anyway. I'm kinda gettin' bored."

Rand gestured to the Kalmuck. He pointed down the trail.

"Yes," the old man said simply. "Pretty soon, they catch us."

Rand stroked thoughtfully the stubble of beard on his chin. He looked up the trail, to his left. The incline continued upward for perhaps another mile, then the land leveled sharply. The black specks, when he looked down the trail again, were already larger. The Kalmucks were making good time.

Rand jerked his thumb to the sled.

"All right, Kusslo," he said sharply, "we make trail again."

The Kalmuck nodded, ran to the sled. Two minutes later, his whip cracked savagely. The ponies threw themselves against the traces. Snow flew beneath their sharp little hooves as the runners clung to the snow. The frozen runners jerked loose. With a lurch, the sled was off.

Fifteen minutes—and they were over the crest of the incline. Two hundred yards further, Rand ordered a halt.

"Come here, palooka!" he shouted to Swede. He motioned the Kalmuck and Pavlov also to join them. Then he spoke in slow, simple Russian that Swede could understand. "You"—he poked his finger in the Kalmuck's chest—"go ahead with the sled. And make much speed. You," he looked at the Russian—"can you use a rifle?"

Pavlov nodded.

"Good," said Rand. "You stay behind. And you two." He gestured to Swede and the younger Kalmuck. "That's four rifles. Now when they come over the crest—"

The old Kalmuck grinned. Respect in his eyes when he regarded Rand. Without another word, he got up and ran to the sled.

The younger Kalmuck caressed the stock of his Russian army rifle, his black eyes glittering.

"I think," Swede said, slowly, "I'm goin' to have lots o' fun."

PAVLOV walked quietly to the two rifles the Kalmuck had thrown out on the snow before he drove away, picked up one, worked the bolt. Rand, watching him, said to himself,

"The old boy's all right. Plenty of guts—and he's used a rifle before."

He raised his voice. "All right, gang. Break out the ammunition. Fifteen clips a piece. I want plenty

of lead spilled—and spilled in one hell of a hurry!"

Again minutes dragged. They waited, spread out in a line. Each man on his knees, a small pile of cartridges ahead of him. Rifles ready, faces set, grim. When the Kalmucks appeared over the crest, death would go on a rampage.

Rand turned to the younger Kalmuck, kneeling at his right.

"How many warriors think you are coming?"

The Kalmuck clenched and unclenched his hands five times.

"Fifty?"

"Yes."

RAND shook his head. He discarded his original hope—that enough Kalmucks might die when they came over the crest to cripple their force. Inducing the others, perhaps, to give up pursuit. Especially if their two leaders—Gurin and Agur—were among those killed.

But fifty men cannot be annihilated by five—no matter how clever the ambush. Ten, maybe, fifteen, twenty. Still enough left to carry on.

The younger Kalmuck hissed softly.

"They come."

Rand listened. Heard nothing. His ears weren't as acute as the native's. He gestured to the other men. Four rifle butts jerked to four shoulders.

"Not," he cautioned, "until I give command to fire."

Now other sounds disturbed the silence. Scrunching of snow beneath many feet. A guttural voice. A laugh. And then the first line appeared over the crest. A dozen men, crouching forward, running swiftly on their snowshoes.

Amazingly, several seconds went by before the four kneeling men were noticed. Now a second line had come over the crest. One of the

Kalmucks yelled shrilly, jerking around to unsling his rifle.

"Let 'em have it!" Rand shouted.

The four rifles cracked as one. Again. Still again. Twelve shots in three seconds—and at least eight men writhed on the snow. Murderous shooting. They kept it up. Firing quickly, yet with cold deliberation. Making every shot count.

The twin line of Kalmucks dissolved—as if struck by a tornado. Screaming men clawed the snow. Others stumbled over them—and died. The Kalmucks did not have a chance.

Nothing could withstand that steady, deliberate stream of lead.

The remaining handful alive made a dash for the crest—to run into the third line of Kalmucks, pressing forward, excited by the shooting. A mad confusion reigned. And ever the four worked the bolts and triggers of the hot rifles. And men continued to fall screaming, clawing the snow.

Rand saw Gurin's bulky figure in the second line. He was the last man on the right, tugging violently at the revolver on his hip. Rand swung the rifle around. With savage deliberation, he lingered, the Russian's broad chest clear in the sights. Then gently squeezed the trigger.

HE cursed under his breath. A Kalmuck, racing madly for safety back over the crest, lurched against the Russian. It cost him his life. Again Rand worked the bolt, pressed the trigger—the Russian's chest in the sights. A click—the hammer striking an empty shell.

Feverishly, Rand slipped a new clip in the magazine. Snapped back the plate. Worked the bolt. And jerked the rifle to his shoulder. Too late. The Russian had retreated beyond the safety of the crest—taking the last dozen feet in a magnificent

dive. The remaining Kalmucks followed his example.

"Like the old days in France, eh?" Rand heard Swede's voice.

"I'll say!"

At least a score of men lay dead or dying on the snow. Several of the wounded tried to crawl to safety. A single shot rang out. Another. A third. Kusslo's son finishing the wounded. Fierce exultation on the Kalmuck's face. A savage completing the kill.

Rand opened his mouth to stop him. Then shrugged. Too late. Besides, the wounded would have frozen to death anyway. The others would not pause to take care of them. Only death stops a savage on the blood trail.

He stood up.

"Let's go. A few minutes before they organize and rush us. Then it'll be with ready rifles. Which might mean another story. Come on!"

They ran after the sled. Every hundred yards, another man paused, keeping the rest covered against a rifleman crawling over the crest. None came, however. Not the Kalmuck style. Sneaking up on their victim in the dead of the night, then a long knife, burying into the enemy's throat, was more their way of fighting.

MINUTE after minute they ran on the wide snowshoes, Rand in the lead, the others trailing single file. On both sides, the parallel ruts of the sled.

Rand knew that in addition to reducing the enemy's forces one half, they accomplished much more. Slowed up the pursuit. Taught the Kalmucks respect for the deadly efficiency of their rifles. They'd investigate now every possible place for ambush before venturing recklessly across it. A loss of time.

They soon sighted the sled. The

old Kalmuck driving obeyed orders. He waved his whip triumphantly in reply to the shrill whoop from his son, but did not slow up. The girl, standing upright too, waved something white.

"Sayin' hello to me," said Swede, running alongside of Rand.

He flourished his rifle. The girl waved again, unmistakably in reply to his gesture. Swede smiled happily.

"Didn't I tell you?"

Rand frowned. The blond giant was a child. Rand had knocked around the world with him eight years. They were as close as only men could be who had time and again faced death together, who had saved each other's lives. Rand did not want to see him hurt. There was a look in Swede's eyes as he waved again to the girl he did not like—

CHAPTER VII

The Blizzard

THE old Kalmuck stopped the sled. Rand ran toward him.

"It is a bad place to make camp," he said angrily.

"I do not stop to make camp," said Kusslo. "Look!"

Rand followed his outstretched hand. The old man was pointing Northeast. Rand was puzzled for a moment. Then he understood. He hadn't noticed the black clouds. Way off on the horizon, they hung like a black pall. And even as he looked, Rand could see the black curtain spreading: ugly, sinister.

"Storm?" he asked quickly.

"Ay. Great wind pretty soon, and much snow."

"Good!" said Rand. "It will cover our tracks."

The old man shook his head.

"When the great wind come and the snow, men must find shelter. Or

they die. Their faces turn black and they do not feel their fingers and the fingers of their feet, and soon they want to lie down on the snow and sleep. They never awaken."

"Isn't that sweet?" Rand murmured in English. He said, "Know you of shelter here?"

"The hunters make *kanus* in the summer—huts where a man may crawl in when the great wind comes. If we find one, we live. If none we see—" The Kalmuck shrugged.

He picked up the reins. The twenty-foot whip cracked. Again the sled lurched, creaked—and the runners sang on the snow. The trail again. But now an impending blizzard to face.

"Lady luck," Rand murmured whimsically, "smile. Boy, how we need you!"

The air began to rustle. Softly at first, then with an ever-increasing velocity. The Arctic wind, giving warning of the frozen hell to follow. The old man now lashed the ponies—skillful flicks of the long whip. The younger Kalmuck constantly veered off, now to the right, now to the left, like a bloodhound anxious to pick up a scent. Sometimes he would disappear for minutes at a stretch.

THE wind brought a new sound. A sound incredibly lonely—a sound which made Rand's spine tingle. The howling of the wolves, greeting the coming of the storm. The enormous gray Siberian wolves. They were now entering their territory—the tundra stretches, the home of the reindeer.

The black pall spread. The sky adjoining it became murky gray. Swiftly, it grew darker. Still darker. And ever the wind increased in velocity.

Until it soon shrieked across the plains like a lost soul in torment.

Until progress against it became a bitter fight.

It had scooped up tiny particles of ice in its mad dash across the snows; they lashed the skin like thousands of tiny needles, adhered to eyelashes, blinded.

"Ain't this fun?" Swede panted to Rand.

Rand smiled grimly.

Abruptly, came the snow, driven by the terrific wind. The world became a swirl of white madness. In five minutes, Rand knew, they would not be able to see ten feet ahead of them. In an hour, they would be frozen corpses. For the temperature had been dropping steadily, mercilessly.

The younger Kalmuck appeared suddenly out of a snow flurry. He waved his arms excitedly, then leaped to the center pony. Pulling its head down and to the left, he swung the sled off the trail. Fifty yards. Fifty more. He paused.

They were before a dome-like structure, low, squat, resembling a hillock of snow. Kusslo jumped out of the sled, and together they dug in the snow—fifteen feet or so away from the hillock. They lifted a square mat of woven branches. The old Kalmuck motioned to the black opening. His gesture unmistakable. It was the entrance to the dome-like structure—the entrance to a Kalmuck *kanu*.

THERE seemed disappointment in the savage shriek of the wind.

Quickly, Kusslo threw the harnesses off the ponies. They lay down immediately, their tails to the wind. Again the old man pointed to the black opening.

Rand climbed in first. It was a six-foot well, at one side of which a narrow passage went off at right angles. He wriggled into it crawled forward on knees and elbows. Black

darkness, but Rand guessed the construction of the *kanu*. The other end of the tunnel should lead into the hut itself.

It did. Rand crawled until he reached a step. He crossed it, raised his hand overhead. He found he could stand now. Hearing someone else crawling through the passage, he tore off his mittens and struck a match. It revealed Vera's lovely face, emerging from the black hole. It was gray with fright.

She scrambled to her feet. Threw her arms about Rand, forcing him to drop the match.

"It was a—a cold thing," she half-sobbed. "I could see its eyes. It crawled."

Her arms tightened about his neck. Rand felt her soft body against his. Inhaled the perfume of her hair. He crushed her in his arms.

SOMEONE else, striking a match. Swede O'Hara, looking at them, his eyes blue flame.

"First chance you got, eh?" he said softly.

Rand released the girl. He returned coldly the blond giant's glare.

"Grow up, you big sap! You're not a kid—the girl was frightened. Jealous, eh?"

Swede leaped forward. His big hands closed on Rand's throat.

"Well?" Rand said coolly. "Going to strangle me?"

He could have reached for his automatic. He didn't. Just stood there, waiting, bitterly wondering whether those fingers would squeeze. He was sick at heart. Buddies for eight years—

Swede stepped back.

"What's the matter?" Rand asked bitterly. "Didn't have the guts?"

The giant struck a match again, now touching the flame to the tip of a cigarette. His bronzed face was

set, coldly expressionless. He did not answer.

The others now crawled through the opening—Pavlov, the two Kalmucks. The latter dragged in sacks of food and the rifles. Kusslo returned to close the surface opening.

Holed in now. For a day, three days, a week. Perhaps even longer. Depended upon how long the blizzard would rage. Suicide to venture out while it lasted.

Black darkness in the hut. Cold, yet a livable temperature. They made themselves comfortable on the earthen floor. No one spoke. Now they were conscious of fatigue. Could feel now the strain of those weary hours on the trail.

Rand sat with his back to the wall, listening to the wind howling outside. It fitted in with his mood—cold, savage. He could not forget the expression in Swede's eyes. A woman had wrecked his life once. And now a woman had smashed a friendship of eight years' standing. Rand no longer cared whether he reached the whaler. Did not matter now. Nothing mattered any more.

His head dropped on his chest. Like slow poison, fatigue claimed his body. The howling of the wind became fainter, more distant. Rand slept.

He awakened several hours later, called out the old Kalmuck's name, and asked for the water canteen to be thrown over to him. He drank, smoked a cigarette, then went to sleep again. The wind still howled.

WHEN he awakened again, he felt fresh, rested. He lighted another cigarette, and heard the girl's voice.

"Can you spare one, please?"

"Yes," he replied.

He could hear her crawling toward him. He gave her a cigarette, lighted it. She curled up alongside

of him. Rand wondered what Swede was thinking.

"I don't give a damn!" he said to himself, savagely.

CHAPTER VIII

Mocking Laughter

IT was on the third day—so far as Rand could judge—that the wind ceased howling.

"Think you, Kusslo," he said to the Kalmuck, "it is safe now to make trail?"

"I do not know," replied the old man. "But my son shall be our eyes. Urlop! Make a circle, as big across as a man can run in three hours. Perhaps Agur and his warriors perished in the great wind. Then you bring me his head, and it shall hang in our lodge."

The younger man replied a guttural assent. Rand heard him work his way through the passage, his trailing rifle bumping the walls.

"Will not the snow weigh the cover so that a man could not raise it?" he asked curiously.

"No, my friend. The wind is too great. It sweeps the snow. Never does it become deeper than the width of ten fingers."

Rand frowned. He'd imagined that the blizzard would bring snowfall of several feet deep, thus almost totally obliterating the huts. To get out, he thought they'd have to pierce the roof. But the width of ten fingers—six inches, perhaps—would still leave the huts in full sight. If the blizzard had already quieted sufficiently to permit the Kalmucks to take the trail, they could not help stumbling across them.

"And it's a cinch they'll take a look-see if we're in one of 'em," he said to himself. "Hell, we'll be caught like rats in a trap! Won't even have a chance to put up a

scrap." The seed, once planted, took root, flourished. With each passing minute, Rand's nervousness increased. His jaw set grimly, he stared in the darkness. Death held no terror for him, but to be caught, helpless, in a black hole—

"Damn it," he said aloud abruptly, "the ponies!"

"What about the ponies?" Pavlov's voice questioned in the darkness.

"Nothing," Rand said shortly.

No use frightening the girl. Besides, the younger Kalmuck may return any moment now, with the happy news that the coast was clear. That it was safe to venture out. Nevertheless, Rand could not stifle the thought of those ponies. On their feet probably now, sharp little hooves digging the snow for the green moss underneath. Their brown hides, against the white background, visible for miles literally. The Kalmucks had good eyes.

"Five minutes more" Rand said to himself, "then I'm getting out of here. I want a run for my money."

A sudden pounding on the side of the *kanu*. Rand leaped to his feet, his hand darting to the butt of his automatic. "What is that, Kusslo?"

"Urlop opening the wall door," the Kalmuck replied calmly. "Better so to get out. The storm is no more."

A LINE of light now streaked horizontally across the side of the hut. Two more vertical lines. A two-foot square section, already cut out, was slowly being pushed into the interior of the hut. More and more light, harsh to the eyes used now to darkness. The section thudded to the floor. A square opening, like a rough window, through which they could see falling snow.

"Urlop!" the old Kalmuck called sharply. No answer. No one at the opening. A sinister silence.

"Urlop!" the old man repeated, his right hand reaching for the rifle against the wall.

Still silence. Then—laughter! Guttural laughter, swiftly increasing in volume as more and more men joined in. Mocking, savage laughter. The Kalmucks gloating over the capture.

Swede moved to the opening, rifle at his shoulder.

"Stand back!" Rand snapped. "You'll only get your fool head blown off."

Swede hesitated, stepped aside.

A SHARP command. The laughter ceased. Gurin's mocking voice.

"I think," he said, speaking in English, "we have reached the end of the trail—eh, Your Highness? Or, perhaps you *still* disagree?"

"My dead body is all that you shall have for your troubles," Pavlov replied quietly, picking up his rifle. "That what you seek you shall *not* get."

"You value your gold more than the life of your daughter?"

Pavlov glanced at the girl. She shook her head.

"You heard my answer," he said shortly. "I've nothing more to say."

A short pause. Then Gurin's voice again, coldly menacing.

"You're a stubborn devil, old man; I give you a last chance to reconsider. If you're putting up a bluff, let me remind you that the five of you haven't a chance. I command to fire through the walls of the *kanu*. Thirty rifles. It wouldn't take long."

"You have heard my answer, Gurin!" the old man repeated.

Silence for a moment. A muffled command. Then a terrific volley. Thirty fingers touching the triggers of thirty rifles. Mad splintering of wood, flying earth. Six feet above the level of the earthen floor, light

streamed through dozens of jagged-edged holes ripped through by the heavy slugs.

"That," said Gurin, "will give you an idea. For the last time—reconsider! Tell me where the treasure is buried—your word is sufficient—and you shall be set free. At liberty to go where you please. You and Vera. She is too beautiful to die beneath Kalmuck rifles!" he added dramatically.

"What about the others?"

"This is out of my hands. The two Americans have killed Kiok—and many more. Their lives belong to the Kalmucks. They will be tortured, and I shall contribute to that of the big one. The two renegades from the tribe shall, too, feel the bite of hot iron. Why should their fate concern you?"

Pavlov looked around the hut. His eyes passed from face to face. They lingered on his daughter's. She shook her head.

"No, damn you!" he shouted savagely.

Gurin cursed. "Very well; I've given you your choice."

"Down!" Rand whispered. "Quick!"

He dropped to the earthen floor, the others following his example. As he lay there, Rand was conscious of the futility of it. Sooner or later, the hungry bullets would find their targets.

They waited—awaited the hail of death.

SECONDS dragged. Without—silence! Heavy silence, tense, sinister.

"Well," Rand thought fiercely, "what the hell are they waiting for?"

Now he heard a murmur of voices. Gurin's guttural laugh. His voice, audible now to those within the *kanu*.

"Well spoken, Agur. Bullets *do* kill quickly, and lack the thrill of

slow torture." He raised his voice. "Pavlov!"

"Yes?"

"Agur has just made a suggestion—splendid suggestion," Gurin drawled, speaking in English now. "Your food is in the sled. Time isn't pressing. I'm curious whether the sight of lovely Vera dying of starvation may change your mind." He laughed again.

Rand understood the Russian's motive. Pavlov's death in itself was little compensation for his troubles; above all, he wanted the location of the treasure. He now hoped that the suffering of the girl might induce the stubborn old man to give in.

THE Kalmucks had another motive. The bodies of those in the *kanu*, riddled with bullets, did not interest them. The same bodies, lashed to the torture stakes, did.

A cruel bunch of devils, they would delight in squatting on their haunches, watching the *kanu*. Knowing that those in it were slowly dying of starvation. Knowing that sooner or later their bodies would be too weak to offer resistance—too weak to lift the deadly rifles. Then—capture! Live bodies to feel the bite of hot iron. The savage has patience. "Hell!" said Rand. "Like rats in a trap."

A mad fury possessed him. He snatched his rifle, crept to the opening. A sudden thought arrested him. Sanity crept back into his eyes. Hope. He remembered Urlop, the old Kalmuck's son. Gurin had said, "The five of you." Didn't know, then, the younger Kalmuck was not in the hut. Still snowing. It had covered his tracks. The young Kalmuck was out there somewhere. Free! Gurin and his gang could not possibly expect outside help for those within the hut. Hence would be off their guard. Urlop had courage and brains.

"Our last chance!" Rand said slowly. "Our *only* chance!"

CHAPTER IX

Tense Moments

DARKNESS slowly claimed the day—the long Arctic night, jealous of the few hours of light. Rand stood to the right of the opening, hugging the wall. Outside, he knew, a guard squatted on his haunches, rifle across his lap.

Rand had heard Agur's instruction to the guard. They were curt, grimly eloquent. Shoot first—investigate afterward. Shoot at the first suspicious move. His own life would pay for the escape of the captives.

"Under torture!" Gurin had added.

Cautiously, Rand looked out. The guard jerked up his rifle. Cold warning in the slanted eyes. Rand withdrew his head. He might have shot the guard. A snap shot with the automatic. But they had nothing to gain from the death of one man. The next would simply be more cautious. A sense of failure, of defeat now gnawed at Rand's heart. Hours now since their capture. Weary hours, waiting, hoping. And still no sign of the younger Kalmuck.

The young tribesman may be in the neighborhood somewhere, waiting. Waiting with the patience of a savage for an opportunity to creep into the camp. A logical explanation. But equally logical was Rand's growing conviction that the Kalmuck had turned back when he saw the capture of the others. Turned back to save his own skin.

Swift Arctic twilight passed, leaving blackness. Several hours yet before the sky would blaze with the glory of the Arctic night. A prolonged, dismal howl somewhere in the distance. The gray wolf greeting the night.

The sound grew louder, louder, raising the dog-hair on Rand's back. The leaders calling the pack together. If luck was with them, by morning they would taste the life-blood of some stray reindeer.

In the complete darkness within the hut Rand found he could peer out of the opening now without being seen by the guard.

At the left, the Kalmucks slept around the huge fire built from one of the *kanus*.

THE howling of the wolves did not disturb them. They lay there, dark patches on the white expanse of the night. Half-buried in the snow, which still fell gently. Like the shaggy little ponies. And as comfortable.

Rand's mind drifted. He wondered where the Kalmucks had found shelter during the blizzard. Would Kusslo's son come? What will be Pavlov's final answer?

He thought of the girl, and cursed under his breath. Poor kid! Born the daughter of the Grand Duke Feodor, with everything the world had to offer at her feet. Only to find death on lonely Siberian steppes. Snow, ice. Bleakness. Poor kid!

His body tensed. He thought he saw a shadow, behind the guard. A black figure, coming around the side of the *kanu*. It was Urlop, long knife in his right hand. He paused over the squatting guard. Rand saw the knife in Urlop's hand swoop downward. In—in to the hilt in the Kalmuck's throat. A sighing sound—so soft that Rand, who expected it, barely heard it. The guard slumped forward.

Urlop grinned, showing his white teeth. He motioned Rand to come out.

Rand crawled out. Stood on the snow now, caressing his rifle. A fierce exultation possessed him. Go

down fighting—that's the way a man ought to die.

"And still," he said to himself, "while there's life there's hope. Still a chance—"

The others now stood behind him—Swede, Pavlov, the two Kalmucks, the girl. Faces grimly determined, resolute. Rand sensed their acceptance of his leadership. They were awaiting his commands.

The Kalmucks around the fire slept on their rifles. Peaceful enough now. But let one awaken. A cry of alarm, a shot—and hell would break loose!

Rand's eyes failed to see Gurin or the chieftain. They probably slept in one of the *kanus*. Kusslo nudged him.

"We go with our knives, my son and I," the old man whispered. "We kill with the silence of the wolf."

Rand frowned, shook his head. Thirty men cannot be knifed, one after another, without at least one giving the alarm before he died. And savages awake like animals, alert, instantly in full possession of the senses.

RAND'S brain raced. Attack the Kalmucks now, while they slept? Kill as many as they could—and then make a run for it? He decided against it. The odds were too great. For open fighting anyway. An ambush, perhaps, later on. Further north, where the country became rough, rocky. They'd have more of a chance.

"Think you, Kusslo," he whispered to the Kalmuck, "you can get the ponies up without awakening the men around the fire?"

"Yes," the Kalmuck replied promptly. "They will recognize their master."

"You are sure?" Rand insisted.

"Ay, that I am!"

Rand's hands gripped tighter the

rifle. "Let's go!" he hissed to the others. He strapped on his snowshoes, padded softly out of the *kanu*, stepping over the guard's dead body. The others followed, their wide-webbed Kalmuck snowshoes making no sound on the soft snow.

Rand led to the left, skirting the ring around the fire as widely as he dared without wasting precious time. They paused at the sled, half-buried in the snow. Swede lowered his rifle. Bent down. His big hands gripped the cross bar between the two runners. He pulled upward. Again. The frozen runners came loose.

RAND whirled to the fire, rifle butt at his shoulder, his heart pounding. There had been some noise. But the men around the fire, their bodies weary from the long hours on the trail, slept.

Now Kusslo and his son moved toward the dark patches on the snow which marked the ponies. They bent over them, their hands stroking the shaggy hides. The ponies stirred, stood up. Quietly permitted themselves to be led. Sweat poured down Rand's face.

He didn't think the trick could be done.

He motioned Swede to pick up the loose traces. Pavlov helped in the rear. Foot by foot, they slowly moved the sled. Further and further away from the fire. Twenty feet, fifty feet, fifty yards. They paused.

The two Kalmucks leading the ponies joined them.

They worked quickly, efficiently. In sixty seconds the ponies were hitched to the sled, ready to take the trail.

Kusslo threw back and over the hide covering the sled. Leaned over, fumbling with something at the bottom of the sled. Rand waved

his hand impatiently. Time was precious.

The Kalmuck grinned. He straightened, holding a large leather water bottle. He grinned again, turned—and Rand almost cried out. The old man was padding softly toward the ring of men around the fire.

Rand cursed, softly but with a terrible intensity. What was the old fool up to? They hadn't a moment to waste—and to take that frightful risk! He moved after him, then stopped. Impossible to head him off now without awakening the devils around the fire.

Now a dozen feet from the sleeping men, the Kalmuck stopped. Rand saw him pick up a long wooden pole, used in the construction of the *kanus*. Kusslo lashed the bottle to the forked end of the pole. He approached closer the circle of men. Swung the pole around and over them. Then, moving very slowly, he proceeded to spill a few drops of the liquid in the bottle upon the snowshoes of every fifth man or so as he went around the circle.

Took time to complete that circle—and Rand, in his mind, a dozen times strangled the old man. "Medicine water" probably in that bottle. Given the superstitious native by the local *shaman*.

"Supposed to lead astray the feet of the enemy," Rand guessed, grinning wryly. "Magic water. And the old fool has enough faith in it to risk his neck—and everyone else's." He shook his head.

KUSSLO completed the circle. He moved toward the *kanu* where the others slept. He spilled more of the liquid beneath the opening. It made a huge brown stain on the snow. Rand breathed easier when, still grinning, the old man returned to the sled.

"You are very lucky, Kusslo," he

whispered fiercely. "You are also an old fool! Come! Already death has shown too much patience."

The grin remained on the old man's lips.

"I know what I am doing, my friend. You will understand later. And then you will say that Kusslo is a man of much wisdom."

"Yes," Rand repeated bitterly pointing—"of much wisdom!"

One of the Kalmucks at the fire sat up. Stared at them now. A shrill cry of alarm lingered for a moment in the still air. Ceased as the bullet in Swede's rifle found the Kalmuck's heart.

"Get going!" Rand yelled savagely, unconscious that he spoke in English. The twenty-foot whip cracked. The sled lurched off.

"A man of much wisdom!" Rand panted, running behind it. "Hell!"

CHAPTER X

The Howling Wolves

KUSSLO drove the ponies to the right. There the land dipped sharply. They were over it, running madly down the incline before the Kalmucks had a chance to open fire.

Constantly the long whip lashed the backs of the ponies, driving them at a killing pace that Rand knew they could not keep up much longer. The snow was too soft.

And then Rand saw the old Kalmuck's object. In a few minutes they were on the bed of a frozen creek. The terrific wind had swept it clean of snow. Hard surface for the sharp little hooves of the ponies. Not too slippery—and the shaggy little animals were as sure-footed as cats. Here they could easily outdistance running men.

But Rand noticed something else. The creek winded like a huge snake.

Sticking to its bed, they were forced to travel fully half as much again as their pursuers, who could easily cut across every loop. Only a matter of time. An hour, two, three. Then they'd be surrounded, forced to fight it out.

He shrugged. The pace the old Kalmuck had set up forbade thinking. He devoted his attention to the trail.

A new sound now, too, to occupy the mind. The howling of the wolves. Faint, at first, then louder and louder. And then Rand began to see the gray forms running swiftly through the darkness. Now on their right, now on their left. Huge, gaunt gray forms. The Siberian gray wolf, who with a single slash of his fangs can rip the throat of a three-hundred pound reindeer. The largest, the most vicious of the breed. Kusslo no longer had to use the whip on the ponies. The gray shapes were sufficient impetus for speed.

A cold hand suddenly gripped Rand's heart, squeezed. For the howling of the wolves abruptly took a new note. First, at the right—a volume of sound which seemed to increase every second. Madness now in the howling of the wolves. It spread. Now at the right. Now in back of them.

"God Almighty!" Rand whispered. "There are thousands of them!"

AS he ran he unslung the rifle. But the gray shapes on either side had disappeared. Rand thought he had the explanation. A herd of reindeer picked up by one of the packs. The others rushing back to be in on the kill.

Kusslo abruptly swung the sled to the right. Off the bed of the creek, on a tiny clearing, backed by a huge wall of a granite cliff. He stopped the trembling ponies, leaped

out of the sled. He gripped Rand's arm. "You shall see," he shouted. "You shall see if Kusslo is a man of wisdom."

The mad howling came closer and closer. Berserk madness in it. Not just howling. The wolves had gone mad! Rand dropped on one knee, raised the rifle. Kusslo nudged him.

"No," he said, shaking his head. "They shall not harm us."

"What do you mean?" Rand snapped.

"Wait! You shall see."

SHOTS now mingled with the mad howling of the wolves. Rapid fire. Rifles emptied quickly. And then a grim tableau abruptly unfolded itself at their left. From around the bend of the creek a dozen Kalmucks came running. Running swiftly. And running still more swiftly, scores of gray shapes came hurling around the bend.

The Kalmucks stopped, turned. They had time for one volley. Then the wolves were upon them. It was over in two seconds. Gaunt gray bodies leaping through the air. White fangs slashing. A man's piercing scream. Then a horrible snarling. A fight for the meat. The kill was over.

The gray bodies paused motionless as fresh howling came from the left somewhere. They joined it, racing madly through the night.

"Let me see that bottle!" Rand said suddenly, turning to the old Kalmuck. Kusslo nodded.

"I think my friend is beginning to understand."

He walked to the sled, found the leather bottle, threw it to Rand. Rand jerked out the stopper. He poured a bit of the liquid on the palm of his hand, smelled it. He wiped his hand on his trousers and threw the bottle back to Kusslo.

"Yes," he said quietly, "I'm be-

ginning to understand. Kusslo is a man of much wisdom, and deserves to be chief of his people."

"In Heaven's name," cried Pavlov, "what happened? What was in that bottle?" Rand smiled.

"An old trick—though I doubt whether it has ever been used for *this* purpose. That bottle contained alcoholic liquid that has the scent of a she-wolf mixed with it. Trappers sprinkle some of that liquid on a rag and make a trail by dragging it several hundred yards. At the end of the trail, they set a trap. Any wolf which crosses it will instantly follow that trail—but no longer cautious. And invariably he'll be caught in the trap."

"I see," Pavlov said grimly.

"It isn't difficult to understand. A number of the Kalmucks had that scent on their snowshoes. Taking constant shortcuts to catch up with us, they'd left these trails for miles. Wolves—as most wild beasts—have an instinctive fear of man; but the Kalmucks carried with them the scent of a she-wolf. These wolves were pretty damn hungry. So—well, you've seen what happened."

"Which means," said Pavlov, "that—"

"That nothing stands now between you and the coast," Rand said coldly. "We'll reach it in two days."

PAVLOV sat down on the edge of the sled. He twisted his fingers.

"I am not a religious man, but—thank God! Liberty—life!"

"Thank Kusslo here," Rand said curtly. "All right, let's get started. May as well get it over with."

He glanced at Swede. The blond giant had one arm around the girl. Her head on his chest. She was crying. "Come on!" Rand shouted savagely. "Let's go!"

Again the runners sang on the snow. One by one, miles slipped by.

Rand ran behind the sled, his eyes down on the trail ahead of him. Looking up occasionally he would see Swede's broad back ahead of him.

"Now why," he asked himself fiercely, "should I give a damn? The hell with the big dumb palooka!"

They paused twice for food and a few hours of sleep.

"Not far now," Kusslo said, grinning triumphantly.

It failed to thrill Rand.

SIX hours later, the old Kalmuck stood up in the sled waving his long whip. He pointed. Rand, who had fallen behind, caught up with the sled. He followed the direction of the pointing whip.

A long, white incline. The ocean where it ended. And to the right, resembling a child's toy ship, three masts of a schooner. The trail's end!

Men came to meet them long before they reached the schooner. Men who embraced Pavlov, carried him on their shoulders. Rand lingered behind and spoke to Kusslo. He shook his head when the captain invited him aboard. "A little later—maybe."

The Russian captain looked at him curiously, shrugged and returned to the others, waiting at the dory drawn up on the icy beach.

Rand motioned to the Kalmuck. Kusslo cracked his whip. And then Swede came running, waving his arms wildly. At a command from Rand, the Kalmuck stopped the ponies. Rand waited.

"Well?" he said coldly when Swede approached him.

The blond giant hesitated.

"I—I just got a kind of a present from Vera." He opened his clenched right hand. "These are black pearls, perfectly matched, and worth maybe ten grand." Rand glanced at the

treasure on Swede's broad palm.

"They're worth a damn sight more than ten grand," he said curtly. "Well, what about them?"

"Half of 'em is yours, ain't it?"

"Not if it's the little girl's dowry," Rand drawled.

Swede stared at him.

"Dowry? What the hell!"

"Isn't it?"

"No!" Swede exploded. "It's a gift, I tell you. From the girl. The old man will have a hundred grand credited to our account at the Bank of France in Paris as soon as his stuff is smuggled out to him. I gave him our names."

"That's swell," said Rand. "Well—I'll be seeing you!"

Swede clenched his big fists, unclenched them slowly.

"I'm goin' to bawl," he said. "If you don't stop it, I'm goin' to bawl like hell. Where you goin'?"

"I made arrangements with Kusslo to drive me to Turukhansk, on the Yenisei," Rand replied coolly. "Then, I guess, I'll drift into China. A swell revolution going on there now—and I know just the boys to approach."

"Good," said Swede. "They'll be tickled pink to get a couple of air-men."

RAND shrugged. "Maybe. I'll write you a letter."

"Will you stop it?" Swede said fiercely. "You know that when it comes to usin' my head, I just *ain't*! Listen, kid! How's chances o' me kinda—well, kinda comin' along?"


Rand smiled happily.

"You're a damn nuisance, you big palooka, but—I guess so! It'll be a few months before we can start spending those hundred grand. In the meanwhile—I heard it's a *swell* revolution."

Next Month: THE SULTAN OF HELL, An Exciting Complete Book-Length Novel of Adventure and Intrigue in Borneo, by Capt. Kerry McRoberts. Don't Miss It!

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MAJOR GENERAL LEONARD WOOD

DESIRE FOR ADVENTURE AND ACTION, WHILE A STUDENT OF MEDICINE AT HARVARD, PROMPTED YOUNG LEONARD WOOD, WHOSE FATHER HAD BEEN A DISTINGUISHED SURGEON IN THE UNION ARMY DURING THE CIVIL WAR, TO BECOME A SOLDIER.

GOING WEST TO FIGHT THE TREACHEROUS GERONIMO UNDER COL. LAWTON HE SOON ROSE IN RANK BY HIS DARING ACTION AND AFTER THE INDIAN CAMPAIGN HE WAS AWARDED THE CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR. DURING THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR HIS DISTINGUISHED SERVICE AS COLONEL OF THE FAMOUS ROUGH RIDERS GAINED FOR HIM THE APPOINTMENT OF GOVERNOR OF SANTIAGO. SOON BECOMING A NATIONAL FIGURE HE WAS SENT TO THE PHILIPPINES WHERE HE FURTHER DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF.

DURING THE WORLD WAR, WHILE HEADING A PREPAREDNESS CAMPAIGN, HE WAS SENT ABROAD TO OBSERVE THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH FORCES IN ACTION. WHILE IN A FRONT LINE TRENCH HE WAS WOUNDED BY SHELL FIRE. RETURNING TO AMERICA, HE WAS UNABLE TO GO BACK TO FRANCE BEFORE THE END OF THE WAR. GENERAL WOOD WAS ONE OF THE FEW AMERICANS TO HAVE THE DISTINCTION OF RECEIVING THE AWARD OF GRAND OFFICER, FRENCH LEGION OF HONOR.



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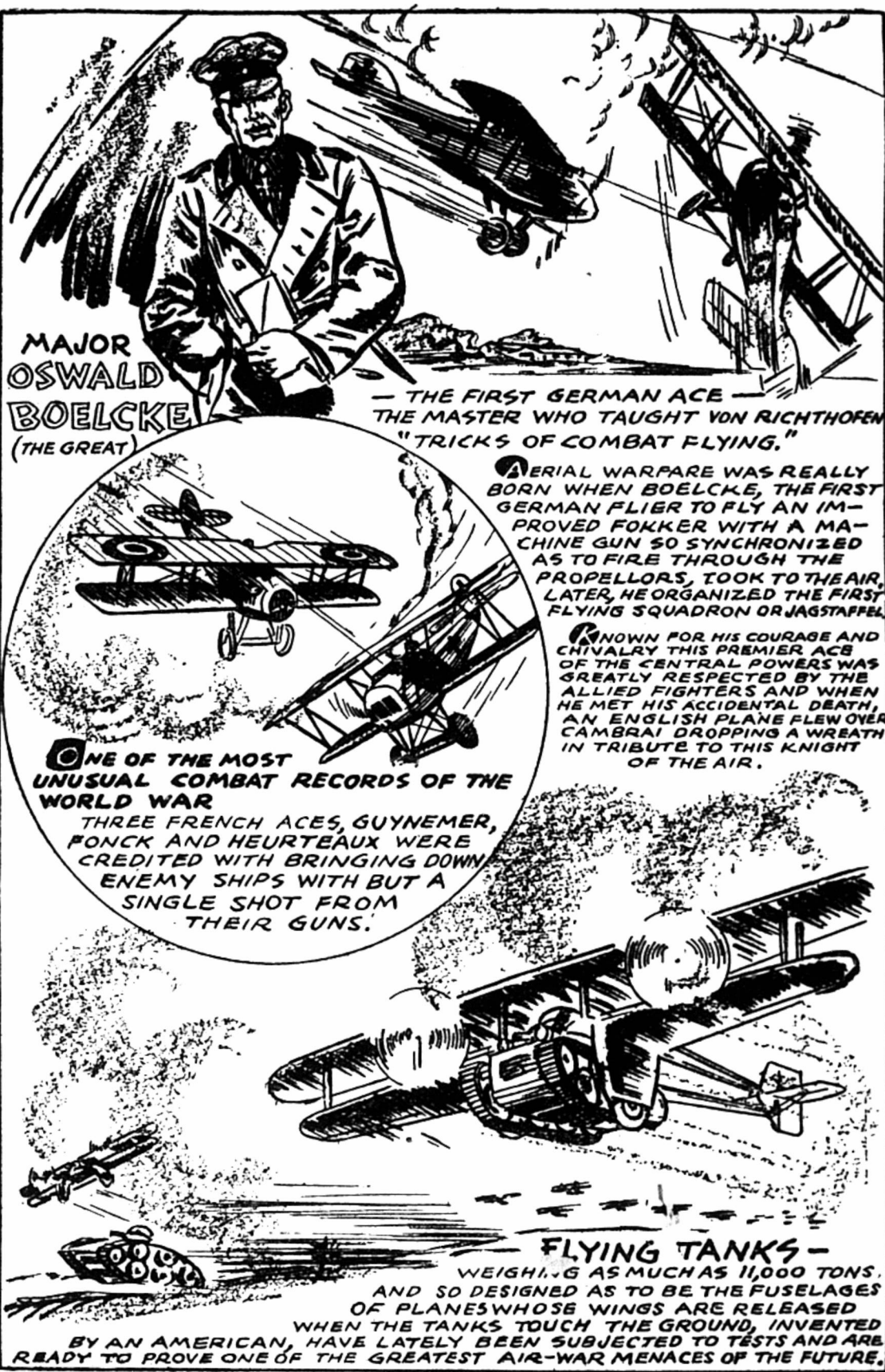


COUNT VON LUCKNER, DURING THE WAR, RAN AN OLD SAILING SHIP DISGUISED AS A NORWEGIAN FISHING VESSEL, THROUGH THE ALLIED BLOCKADE, AND ROAMED THE SEAS SINKING 500,000 TONS OF SHIPPING, YET HE NEVER TOOK A LIFE -

ALL PRISONERS WERE TAKEN ABOARD HIS SHIP AND TREATED AS GUESTS.

COUNT VON LUCKNER

This is the Original Illustrated Adventure



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OSWALD
BOELCKE**
(THE GREAT)

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THE MASTER WHO TAUGHT VON RICHTHOFFEN
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KNOWN FOR HIS COURAGE AND CHIVALRY THIS PREMIER ACE OF THE CENTRAL POWERS WAS GREATLY RESPECTED BY THE ALLIED FIGHTERS AND WHEN HE MET HIS ACCIDENTAL DEATH, AN ENGLISH PLANE FLEW OVER CAMBRAI DROPPING A WREATH IN TRIBUTE TO THIS KNIGHT OF THE AIR.

ONE OF THE MOST UNUSUAL COMBAT RECORDS OF THE WORLD WAR

THREE FRENCH ACES, GUYNEMER, FONCK AND HEURTEAUX WERE CREDITED WITH BRINGING DOWN ENEMY SHIPS WITH BUT A SINGLE SHOT FROM THEIR GUNS.

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WEIGHING AS MUCH AS 11,000 TONS, AND SO DESIGNED AS TO BE THE FUSELAGES OF PLANES WHOSE WINGS ARE RELEASED WHEN THE TANKS TOUCH THE GROUND, INVENTED BY AN AMERICAN, HAVE LATELY BEEN SUBJECTED TO TESTS AND ARE READY TO PROVE ONE OF THE GREATEST AIR-WAR MENACES OF THE FUTURE.

Feature—the First to Appear in Any Magazine

The WHIRLWIND'S

*Swashing Blades and Singing
Lead in an Action-Packed
Tale of the Highways
of Peril*

A Complete Novelette

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

*Author of "The Mark of Zorro," "Alias
the Whirlwind," etc.*

AT THE top of the hill, Don Miguel Diaz ordered the native coachman to stop the carriage and give the horses a breathing spell. They had traveled at a swift pace along El Camino Real from Santa Barbara. Night had fallen and a big moon was up. Yet, despite the soft breeze that came from the distant sea, it was warm after the hot day.

Don Miguel Diaz listened a moment. Far behind he heard the squeaking of the wheels of his carreta, the big cart that followed his carriage and brought his baggage, and some other things of which the general world knew nothing.

He listened also for sounds nearer, which might presage danger. He strained his eyes to peer into the drifting shadows to ascertain whether any shadow held menace. Seeing, hearing nothing to cause him alarm, he grunted a little and got out of the carriage.

"I stretch my legs," Don Miguel said. "A pest on this journey! Yet it may be worth it in the end, both in revenge and profit. Ha! A few miles more, and I am at the inn in Reina de Los Angeles! A bath, some



Sitting in the saddle was a man

change of clothes, a tankard of wine, and hot food—ha!"

The native coachman said nothing, having learned long before that nothing was the thing to say at such a moment. Don Miguel was ever ready with whip or toe of boot. At no time did Don Miguel possess a mild disposition, and after such a journey as this, in the dust and heat, with his nerves on edge and his temper aflame, he was likely to resort to violence.

Don Miguel was middle-aged, unmarried, and had an unsavory reputation from San Francisco de Asis to San Diego de Alcála, and even back in his native Spain. Men endured him because of his blood and rank, but none gave him a hand in true friendship.

REVENGE



who wore a black cloak and had a mask over his face

The carriage had been stopped at the edge of a mass of rocks. Now, Don Miguel started to walk along these, stamping his feet and swinging his arms to induce blood circulation after the cramping in the carriage.

A premonition of danger came to him. He jerked up his head and his right hand dropped toward his sash, wherein he carried a pistol.

Deep down in his throat, Don Miguel made a sound expressive of both astonishment and fright. From the shadows near the rocks had emerged a huge black horse. Sitting in the saddle was a man who wore a black cloak and had a mask over his face. The moonlight glinted from the weapon he held.

"I can fire quicker than you," the

masked rider said. "It were the part of wisdom for you to rest your fingers on your shoulders."

Don Miguel was a man of discretion. Moreover, he had been in many escapades and not a few tight corners, and could think quickly in an emergency, and to some purpose. He knew that the pistol of the other could explode, and a ball tear into his body, before he could draw his own weapon from his sash.

He put up his hands, slowly, and touched his shoulders with the tips of his fingers, meanwhile thinking with racing brain.

"You are a highwayman?" Don Miguel asked.

"I am El Torbellino, The Whirlwind!"

"Indeed? I am honored by your

attention, *señor*. I have heard of the daring exploits of El Torbellino. But you are wasting your time and talents, *señor*. If you wish my horses, or my carriage, or even my lazy native coachman, take them—for I am not in a position to prevent. But I travel without jewelry or funds."

"HOW, then, do you expect to pay your way?" The Whirlwind asked, with some sarcasm.

"As to that, I have a friend in Reina de Los Angeles who owes me money. I am going there now to collect it. Had you confronted me on my return journey—"

"There may be no return journey for you, *señor*!"

"What is the meaning of such talk?" A trace of alarm was in Don Miguel's voice. He was not without deadly enemies.

"Can you not understand plain language, Don Miguel?"

"Ha! You know me?"

"And considerable about you," The Whirlwind added. "If you have no purse upon your person, no doubt it is cleverly hidden in your carriage."

"Now that I know you for El Torbellino, there shall be no deception," Don Miguel said. "I have a purse in my sash. If I may drop my hand—"

"Draw out nothing but the purse, *señor*," The Whirlwind warned.

Don Miguel moved carefully. He got out a small money pouch, and handed it up, and The Whirlwind took it with his left hand.

"Very good!" The Whirlwind said. "Now, Don Miguel, we'll go to your carriage, and you may give me your heavy purse, which no doubt is hidden beneath the cushions."

"You are *el diablo* in human form! Ride after me, then."

Don Miguel turned to walk back to the carriage. The Whirlwind rode at his heels. The native coach-

man squawked once when he saw the masked rider, then stood silent.

"Make haste! Your cart is approaching," The Whirlwind said.

Don Miguel had been counting on that. He had been listening to the squeaking of the wheels of the *carreta*. Three men were with the cart, two natives and a white rascal who was a good man in a fight.

And suddenly, as he came to a small patch of shadow, Don Miguel gave a screech for his men to help, and darted quickly to one side. His pistol came from his sash, and there was a quick shot. A roar, a flash of flame, a cloud of pungent smoke, the evil whine of a ball flying through the air!

That was Don Miguel's trouble—it flew through the air, missing the target by inches. The Whirlwind had jumped his horse aside. He did not fire in return. Don Miguel expected it—thought that the next instant would be his last. Now he scarcely knew what to do.

"Your pistol is empty!" The Whirlwind said. "Mine is ready for firing. But the blade is better, *señor*, with which to punish you for your attempt."

AS he spoke, The Whirlwind re-turned his pistol to his belt, and his blade came rattling out of its scabbard and flashed in the moonlight.

Don Miguel gave a screech of rage, and bellowed to his men again, and whipped out his own blade. He was not without skill as a swordsman, yet The Whirlwind was mounted. And he seemed able to make his huge black horse respond to his slightest thought.

Blades clashed and rang, and the wild laugh of The Whirlwind rang also, to echo back from the rocks and cause a din that sounded down the slope and along the highway—there to be heard by certain troopers from the presidio at Reina de Los Angeles.

"A swordsman—you?" The Whirlwind howled.

He pressed his foe back against the rocks, held his black horse broadside, fenced from the saddle, bending forward and protecting both his mount and himself. Large globules of perspiration glistened on Don Miguel's face in the moonlight, and that face grew taut, for Don Miguel knew this man was but playing with him.

A sudden sweep, another raucous laugh—and the sword of Don Miguel was torn from his hand and went sailing away to clatter against the rocks. Don Miguel reeled back, weaponless, helpless.

"And now, *señor*—" The Whirlwind said.

A pistol exploded not far away, and a bullet sang past The Whirlwind's head. Through the shadows, three men rushed upon him.

II

THE carreta had come up, and those with it had heard Don Miguel's cry and the din of combat upon the heels of the shot. The natives, armed with bludgeons, rushed forward because the white renegade with them flogged them to it. It was this white man who fired and almost struck The Whirlwind with the bullet.

The coachman was out of the fighting, both because he wished so to be and also because the restive horses demanded his full attention. The other three came on. The Whirlwind bellowed at them, wheeled his horse and charged down upon them.

His pistol remained in his belt. He disdained to draw it in this emergency. He was upon the three like a thunderbolt out of the night. The tip of his blade pierced a man's shoulder, and he screeched and turned to run away. His black horse bumped the

second native and sent him sprawling, half-conscious, in the deep dust of the highway. The white man had tossed his useless pistol aside, and now held a heavy curved blade.

"Road robber!" he thundered, and rushed to the attack.

Once, this man had been of a band of pirates, and he doubted that any alive had more courage than he, or more ability in rough fighting. He thought well of himself in combat, and believed all rules of fair fight were trash. Now he swung his heavy blade, not in an effort to wound The Whirlwind, but to maim the horse he rode.

But The Whirlwind sensed the move. He parried the blow. His rage became terrible because of what the other had intended.

"Scum!" he cried.

The blades clashed again, and the heavy sword was almost torn from the grasp of the man on the ground. His arm was numbed. For an instant he was helpless. In that instant, The Whirlwind ran him through the right shoulder and drew back his blade red.

"Be glad it was not your heart!" The Whirlwind said.

Don Miguel, in the shadows at the base of the rocks, was striving to reload his pistol. Now The Whirlwind was upon him, making him drop the weapon. Don Miguel made a dash to get his blade on the ground, but The Whirlwind was before him again, and prevented that.

"To your carriage, *señor*!" The Whirlwind ordered. "I wish your heavy purse!"

THE two natives who had been with the carreta had deserted. Ahead on the highway they had dashed, and no doubt would not return until called by Don Miguel, if he ever called. The coachman stood at the head of the team, cooing them to quiet. The white renegade was leaning against a rock,

moaning as he clutched his wounded shoulder.

Don Miguel went to the carriage and found a purse, which he passed up to The Whirlwind. Then he spoke, in tones the coachman could not hear:

"Señor El Torbellino, it is possible that this meeting may be of profit to you."

"That was my thought in bringing it about," The Whirlwind said. "How much profit, I shall not know until I inspect the contents of your purses."

"To lift my purse will give you immediate profit in a small measure. But I have a greater profit in mind, if you are man enough to do me a service."

"WHAT is the thing you fear to do yourself, Don Miguel?"

"Did I say I feared? Perhaps it is only that I must not appear in the matter. I am willing to pay—"

"Get to the gist of it!" The Whirlwind interrupted.

"In my native Spain, there exists an ancient feud between my family and another," said Don Miguel. "I have learned that a scion of that other family lately came to California, after a quarrel with his father."

"Such things happen," El Torbellino admitted.

"I go now to Reina de Los Angeles, to search for this man. I never have seen him, but there may be a family resemblance to reveal him to me. No doubt he uses a name not his own."

"It is usually so," The Whirlwind agreed.

"When I find him, I shall grind him into the dirt. He must be tormented, goaded, belittled, made a thing for mockery. His proud spirit must be humbled so, in time to come, his arrogant father in Spain will learn how his son became as a worm—before he died."

"He is to die, then?" The Whirlwind asked.

"When I have plunged him to the

depths of degradation, then will I kill him!"

"Can a hidalgo like Don Miguel Diaz stain his blade with the blood of a man who has been plunged to degradation?"

There was sarcasm in The Whirlwind's voice, but Don Miguel thought best to ignore it.

"It is permissible," he replied. "No matter how low the fellow sinks, still he is of gentle blood."

"And what do you wish me to do, Don Miguel?"

"When I have identified my man, I want you to be the gnat in his eye. Make a fool of him, use every wile to make men think he is soft, a coward, mere good-blooded scum. Make him a thing for ridicule. We can arrange details later. There'll be gold for you, señor, if you can accomplish this for me."

"How am I to know when you are ready for me to do this work?"

"I shall hang my serape from the window of my room at the inn, with a knot tied in its middle."

"If you hang it there, no doubt I'll see it," The Whirlwind said. "So you wish me to be a gnat in this fellow's eye?"

"I want him insulted, browbeaten, attacked but not slain, treated like a cur—and in such a manner that all men will know of it."

"You are an ancient enemy of his family—that is it?"

"That is it," Don Miguel Diaz affirmed. None knew it better than The Whirlwind. For The Whirlwind was the man Don Miguel meant. And here he was being employed to become as a gnat in his own eye.

III

"INTO your carriage, and drive on!" he ordered Don Miguel. "Whip up your horses! Pick up your rascally crew as you go along."

"My carreta—"

"Send your natives back for it. Tell them they have nothing to fear from me. Begone!"

Don Miguel got into the carriage and spoke to the coachman, and the vehicle rolled forward. The Whirlwind rode in the opposite direction until he came to the heavy cart. He sprang from his horse, looped the reins over his left arm, and walked to the carreta. For a time, he was busy there.

The two natives who had been with the cart came creeping out of the shadows.

"Come forward," The Whirlwind commanded. "Drive your cart away. Pick up the wounded scum beside the road and carry him with you. His wound is but a clean cut, and does not call for so much bellowing on his part."

They drove the cart on quickly, whipping the horses. The Whirlwind mounted, and started to wheel the animal he bestrode—but stopped abruptly.

The dull thunder of hoofs came to his ears, hoofs pounding in the deep dust of the highway. A dozen horses at least! And there were certain sounds which indicated armed men.

The Whirlwind did not hesitate now. He wheeled his mount again, touched with the spurs, rode like a madman.

Behind him was a bedlam of cries as he was seen fleeing through the moonlight.

GLANCING over his shoulder as he rode, The Whirlwind saw that same moonlight flashing from blades. The troopers from the presidio at Reina de Los Angeles were at him.

Sergeant Juan Cassara rode at their head. In the absence of his superior officer, Sergeant Cassara was making great efforts to capture The

Whirlwind. The troopers had been patrolling the highway, and had heard sounds of fighting.

Pistols barked behind The Whirlwind as he rode, but no ball came near. He made an elusive target in the moonlight, in the cloud of lifting dust. Above the thudding of his mount's hoofs, he could hear a stentorian bellow as the big sergeant urged his troopers on.

THE Whirlwind bent over his saddle, and rode, calling upon his horse for top speed. Around a curve he went, and quickly left the highway to enter a deep, dark gulch.

The pursuit thundered past. The Whirlwind got back into the highway immediately. As the troopers pulled up beyond him, failing to see him ahead in the moonlight and realizing they had been tricked, he discharged his pistol and screeched into the night. Then he raced in the opposite direction, where twinkling lights indicated the little pueblo of Reina de Los Angeles.

After him the troopers came, but their mounts could not match the one he rode. Before he neared the town, The Whirlwind left the highway again. Into an arroyo he rode, and swiftly along it, until he was in a position behind some of the buildings of the village.

There he stopped the horse, dismounted, stripped off saddle and bridle and stowed the gear among some rocks. He slapped the big black on the rump, and the animal plunged away through the night.

Now, The Whirlwind stripped off mask and hat and black cloak, and hid them in the rocks also. Through the shadows he went, straight to the little chapel on the plaza. Sauntering out of the darkness into the moonlight, he strolled beside the chapel steps. He stopped a moment,

bent as though to do something to a boot. His keen eyes made sure that nobody was near. Into the chapel entry he darted. Something thudded into the poor box.

THEN he went on, toward the inn. Don Miguel's carriage was before it now, but the *carreta* had not arrived. Natives were hovering about. Sergeant Cassara thundered across the plaza with his squad, and stopped before the inn. Inside the hostelry, Don Miguel was bellowing details of the robbery, changing those details to suit his convenience.

Smiling, The Whirlwind went to the rear of the building, stopped an instant outside the kitchen door. Animation fled his face. The man seemed to change to a lifeless, ambitionless clod. Now he was but Pedro Garzo, a stranger who had wandered into the town and had been given work by Carlos Lazaga, the landlord.

It was a hard rôle for him to portray. Only by playing The Whirlwind at times could he bring adventure into his life. And this double life called for great care. None here to come to his aid if he were captured.

The disguise, the wild rides, the clashes with travelers on the road—these things kept his real spirit alive and offset the menial labor he performed. And the big black horse he rode! He was owned by Lazaga, who had traded for him, and was so wild none could ride him. But The Whirlwind had tamed him secretly, had also trained him to do certain things.

He entered through the kitchen door, to find Lazaga and his pretty daughter, Juanita, alone in the kitchen.

"Pedro Garzo! I thought you'd never return!" the landlord barked. "We have a rich guest. He demands

the utmost in service. He is Don Miguel Diaz, a man of prominence and wealth. Fill this tankard with our richest wine. That wineskin in the corner, dolt! Bestir yourself! Is laziness your gratitude for me picking you up and taking you in, giving you bed and food—"

"Peace, *señor*!" Pedro Garzo begged.

"Did you salt that wild black horse of mine?"

"I did, *señor*, and also watched him for a time."

"Wasted moments! Nobody could tame him. He stays in pasture till I can trade him to some blind fool who buys a horse from appearance alone."

"As you did, *señor*?"

"No insolence! Bestir yourself! Take in the wine."

Pedro Garzo entered the main room of the inn, carrying the tankard. He approached Don Miguel, who was sprawled on a bench beside a table. He put the tankard down before him.

THIS was the moment, Pedro Garzo knew. He looked not unlike his father, and no doubt Don Miguel would be swift to note the resemblance. Don Miguel looked up at him, looked sharply. His face paled, then grew almost purple with suppressed emotion. An instant later, his countenance cleared, and his eyes glittered.

"What manner of lout is this?" Don Miguel cried. "Do you not salute your betters with bowed head, and retreat backward from their presence? Away from me, scum! You are a stench in the nostrils of a gentleman!"

Pedro Garzo fought to retain control of himself. His eyes blazed, and he lowered his head quickly so the other man could not see.

"I am Don Miguel Diaz, fellow!

Know you that? I demand respect from such scum as you! Away from me! You smell sour. Perhaps 'tis swill in your veins for blood."

"*Señor!*"

"Ha! You dare dispute it?" Don Miguel roared. "Insolent! Get you a cloth, and wipe the dust from my boots!"

IT was the insult supreme. Pedro Garzo lifted his head, and his eyes met those of Don Miguel squarely. Pedro Garzo's face was like a mask. His voice seemed to drip venom when he spoke:

"Is the *señor* quite sure he wishes me to clean his boots?"

The threat of sudden death was in that voice. Pedro Garzo fingered the hilt of a knife in his sash. Don Miguel hesitated an instant, and then:

"Out of my sight!" he roared. "Perhaps you would only soil the boots more. And do not look at me in such a threatening manner. I never saw such insolence before! I'll take a stick to your back!"

"Does the *señor* think that would be wise?"

"What is this? Landlord—landlord!"

Carlos Lazaga came running. "What is it, Don Miguel? Has something displeased you?"

"This servant of yours—this common scum — dares be insolent to me! Who is the fellow?"

"A wanderer who passed through and to whom I gave shelter, Don Miguel."

"Keep him out of my sight. Let me be served by another. That girl over there—who is she?"

"She is my daughter, Juanita, Don Miguel."

"A likely-looking wench. Let her attend me. Have her bring me meat at once, and more wine — to my room."

"But, Don Miguel—"

"To my room, fellow!" Don Miguel roared. "Let her guide me there now."

Don Miguel lurched to his feet, and the others in the inn shrank from him. Juanita Lazaga came forward when her father beckoned, and picked up a pan of tallow dip with a burning wick in it. Plainly, she was frightened. But she gained courage when her glance met that of Pedro Garzo.

IV

AT THE door which opened into the patio, off which were the guest rooms, Juanita stepped aside and bowed to allow Don Miguel to pass through first.

Pedro Garzo had chance to whisper to her:

"Tie his serape in a knot in the middle, and hang it out the window."

Then the girl went on, taking the lead again and lighting Don Miguel's way. Into the inn stormed Sergeant Cassara and some of his troopers, demanding wine. Lazaga was busy, together with Pedro Garzo and two natives who worked in the inn.

Presently, Juanita returned to the kitchen for meat and more wine, which she carried to Don Miguel's room. There, she served him. He talked as he ate, while the girl stood back against the wall, as close to the open door as possible. While pretending to make the room more comfortable, she had done as Pedro Garzo had asked her, though she could not guess the reason for such a strange request.

Watching his chance, Pedro Garzo slipped from the inn and hurried through the shadows to the arroyo, where he got the clothes and weapons of The Whirlwind. Inside the patio, he dressed swiftly, putting on the hat and mask, the long black cloak which shrouded his form, put-

ting on his sword and thrusting a pistol into his sash.

He slipped through the shadows again, until he came to a palm, from behind which he could look across the narrow patio and into Don Miguel's room.

Juanita Lazaga was still standing against the wall, stepping forward only now and then to refill Don Miguel's wine mug. Don Miguel was through with his eating now.

"You are a pretty wench," he was saying. "Your age? Ah, just the proper age! 'Tis not often I look twice at a girl of the common people. You should feel proud."

"Sí, Don Miguel!"

"Come here, and sit upon my knee."

"Oh, no, Don Miguel!"

"What is this? You refuse such a request from me? Come, come, my girl! What is a kiss?"

"I—I am wanted in the kitchen, if you are through eating, Don Miguel."

"Let others do the kitchen work, pretty one. You should not soil your hands."

As he spoke, he got possession of one of those hands, and drew her toward him. Laughing boisterously, he pulled her down to his knee. With the other hand, he tilted back her head, then bent his own, as she turned white and shuddered and tried to avoid the kiss he intended to give.

"Pardon, *señor*!" said a voice at the door.

DON MIGUEL growled and thrust the girl from him. Juanita Lazaga gave a cry and crouched back against the wall. The Whirlwind stood in the doorway.

"What are you doing here?" Don Miguel cried. "Who are you, fellow?"

"I am El Torbellino, *señor*."

"The highwayman! You have

robbed me once already tonight. Is there no law in this land?"

"Send the girl away. I desire to talk to you."

"Begone, wench!" Don Miguel cried.

"And you will tell nobody of my presence here, girl!" The Whirlwind ordered. "If you do, and trouble comes for me, it will be the worse for your father."

"I—I have not seen you, *señor*," Juanita cried. Then she fled into the patio.

"Now, *Señor El Torbellino*, what does this mean?" Don Miguel demanded.

"I cannot understand you, Don Miguel. I have been watching, and your serape hangs through the window, with a knot in it, as you arranged."

"What? This is strange," Don Miguel said. "I did not hang it there. That wench—"

"Would she also tie a knot in it, *señor*? Perhaps it was but an accident. Yet here I am, as you wished."

"Very well! The man I meant—he works here at the inn. I heard him called Pedro Garzo."

"I know him, Don Miguel."

"He's your man! Goad and torment him. Make him a thing for mockery! Do your work well, then come to me and collect."

"I shall take my pay, Don Miguel, no fear."

"Grind him into the dirt!" Don Miguel ordered. "Be a gnat in his eye! Now, get out before somebody finds you here. If that girl gives the alarm—"

"She will not do so, Don Miguel, fearing that I may harm her father. And a word in your ear, Don Miguel. This Juanita Lazaga is a nice girl in every way. I dislike to see such harmed. My sword is ever ready to defend such. I am understood?"

"There are oceans of girls," Don Miguel said. "I shall forget this one, if you insist."

"I insist, *señor*."

"Do the work I have instructed you to do, El Torbellino. My pay will reward you. Now, begone!"

THE Whirlwind slipped from the room and into the darkness of the patio. Like a shadow, he went to the wall and scaled it. And a short time thereafter, Pedro Garzo slipped through the kitchen once more, and into the big room of the inn, where Sergeant Cassara and his troopers were guzzling wine.

In time, the soldiers went to the presidio. The town loiterers drifted out and away. The lights were extinguished save one torch which always burned through the night. Juanita had gone to her bed, and Lazaga, yawning, approached Pedro Garzo.

"Straighten the tables and benches," he ordered. "Clean the tankards and wine mugs. Then sleep in front of the fireplace, ready to attend if any night guest comes off El Camino Real."

The sounds in the plaza died down. All was quiet by the time Pedro Garzo had finished his work. He stood at the window and looked into the moon-drenched night. He could see the bulk of Don Miguel's carriage, and the carreta beside it, with the two natives sleeping beneath it.

The lights had been extinguished in the houses across the plaza and in the huts of the natives. Pedro Garzo wandered to the door. A moment he hesitated there, watching and listening. Then he slipped out, and closed the door behind him, and followed the wall of the inn to the rear.

A few moments later, it was El Torbellino, The Whirlwind, who darted swiftly from shadow to sha-

dow, from dark spot to dark spot, as he left the plaza and made way to the presidio. Things were lax there in the absence of the commanding officer. From the barracks room came sounds of snoring. There was no guard stationed.

The Whirlwind slipped beside the building until he came to a door, which opened at his touch. Into the building he went, using extreme caution. Into a corridor he slipped, and along it. At a door, he stopped to listen again.

There was only faint light in the corridor, coming from a single torch far in front. The Whirlwind opened the door beside which he stood, and entered a room. Heavy snoring came from a couch in a corner. Through an open window, moonlight streamed into the room, to reveal Sergeant Juan Cassara in heavy sleep.

The Whirlwind crossed the room swiftly, noiselessly. His left hand touched the sergeant on his shoulder.

"CASSARA! Cassara! Come awake! Make no noise!"

Sergeant Juan Cassara was an old campaigner. To come from deep sleep to a knowledge of danger, with his faculties instantly alert, was no great task for him. He jerked up, sat up in his bed, rubbing his eyes.

"What—what—" he mouthed.

"Be silent, and listen!"

"Who's there? I can see nobody. Is that you, José? What is the trouble?"

"Make no sound, Cassara, or you die! This is El Torbellino."

"What! You dare to come here and—"

"Listen, fool! I do you a service," The Whirlwind said. "I bring you a chance for advancement, promotion, perhaps a money reward."

"What is this you say?"

Sergeant Cassara sat on the edge of the couch. Now he could see

The Whirlwind standing at the side of the window, could see him faintly in the moonlight, and saw also the pistol The Whirlwind held.

"A certain Don Miguel Diaz has come to the pueblo," The Whirlwind said.

"You robbed him on the highway," Cassara accused.

"I took a purse from him."

"He is a prominent man. We'll run you down for the robbery. Your day of fate is close at hand, El Torbellino."

"LISTEN, fool! Don Miguel brought with him a carreta."

"Is it something new for a hidalgo to travel with baggage?"

"There is more than baggage in the carreta. It has a double floor."

"What is this?"

"Take some of your troopers and investigate quietly. Two natives sleep beneath the carreta, but surely you can handle such."

"And what shall I find?" Cassara demanded. "What excuse have I for molesting the baggage of Don Miguel Diaz?"

"For some time, Sergeant, you have been wondering regarding certain smuggling activities, have you not?"

"Ha! Tea!"

"Tea," The Whirlwind agreed. "Those of noble blood who love to drink the stuff pay dearly for it. But they do not wish to add the tax."

"It is easy to smuggle."

"Between the double floors of Don Miguel's carreta you will find plenty of tea, Sergeant."

"Would such a man—"

"Are you an imbecile?" The Whirlwind demanded, "Don Miguel Diaz is a good-blooded rascal. He has more rank than money. He is a man who spends freely. He thinks it not beneath him to smuggle tea from San Francisco de Asis to his rich friends in San Juan Capis-

trano and San Diego de Alcala. It is at once a lark and profitable."

"Under my very nose!" Cassara exclaimed.

"The offense is such that a man's rank would not protect him."

"Were His Excellency, the Governor, himself smuggling tea, we'd put him in custody."

"To have courage enough to arrest such a man as Don Miguel — that would bring you praises from high quarters."

"It would, indeed. Also, I have heard some gossip to the effect that His Excellency, the Governor, has no particular love for this Don Miguel, having lost heavily to him at cards and dice."

"With both of which Don Miguel is more than adept," The Whirlwind suggested.

"If you are leading me astray—"

"You can seize the two natives, and make your examination quietly, can you not?"

"It shall be done, El Torbellino. Why should you bring me this information—you, an outlaw yourself?"

"El Torbellino is an outlaw—sí. He pretends to be nothing else. He has a dislike for men who pose as one thing and are another."

"We agree in that, El Torbellino. I thank you for this information, if it is true. But, for your robberies and other sins, I'll capture you and string you by the neck, if I can."

"That is to be expected," The Whirlwind replied.

V

THROUGH the night, down the hill from the presidio and to the plaza went Sergeant Juan Cassara and certain of his men. The big sergeant was not certain whether this was a jest, but it was something too big to be ignored.

They slipped toward the inn, quickly surrounded the carreta, and seized the two natives sleeping beneath it. Two of the troopers led them to the presidio, where a corporal was to make pretense of questioning them as though suspecting they were men wanted for rebellion against the governor. Hence, if nothing came of this search, nobody would know it ever had been made.

Cassara and the others searched swiftly, and swiftly did they unearth the evidence. Sergeant Juan Cassara was astounded. He sent back to the presidio for the remainder of his troop. He put a guard over the carreta. He surrounded the inn. Then he entered and called for lights, and made quite a din, which seemed to shock a certain Pedro Garzo, who looked as though he had been sleeping in front of the fireplace on the packed earth floor.

Lazaga was aroused. Lights burned. The din and clatter brought the town awake, and curious persons hurried across the plaza. Don Miguel Diaz, having been called mysteriously, appeared in the main room of the inn, fully clothed, his blade at his side.

"What is this turmoil?" Don Miguel demanded. "Is it possible for a man to get some sleep?"

"I am Sergeant Cassara, in charge of the soldiery here," said the big man before him.

"And what is that to me, fellow?"

"You, *señor*, are under military arrest."

"What is this? Are you mad? Military arrest? And for what, fellow?"

"For smuggling tea, *señor*. It is an offense against the present laws."

THE charge caused consternation. Those in the inn crowded forward, and more men came in from the plaza. The flickering torches revealed an unusual scene. Don Miguel Diaz stood back against the wall, his

face a picture of rage, his hand fumbling with the hilt of his sword.

"Where is your officer?" he demanded.

"Away on a mission. I command here in Reina de Los Angeles, *señor*."

"This mistake will be the end of you."

"There is no mistake. We have found tea in your carreta."

"I know nothing of it."

"Do you know anything about your carreta having a double floor?" Cassara demanded. "You have been watched, *señor*. Your perfidy was reported to me."

"What man dared make such a report?"

"HIS name I will not reveal at present, since he did us this turn."

Don Miguel began to storm. He invented new names for dull-witted soldiers. He enlarged upon his blood and rank and standing in the world. Sergeant Juan Cassara stood before him like a rock and let him rant.

In this confusion, it had been a simple matter for Pedro Garzo to slip from the room unseen. And it was just as simple, at the proper moment, for The Whirlwind to return. Watching from the kitchen, standing carefully back in the shadows, The Whirlwind waited.

Into the kitchen from the patio slipped Juanita Lazaga, her eyes wide with fright. When she saw The Whirlwind again, she gave a little squeal. "I—I thank you, *Señor El Torbellino*, for what you did," she whispered. "In Don Miguel's room, I mean."

"Say nothing of it," The Whirlwind begged.

"Are you not in danger here?"

"Danger is a thing I love."

"Never could I understand how one man could be two," she said.

"Do not try to understand, *señorita*;

some things are better when not understood. Now, if you'll slip away—"

She smiled at him, and ran into the patio again. But perhaps she came back later, furtively, to watch from a distance.

In the big room of the inn, Don Miguel was still blustering. He remained standing with his back to the wall, between the fireplace and the kitchen door.

"Come, Don Miguel!" Cassara said, finally.

"Where do you wish me to go?"

"To the presidio. Where else? To the room we have there for prisoners."

"You would dare conduct me—me!—to such a place? The governor shall hear of this! You'll be kicked from his army, run out of the country, perhaps imprisoned yourself at hard labor in return for insulting a—"

"Enough of talk!" Cassara stormed. He motioned, and his men fell back toward the door which opened into the plaza. He beckoned for Don Miguel to follow.

"One moment, *señors!*" said a voice at the kitchen door.

There was The Whirlwind confronting them.

HE held a pistol in his hand, and menaced them with it. Across the room, some of the troopers made ready to spring forward.

But Sergeant Cassara held up a hand.

"Do not fire!" he bellowed. "So! We have two criminals here, eh? El Torbellino, is it? Now, my pretty highwayman—"

"Not a move, or I fire!" The Whirlwind snapped. "Keep your men quiet a moment, Sergeant, and be quiet yourself. I would look over this pretty smuggler."

"Arrest this man!" Don Miguel

cried. "He robbed me on the highway. He entered my room here at the inn—"

"To prevent you insulting a *señorita*," The Whirlwind said. "Don Miguel, you have a blade at your side. Draw it."

"YOU think I would fight with such scum?"

"'Tis I who lower myself by fighting with a common smuggler of tea," The Whirlwind said. "On guard, rat!"

Now Don Miguel forgot all else except this masked man before him. He bellowed his rage, and whipped out his blade. The Whirlwind deftly transferred his pistol to his left hand, and got out his own sword, and wheeled back so that the light from the torch would not be in his eyes.

"Hold off your men, Cassara, while I attend to this business," he ordered. "You owe me that much. When I am done, make your play at me."

"If you kill my rich prisoner—"

"I do not intend to slay him," The Whirlwind said.

Thinking the other off guard for a moment, Don Miguel Diaz made a foul attack. But The Whirlwind was not off guard. He side-stepped neatly, and his blade came up. Steel rang—steel clattered against the wall. Don Miguel Diaz was unarmed.

Don Miguel reeled back against the wall. He had not brought his pistol with him from his room. He was helpless, powerless to aid himself. His face paled, and the perspiration stood out upon it.

Like the darting tongue of a snake, the blade of The Whirlwind went in and out. It slashed Don Miguel's garments to ribbons. It seemed like a live thing with the light from the torch dancing along it. Its point touched Don Miguel here and there, just enough to cause a sting and draw blood.

Don Miguel started to slip along the wall, but The Whirlwind forced him back to the edge of the fireplace. The blade darted in and out again.

"Soldiers, save me!" Don Miguel howled. "Will you let this highwayman slay me?"

"Cease your bellowing, craven!" The Whirlwind cried. "Attend me! Here is a bit of cloth! Stoop, Don Miguel Diaz, and wipe my boots!"

"Scum!"

"Wipe my boots, or I blow you to hell!" The Whirlwind said.

He brought the pistol around in his left hand, so its muzzle covered Don Miguel's heart. The latter saw glittering eyes through slits in the mask The Whirlwind wore.

"At once, *señor*!" The Whirlwind barked.

"Rather than do such a thing—"

The blade darted forward again. Its point ripped down Don Miguel's left shoulder, and bit slightly into the flesh above the heart.

"IN an instant, I fire!" The Whirlwind said.

Don Miguel sobbed and stooped, picked up the cloth, and wiped it across one of The Whirlwind's boots. Instantly, that boot spurned him, so that he sprawled on the earth floor.

"You are not fit even to wipe my boots," The Whirlwind said. "Why do you blink so, *señor*? Is there a gnat in your eye?"

"You—you—" Don Miguel began.

"Do not speak what is in your mind, else this pistol shall speak also," The Whirlwind warned. "Sergeant Cassara, here is your prisoner."

"Very pretty!" Cassara said, as he lurched forward. "But it does not excuse you, *señor*, for your misdeeds. You are my prisoner also."

"You think so?"

"Seize him, men, and cart him away!"

THE Whirlwind laughed as they surged forward. He gave a quick spring, and tore the torch from the wall, and hurled its flaming bulk into their midst. Through the window he sprang, with pistol balls flying about him, and dropped to the ground outside unscathed.

As The Whirlwind had anticipated, the troopers got in one another's way. They were compelled to run through the plaza door and around the building to get at him. And The Whirlwind, stripping off cloak and hat and mask and blade as he ran, vaulted the patio wall, stuffed the things into a recess behind a clump of brush, and darted through the kitchen door.

And it was Pedro Garzo, eyes seemingly wide with wonder, who stumbled and staggered out of the way of the soldiers, as they rushed through the kitchen to make search in the arroyo behind it.

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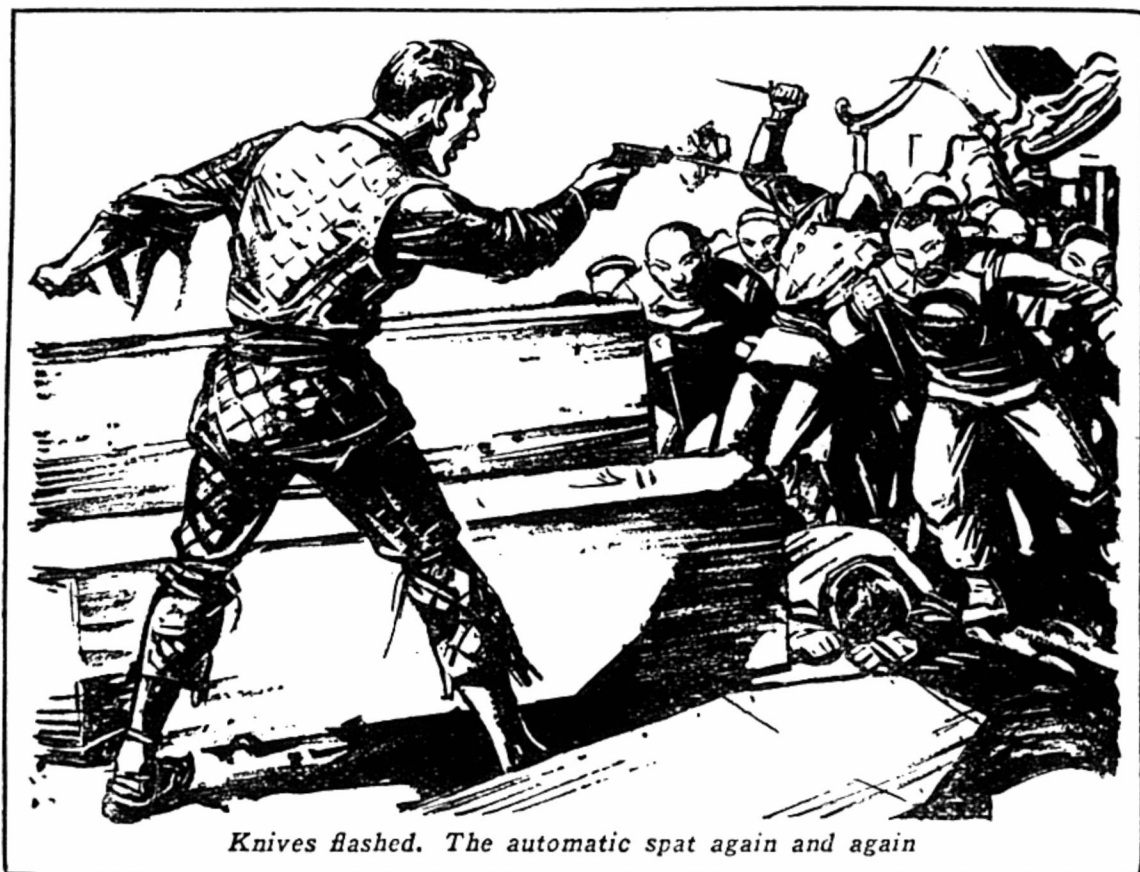
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The GREEN GOD



Knives flashed. The automatic spat again and again

A Fast-Moving Story of Chinese Torture and Savage Strife in the Native Quarter of Tientsin

By L. RON HUBBARD

Author of "Danger Ahead," etc.

SWIFTLY Lieutenant Bill Mahone of the Navy Intelligence pulled his automatic from its shoulder holster and crawled along the side of the coffin, screening himself from possible guards.

Against the dark sky he could see the outline of the mound which marked the tomb of General Tao Lo, and around it the many unburied coffins which might or might not house the dead of Tientsin.

It was a dangerous mission that had brought Mahone venturing into the night. He had convinced his

commander that they would not be able to stop the constant looting and murdering that had cast a reign of terror over the city until the Green God was back in its temple.

Tientsin's Native Quarter was half in flames, the dead were heaped in the gutters. The Chinese were convinced that their city would fall, now that their idol was gone. Before long these fanatics might sweep into the International Settlement and wipe it out.

Mahone had received a slip of paper that one of the natives in the

Intelligence Department had brought in. It had been found in the Native Quarter, and the Chinese ideographs had read, "A jade calling card for General Tao Lo." The general had been dead for a year, but Mahone was convinced that the Green God had been hidden in his tomb.

Now Mahone, disguised as a Chinese coolie, had come alone to try and get the Green God from the general's tomb and save the city before it was too late.

AS he crawled along the side of the coffin a cry rang out directly above him and he felt the bite of a knife in his shoulder. With a spring he catapulted away and looked back. A dark figure leaped to follow him! Mahone's automatic spat fire and the shadow by the coffin screamed in agony. In front of him he could see other shadows rising up like ghosts. The faint light fell on the blades of many knives. Vicious snarls were hurled at Mahone as the guards swept down on him.

Knives flashed. The automatic spat again and again. There seemed no end to these yellow fanatics. Bodies hurled their fighting lengths upon Mahone.

With his empty automatic he clubbed and beat about him. He could feel the impact of his steel crashing down upon skulls, arms, bodies. Chinese were sweeping over him in a stifling mass. Knives bit into his flesh like white-hot irons.

He felt men go down upon him, beside him, as he brought his gun-butt down. But each time he struck another screaming demon leaped to take the empty place. His arm was aching with exertion. He was bleeding from many wounds, but he fought on relentlessly.

Feet kicked him in the face, talon-like hands sought his throat, knives lanced in for his heart. His hand

was sticky from the blood of crushed skulls.

By rolling over and over he managed to baffle the knives which flashed above him. Suddenly he brought up against a coffin. Then, protected on one side, he tried to gain his feet.

But each time he rose as high as his knees, a body would launch itself into him, pinning him again to the ground. He was partially protected by the inert Chinese he had either killed or knocked unconscious, and hope that he might be able to escape welled up within him.

His left hand fell upon the hilt of a knife and he snatched it up, lashing at the air before him. He felt that blade catch again and again, but each time he pulled it from the flesh it had met and threshed out for new targets.

The knife blade was growing sticky and he felt a hot trickle of moisture running down inside his sleeve. The salty stench of blood was in his nostrils as he fought.

He was almost exhausted when the rush stopped momentarily. He sprang up and stood for an instant looking about him. Then the charge closed in again and the fiendish impact of bodies almost forced him to the ground once more.

With a leap he gained the top of a coffin lid and stood there a moment, thrusting down into the mass below him. They were closing in at his back. He felt a knife gash his thigh.

WITH the barrel of his pistol held tightly in his hand he beat down into the writhing shadows which struck up at him.

He sprang clear of the clutching hands and struck the ground running. A swelling roar of sheer rage met this tactic as the guards saw their quarry escaping. With one accord they plunged after him.

Running with all the speed he

could wrest from his tired body, Mahone dashed around the corners of the grim boxes, and skirted the mounds.

Suddenly a shot rang out ahead of him, to be followed by another. Mahone zig-zagged and tried to change his course. Flame burst out at him again.

A bullet caught him in the shoulder, whirling him about. He lurched, stumbled, tried to catch himself. With the momentum of his speed carrying him forward, he plunged, almost horizontal into the side of a coffin.

The yells grew dim in his ears and he felt himself slipping into the dread black of unconsciousness.

WHEN he regained his senses he felt himself held tight between two wooden walls which crushed at him. He tried to move his arms but he found that they were bound to his sides. His legs were lashed out straight and he could not bend his knees. Not a foot above his face he could feel the presence of wood.

Suddenly he realized where he was. He was bound tightly in a coffin. The heavy lid had been placed above him. He was sealed in. And the smell of rotting flesh was making his senses reel.

He was helpless in the hands of the men who had stolen the Green God, turning Tientsin into a bedlam of murder. Did they think he was dead? Would they leave him there beneath that heavy lid to die?

Although the lid was not nailed down, as Chinese coffin lids never are, its weight was sufficient to resist any effort to move it from the inside, even if his hands were free.

Straining his arms into his sides and then out again, he found that he was powerless to release the strong ropes which held him.

He stared up into blackness, a pan-

icky sense of failure taking hold of him. He had failed in his mission to return the Green God to its proper place in the temple, and in that failure he was about to die horribly.

The fetid air closed in upon him and seemed to weigh down and pin him in his gruesome confines.

Then, through the thick walls of his prison he could hear the murmur of voices. He pressed his ear to the wood to hear better.

The soft, cultured accents of a Chinese gentleman came to him. "If this foreign devil knew where to find the Green God, others will also come. We will take it to the House of So-Liang and hold it there for the master when he comes for it. You will stay here, hiding in a coffin, and when the messengers come, tell them to go to the House of So-Liang."

Mahone's heart raced as he heard those words. They thought he was dead, and they were about to remove the Green God to a well-known lair of thieves in the outskirts of Tientsin. Then he had been right about the whereabouts of the Green God. If he could only get loose!

But his heart plunged sickeningly as he heard the next words. "You will bury this foreign devil so that his fate will forever remain a secret."

They were going to bury him alive! He knew what that meant. Slow suffocation, going mad trying to breathe the poisoned air, buried alive and upright as the Chinese dead are buried. Suffocation standing upright!

THE cultured voice came yet again. "He is bound securely and the devils within him will be thwarted in their attempts to escape. Thus we will be pursued by no demons. Have the men dig the grave."

Mahone heard the clank of a crude pick striking rocks and the scrape of a shovel picking up the dirt. He

was lying there powerless, listening to the rattle of tools as they dug out his own grave.

They were digging a hole four feet square and eight feet deep. They would lift his coffin up and carry it to the opening. They would tilt it down and slide it upright into the hole. Then he would hear the rattle of stones and dirt coming in on top of him. And he would be sealed in forever, buried alive!

The thought gave him terrible strength and he threshed about in an effort to free an arm. Although freedom from this coffin would only mean a ready death at the hands of the fiends who were about to bury him alive, it was better to die fighting than passively. He struggled furiously.

After what seemed ages, he felt his coffin lifted up and felt it lurch as men carried it along. The silence was broken only by the soft footfalls of the bearers as they carried the box to the open grave.

But as they picked him up, another surge of strength had caused him to lift his arm upward with a jerk. The violence of the move caused the bonds to bite deep into Mahone's flesh, but hope flamed within him. For he had felt something give. Only a fraction of an inch, but it meant that one of the knots was faulty.

WORKING feverishly, afraid lest his movements betray him to his pall-bearers, Mahone repeatedly threw his arm toward the lid. And each time he felt it go just a little farther.

They were setting him down again and he knew that they were beside his grave. Mahone gritted his teeth against the rope burns on his bare wrist and threw up the arm again. This time there was only a slight resistance. Straining it up he felt the bonds give, come loose. His arm was free!

But then he realized the futility of the movement. The Chinese were all about him and before he could raise that lid, providing he could lift it from the inside, they would strike down upon him and there would be no question as to his mortality.

Nevertheless, he reached across his body and fumbled for the knot which held the ropes about his other arm. Pain shot through his hand as the savageness of his efforts tore a nail from his fingers.

They were lifting the head of the coffin now in preparation to sliding it into its upright position in the ground. Mahone paused in his attack on the second knot and tried to push up on the lid with his loose arm. But the weight was too great and the wood did not give the slightest distance.

Mahone felt the box coming upright and knew that strong arms were holding the lid in place. He sagged down slightly and his feet touched the bottom of the coffin. He tore again at the other knot.

HIS coffin was being held vertical. There was a moment of inaction. Then Mahone found himself plunging down through space. The coffin hit with a heavy thud which jarred the timbers. Mahone's knees buckled under him as he hit and banged against the lid.

His hand had been jarred loose from its work on the knot, but now he returned it feverishly to the task. He knew not what he could do, but he knew that if he ceased to move the terrible silence of that grave would close in upon and hold him helpless from sheer terror.

Above him he heard a shovel scrape and a quantity of loose dirt struck against the top of the box, rattled down along its sides. Another shovel followed. And once again Mahone heard that awful sound of the

gravel and sand striking against his gruesome prison.

Then his other arm came free. Thoughts of escape flashed through his mind. Then he gave an inaudible gasp of relief as he hit upon a possible plan.

He threw his weight against the vertical lid. With a slight creak it fell a short distance back from the top of the box. Mahone put his two arms above him, plugging the opening the lid had left.

Gravel rattled down swiftly. It brought the dust in upon him and he choked from the suffocation of it. He felt sharp stones hit against his forearms as he held them up. The weight of the dirt coming from above was painful.

THEN the rattling stopped and Mahone knew that he was imbedded in the grave and that the Chinese above him were filling in what remained of the hole. Soon there would be just a mound up there to mark his grave.

Mahone knew that he was rapidly exhausting the oxygen in the small space and that he must work quickly before the stale air rendered his strength useless.

He withdrew his forearms and felt dust and stones crash down over his body into the coffin. He stepped upon the pile they made and clawed at the loose dirt above him with frantic fingers.

Little by little the dirt came down and crept up on the floor of the coffin. And as it crept up, Mahone stood upon it and brought more down. He was rapidly opening a hole outside the coffin and he prayed that he would be able to reach the top before the fetid atmosphere robbed him of his strength.

Then he was able to project his body part way through the hole left by the sagging cover and he quickly

opened enough space on top of the coffin to allow him to leave the interior behind him.

The dust which hung thickly in the darkness was in his throat and the dirt itself was through his hair and clothes. Finally he found that he could crouch on top of his former prison and he clawed up and up until he could finally stand. A good sized chunk of dirt came down with his fingers and cool air suddenly swirled in about him.

He was free! With his arms laid out along the surface he pulled himself up part way and then he stopped to listen. He realized that even though the others might be gone there would still be a guard here to inform messengers as to the whereabouts of the Green God.

But the night lay still and heavy among the graves and he pulled his long body all the way up to stretch thankfully on the ground to rest.

As he lay there a low voice fell upon him. As nearly as he could guess, it was on the other side of the tomb of General Tao Lo.

With the one thought in mind that he must get to the House of So-Liang to recover the Green God, Mahone climbed to his feet and prepared to slip away.

A shrill cry split the night behind him to be followed by still another. Mahone took to his heels and ran rapidly among the mounds, trying to put distance between himself and his pursuers.

HE could hear their calls less than a hundred feet behind him and he knew that even in this darkness a running man could easily be seen. But his strength was going fast and he knew that he would not hope to last very long at the present pace.

Putting every ounce of energy into one burst of speed he raced across the dark plain. Ahead of him he

could see a mound of fair size and he darted around it. The calls of his pursuers were perilously close, but he threw himself at full length on the ground and waited breathlessly. At his hand he could feel the side of a coffin and he hugged it closely, praying that he might not be discovered.

He heard the rapid patter of running feet coming closer to him. Several shrill cries came from the vicinity of the large mound.

HE was certain that the rasping of his breath would cause him to be discovered for the baffled cries were coming close to his hiding place.

Pressing against the side of the grim box, Mahone prepared to leap at the throat of the first man who discovered him.

He had not long to wait for a Chinaman rounded a corner of the box and stood there staring down, too startled to cry out. Mahone sprang for his throat, closed vise-like fingers about the man's windpipe. There was no outcry, only a choking sob.

Something flashed down out of the convulsing yellow hand and Mahone laid the body on its back and stooped to pick up the man's weapon. It was a long, sharp knife.

Gripping the hilt, Mahone crept on. The sounds of the searchers were growing faint as they worked their way from the mound.

Soon they would discover the absence of one of their number and Mahone slid rapidly along, trying to put enough distance between himself and the others before that time of discovery came.

Ahead of him flickering lights told him the position of the Native City, and still cautiously, lest he be followed, he made his way toward them.

Once in the outskirts he felt easier. Although he was bloody and dirty, he was still possessed of the yellow dye and his black hair. And filthy Chinese, gashed and blood-stained, were all too frequent in these days of rioting and murder.

Walking along the wall of a muck-filled street he came upon a marketing square. Slipping through the excited crowds and stepping over an occasional corpse in a gutter, Mahone found himself in the street of the House of So-Liang.

Above him the sky glowed faintly red by the light of burning homes, and in his ears came the roar of a far-away mob running amuck.

He knew that the one chance of restoring a semblance of order to the Native City and of saving the International Settlement lay in replacing that strange Green God back in its temple. Chinamen, convinced that the city would fall during its absence, were, themselves, bringing about the downfall of Tientsin.

A BLACK opening in the wall loomed ahead and Mahone found that he was on the threshold of the House of So-Liang which passed as an inn but which was, in reality, the hang-out of the most vicious thieves in all this city of thieves and murderers. To enter might mean death, but not to enter meant the flaming ruin of the city. Mahone felt of the knife in his tattered coat and plunged into the darkness.

A streak of dirty light and a babble of voices met him as he turned a corner in the dark alley. A low doorway opened in the wall and Mahone stepped through.

A squalid scene met his eyes. Ragged, evil Chinamen with darting eyes sat cross-legged along the walls or about a blanket in the middle of the floor.

About the blanket the men sat play-

ing some gambling game with short pieces of colored bone. Some of them glanced up as Mahone entered and then looked back to their play. On the blanket Mahone could see rings and gold coins. The thieves were gambling away their loot.

Mahone took a seat with his back to the wall, pretending to drop his head in sleep. But in reality it was to hide the betraying gray of his eyes.

Watching covertly he waited for some sign.

A Chinese officer entered and spoke to two men at the gambling table who immediately picked up their stakes and left the play.

But Mahone had heard just enough. The voice had been the same as that at the graves!

THE yellow trio walked back through the room and mounted the rickety stairs at a far corner. Mahone watched them pass up out of sight. He heard a door slam overhead and the sound of straw-slippered feet on the planks.

Waiting until he could rise unnoticed he walked toward the stairs. He had reached the first step when he heard a door slam above him. It was too late to stop now and he went on up.

Steps came down to meet him but he dared not look up for fear the descending Chinaman would notice the gray eyes. Mahone felt a hand snatch at his shoulder and he looked up with an involuntary jerk. It was the Chinese officer again.

The Chinaman stared at him for a second before Mahone lowered his head again. But that second was enough, for the officer had seen the betraying color. With an oath he leaped down for Mahone.

There was no stopping now or arguing. Mahone picked up the other as though he were a child and threw

him down to the first floor. The Chinaman screamed out an order and as one, the gamblers and men along the walls rose up to race toward the stairs.

Mahone whipped out the knife in his coat and braced himself to meet the rush. To race on up the stairs would be useless. He was trapped and he could only try to fight it out with these howling demons below.

The first reached him, a shimmering blade ready to swoop down upon Mahone. But the American's knife flashed and came back into position for a second strike. The first Chinaman fell back impeding the progress of his mates.

Two men snatched at Mahone but the deadly knife flashed down twice. The two had barely time to fall back, clutching at their throats, before the horde swept upon him.

The flickering yellow light glittered from drawn blades. Chinese were swarming up over the railing, trying to get at his back. To evade these, Mahone gave ground slowly. His knife was a streak of metal which seemed everywhere at once.

HE looked down into yellow faces, bloodshot eyes and foam-flecked mouths which snarled. He withstood the lunges of the filthy bodies as they pressed him up and back.

His right hand clenching the repeatedly striking knife, he sent his left fist into the mass, felt his knuckles striking home.

A knife gashed his arm and he whirled to see that the Chinese were pouring over the railing, getting at his back.

Pressing himself to the wall and fighting now on three sides at once, he inched up, trying to get above the end of the railing. Once there he could turn and meet them only from the front.

In the mass below he saw an arm swing up and a flash of hurtling steel. He shrank back just in time to avoid the thrown blade. It quivered in the wooden wall beside his shoulder.

He was steadily creeping up. One last Chinaman stood above him. He flashed down with his knife and missed. Yellow hands tore at his throat. A knife gashed his leg from below.

Utilizing a precious second, Mahone reached out and seized the writhing body above him. Turning he threw the Chinaman straight into the faces of his assailants below.

NOW he could hold out as long as his strength would last. He was fighting them away from him in front. Now and then he kicked out at a jaw with his foot and felt the crunch of bone under his toes.

His knife lanced down to meet a leering face which sprang at him. He felt the steel rasp into flesh and bone, but the Chinaman jumped back and plunged down, Mahone's knife still in his face.

Weaponless now, Mahone resorted to his two fists. Hammering relentlessly at the mass which pressed up, he managed to keep those death-blades away from his vitals and those tearing yellow hands away from his throat.

He knew that he could not last forever, for where he was one, they were many more at their call.

He became conscious of a bellowing voice shouting from the mass below. One by one the snarling faces drew away.

Suddenly he was left alone on the stairs and he stood there, his arms hanging wearily at his sides staring down. Dully he wondered what had happened, but then he knew.

The Chinese officer was standing at the foot with drawn automatic.

The last Chinaman out of range, the officer prepared to fire.

Mahone stared down into that black muzzle for a fraction of a second, then he turned to leap up the stairs. He expected to hear that fatal shot at point-blank range any instant.

But he had almost reached the top before the pistol barked. Untouched, Mahone leaped up to the top and gazed wildly up and down the hall.

That second's hesitation cost him dear. For above him he glimpsed an upraised club which was descending with terrible speed. He raised his arms, trying to ward off the blow, but he was too late.

For the second time that night he was unconscious in the power of these maniacs who had plunged Tientsin close to the brink of destruction.

When he awoke he tried to rise, feeling himself forced down to the floor once more. He was weak from loss of blood and the fight on the stairs.

Dazedly he looked up and found that he was in a large room which was ornate in its decoration. He reasoned that he was on the second floor of the House of So-Liang for they would scarcely bother to carry him any further.

Silk draperies were folded against the walls and the single lamp in the middle of the room shimmered from the dull colors of the light material. Seated in a chair at a table beside him was the Chinese officer. Kneeling at his head were two guards, prepared to hold him down.

HE saw the light glance dully from their stained teeth, and the odor of their filthy bodies was strong about him. Once more he tried to move, but the Chinese officer at the table pointed an automatic at his stomach.

"Foreign devil," leered the officer,

"I do not know how you found our hiding place, but I do know that you will live to regret it, even though you do not live long. While we wait we will amuse ourselves with you."

Mahone closed his lips tightly but said nothing. He was a prisoner again, and he probably faced a more awful death than he had in the grave. While he was yet alive there was hope, though he wondered if it would not be better to let that automatic belch death at him.

"You wanted to know the whereabouts of the Green God." The Chinese officer's voice was smooth and deadly. "Many men would like to know this. You have seen the Green God? No? Well, look at it before you die."

A third guard who stood against the light silk hangings was ordered to fetch something from across the room. It was a silk-wrapped parcel.

The Chinese officer pulled back the wrappings and Mahone found himself staring up at a blaze of green light.

THE Green God was jade, probably twenty pounds of the finest jade. But that was not the key to its value. For about its neck, hanging down over the fat green chest was a string of large pearls which glowed in the light. And the eyes glittered from the red fire of two huge rubies. On the fat, folded hands there were immense diamonds.

In spite of his peril, Mahone gasped at this show of brilliance. Never before had he seen anything to equal it. No wonder the Green God had been the source of so much murder and rioting!

He had only to reach up and take the thing, return to the Headquarters of Naval Intelligence and peace would reign once more over Tientsin. But the barrier there was as invisible as it was awful. Death by torture!

The Chinese officer replaced the wrappings. "Now that you have seen it, it is a pity that you will be unable to tell about it." He gave the third guard an order and the Chinaman left the room.

Mahone waited tensely for his return. He dared not think of the fate which awaited him for Chinese torture is known for its exquisite cruelty. He lurched up once more but strong arms held him tightly. He resorted to the better course of allowing his strength to return to his racked body. Perhaps there was some way out of this. And again, perhaps not. Even if he got out of the room he would never be able to reach the street alive!

A door slammed in back of his head and the guard approached the officer, two items in his hands. Mahone saw that they were a rat trap full of terrified rodents and an old earthenware pot.

Shudderingly he wondered what manner of torture could be devised with these two objects, but he was not long in finding out.

The Chinese officer stepped to his side and drew back the coolie coat exposing Mahone's white abdomen. The American tried to roll sideways, but the guards held him still.

The third guard went out again and returned with two men. These took their places at Mahone's legs. He kicked at them but they gripped him and held on tightly.

THE officer then took the cage of rats and carefully blocking the edges of the vessel, held up one end. He placed the door of the rat cage inside the pot and the third guard poked at the animals, making them enter the vessel.

Mahone's flesh began to creep as he felt those sharp claws racing over his abdomen. Something like terror was beginning to crawl over him. He

watched the officer lash the vessel tightly to his stomach.

It was not until then that Mahone knew what was about to happen to him. For the Chinaman picked up an unlit pitch torch from the floor and carefully applied a slow-burning match to the head.

Mahone knew that they would press that torch to the top of the pot. He knew that the vessel would become untouchably hot. And that the heat would throw the enclosed rats into a panic. The rats had only one method of escape. They could not claw and tear their way through the heavy pot, but they had something soft and resisting below them. They would tear away from that heat and rip into Mahone's stomach. They would lay bare his skin and burrow deep into his intestines!

The awful realization of the hideous death he was about to meet gave Mahone new strength and he twisted about, attempting to dislodge the pot. But the leering Chinamen about him pressed him back with a force born of cruelty.

THE torch was flaring up now, sending new shadows leaping about the room. The Chinese officer came slowly to Mahone's side and touched the top of the earthenware pot with the flame. He held it there for a moment.

Close above his head was the silken curtain. Mahone fought down the terror inside of him and thought rapidly. He knew that silk was highly inflammable. If there was only some way to get loose!

The claws were plunging deep. In a second it would be too late. Agony gripped him, and the air blurred red with pain. He threshed out with his right arm and threw one of the guards slightly off balance. He twisted his wrist with a violent jerk. The rats were going deeper.

He felt his arm come free, felt coarse fingers attempting to regain it. Heaving up he snatched at the light silk. With a shimmering billow it suddenly tore loose from its hangings. Mahone brought his arm down, lashing the silk across the torch.

His action had been so rapid that the officer had had no time to reach for the automatic or withdraw the torch.

Flame shot up from the drape. With a cry the guards jerked back. Mahone reached up again and ripped down another drape, throwing it over the first.

Then he was free beneath a pyre of flame. His hands caught at the pot. It withheld his efforts for a moment and then came away. With a quick slap at his middle, Mahone knocked away the burrowing rats.

He leaped up away from the flames which had almost engulfed him. He saw that the silken robe of the officer was on fire, that the guards were beating at the flame on their own clothes.

Mahone jerked down other draperies and wrapped them around him tightly to stifle the tongues of fire which licked at his trousers. Then he jumped to the task of throwing everything inflammable on to the roaring blaze he had started.

TWO objects on the table caught his attention and he jumped through the red heat to snatch them up. One was the Green God, the other was the automatic pistol of the officer.

Unnoticed in the bedlam which had arose, Mahone plunged through the door. He had yet to beat his way through the mass of thieves and murderers below. At the head of the stairs Mahone stared down.

The Chinese on the first floor had heard those screams of the officer and guards and they were surging up the

stairway to meet him. Mahone plunged down to meet them half way. He shot straight into the mass of yellow faces.

Still charging down he shot again and again. But there was no cutting through that mass. The automatic clicked empty and Mahone stopped to let them reach up to him.

For a second time that night he was using the butt of a gun for a club. He felt himself hampered by the twenty-pound Green God under his arm and he shifted it about. Then he realized its value, for the wrappings had become undone and the idol was hanging by two feet of heavy silk. Mahone swung it about his head like a sling, felt it crash on faces and bodies before him.

Slowly they gave way before him until he was almost at the bottom of the stairs. Unnoticed by the yelling Chinese, smoke had begun to creep down the stairs to them. In a moment the whole structure would be a mass of flame.

HE glimpsed a tongue of scarlet shoot down through the ceiling to be followed by others. The floor would not hold out much longer, and he must get through!

A blazing roof beam crashed down on the mob. He fought, whirled around to stare up.

Now was his chance! With a mad lunge he threw himself among them. Above him he could see the upper floor starting to come down.

He was running a race with fire, for if that beam crashed before he could make the door, the fate of the Green God would forever remain a mystery, and death would be even worse than the torture he had just escaped. The Chinese were still staring up, unable to comprehend what was taking place. Mahone was among them, half way through to the door, when the far corners of the

room plunged down. Then the entire mob began to race for the door.

But Mahone had the start on them and he saw the black opening loom up in front. Behind him he heard a terrific crash as the entire ceiling came down. A burning beam struck him a glancing blow on the shoulder. Dying screams beat upon him.

The night was cool outside as Mahone plunged on down the twisting alley. Now if he could carry this burden safely through the Native City, Tientsin would be restored to normalcy.

In the street the howling mob was racing by, intent on loot and murder. Mahone dashed in among them and screamed as loud as any. He was racing in the direction of the International Settlement. At a corner, Mahone left the crowd and ran on toward his goal. He bent his steps to the office of Naval Intelligence.

A WILD, blood-spattered being crashed through the door of the N. I. office and lurched to a stop in front of the commander's desk.

The commander drew a pistol and backed away. Then he threw the gun down and came forward. "Mahone!"

Mahone sagged against the desk suddenly aching with weariness. "Yes, Mahone," he answered. "I haven't got it in my hip pocket, but here's your Green God!" He dropped the silken parcel on the desk and drew back the wrappings.

Undamaged, the Green God sat there smiling contentedly.

"You'll have to get it to the temple, Commander," Mahone continued. "I'm done in."

"Mahone!" cried the commander, dazzled by the brilliance of the idol. "You've saved the city!"

But Lieutenant Bill Mahone, N. I., slumped to the floor to stare up at the grinning god. "I hope he appreciates all I did for him tonight."

The Death Ship



Crayton grabbed a coil of stout rope

Follow the Grim Course of The Flying Crescent in One of the Most Gripping Sea Stories in Years

By **GEORGE ALLAN MOFFATT**

Author of "The Devil From Devil's Island," "Pirate Gold," etc.

WEARILY and grimly, all gray and black in the shadowy darkness of the late afternoon, her sails heavy with the cold, dismal rain that lashed against her rigging and beat a dreary melody of death on her decks, *The Flying Crescent* plowed laboriously, on a starboard tack, through the iron gray seas.

From the saturated canvas, water trickled to the deck and ran down and over the wire rigging in little rivulets of gleaming, silver gray. Amidship, a spanker, hauled to stop

the whanging of the boom, flopped weirdly in the dismal rain.

Near the fore hatch three men stood silent, their faces drawn and eyes staring at the dead man lying at their feet, his body still twisted and distorted from the last spasm of anguish before life had slipped away from the pain racked body.

"You'll need to give me a hand at sewing him up," one of the three men said. "It's me fingers that's getting weary sewing the bodies of dead men up in the cursed canvas."

He was an old man—the ship's

carpenter, and in his hand was the palm and needle. At his feet lay the canvas for the dead man's shroud and the old iron to weigh the body down.

"It's a death ship, this devil of a tub," the second man, a seaman, said in a whispered voice; "and I ain't feeling well meself, and you can get someone else to help sew 'im up."

The third man laughed. It was a cold, inhuman laugh—stark and bitter. His face was haggard and drawn; his eyes sunken and a steel gray. The seaman looked at the haggard face, at the sunken eyes—at the ghastly grin on the lips when the laugh died away.

He looked only once and then turned and fled.

"I'll say 'tis a great crew I'm shipping," the haggard faced man said. "It takes two men to sew a corpse up and no two men to be found."

"Aye, Captain," the old carpenter replied grimly, "and it's lucky you got any crew left with men falling to their death out of the rigging like as if a ghost was killing them. It's nerve racking for even an old salt like me to be sewing these poor laddies up every day."

THE face of Captain Crayton, a face young, though ghastly and old looking as it stared at the body of the dead seaman, relaxed a little. The grin of pain left his lips.

"Bill," he said quietly, "it's only men we can depend on that die. Now there aren't none left to kill and 'Red' Murray can do as he likes with the ship."

"Sure, and he's in the forecastle now talking with the scum we have aboard," old Bill replied. "And the men are terror stricken and—"

"Just as he wants them," Crayton broke in curtly. "But stove your moaning and slide the canvas under this chap."

Easily, without effort or without any visible emotion, Crayton raised the body of the dead man up as the old carpenter slid the canvas under him. The rain fell around them with the dreary monotony of a funeral dirge. Crayton sewed quickly, with the deftness of an old seaman.

THE sewing done, he lifted the body to the rail and let it slide into the foaming sea. He knew that behind him furtive eyes watched his every movement; he could hear the low mumble of curses that came through the rain-laden air, cursing him for his callousness, for bringing men out to die on that strange ship of death.

But for the men in the forecastle, Crayton had nothing to do with their sailing on the ship. He should have known, back in Wenchau, where he signed on as captain of *The Flying Crescent*, that all is not well when the captain is given a picked crew. Not picked because the men were sailors, but picked because they were riff-raff, the scum of the China Sea—a crew that would do as the owners, a small concern of questionable reputation, wanted them to do.

It was Jim Crayton's first berth as captain. He was young, still in his late twenties, but the sea had been his life—his home. It had been the life—the home of the Craytons for two generations before him. At twenty-five he was a first mate, and at twenty-eight he was given a ship—*The Flying Crescent*.

Life had seemed bright to him the morning he sailed out of Wenchau with his first command. *The Flying Crescent* was an old hull, water soaked and leaky, but that made no difference to Crayton. She was his first command. It made no difference to him that the riff-raff in the forecastle were a complement of human beings that at best had two

hands and two feet and were breathing.

HE didn't know that the first mate, Red Murray, a huge, scowling, red-headed bulk of human flesh, sat in his cabin and drank whisky and wondered how much trouble he would have with the kid of a captain in carrying out the orders of the owners—to sink *The Flying Crescent*. The old ship had served her day and insurance to the crooked owners was far better than a water-logged hull left to rot away in some back water.

But Crayton was young and this was his first ship. He pampered her, caressed her, and drove her through the China Sea as no man had done for many years. She fairly flew, as if conscious that again a hand that caressed her, loved her, was sending her forward into the piling foam at her forefoot. She flirted the sprays about her head, trampled the broken seas at her quarters, and carried her canvas with the stately grace she had done of old.

And the wind, as if catching something of the dying glory of the stately old queen, blew out of a smiling blue sky, a fierce weight in its bosom to send her along at a speed she had not known for many years.

For two weeks the wind blew strong and happy. The old ship roared through the seas proudly, leaking but little now, responding like the crack she was to the hand of youth that had suddenly taken her helm.

But at the end of the two weeks things started to go wrong. Red Murray, scowling and full of bad whisky, put the proposition of sinking the old ship up to Crayton. Murray had no fear of talking bluntly and openly. He had no fear of the crew and Crayton was a kid captain, and if he refused, it would be a small matter to handle him. He

had been shipped because he was a youngster and because Red Murray knew he could be taken care of easily.

But Red Murray had failed to reckon on two things. The first was that Crayton was honest—and behind him was the tradition of generations of the sea; the second was more fatal than the first. Crayton was a youngster in the eyes of the old seaman, but he was a youngster with a powerful right. As a result of the conversation, Red Murray was picked up off the floor of the chart room, his body limp, his eyes glassy, and his chin numb from Crayton's right fist.

It was not until some time later that Red Murray came too enough to realize what had happened. At first he blinked groggily, and then the scowl left his face and the cold, ruthless light of murder came in his eyes. But he said nothing, did not go near the captain again.

AND after that the old ship ran into days of calms. The wind that had come out of the blue sky died away, as if it had done its best to send the old queen along and had suddenly tired of its effort. *The Flying Crescent* rolled wearily in the calms. It was hot, stifling and sticky. Ahead faint breezes blew, but always out of reach.

Then out of the night a gale came, whistling and roaring. The old ship picked up her canvas, flew again, with seas roaring at her bows. And it was on this night that the first man was killed. A broken royal came down and killed him. Not an uncommon mishap, but when Crayton examined the dead man, he saw that the royal had not been completely broken by the wind.

His face set and his eyes narrowed, Red Murray stood at his side, grinning maliciously. The man killed

was a white man, a man Crayton knew he could depend on to stand by him when the final test came between him and Red Murray.

"Men dying like this," Murray sneered, "isn't good for the morale of the crew."

Crayton said nothing. He turned and went aft and sent old Bill, the ship's carpenter, to sew the body up and heave it over the rail.

AND from that night on, with the blood stain on her deck, *The Flying Crescent* became a living nightmare to Crayton. Murray's tactics were obvious, the tactics of a man that struck in the dark and would not come out in the open to fight. The crew started to mumble and growl and Murray did nothing openly to stop them, and at night he spent much time in the forecabin. Twice Crayton went there and ordered him out. Red Murray went with a sneer on his face and his tongue silent.

Two nights later another man died in a mysterious way. No one knew how it happened. The second mate, an old man, got mixed up in the windlass and was killed. The death was mysterious. Crayton could not understand why the old man had fooled with the windlass in open sea. If Red Murray knew, he said nothing. The sneer remained on his face and he worked silently, taking his orders from Crayton without a protest.

That night the dismal, cold rain started to fall. The gale blew harder and *The Flying Crescent* plunged through the broken seas grimly, with her ancient rigging straining against the wind and her gray, black body lunging forward helplessly—desperately, as if the death that had come on her decks was a forewarning of her own end.

She carried her canvas in face of

the gale gallantly, but now there was something grim and dark about her manner; she fairly flew through before the gale, as if fleeing from the terror that gripped her.

Jim Crayton did not sleep. Thin lines creased his young countenance, and his eyes were sunken, and a haggard, desperate look came on his face. Suddenly, it seemed that he had become an old man. His first command! If he failed in that and lost his ship, there would be no more commands; yet deeper than that fear was the tradition of the sea within his bronzed, powerful body. He was the third generation of Craytons that had sailed these seas—and he was to be the first an accusing finger of scorn might be raised against.

AND then came the night when the man fell from the yards, fell to his death on the deck and no man would help the old carpenter sew him up. By now the crew was in open mutiny; their faces were blanched with terror. They were sailing on a death ship and to the superstitious mind of a sailor, this brought a fear and terror that a landsman cannot understand.

These things flashed through Crayton's weary mind as he heard the bundle of canvas with the body and the old irons strike the water. In the beginning there had been four men among the crew that were white under the skin. These men, Crayton had hoped, would fight with him to save *The Flying Crescent* and their reputations.

Now three of them were dead and only old Bill, the carpenter, was left. He was old, but the sea was in his veins and painted over his rugged old face. His eyes were blue and frank.

He did not fear death; he looked on young Crayton as he would have his own son.

But one man out of fifteen! And those fifteen half-breeds and Chinks, men little above the instincts of beasts who knew no such thing as reputation and were ruled by the primitive passions, the greatest of which was fear.

Red Murray was different. There was the beast about him—the cunning and the deadliness of the cobra, and if this cunning failed, there was power and strength in that body to drive it through a sea of attackers with great fists and hands that could use a gun with unerring deadliness.

Murray was playing the game with craftiness. Somehow his hand was behind these three deaths. He knew the childlike mind of the men in the forecabin; he knew to what ends terror would drive them. It would be mutiny, no matter if it were covered with a veneer of frightened men; yet a mutiny that Red Murray would be free of—unless the terror failed and he had to drive the men on.

"Sure, me lad," old Bill said as they backed away from the rail, "it's now that the men will strike. This death is the breaking part of the cord for them."

FROM the forecabin came the rising growl of fear-stricken men. The terror of death had laid its cold, clammy hand over the ship—a death that came out of the night unheralded, unseen.

Crayton turned and walked aft, with old Bill close at his side. They went in the chart room.

"It's sleep you need now, me lad," old Bill said quietly. "By tomorrow Murray will strike. Tonight he will let the scum shiver in their terror and do what they can, which won't be much. Tomorrow it will be different, because when Murray strikes there will be guns."

Crayton lay down wearily. He closed his eyes but he did not sleep.

Old Bill went out on deck. Crayton's head whirled from sheer exhaustion. He had no intention to fall asleep but unconsciousness came over him slowly—drowsily.

OUTSIDE the night fell. The darkness came in a gray, deepening mist. The rain stopped and the gale gave way to a light wind, but the wind carried the old *Flying Crescent* through the rolling waves, like a gray phantom ship of death.

There were no running lights out. The crew huddled in the forecabin fearful to step out on deck lest the strange death would strike them. Broken, chattering, trembling wrecks of human scum, they crouched in the bunks, their eyes wide and their fear ready to lead them to anything. Red Murray was with them. Crayton knew he was there but the hour for him to strike had not come.

An hour passed. The gray mist gave way to darkness, but overhead the clouds were breaking and a moon, racing by them, cast soft, bluish shafts of light down on the water-soaked canvas of the old ship and down on the poop decks.

Silently and grimly *The Flying Crescent* plunged on in the night. No sounds came from her deck—no lights shone from the windows of the cabins aft.

Then out of the darkness slinking, dark figures moved on the poop ladders. A low mumble of subdued chatter broke the stillness. There was a soft call in the darkness. The man at the wheel answered. Down in the waist a door slammed and something crashed.

The helmsman left the wheel, crept forward stealthily, with a knife gleaming in his hand. Old Bill was not ten feet away from him. He had heard the subdued chatter of voices; he had heard the slamming door. He started for the chart room,

but as he did, the creeping form leaped at him and together they went to the deck.

OLD BILL fell on his back and sent his right up at the man's chin. The knife came down but another blow knocked it from the killer's hand. And then the night was full of dark figures hovering over old Bill.

He did the only thing left to do and he did it excellently. He let out a whoop that could be heard in every part of the ship. It cut through the sleeping consciousness of Crayton like a knife. And before he was fully awake he was on his feet, dashing to the side of his friend. He plunged into the center of a raving, fear-stricken mob—wrecks of men that had suddenly become demons of rage and murder.

Crayton did not stop to survey the milling sea of humanity around him. His right shot out with a crashing bang and knocked the man on old Bill three feet back. And then in the split second that followed he took in the situation. The presence of the captain and the blow that had sent the helmsman three feet backward halted the enraged mob.

Above, the wind thrummed in the rigging and the roar of the running sea mingled with this thrumming sound. Crayton saw that no hand was at the wheel. He smiled grimly. It was just as well that no hand touched it for a while. The ship would come back to the wind. There was danger that getting back might do damage, but it would cause enough commotion to force the crew into rational sense.

In front of him the mob was advancing again, with knives glistening in the night. Crayton's eyes searched for Red Murray but he was nowhere to be seen. Again a grim, haggard smile came to the young

captain's lips. Red Murray was playing safe. The men would kill Crayton and then turn to him to guide the ship to some port. The grim smile twisted itself into a snarling, bitter grin.

His hand had grabbed a coil of the mizzen topgallant halyards. He threw a knot in the end of the stout rope. Old Bill was on his feet and he did likewise. Rope in hand, Crayton walked into the middle of the surging crew, the rope lashing out viciously to the right and left, striking heads and bodies. He flailed the crew mercilessly, driving them back to the rail. Knives dropped from hands. Men grunted in pain and then screamed.

ON and on Crayton flailed them. By this time the ship was all awind, her sails thundering and her gear clashing. The rope in Crayton's hand struck out with a fury that was greater than the anger of the winds. Crayton drove the scum of human wrecks back and back, cursing them bitterly. At his side was old Bill, yelling at the top of his voice at every lash of the rope in his hand.

Suddenly the crew saw what was happening to the ship. This was a greater driving force to them than the rope in Crayton's hand. Crayton yelled to old Bill to take the wheel. Then he drove the men from brace to brace, forcing them to haul up tacks and sheets until the ship leaned against the wind and her ancient prow nosed its way through the waves once more.

And after that the men slunk back to the forecastle, beaten and afraid. Crayton knew that never again would he have to beat them. He knew that the next time Red Murray would be at their head and the mate would come armed and it would be sixteen men against two.

But Crayton wasted no time think-

ing of this. He went back to the wheel where old Bill was acting as helmsman.

"It's me or Murray now," Crayton said quietly. "He let those poor devils try the mutiny themselves and they failed, and they won't try it again alone. But Red Murray will lead them, and we can't fight sixteen men armed—"

"RED MURRAY will see that they are armed enough," old Bill broke in grimly, "and he won't wait very long."

"If he waits a half an hour," Crayton answered grimly, "he will wait too long."

"Don't you go getting killed," old Bill said with a worried note in his voice. "If there is any dirty work to be done better let me do it."

Crayton shook his head slowly.

"Red Murray murdered those three men," Crayton said, "and you can't murder three men on a ship without leaving some trace."

"You damned fool," old Bill grunted, "you ain't—"

"If I arrest Red Murray and take him into port, he'll make a fool out of us," Crayton said. "We have no proof that he murdered those men or was behind this mutiny, and taking an innocent man into port under arrest isn't pleasant when they get through with you. He murdered the second mate in that windlass and he sawed the royal mast to kill 'Dutch' Scroggins, but we couldn't find evidence. That chap tonight was pushed off the main mast and I'm going up there. If I can prove that Murray killed the chap, we might do something with this crew; if I can't they'll get us before morning."

"But ye ain't trying anything alone," old Bill protested. "They'll kill you before ye get twenty feet away from here."

"Keep that wheel steady," Crayton

said. "I'm going up the main rigging and see what I can find."

"You damned young fool—"

But old Bill had no chance to finish his tirade against Crayton. The young captain was down the poop ladder and onto the deck. Crouching low, his right hand gripping a revolver, he crept through the darkness. He knew the time for bare fists was over and his gun was ready for quick action.

Shadows moved obliquely—grotesquely around the hatches and near the forecastle, shadows that looked more like animals creeping in the dark than men. Now and then a shaft of bluish moonlight would cut down through the strained and creaking rigging of the old ship. Once the shaft fell on a man crawling for the cover of the hatch.

CRAYTON crept swiftly now, his crouching form hugging the rail. He twisted a little, threw his arms up, and the next second he was scurrying up the rigging with the agility of a monkey.

The wind whistled through the canvas and the yards moved a little back and forth. The rigging was wet from the four-day rain, but Crayton's hand held to it firmly as he made his way up to the mainmast.

His hand gripped the peak halyard as he drew himself up astride the mainmast. For a moment he rested there, his eyes straining through the darkness.

Then he saw it, saw it as the shaft of moonlight shot down through the canvas, lighting the crosstrees. It was a piece of cloth fluttering in the wind. Crayton could see that the cloth was blue and that it was stuck on the rigging of the crosstrees.

His body stiffened. His hands went for the throat halyard, but as he did a leaping tongue of red flame came up at him from far below;

there was a deafening roar, and then Crayton was conscious that a bullet had cut through the rigging near his head.

ABOVE him the piece of cloth waved back and forth in the wind. Another flash of red came from the deck. Another thundering explosion and another bullet cut near him.

He flattened his body over the mainmast, hiding it from the aim of the man below. For a little while he lay there, not a muscle moving, and then he stuck his head out. The deck below was dark and empty. Then from behind the hatch came the leaping flash of red, and the bullet buried itself in the mainmast a few inches from his head.

His gun roared, but he realized the utter futility of a duel with the man hiding behind the hatch. The flash of his gun brought more bullets up toward him, and then he heard a wild yell. Coming up the rigging were two men, knives in their mouths and guns in their right hands.

Crayton twisted his body around and waited for them. The leading man sent a bullet toward the mainmast and as he did, Crayton's gun belched fire. The man stiffened, swayed on the rigging a moment and then fell backward into the sea. The other man was scrambling down the rigging frantically.

And then Crayton's body went upward. His hands gripped the rope of the throat halyards and with a mighty pull he got his body up over the crosstrees. A bullet smashed a pulley near his hand. Another cut a rope over his head.

His hand went out for the piece of cloth flying in the wind. He was conscious of the straining and cracking of the yards and the rigging of the old ship as *The Flying Crescent* plowed through foaming sea. A bul-

let caught him somewhere on the shoulder. There was a stinging, burning pain. His fingers closed around the cloth, pulled it away from the rigging.

There was a deafening roar in Crayton's ears. His head swam crazily and something on his right temple stung like a bee. His body swayed on the crosstrees. His hands groped for the halyard rope, caught it, but were too numb to hold on.

Then he was slipping off the crosstree, slipping down into the vast darkness below, but his hands were working. He was like a prize fighter knocked senseless but still fighting. His fingers gripped something cold and sharp.

And then he was shooting downward into a pit of jet black darkness.

Down and down he went. His hands burned. It seemed to him that he had fallen miles. And then his body crashed against something hard. The blow brought his senses back with a snap. In a flash he knew what had happened. He had been stunned by a bullet creasing his head and in that stunned state, his hands had instinctively, largely from force of habit, reached for the backstay wire.

HE was on his feet with a leap. His senses were still groggy but he was able to move his body. He realized that his gun was no longer in his hand. He saw a form rise up from behind the hatch, saw a gun leveled at him. With a flying leap Crayton went through the air.

There was a blinding flash of red in front of him. His face seemed to be on fire with a burning, stinging pain. A roar that almost split his ear drums followed. And the next second he crashed into a body, the force of his leap sending the two

men to the deck in a fighting, kicking mass of human flesh. Over and over they rolled. Crayton knew that the man grappling with him was Red Murray and he knew that it would be a fight to the death of one of them.

HE had no time to worry about the dark figures that moved over them. He had no time to realize that the minute he was free from Murray's body, fifteen bullets would bore through him. He thought of only two things. The piece of blue cloth in his pocket and the powerful arms of Red Murray that gripped for his throat. It was an unmerciful fight. Red Murray, fresh and with brain clear, fought with the cunning of a beast. Crayton, his brain still in a fog, fought desperately, with inhuman strength against almost hopeless odds.

Back and forth they struggled on the deck, moving closer and closer to the forecastle. Red Murray's gun had fallen from his hand. The mate sought desperately to gouge the young captain's eyes out and then to get a death grip around his throat.

Crayton kept Murray under him, lashing out with right and left. But the old strength was gone from the blows. The blows landed but Murray grunted a little and then worked his hands harder and faster. Crayton was weakening slowly. He knew the struggle could not last much longer.

Then suddenly his body was being raised in the air. He heard a cold, brutal laugh come from Red Murray. The next thing he knew he was being hurled through the air, through a door. He landed on the floor of the forecastle with a sickening thud. He lay there, unable to move, the wind knocked out of his lungs.

He saw the huge body of Red Murray come bulging through the

door. He saw a knife gleam in the mate's hand. And then Crayton came to life weakly, with one last effort. He doubled his numbed legs under his body and then gave a lurching push forward.

His hands reached out and caught Red Murray by the ankles; his body rose up slowly, in a hunched up ball, and the hands gripped the mate's ankles, gave a quick upward pull and Red Murray turned a complete somersault, landing in the far corner of the room on his head and shoulder.

Crayton staggered back, his body swaying weakly. He saw Red Murray jump to his feet. He saw Murray come lunging toward him. Crayton wondered vaguely why some of the crew hadn't shot him as he stood alone, swaying back and forth. Then he was conscious of a lurching sensation under foot. Something was happening to the ship, but all this came to him in a flash and then was forgotten. Red Murray was on him.

CRAYTON'S right shot out, the blow starting from his toes and carrying all the weight of his body behind it—if not a great deal of strength. Red Murray's head snapped back. With a bellow of rage, the mate came in again, his powerful neck and shoulders down, his long arms reaching for the swaying body of the young captain.

Again Crayton swung his right. Red Murray's head snapped back but still the bellowing, raging mate was boring in. Crayton side-stepped the long arms, side-stepped in a daze. He knew his right and his left were shooting forward, striking something; he knew now that there were others in the room, watching him—a sea of weird, ghastly faces swimming in front of his eyes.

He backed away and went against

the wall. He shook his head to clear his befogged brain, but all the time he was shooting his right and left out mechanically—like a punch-drunk fighter.

Then suddenly he saw the huge face of Red Murray directly in front of him. He saw the square jaw and the heavy chin.

WITH a groan, Crayton hunched his body forward, shooting his right out in an overhand haymaker, throwing the full weight of his body against the blow.

There was a loud smack. Everything reeled and danced crazily in front of his eyes. The room was turning upside down. His knees buckled and it was only with an effort that he remained on his feet. His right shot out no more. There was no one in front of him.

Then slowly his brain cleared and the room stopped turning upside down. His eyes cleared. He saw sprawled on the floor in front of him the inert body of Red Murray.

Somewhere near him a voice called out:

"You did it, laddie. Sure as hell you did it."

Crayton turned slowly. Backed in the corner was the crew and standing in front of them, a revolver in each hand was old Bill.

"I becketed the wheel, laddie," old Bill called out, "and came fore to see that it would be a fair fight. Red Murray will listen to the birdies for some time after that last blow."

Crayton blinked a little and then shook his head again.

"Get the weapons from the crew," he ordered old Bill, "and after that I will show them something that made a good ship a murder ship."

Five minutes later the weapons of the crew were all piled up in a corner and Red Murray was tied securely hand and foot.

Then Crayton took the piece of blue cloth from his pocket.

"The chap killed this afternoon," he said to a crew that was trembling with fear, "was killed by a man pushing him off the crosstrees above the mainmast. The man that killed this chap wore a blue shirt. The dead man wore a brown one. When the killer lay flat over the crosstree, waiting for the poor devil to come up, a piece of his shirt caught in the ropes. In his hurry to get down, the killer forgot that he had torn his shirt.

"Now there has been a great deal said about this ship being a hoodoo ship—a killer. The ship is as fine a queen as ever put her nose through these waters. The killer happened to be a red-headed first mate that was hired to see that the ship was sunk. He put the proposition up to me, and I sent him to the floor to listen to certain birds sing for a while.

"AFTER that he decided to play a cunning game. He didn't have the courage to strike himself; so he killed three of the crew to put fear in your hearts and make you crazy. He figured you men would do what he was afraid to do openly. Kill me and old Bill. If you had done that, he could have sunk the ship without much trouble and many of you would have gone down with it because live men talk and dead men don't."

Crayton walked over to where Red Murray lay on the floor, his eyes watching the young captain with a look that was glassy and fear stricken.

"As I said, the killer lay on that crosstree and when he fled after killing the sailor, left a part of his shirt up there. And if there is any doubt who owned the shirt, we'll see if it doesn't fit this torn part out of Red Murray's shirt."

Crayton knelt down. The crew, pale faced and staring, watched him. On the front of Murray's blue shirt was a piece torn out. The piece in Crayton's hand fitted the torn part exactly. A low growl rose up from the throats of the crew. Crayton got up and put the piece of cloth in his pocket.

"Take Murray aft," he said to old Bill, "and lock him up. He may talk when we get to port, but if he doesn't, this cloth and other evidence I can get against him and the crooked owners of this ship will be enough to send him over the road."

Old Bill grinned and motioned for two of the crew to help him. The men jumped forward eagerly, all fight and all fear gone from their eyes.

"WE'LL dump these arms overboard," Crayton said. "I don't think we'll have any more use for them this trip."

The crew jumped forward to carry out the captain's orders, but he waved them back. He gathered the arms up himself and carried them out of the forecabin to the rail and dumped them overboard. When he returned Bill was waiting for him.

"Ye don't need to fear letting these lads get their hands on arms now," he said. "You've made a bunch of men out of human wrecks, and you won't have any more trouble with them on this trip."

And Bill spoke with the wisdom of the sea and years behind the mast. The crew of human wreckage taken on at Wenchau developed overnight into men that had suddenly found a new leader—a man to bring back to their warped souls something that had long since died.

AND the next day the sun broke forth on a smiling blue sky, with not so much as a stream of a passing cloud to hide the sunlight; and out of this blue, cloudless sky blew a strong wind that filled the sails of the old *Flying Crescent* and sent her roaring happily through the green waters.

She was like a fine race horse trying her paces. She leaned and bowed and soared, thrumming with the wind's stress, speeding to her port of destination, with piles of foam at her forefoot. For once again she was the queen of other days, a glorious, beautiful thing, a thing of rosy tinted ivory beauty, with the grace of a beautiful woman, delicately framed against a background of blue green satin.

And at her helm stood a young man, his body weak and his head bandaged, but his eyes flashing, and his pale face aglow with the sheer beauty of a great old ship, a ship that he had saved from a watery grave that would have buried his reputation and all that he had known and loved in life with it.

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LOOT *at* Kwang-Kum

*Corporal Craig of the
Foreign Legion Lost His
Hand—But He Packed
A Mighty Wallop
Just the Same!*

A Complete Novelette

By BOB DU SOE

Author of "Escape," etc.

I

"YOU are next, Cabo," the medical orderly nodded, and Legionnaire, Corporal Craig, stepped forward with a grim smile.

The *Médecin Major*, a terse be-whiskered little man, examined the inflamed and swollen hand that Craig held out to him and his brow puckered with a frown. "Bad—very bad," he muttered.

Corporal Craig, with all his Yankee nerve, continued to grin. "Yes, Major, sure feels like it."

"Can you tell me how you happened to receive a bayonet wound in your hand?" demanded the major. "And a French bayonet, at that?"

The corporal had a fair idea but he had no intentions of relating his suspicions to the major. "I fell on the cursed thing," he lied. "It's a wonder it didn't puncture my liver."

The major's glance met the steady gaze of the hardened, sun-tanned soldier before him and his frown deepened. "You fell on it," he repeated.



Craig raised his hands. He

"*Bon Dieu*, do you think I am a fool? Do you think I know nothing of wounds?"

"Why, I hope not, Major. I marched a hundred kilometers through this cursed jungle the last three days just to have you patch it up."

"So—? Very well, it comes off at the wrist."

"Hell, is it as bad as that?"

"Can you not see that gangrene has already set in? A few hours more and it would have been the whole arm."

The grin was gone now from the corporal's face. The muscles in his lean jaw stuck out like knots on a log and the clear blue of his eyes darkened with anger. "All right," he growled. "Chop it off."

The major motioned toward a long, white table and spoke to the orderly.

"Never mind that." Craig thrust out his hand. "I said chop it off."

The major shrugged. "Very well, if you think you can stand the pain. Drink this, I don't want you to faint



was thinking fast—playing for time

and make a sorry mess of things."

Craig drank the cup of cognac and set his jaw. He did not faint; he was not that kind, but his face grew white beneath the tan and he came very near being violently sick before the ordeal was over. Every stab of pain carved the vivid memory of that bayonet thrust deeper and deeper into his brain.

In the uncertain light and the confusion of the hand-to-hand fighting that had completed the capture of Kwang-Kum he had failed to recognize the man who had made the lunge. There had been no question of the uniform he had worn, however, nor of the skill with which he had made the thrust. He had been a member of Craig's own company, determined to put him out of the way, and a man to whom murder was no obstacle.

The major filled the cup with cognac twice more before he had finished with the last bandage. He was no stranger to the bravery and the

iron nerve of these men of the Legion but this particular job got a little the best of him. He felt the need of a drink himself. "Report tomorrow morning," he ordered. "Better go to your barracks and take it easy."

CRAIG swayed just a trifle and managed to grin. He was quite drunk now, though the major would not have guessed it. "Yes, sir, tomorrow morning," he replied, and touching his *képi* with his good right hand, he left the hospital.

In the *caserene* at the far end of the barracks he sat down at an empty table and ordered more brandy. He unbuttoned his tunic, removed his *képi*, and wiped the large beads of sweat from his forehead. It was not often that he gave way to his feelings in this manner but he had been through a large slice of hell in the last three days and the loss of a hand is a bit beyond the condolence of an oath.

"You *salo*, I have been looking all

over the place for you," a tall, young Belgian approached the table. "How is the hand?"

"Hello, Faudre." Craig shoved forward the bottle. "The hand? I don't know. You will have to ask the *Médecin Major*. He's keeping it for a souvenir."

"*Sacré*, you do not mean he—"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"*Bon Dieu*, that is tough. And you still have no idea who it was that tried to stick you?"

CRAIG eyed the young Belgian a moment before he answered. For nearly five years, ever since that first day at Bel-Abbes, they had been the best of friends. "Faudre," he finally spoke. "You didn't do it, did you?"

"Me? *Sacrébleu*, are you mad? Of course I did not do it!"

"I know you didn't. Just wanted to hear what you'd say. But that leaves one of only two others who did do it. There were but five of us, you know, who mopped up that temple with Lieutenant Leclair. With the lieutenant dead there are only four of us left—Vanel, Pelissier and ourselves."

"Then you mean it was Vanel or Pelissier! *Bon Dieu*, I wonder! I almost forgot, too. I was looking for you because the captain wishes to talk with you."

"I have an idea it is about the lieutenant."

"About the lieutenant, eh? Then that settles it. The lieutenant was murdered."

"Murdered! *Sacré*, it is impossible!"

"No, it isn't. You remember when we hid that idol in the temple the lieutenant told us to say nothing about it and then started to leave?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And then do you recall that Pelissier and Vanel followed him and that when we caught up with them they

were standing there waiting for the lieutenant to die?"

"Yes, that is all true, and it was then that Vanel took the map, that Leclair carried to direct us to the temple, but they both swore they saw the lieutenant drop as they turned into the corridor."

"Zut, do you believe everything you hear? Faudre, that idol was gold. Understand, gold. We all saw enough to know that, and with the lieutenant out of the way, and myself, too—I guess they would have tried to get you—if they had dared," Craig waved his good hand.

"Well, that ought to be explanation enough."

"*Bon Dieu*, I see it now! If you could only prove it to the captain."

"I'm not going to try. Neither am I going to say anything about the idol. I've got a score to settle with one of those dogs now, and while I am at it I'll square that little debt for the lieutenant, too."

"My friend, I am with you." The dark, sober eyes of the Belgian suddenly hardened. "And now, if you are not too drunk, you had better report to the captain. We will talk this over when you return."

II

CAPTAIN MONET glanced up from his desk as the orderly ushered Craig into his presence and his sharp, black eyes, peering from beneath his bushy brows, missed no detail.

"You have lost a hand, Corporal," he spoke with feeling. "Too bad—too bad."

"It might have been a leg," Craig replied.

"Yes, that is one way to look at it. Or it might have been even worse—Lieutenant Leclair, for instance."

Craig did not answer. Faudre had been right; he was to be questioned

again regarding the death of the lieutenant.

"I have your statement," the captain went on, "that you were present when Lieutenant Leclair was killed."

"I was in the temple, but I was not near him when it happened. As I reported, I did not know he had been shot until I reached the entrance and found him dying."

"Yes, I understand all that." Monet twisted his mustache in thought. "But suppose you go into it again with a little more detail."

"Well, there isn't much else, *mon Capitaine*. My orders, as you know, were to take the temple, and we charged. We were driven back twice and most of my squad had been killed when Lieutenant Leclair came to see what was holding us up. He had a sack of grenades and on the next charge we used them and succeeded in getting inside the building.

"After that nothing remained but the mopping up. There being only five of us, the lieutenant included, we stuck pretty close. There were a half-dozen dingy dark rooms in the place and we went through all of them to see if any of the Tonkins were hiding there.

"THE devils had all cleared out and the lieutenant headed back toward the entrance. I was in the rear and when I entered the main corridor I found the lieutenant dying from a bullet wound over the heart."

"And the other three men—Faudre, Vanel and Pelissier, did they see nothing, either?"

"I questioned them at the time, and you have talked with them since. Pelissier says he saw him fall as he approached the entrance. That is all."

"But could you swear that what he says is the truth?"

"No, I could not. The shot was fired before I entered the corridor."

"But you heard the shot, did you?"

"I heard a score of shots, *mon Capitaine*. There was firing going on all around us. Whether I heard the shot that killed the lieutenant or not I couldn't say."

THE captain stuck his hand into a drawer of his desk and brought out a single, tarnished bullet.

"Take a look at that," he said, and held the bullet out for Craig to examine.

The corporal recognized it at a glance. "From one of our Leblers, isn't it?"

"Yes, and also out of the dead body of Lieutenant Leclair."

"*Bon Dieu!*" Craig did his best to appear surprised. "You—you mean—he was murdered!"

"That's what I mean," snapped Monet.

"But you have no proof—the bullet might have been a stray."

"Correct." Monet tossed the bullet back into the drawer. "Well, I suppose it will have to rest at that. However, I am not satisfied, Corporal. Keep your ears open—and your mouth shut. It looks suspicious—very suspicious."

"I will keep a close watch," Craig replied. "And while I am here, Sir, I would like to mention this—this wound."

"Very well, what about it?"

"It is only that I hope it will not alter my standing with the company. It is the left hand, you see, and it won't make any difference in my duties."

"You wish to remain in active service, is that it?"

"Yes, *mon Capitaine*, I wanted you to know in case—"

"I understand. Your spirit is commendable. I will see what can be done about it."

Craig thanked the captain with a very proper salute, groped his

way out of the office and went back to his table in the canteen.

Faudre was still there, waiting for him. "Was I right? Was it about the lieutenant?" he inquired.

"Yes, you were right, and so was I. It was about the lieutenant, and Monet has the bullet that killed him—a bullet from a Lebel."

"Sacré, then there is no doubt!"

"No, none. The only question is, which one of them did it, and how can we prove it?"

"It will be impossible unless one of them gets drunk, mad or something and talks."

"That's an idea. I'll remember that. And now I have a bit of work for our little woodpecker. Call him, will you? He is here at the bar."

TOUSSANT, a mild-mannered little Swiss, came in answer to their summons. He seated himself at the table and from under his tunic he produced the latest example of his skill, a tiny statue of the beautiful Josephine that he had carved with the utmost pains from the broken butt of a rifle.

Michelangelo, with a block of the purest marble and the living model to inspire him could not have produced a piece of work more perfect.

"For you, *mon Cabo*, I will make it ten francs," the little man caressed the beautiful Josephine with tender affection.

Corporal Craig shook his head.

"No, Toussant, the thing I want is very simple—nothing artistic about it at all, just a plain wooden hand."

"Your hand! Ah, *mon Cabo*, I had not noticed. I am most sorry."

"Nothing for you to grieve about, Toussant. It's business. I'll give you ten francs for a new fist."

"Sacré, I would not think of it! I will make you the hand, yes. But

I want no money, my friend; I would not think of it."

"No money! What about that place you are going to have some day in Paris—that swell studio with all the million dollar ladies hanging around sipping cocktails?"

"Zut, that is but a dream, my friend—a dream."

"Well, have a drink, anyway."

"Ah, a drink—yes, to be sure. And tell me about the hand, do you want it open so that you can perhaps wear a glove, or do you actually want the fist, as you said."

"Make it a fist," Craig replied, "and make it good and big. The heavier the better."

"I understand, *mon Cabo*. Now your other hand, let me have a look at it."

"Oh, they don't need to match. Just be sure it's a fist, that's all."

"You will leave that to me," the little man studied the corporal's one good hand with a practiced eye. "When the wound is healed I will have a new fist for you that will be the envy of the Legion."

III

CRAIG and Faudre were still seated at the table in the caserene later that afternoon when two Legionnaires entered through the door opposite and approached the bar. One of them was Vanel, a short, thick-set man with coarse, heavy features, and the other was Pelissier.

Jean Pelissier was an entirely different type from his companion. He was slender, high-strung, and even in the sackcloth of the Legion he was something of a dandy. However, there was a weakness about his mouth and chin, and an evasion in his wide watery eyes that did not encourage confidence.

Vanel caught sight of Craig and

Faudre, and after a word to his companion the two left the bar and crossed the room to the occupied table.

"We heard about the hand," Vanel spoke first. "Tough luck, but I suppose you will get a soft billet now at Headquarters—and maybe another stripe, eh?"

"Neither." Craig eyed the man sharply as he spoke. "I am staying with the company."

"So? Well, maybe that is best—better for our purpose, anyway."

"You mean on account of the idol?"

"Sure, what else? When we get the chance to pack it away it will be better if we are all together."

"Very considerate of you. But suppose we are not?"

VANEL returned the corporal's stare. "I think we had better agree not to return to the temple until it is convenient for all of us. We are good friends, but one cannot tell what might happen."

"Suppose one of us stops a bullet—or a *bayonet*, for instance?"

"That is a different matter."

"I see, tough luck for the one who gets it but a bit of good luck for the rest."

Vanel shrugged impatiently. "Well, why not? *Sacré*, this is no different from picking a few sous off a dead native. If you survive the battle you get your share. If you do not, somebody else gets it."

"Sure, only the difference here would be in how one or the other of us came to meet up with this bit of tough luck."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't understand, eh? Never mind, it wouldn't make any difference if you did. What are you going to do with that map you took from the lieutenant?"

"Keep it, of course. How else could

we find our way back through that cursed jungle? The temple was blown up—so was the whole village. We must have something to go by."

"I suppose so, but why should you be the one to hang on to it?"

"Because, I had sense enough to get it when we had the chance. Is that not enough?"

CRAIG was playing a difficult role. He was no saint. He had agreed to share in the loot back there in the jungle. It was part of the game. However, he had not suspected then as he did now that the spoils had fallen into their hands as the result of a deliberate murder.

"No, Vanel." He shook his head. "As you say, we are all good friends but one can never tell what might happen. Better give the map to me and I will make copies of it for the rest of us."

Vanel was not clever. He felt himself stumbling into a trap but he was not quick-witted enough to think of a way out. The idea did not appeal to him; that was plain, but there was no way he could gracefully refuse. He took the map from an inside pocket of his tunic and handed it to Craig.

"You see," he demanded of the others, "I am no longer responsible for it."

Craig put the map into his own pocket, just a bit relieved. He had not expected to get hold of it quite so easily.

Pelissier did not seem any more pleased about it than Vanel and the corporal wondered what they would do when they discovered that he was going to keep the map for good. Not only that, but he had no intentions either, of making the copies he had mentioned.

The bugle blared shrilly over at the barracks and the crowd in the *caserene* gulped their drinks and

made a hasty exit. Craig went stumbling after them, cursing the terrific pain in his arm. He had never succeeded in drinking himself into unconsciousness like some. He would have to bear his torture without aid, unless he made an appeal to the *Médecin Major*, and he would never do that.

Captain Monet met him as he approached the barracks and inquired as to why he was not in the hospital.

"Not for me," Craig replied. "If it is just the same with *mon Capitaine*, I would rather keep busy."

The captain shrugged. "Very well, the replacements will arrive tomorrow from Saigon. Until we decide what to do with you, you can work on them."

IV

THE replacements were the usual assortment of Germans, Russians, Austrians, with a few half-breed Spaniards, Italians and the Lord only knew what else, and when Corporal Craig found his squad again recruited to full strength he willingly followed the captain's suggestion.

Four hours each day he drilled them on the double, as if their three months training at Bel-Abbes had been nothing. The rest of the time he lectured them on the finer points of soldiering with the Legion and made them practice all he told them.

Much as it displeased Vanel and Pelissier, he drilled them the same as he did the *bleus*. It was an easy way to keep an eye on them and the harder he worked them the less time they had to think about the maps they so far had not received.

When Vanel began to make impatient inquiries Craig put him off with vague promises and watched him the closer.

As the days passed his arm grew

better and finally Toussant presented him with his fist of wood. Craig examined the hand with delight. It had been carefully stained and polished.

There was a leather sleeve and strap to hold it in place, and every wrinkle of finger, knuckle and even the nails had been cleverly carved in their proper place as if it had been cast in a mold.

"By heavens, Toussant!" he exclaimed, "that's a work of art."

"I am afraid it is a little large and a bit heavy," the little man apologized. "But you wanted it that way, *mon Cabo*, so I—"

"Perfect!" Craig declared. "Come, let's see how it works."

"One moment, there is something else," Toussant made sure no one was observing them. "You twist the thumb—so, then you lift it out and there is a hole—see?"

"A hole! *Sacré*, that's clever!"

"At first I thought you might fill it with lead." The little Swiss shared the corporal's delight. "But how much better to fill it with gold—or a thousand franc note, eh, *mon Cabo*?"

Craig was thinking of neither. It was the possibility of hiding the map that had occurred to him, almost immediately. He, too, cast a hasty glance around them and twisted the thumb back into place. He questioned Toussant rapidly, and was assured no one else knew the secret of the hand.

FAUDRE sat opposite Craig at a table in the *caserne* that evening, his eyes glued on the corporal's wooden fist. "A clever piece of work," he declared. "Sometimes I could swear the cursed thing actually moves."

Craig took the block of wood in his one good hand and stroked it fondly.

"No, it doesn't move, but did you ever think what an awful blow I could land with the thing?"

"Yes, like a blow from a club."

"And no knuckles to bark. I wonder how Vanel would like to feel it just once alongside his thick skull."

"Zut, that swine will never stand up and fight like that. I think he is satisfied now that he has lost that map. Keep an eye on him. The next time he may use a bullet instead of the bayonet."

"He will not try anything here. But what makes you think he is sure about the map?"

"He said so. He asked me yesterday if I had received my copy yet."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him no and that I was beginning to think we never would. I thought it best to agree with him—might learn something."

"GOOD idea. But when the company moves you must tell him you finally got it. When he doesn't get his he will start something and then we can settle the affair."

"But the company may not move for weeks, maybe months."

Craig shook his head. "If I am not mistaken we will be on the march in a very few days. We have a new lieutenant. He arrived this morning. Colonel Beauchamp will inspect the company tomorrow morning."

"*Bon Dieu*, is it possible! Where will they send us?"

"Back into the jungle, where else? They might even send us back to Kwang-Kum to lay for that long-haired devil, Meng. No one knows the ground there better than Company Ten."

"You are right. And then the secret of the temple, eh, Yank?"

Craig nodded slowly and stroked his fist. "Yes, but I am only guessing. Who knows the plans of the *Conseil de Guerre*?"

V

NO word had reached him as a result of his appeal to the captain and the next morning Craig reported for inspection with the company still wondering what they had decided to do with him.

Most armies, he knew, would consider a soldier with only one hand unfit for service but that was not the case with the Legion. He remembered old André Bessone, the peg-legged drill sergeant at Bel-Abbes, and the one-armed corporal in charge of the *Bureau de Poste*. Not that he wanted to soldier like that, but it eased his mind to recall them.

"*Garde à vous!*" barked the new lieutenant, and the already perfect line grew a bit more rigid. The colonel, with his aide, came strutting across the parade ground then, and when Captain Monet had properly received him, the inspection began.

The parade of gold braid was followed by the usual lecture on valor and discipline, to which no one paid the least attention, and then suddenly out of the drone of words Craig recognized his name.

"Corporal Craig, two paces front!" the captain ordered, and then, out of another burst of flowery oration, Craig learned that he was to be rewarded for something or other by a promotion to the rank of sergeant.

It was no small reward with which they had honored him, but what was more, he realized that he was safe. A sergeant did not labor with his hands, nor necessarily carry a rifle. He could do his fighting with a revolver, and to command he needed only a strong pair of lungs.

He listened while the order was read aloud, then at the captain's signal he saluted and took over the position of sergeant of the platoon. There was a brief drill after that,

and finally dismissal with strict orders that no man was to leave the post.

"A sergeant! *Bon Dieu!*" exclaimed Faudre. "And you were right about our leaving, too. When they refuse us the walkout that means we march."

"Yes, we march. Might as well make it clear to our good comrades now where we stand. The next time Vanel mentions the map you can tell him I have decided that two of them are enough and that you and I will be the ones to keep them."

"And when I tell him that, we can look for trouble."

"Good, that's what I've been waiting for. But don't argue with them yourself. Send them to me."

The blare of bugles and shouts of the room corporals brought Company Ten to life a good hour before daylight the next morning. There was nothing unusual about that but when the men realized those shouts called for full packs—ready to march, there was an immediate uproar.

"Snap into it!" ordered Sergeant Craig. "Down on the parade ground in ten minutes!"

WHEN the ammunition and rations had been added to the mountainous packs the men resembled so many beasts of burden, but that was the Legion. In columns by three the company assembled, and then came the command. "*En avant—marche!*"

Out through the great wooden gates they swung, with the drums and bugles cheering them on. Later Captain Monet gave the order to march at ease and the long, man-killing march was begun.

All that day they tramped steadily through the dripping, steaming jungle. At the end of the first hour their lean faces were streaked with sweat, and the inexperienced *bleus*

had begun to worry with their packs.

Two hours and the rivulets of sweat had turned to streaks of mud. At the end of the third hour their mouths hung open and their backs began to bend. It was then that the sergeants and corporals took up the burden of encouraging them—urging them on.

"It looks like you had missed it this time," Faudre ventured a word with Craig when they made camp that night. "This is not the trail to Kwang-Kum."

"NO," the sergeant agreed, "we left that trail when we turned off at the river. Tell me, *Saló*, what's all this quiet talk with Vanel?"

"Nothing. A lot of soft soap. He has been very friendly since we started the march. I told him this morning that you had given me the copy, as you said, and he has been trying to get me to let him see it."

"So, that's it. I am afraid that wasn't such a good idea after all."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, just feel that way. Watch yourself. They're a bad pair, those two—damn bad."

"Zut, I am no infant. I can take care of myself."

Late the third day the column came abruptly upon a small village at the fork of two streams and there Captain Monet gave the order to halt and stack arms. The tents were pitched, a guard was posted, and the rest of the company was put to work cutting out the trees and vines at the edge of the clearing.

"*Sacrébleu!*" a bearded, old veteran exploded with wrath. "Do you know what that means, you *enfants?*"

Craig heard him and grinned to himself. He knew what it meant.

The powers on high had decided that they needed another outpost, and Company Ten was there to build it.

VI

CONSTRUCTION of the new fort began next morning with the first rays of dawn. A squad under the direction of Monet marked out the location of the stockade and buildings while the rest continued with the clearing. A launch would come laboring up the river in a day or two with supplies, tools and other equipment, and by that time most of the logs would be cut and ready.

There was work for everyone—tasks that demanded experience and skill, and at the head of it all was Captain Monet. His keen eyes missed nothing, and his alert brain was a jump ahead of every problem.

The sergeants had their duties, also. With a company composed entirely of *anciens* their part would not have been difficult but there were *bleus* to contend with and their distaste for this inglorious labor was apparent. They had left Bel-Abbes in far away Africa with high hopes of battles, medals and prompt promotions and their disgust was only natural.

It was during the second night on the site of the new outpost that the treachery Craig had feared gave the company a sudden and decided shock.

Craig himself was stupefied with mingled rage and grief. The startled shouts of a sentry brought him from his tent and the corporal of the guard explained between oaths that there had been a murder—one he was sure of, and possibly three.

Craig felt his blood turn cold. "Who was it? Who was killed?"

"Faudre. His head crushed. They must have done for Pelissier and Vanel, too. They are not at their posts."

"Faudre! Damn their rotten hearts!" Craig ran to the picket line and down on his hands and knees he

examined his old *copain* with feverish hope. It was no use; the corporal had been right. Faudre was dead.

"What is it? What has happened?" Captain Monet hastily joined them.

The corporal answered him. Craig was fighting back the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him. He knew what had happened as surely as if he had been there to witness it.

Faudre had been stretched cold, then searched. His tunic was unbuttoned; his pockets were inside out, and the lining had been torn from his *képi*.

"*Nom de Dieu!*" the captain swore. "And the other two are missing! That is strange work for a Tonkinese—unless they dragged them away to search them."

CRAIG took the captain by the arm and led him aside. "The natives had nothing to do with this, *mon Capitaine*. They would never have taken a dead man's ammunition and left his rifle. In the first place they would not have used a club. They would have knifed him."

"You are sure about the rifle?"

"Yes, and another thing, there was no fight. No one heard a sound."

"But you can't mean that the other two killed this man, robbed him, and deserted!"

"That is what I mean," Craig declared. "I have known them all a long time. I know those two swine had it in for him. Maybe they did not intend to kill him but that is what happened and after that there was nothing they could do but clear out."

"*Sacré*, and we dare not go after them, either."

"Why not, *mon Capitaine*?"

"Because the jungle is alive with bandits and we cannot spare the men."

"Then let me go alone. I will

bring them back. Faudre was a friend of mine."

"Impossible. If they did not kill you the Tonkins would. They are not worth it. And, they will never get out of the jungle, anyway."

"But they have rifles and ammunition. If the bandit, Meng, gets his hands on them—"

"Yes, yes, and if I let you go it will only mean another pistol for Meng in addition to the rifles. No, let them go. We will probably find their heads somewhere in the brush."

Craig dared not argue further. He saluted and walked away. He could not tell the captain that he blamed himself for this thing that had happened to Faudre. Neither could he tell him now of Leclair or of that bayonet thrust in the dark. The chances were good, too, that the deserters would escape. They would avoid the trails entirely and head straight through the jungle for the ruins of Kwang-Kum.

THE corporal of the guard threw a blanket over the lifeless body of the young Belgian and Sergeant Craig went blindly back to his tent. He stood there a moment, cursing, stroking that wooden fist, then he suddenly made up his mind. They could call it desertion if they wanted to. They could disrate him and sentence him to the penal battalion, but he was going. He owed it to Faudre no matter what the cost.

Hurriedly he made sure of his revolver, filled his pocket with ammunition, and slung his *bidon* over his shoulder. There were a couple of tins of sardines in his knapsack, and shoving these in his other pocket he peered cautiously out of his tent.

Monet was not in sight, and boldly he stepped out into the company street and approached the nearest sentry. The guard saluted, and when he turned to retrace his steps Craig

slipped across the line and disappeared into the jungle.

VII

ALL that night Craig fought his way laboriously through the tangle of vines and underbrush, guided by occasional glimpses of the moon as it filtered down through the dense growth above. At daylight he came out on the bank of a black, sluggish stream with confidence that he had traveled in the right direction. The river was the Song-koi and somewhere above, a day's march, or maybe two, lay the ruins of Kwang-Kum.

The going would have been easier by dugout, but that would have been suicide. It was dangerous enough to follow the path along the bank but Craig knew he must take this chance if he hoped to ever reach the ruins. Nothing would have given the cut-throat Meng more delight than the capture of a lone Legionnaire.

Craig was not attempting to trail the deserters. His plan was to reach Kwang-Kum first and lay for them there. He was sure they, too, would keep well out of sight and that would give him a good chance to get ahead of them. It bothered him a lot, the disgrace of desertion that hung over him now. He was no quitter, and yet there would be no distinction when the unforgiveable charge was placed on his record.

Whenever he stopped for a few minutes rest he listened and scanned the river closely in both directions but not once did he catch a glimpse of the two men he felt certain were somewhere along the bank of that stream with him. Whether he had passed them or had not yet overtaken them he had no way of knowing.

Just before dark he took a last look at the map and shoved it back in the hole in his wooden fist.

Guessing his location as near as possible he judged that by midnight he would be within a mile or two of Kwang-Kum. He could only guess at what he would do then. It would all depend upon the movements of the others. He ate his first can of sardines; drained his *bidon*, and pushed on. The jungle seemed to take on new life as night fell. A dozen times he would have sworn there was someone following at his heels, and twice he stopped, gun in hand, ready to fire. Nothing happened, however, and finally the strange cries and the cracking of rotten limbs ceased to startle him.

HOURS later the path began to widen gradually and Craig proceeded more cautiously. The ruined village must be somewhere near-by or else he had missed it entirely. Feeling his way, peering intently into the darkness ahead, he kept on, expecting each minute to find himself on the edge of the clearing. The challenge that was suddenly flung at him from almost within arm's reach caught him completely by surprise.

"You heard me! Drop that gun!" the gloating voice of Vanel came from somewhere in the deep shadows of the jungle. "Drop it, and get your hands in the air or by *le bon Dieu* I'll drill you through the middle!"

Craig cursed himself for a blundering imbecile. Desperately he tried to make out the source of that voice but Vanel was well hidden.

"All right, you pig-headed fool, here goes!"

Craig dropped the gun. He knew Vanel was not bluffing. Could he have located him he would have fought it out with him but there was no use defying a rifle in the hands of a killer whom he could not even see.

"Now the hands—up with them!"

Craig raised his hands. He had

discovered Vanel at last, crouched in the deep shadow of a fallen tree at one side of the path.

"You were right, it is him," another voice sounded near-by, and Pellissier came out of a clump of undergrowth on the opposite side of the trail. "He is not so smart, this *salô*. In fact quite dumb."

CRAIG swallowed an oath. The rascal was right. He might have known they would be laying for him. They had realized he would follow them. They had managed somehow to keep ahead of him and when they felt the time was ripe they had simply hidden beside the trail and waited for him to come along.

Vanel came forward and picked up the revolver. "Now, you cursed liar," he growled, "where is that map? We knew you'd come sneaking after us. Thought you'd get it all yourself maybe? Well, we fooled you."

Craig was thinking fast; playing for time. "What do you need a map for now? Where is the one you took from Faudre?"

"We didn't find it. That doesn't make any difference, anyway. Come across and be damn quick or you will get what we gave him."

"So you admit it, you murdering swine! Faudre is the second one you've slaughtered on account of that cursed idol. I suppose I'll be the third."

Vanel laughed aloud. "A good guess, *mon Sergeant*. And this time we will not be pressed for time. If you do not feel like talking we will take the time to make you."

Craig saw a trace of hope. He felt sure he could locate the village and the ruined temple now, without any trouble, but if they were determined to have the map they would not kill him until they had at least made a thorough search for it.

"You yellow rat, you couldn't make

me do anything, at all," he retorted.

"If you want that map, try and find it."

VANEL leveled the revolver. "I'll wait just two minutes and then you'll get a slug through your thick skull!"

"A lot of good that will do you," the sergeant scoffed.

"He is right," Pelissier put in. "Better make him tell us."

"Zut, you are weak-livered again, that is all. But go ahead—search him."

Pelissier ripped the tunic from Craig's back and went hastily through the pockets and lining. He felt for the sergeant's money belt then; found that he did not have one and made him remove his boots. He pried off the heels and separated the soles with his bayonet but there was no trace of the map.

"Strip him and tie him up!" ordered Vanel.

With his clothes strewn about on the ground and his hands tied behind him with his own belt Craig stood there helpless, wondering what would come next.

"You've got it somewhere, you dog!" Vanel fumed with rage. "Where is it?"

"Go to the devil!" Craig answered with contempt.

"By *le bon Dieu*, I said I would make you tell, and I will!" Vanel sprang forward and landed a cowardly blow on the sergeant's jaw.

Craig went sprawling backward on the ground.

"Now talk, fool! Where is it?" Vanel shoved the revolver in his belt and picked up his rifle. "Speak, I say! Where is it?"

Craig answered with a defiant oath, then he felt the point of a bayonet against his naked chest. He flung himself over on his side and tried to gain his feet but the bayonet

caught him in the back and pinned him down.

"Ah, let him alone," Pelissier interrupted the torture. "He hasn't got it or we would have found it in his clothes."

"Shut up!" Vanel turned on him angrily. "If he hasn't got it what did he come here for? He will tell or I will kill him!"

"Then kill him, you blood-thirsty fool, and get it over with. We don't need the cursed map, anyway."

"Why don't we?"

"Because the ruins can't be far now. When we find the village it will be easy enough to locate the temple. It will be daylight before long, too, and if there are any natives around we'll be trapped like rats."

Vanel hesitated a second, then with an oath and a final vicious jab of the bayonet he followed Pelissier who had already started off along the path.

VIII

CRAIG lay there several minutes, cursing with the pain from his wounds. He realized finally that Vanel had left without actually killing him and for that he was forced to give thanks to Pelissier.

The actual hiding place of the map had not occurred to them, and they had overlooked another very important thing in tying his hands. Heaven bless the cleverness of that little woodcarver.

A few twists of the stump of his forearm and Craig pulled it free from the sleeve that secured his wooden fist. With the block of wood between his knees he freed his good hand and then laced the leather sleeve back in place. The gashes Vanel had carved in his side and back with the bayonet were bleeding

freely but he could not stop now to attend to them.

When he had gotten into his clothes Craig immediately took to the trail again on the heels of the two loot-mad deserters. A half-kilometer farther on the path ended abruptly on the edge of that clearing he had sought for so many hours. There in the faint gray of approaching daylight lay the deserted shambles of Kwang-Kum.

As Pelissier had said, it was easy to make out the few streets and the various buildings, easier than any of them had thought it would be, and making his way carefully through the ruins, Craig headed straight for the temple. He heard an exalted shout as he moved from one pile of debris to the next and took it for granted that the two who had left him back there to die had found the spot they were searching for.

Another cry followed that but he gave it no thought until a minute later as he approached the entrance to the temple he beheld the limp body of a man lying face down on a pile of stones. It was Pelissier.

"*Sacré*, another one!" Craig gasped. There was no need to examine the body. Pelissier had met the same fate that had befallen Faudre. His skull had been crushed from the blow of a gun-butt. Could they have quarreled or was it that Vanel had planned it that way from the very first?

SEIZING the dead man's rifle, Craig crept cautiously into the temple. Most of the roof had fallen in, part of the wall had crumbled, also, but he gained the corridor and worked his way along toward the chamber back of the altar where they had hidden the idol.

An angry exclamation came from Vanel in the room beyond and Craig peered cautiously through the door.

In a ray of light that shone down through the battered roof Vanel stood cursing with increasing rage at the ugly idol propped against the wall. He scratched viciously at the tarnished gold with his bayonet, then standing erect he spat at it with another stream of violent oaths.

CRAIG, too, emitted an exclamation of astonishment, then a scornful laugh. The scratches made by Vanel with his bayonet had revealed in an instant the true worth of his prize. The thin veneer of gold had peeled from the worthless body of bronze like blistered skin.

Vanel whirled around with a snarl of hate. His swarthy face was twisted with unreasoning fury. His fists were clenched. "You—!" he spat.

"Yes, me!" Craig covered him with the rifle. "And your ruthless murdering has been for nothing. Take that gun from your belt, muzzle first, and drop it on the floor."

Vanel stared stupidly a moment at the rifle pointed toward his breast, then he suddenly burst into a roar of insane laughter. Deliberately seizing the butt on the revolver, he jerked it out.

Craig pulled the trigger of his rifle. He pulled it twice but the faint clicks of the hammer were drowned in another shout of mad laughter.

"Fool! Imbecile!" raved Vanel. "As if you had brains enough to trap me! There has not been a bullet in that gun for hours. Pelissier—he was another stupid dog like yourself."

Craig had not thought to examine the rifle. He knew the villiany of the beast before him. He had not been greatly surprised at finding the body of Pelissier, but it had not occurred to him that Vanel's treachery toward his own companion had been so surely planned.

It would seem now that there was

nothing for him but to face the point-blank fire of that revolver but if he had to die it would not be without one last struggle. With all his strength he suddenly hurled the rifle, bayonet first, and leaped aside.

The revolver roared and a bullet tore a half-inch groove across the back of that wooden hand. Blindly he threw himself forward, determined to seize the weapon before it spoke again, and then he beheld the ghastly sight of his enemy struggling to pull that long needle bayonet from his side.

The steel came free, and cursing horribly, Vanel stooped to recover the revolver he had dropped. His fingers closed on the butt and he raised the muzzle to fire but a hard, hairy fist caught him square on the jaw and he sank back with a groan.

CRAIG took the weapon from his limp hand and stood there waiting for him to move. His own knees were on the verge of caving in and he backed over against the wall. How long he stood there he never knew, but when the haze cleared from his brain Vanel still lay where he had fallen. The bayonet had done its work.

Slowly Craig thrust the revolver into his belt, and kneeling down he removed the tiny metal disk of identification from around Vanel's burly throat.

The idol, pop-eyed and grinning, stood near-by and he glanced at it with a shake of his head. He started to rise, then abruptly he stopped and stared again. The light from above shone full on that ugly face now, and the stupid gaze of the thing seemed to suddenly challenge his own with a flash of brilliant green.

Puzzled, he took his knife from his pocket and dug at one of the gleaming eyes with the point of it. A pale green stone as big as one of

the buttons on his tunic dropped into the palm of his hand and lay there glistening.

HE could only guess at the unquestionable value of the stone, and yet the possession of it did not thrill him. The cost had been too great.

He dug the mate to it from the other eye, and removing the thumb from his wooden fist, he dropped them into the hole for safe keeping. The map he had kept so carefully hidden there was no longer of value.

When he had dressed his wounds as best he could, he took the rifle that had belonged to Pelissier, also Vanel's, which he found resting against the wall, and went back through the littered corridor to the mound of rocks outside. Here he stopped long enough to collect another of the little metal disks, then headed back along the path through the jungle.

* * *

Captain Monet was inspecting the half-completed stockade at the new outpost three days later when a working party brought a ragged, delirious sergeant of the Legion in through the gate and carried him to the temporary hospital.

"He got them all right, *mon Capitaine!*" one of the soldiers called excitedly. "Brought in their guns and tags!"

Monet had thought at first that the disabled man was someone injured in handling the heavy logs they were bringing from the jungle. He left the stockade when he realized the truth and hastened to the hospital.

"Sergeant Craig!" he exclaimed. "*Bon Dieu!*"

Craig opened his eyes at the familiar voice and nodded weakly toward the two dirty rifles laying on the floor.

"I had to do it, *mon Capitaine*—I

knew it was them. Lieutenant Leclair and Faudre—the brute, Vanel, killed them both.”

The captain nodded. “So you followed them to the ruins at Kwang-Kum.”

“Yes, but how did you know?”

“Because Vanel, Pelissier, Faudre and yourself were the four men with Lieutenant Leclair when he was killed. I knew there was some connection when you disobeyed my orders and went after them. And Leclair, you know, was killed at Kwang-Kum.”

Craig tried hard to meet the captain's gaze.

“It was not—desertion.”

Monet shook his head. “No, we will call it a breach of discipline. We will discuss that when you recover.”

Craig closed his eyes with a sigh

of relief. When he opened them again the captain had gone, but in his place stood an anxious little man, cap in hand, staring down at him with deep concern.

“Toussant!” the sergeant spoke, and held out his wooden fist. “Take it—keep it for me.”

Carefully Toussant unlaced the sleeve, and as he did he noted that groove across the knuckles. “It has been damaged, *mon Sergeant*, I will carve a new one for you.”

Craig shook his head. “No, I want it back just as it is—sort of a souvenir, you know. And, Toussant.”

“Yes, *mon Sergeant*.”

“That dream of yours—the studio in Paris with all the beautiful ladies sipping cocktails. It's yours now—the real thing. There in that hole under the thumb.”

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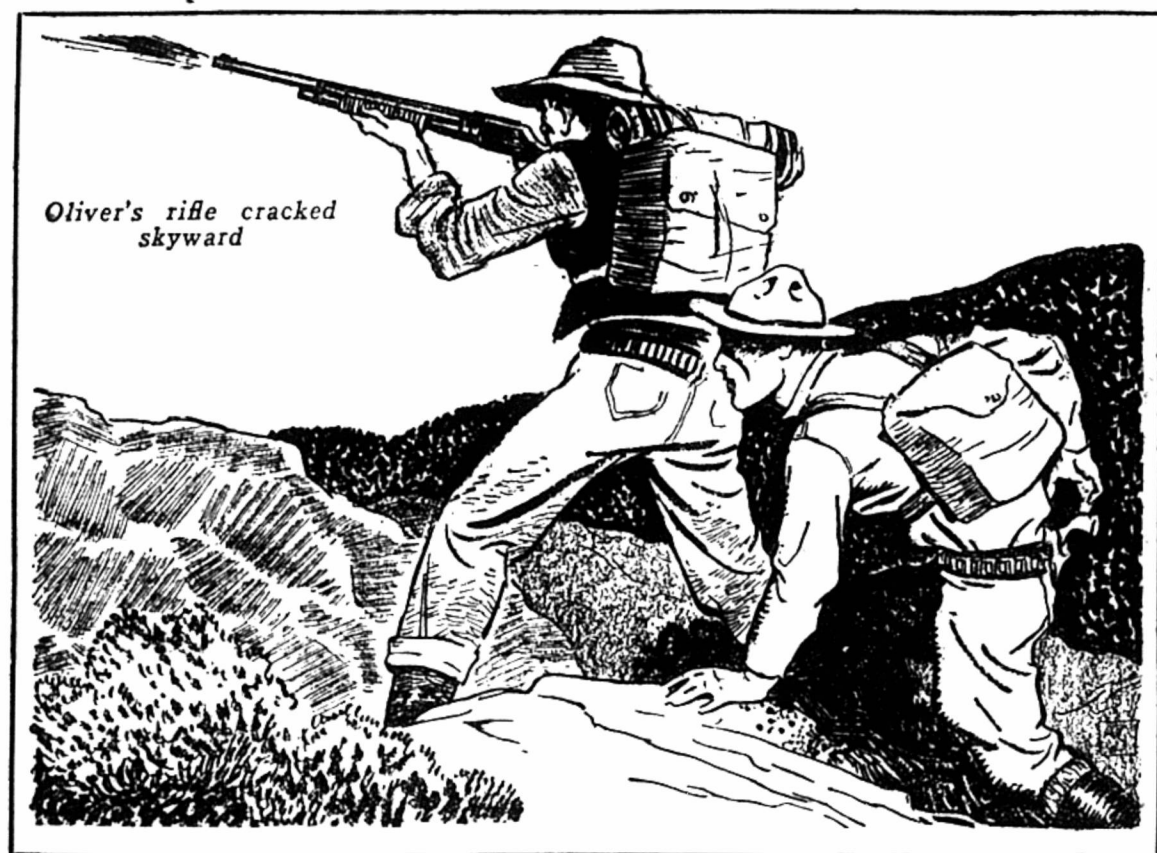
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The Amaitio Curse



An American Secret Service Man's Pulse-Stirring Adventures on a Dangerous Man-Hunt in Mexico

By **RUSS MESERVEY**

Author of "Spread-Eagled!" "The White Wolf," etc.

AS HE heard the report of the gun Pete Henley sprawled flat, clinging to the hot Mexican sand. He saw a bullet kick up a squirt of small pebbles, knew someone was finding the range. When the second bullet whined, he rolled quickly, was back where the first shot had spattered the sand.

He did not wait for the shrill scream of another bullet. He crouched to his knees, dug his toes into the sand, dove for shelter behind a small boulder. He reached it

just as a third bullet smacked against the opposite side of the rock.

Henley knelt, snapped the heavy Colt from his holster, clicked off the safety catch, hefted the gun, waiting, listening. Those bullets had come from a rifle—he knew better than to try shooting it out with the longer-range weapon.

The boulder behind which he crouched was not large, but Pete Henley was not a large man; he was, in fact, one of the smallest United States Secret Service operatives in

the Department of Justice, and one of the coolest. Because of his stamina and resourcefulness, he had been sent down into Mexico on this case.

As he waited, sticking close to the rock, nerves alert, a fourth rifle shot cracked, but from the opposite direction of the first three reports. There was no warning whine of a bullet, no thud of lead into hot sand.

IN a few moments a shout came up from the slope on his side of the boulder, some seventy yards to the east. The shout was followed by a sombrero bobbing up the rise into sight; then by the tall angularly powerful figure of Mark Oliver, ex-bank manager, who had led him down here.

"Hey, Henley!" Oliver called as he approached. "I heard some shots. Did you see anybody?"

Pete Henley stood up, holstering his Colt, eyeing the lined features of the ex-bank manager with shrewd appraisal.

"Somebody used me for a target, Oliver," Henley admitted. Hiding the distrust in his gray eyes, he asked: "Didn't you just fire your rifle down in that gully?"

"Sure I did!" Oliver exclaimed gruffly. "After I heard those shots, something dashed through the brush and I tried to pot it. I missed." He strode up to Henley, leaned his rifle against the boulder.

"Probably some Mexican bandits spotted us, Henley, and shot at you. We'd better move on until night. We'll get to the ruins early in the morning."

"Find any water?" Henley demanded.

"No water," Oliver answered sourly. "Damn those two guides! If they hadn't deserted us, we'd have caught that crook Andres by now! We'll run onto water, though. Let's go, Henley!"

Pete Henley, looking away quickly with veiled eyes, went to the brush behind which he had dropped their two packs. Picking up his own, tossing the other to Oliver, he traced after the tall ex-banker. They trudged across the flat, traveling southeast.

As they scrambled down the gully up which Oliver had just come, Henley noted that it made a horseshoe bend back around the plateau. A fast-moving man could shoot over the ridge from the west, then run along the gulch out of sight and appear up the east slope. There had been time, between the first three shots and Oliver's appearance, for just such a trick.

Henley dropped a few paces behind, following Oliver.

As they trailed across the sandy flats, climbing rocky foothills that terraced each other in higher, narrower plateaus of rocks and scrub trees, Pete Henley's mind retraced their steps.

A private banking house, specializing in Mexican loans, had been fleeced out of two hundred thousand dollars by its Mexican cashier, Andres. Andres had absconded with the cash, and Mark Oliver, the bank manager, had come to the Federal authorities in San Francisco with information about the hiding place of Andres.

THE reasons Oliver offered for believing Andres had gone into Mexico were logical, but in one particular rather weird. Henley had never quite believed the whole story.

"Andres and I've hunted down in that country during our vacations," Oliver had explained in his gruff, evasive manner. "It's a wild spot, but we liked it. There's supposed to be an Aztec treasure in an old ruins north of Mescala—something Cortez missed, I guess. Anyhow, Andres

and I hunted for it twice, and he's tried to get me down there again every year since. But I wouldn't go back. Not for plenty!"

And when Henley had asked why he wouldn't go back, Oliver's face had gone sour and his dark eyes had become smoky.

"Ever hear of a thing called *amaitio*?" he had countered. "It's a native curse of some sort! It's local and applies only to the region about that particular ruins. The legend is that a man goes in, but never comes out!"

Mark Oliver had shuddered visibly and his jaw had tightened.

"I got near the spot once," he had claimed, grimness in his harsh voice. "Once was enough!"

THE rest of his argument was that a man like Andres, a Mexican who had stolen two hundred thousand dollars, would brave even a native curse in the hope of finding that Aztec treasure.

"Andres is down there right now!" Oliver insisted. "He's probably dead, too. But the money he stole will be there with him!"

The *amaitio* curse had seemed a fake to Henley, and the small detective had told Oliver as much.

Another thing that didn't seem to fit the whole story, to Henley's shrewd mind, was the relative ease with which the officials had induced Mark Oliver to lead Henley down to the old Aztec ruins. There was an incongruity between the bank manager's apparently stark fear of that particular Mexican locality, and his righteous determination to catch the thief and effect the return of the stolen two hundred thousand dollars.

But Henley had mentioned this phase of the case to nobody.

"I'll go down there with you, Henley," Oliver had agreed finally.

"I feel it's my duty. I trusted that damned Mexican cashier. I'd like to throttle him myself with my bare hands! I'll go. But I'll have to resign my position here with the bank first, in fairness to them. I don't expect either you or I will get out of those ruins alive!"

He had made this declaration in front of Henley and Henley's superior in the Department of Justice district, with several police officers and a group of bank officials present. Hearing him, Henley had lifted shaggy eyebrows and shut his mouth.

And while Mark Oliver was resigning, becoming an ex-bank manager, and buying his outfit for the tough trip, Henley had spent his time in a manner not usually ascribed to detectives—Pete Henley had prowled around three days in the Mexican department of the Museum of Natural History.

Henley kept his gray eyes on the broad shoulders of Oliver as they climbed higher, deeper into the mountains. The steady driving power of the ex-bank manager, and his sure-footed, rapid progress, made the smaller detective sweat.

THE country through which they were trailing became more desolate, in spite of the thickening trees, each mile. The scrubs became taller, with heavy foliage that shut out vision ahead and behind. The boulders became larger and larger until each one assumed the size of small, rocky slopes up which Henley struggled with difficulty.

They found water—a trickle oozing from the mountain side, disappearing under a cracked rock—and went on again, scarcely stopping to drink and refill their canteens.

"We may reach those ruins before sundown," Oliver growled over his shoulder. "I think we're closer than I figured."

Without waiting for an answer, Oliver hurried ahead, his long legs weaving around the smaller, jagged rocks, crashing through underbrush.

Henley's senses quickened, his nerves tightening. He let Oliver get thirty yards ahead of him and began darting keen glances behind and from side to side as he followed.

THEY scrambled over a steep, ragged series of jutting boulders, and as Henley reached the top Oliver's rifle cracked, the long barrel aimed skyward.

"Damned eagle!" the ex-banker shouted.

Oliver's rifle cracked twice more in rapid succession.

Looking up, Henley could see no bird in the sky.

"Missed!" Oliver growled. "The flying devil wheeled into the trees!" He lowered the gun, turned upon Henley. "Too bad those natives took your rifle along with the mules last night. You might have had a crack at him, too."

"I'll stick to the Colt," Henley said shortly, and patted the holster at his hip. "I didn't even see your bird, Oliver."

"Yeah?" Oliver's tone was gritty, suddenly cruel. He touched the heavy revolver slung from his own belt. "Forty-fives are good for blasting at short range, but a rifle's surer."

"Still thinking about that *amaitio* curse business?" Henley demanded. "You'd need a revolver for that, I imagine."

Oliver spat against a rock. "You'll see, Henley!" He showed no fear of the death legend now. "Come on. It's not far from here. Watch out for snakes, too."

He turned, strode through the thick trees.

Henley followed again, warily, sensing danger acutely.

They were on a plateau, but entirely different from the sand plateau where Henley had been shot at. It was as though they had walked suddenly into a different world. Even the soil felt different, softer, springier under foot.

The trees were densely grown, making progress difficult. The thick canopy of leaves overhead shut out the light. A few yards within the tangled growth and they went forward in semi-darkness. The vague, tall form of Mark Oliver slid in and out of darker shadow between tree trunks wrapped with vines. Henley began to trot intermittently to keep Oliver in sight.

As they went ahead, Henley got the feeling that they were circling, winding right and left. He took out his pocket compass, but the gloom of the tangled forest kept him from reading the small needle.

He put the compass back in his pocket, loosened the Colt in its holster, keeping one hand on it, and hurried after Oliver.

A SICKLY, musty odor pervaded the snarled woods, became more pronounced with each step. The nauseating smell carried with it an unnamed feeling of death, jungle rot and decayed flesh.

Henley lost Oliver for a moment, as an unseen vine caught his throat, held him back. He tore free, ran on, stumbling.

The nauseating, musty odor sharpened, became the fetid stench of human decay, of gnawed flesh mangled and cast aside.

The vague figure of Mark Oliver fled through a patch of greenish-gray gloom, retreated along a twisted, narrow path between thick tree trunks.

Henley broke into a sweating run, ducking low to keep his body clear of looping vines and low, snarled

branches. He ran with the Colt in his hand.

Oliver disappeared again, as though snatched away into blackness. Doubling his speed, Henley ran on, crashed into a tree, spun off at right angles, still following the narrow path.

His breath, with the fetid stench in his nostrils, came in hard, rasping gasps. He hit another tree, spun off, twisting, lunged abruptly into bright, blinding sunlight.

THE speed of his driving legs carried him twenty yards into the open before he could stop.

Blinking, squinting in the sun's sudden glare, he saw Oliver's lank figure hurrying across the barren plateau toward a crumpled, half-demolished heap of ruins. Oliver was some sixty yards off on his right, a third of the way across the open space between the edge of the thick forest and the vine, and moss-covered ruins. As Henley watched, Oliver's revolver snapped into his hand, pointed upward, crashed into the startled stillness three times in quick succession.

Almost immediately, from one of the crumpled towers of the ancient Aztec temple, a rifle barked.

The bullet whined above Henley's head, smashed through branches and leaves behind him in the jungle-like forest.

A second shot made a fountain of small stones at Henley's feet. He whirled, raced, zigzagging back toward the rim of woods.

As he dove into the shelter of trees, a third bullet whined, hit him, knocking him flat against soft, musty earth.

He sprang up, swore, tearing off his pack, and backed further into the gloomy shelter of the woods.

A few feet away, the stretch of barren plateau surrounding the Aztec

ruins made a white, brilliant glare, and across it he saw Oliver walking rapidly, directly toward the crumpled temple.

Then Oliver dashed for one of the arches, disappeared.

Henley, swearing softly, bandaged the bullet wound. The lead had torn through the upper muscles of his left shoulder. When he had a handkerchief and a bandanna adjusted so that the flow of blood was almost stopped, he began to move along the rim of protecting trees, watching the ruins, listening for sounds.

The barren between the forest and the temple was almost a hundred yards across. It circled the ruins, making a sort of grim green and gray island of the forgotten mass of stones and heavy vines. A few trees, taking root in a crumpled tower, stood like sentinels guarding the ancient gods.

Sliding behind the outer trees, keeping his eyes on the ruins, Henley stopped suddenly.

He stared, squinted and stared again.

THE ground, a reddish gray blotch near the temple, seemed to be moving. He rubbed his hand over his eyes. When he looked once more, the movement of sand and small stones stopped.

He thought of mirages and shook his head distrustfully. Those optical illusions of the desert required dry air. The forest surrounding this narrow strip of barren sand was tropical, saturated with moisture. There could be no mirage here.

As he looked again at the reddish gray earth across the plateau, a shrill, piercing cry broke the sticky stillness. The cry came again, and died abruptly in a scream.

Henley broke from the fringe of trees in a run. He bent over, re-

volver gripped in his right hand, and raced for the ruins. Sand spurted back from his pounding feet, but no whine of bullets or bark of rifle came from the silent temple.

The sandy barren, as he sprinted for the arch through which Oliver had disappeared, became suddenly softer, reddish in color. He panted across the last stretch and pounded under the arch on solid rock.

SLOWLY, he glanced hurriedly about. Grass and weeds grew thickly from cracks in the stone flagging and from the cracked walls. Spider webs made shadowy patterns in the dull corners of the ancient court. A long, spotted snake slithered away into a tangle of brush near a stone stairway.

Henley hit the stairs two at a time, came out on a balcony from which broken, stone-arched doorways led into uncertain corridors. A hairy tarantula slid across the balcony, like a squat, ugly velour hat pulled on a string.

The sound of the scream seemed to have come from higher up. Henley ran down the middle corridor, found stairs, raced up them, and came out on another balcony that led to a flat, railless walk connecting with a different part of the ruins.

As he went across this narrow stone, unwallied passage, a low, gurgling sound caught his ears. It came from ahead of him.

He hurried on, through a doorway without a top, and came into a walled room where only half the ceiling remained. He stopped abruptly, then leaped forward.

On the stone floor a man in dirty, blood-stained corduroy trousers, torn shoes and ragged shirt lay gasping, gurgling, clutching at a knife wound in his chest. Under the portion of the room that was covered, a blanket trailed from a portable folding cot,

and several cans of food, unopened, were stacked in a corner.

The man on the floor turned his head, stared at Henley.

"You're Andres?" Henley demanded, leaning over him.

The Mexican nodded, breathing in short, quick gasps.

Henley bent closer to him, kneeling, lifting Andres' head.

"Who stabbed you, Andres?" Henley asked tersely.

The man on the floor, black eyes staring, moved his lips.

"You're the—detective?" he asked weakly. Blood came from his mouth as he spoke.

"I'm a United States Federal dick," Henley admitted rapidly. "But I want to help you now, Andres. My job is to keep you alive and bring you back to Frisco. It'll be better than dying here. Who stabbed you? Oliver or a native?"

Andres seemed suddenly to gather courage and strength—the last effort of a dying man. He struggled to sit upright. Henley helped him, bracing his back with an arm. More blood came from the Mexican's lips, drooling bubbly red from punctured lungs, as he spoke, and his eyes blazed with final fury.

"Mark Oliver killed me!" he cried feebly. "I told him where—the money was hidden and he—stabbed me. He's gone for the money now. It's—in these ruins. God—it hurts!"

HE gripped his chest, squeezing the gaping flesh together.

"O l i v e r double-crossed—me!" he cried again. "He and I stole the money—together. He sent me down—here—promised to meet me—we'd go to South America. He signaled when he—came. Three shots in—the air. I saw you—scared—tried to kill you. I—look out for—the—*amaitio*—"

Andres collapsed, quivered, stop-

ped breathing. Blood oozed from his mouth, and from the knife wound. Then that stopped, too, but for the slow seeping of cooling red over the stained shirt.

Henley stretched the dead Mexican on the stone floor, spread the blanket from the cot over him, stood there, staring grimly down at the stilled form.

He turned suddenly, gray eyes slitted, and went quietly, stealthily out of the half-covered, ancient room, across the stone connecting passage, down the balcony steps.

AT the lower balcony he hesitated, listened, looked down into the court. There was no sound. There was no one in sight. The same hairy tarantula slid its ugly, poisonous body back across the stone flooring into a darkened corner.

Henley went silently down the last flight of stairs and across the court to the high, arched entrance. The fringe of the forest across the bleak plateau stood etched in vivid, sickly green. Oliver might be crouched behind one of those trees now, rifle poised, waiting for him to appear.

Or the murdering ex-bank manager might still be digging out the stolen money, somewhere within the ruins. Standing flat against the wall of the arched entrance, holding his Colt in his right hand, Henley waited.

A voice called to him suddenly and he spun toward the court. Mark Oliver was watching him from the top of the balcony steps.

"Hey, Henley!" Oliver shouted gruffly. "You got here finally, eh?" He started down the stone stairway, carrying his rifle and an oblong package wrapped in soiled, stained canvas. "I heard Andres shooting at you on the plateau, but I guess the thief didn't notice me!"

As he advanced, Henley saw blood on his shirt, blood on his right sleeve

and on his trousers. The sheath knife was back in its leather case, and his revolver was holstered.

It flashed into Henley's mind that maybe Oliver thought he had just reached the ruins, had not explored the temple. There was, too, the possibility that Andres had lied, even while dying. Criminals had lied before, facing death—lied for vengeance. But the blood on the man—Andres' blood!

"You don't need to hold that Colt on me, Henley," Oliver growled as he crossed the court. "I've got the money Andres stole, right here in this canvas. I had to kill him to get the information, but it was in self-defense. Look at the damned blood on me!"

"I see it," Henley admitted grimly. "You get cut up much?"

"A couple of scratches."

Oliver held out a long, powerful arm, displaying several still bleeding fingernail gouges. The ruthless nerve of the man was astounding. But the crafty, barely veiled glint in his dark, shifty eyes was murderous.

"YOU'D better stand where you are, Oliver!" Henley ordered, and kept the Colt trained on the ex-banker. "I'm not sure of you yet!"

With a harsh snort, Oliver leaned his rifle against the court wall and, ignoring the revolver pointed at him, stepped closer to Henley.

"Take the cash, Henley," he said hoarsely. "You can have the reward and the glory. I don't want the responsibility of carrying it back to Frisco! Hell! I've known you thought I was in on this theft from the start—"

As Henley's left hand gripped the canvas wrapper, Oliver's fist knocked the Colt aside. The blow had the speed of lightning. The gun did not even go off.

At the same instant, Oliver's right

fist swung in a quick, hard arc at Henley's head.

THE detective ducked the blow with the agility of a panther as he dropped the money and swung the Colt back at Oliver. But he was too close to the stone wall of the arch. His head hit the stone with a sharp crack that stunned.

Mark Oliver's powerful arms were around him, pinning both hands to his sides, before he could recover. And the hot, grating voice of the ex-bank manager was in his ears:

"You damned dumb cop! I was in on this racket from the start! I figured it out, and engineered it! And now I'll be free!"

Henley felt himself being lifted bodily, carried through the archway out into brilliant, blinding sunlight. Oliver had managed to pick up the canvas wrapper containing the money, and had wrenched the Colt from Henley's grasp. But his arms, encircling the detective like a man carrying a sack of flour, made the mad urge to fight back futile.

"Free!" Oliver bellowed. "You understand that? I'll go back to the States a rich man! I'll draw them a picture of this damned temple, and make 'em a map so they can come and find your bones! And the bones of Andres, too! Dried bones, Henley, with no meat on them! The ants'll do that!" He laughed with weird, insane glee.

"You didn't believe my yarn about the *amaitio* curse, did you?" he persisted, gloating over the horror to come as he carried Henley out nearer the reddish gray sand surrounding the ruins.

"You'll believe it now, Henley! You'll scream and writhe with fear!" He twisted Henley around so the detective's gray eyes stared straight ahead at the plateau. "It looks like red sand, that strip out there, Hen-

ley! Red sand! Haw! Haw! Haw! Ants. Little red carnivorous ants! Millions, billions of 'em! Worse than cannibals, those red devils. The natives call 'em *amaitio*."

Squirming with his right arm only, Henley tried to get his hand and arm free for an instant. He looked down at the reddish earth. The whole ground, for a space of thirty yards across, was beginning to move, to writhe like some livid volcanic lava.

"I took three shots at you back on that other plateau!" Oliver's voice roared. "While I was supposed to be scouting for water. I'm glad I missed! Haw! Haw! Haw! This'll be more fun. I'm going to break your leg so you can't run. Henley, and then I'm going to pitch you in! The ants'll finish you in ten minutes! They eat from the outside in. You'll stay alive to see your own bones, Henley. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

OLIVER reached the edge of the seething mass of reddish man-eaters, stopped, twisted Henley in his arms, reaching for one of the detective's legs. Oliver still held the Colt in one hand, the money in the other, but a hard, backward jerk of an ankle crotched inside his elbow would snap the knee joint.

As Oliver's forearm swept downward, Henley broke free with his right arm, swung his fist with all his might. The position was awkward, the blow nothing to Oliver.

But Henley's fist, aimed with deadly forethought, landed squarely on the nose of the murderer holding him. A quick, throbbing squirt of blood came from the broken skin, ran down Oliver's face, down his shirt. He cursed, bent over, shaking his head. The blood splattered the ground, and drops of it hit the red, writhing mass of *amaitio*.

With a tremendous heave, and still

cursing, Oliver pitched Henley away from him, out into the center of the seething morass of ants. The small detective hit, cat-like, on hands and knees.

HE was on his feet in an instant, lunging toward the arid, rocky plateau, with Oliver's voice bellowing at him. "I'll cripple you with the Colt, you—"

The automatic in Oliver's hand blasted.

A slug ripped Henley's trousers, seared the flesh, but drew no blood.

Battering at the ants swarming over him, Henley staggered through the red, clinging mire. The second, crippling roar of the Colt seemed to sound perpetually in his ears.

But the blast never came. Even the ants clinging to him seemed uncertain of their living meal. They dropped off, a few at a time, and then in numbers, as Henley fought for the safety of the arid plain beyond. And suddenly, as though at some unspoken command, the red mass of death before him parted, split away, leaving a path.

He stumbled a few yards further, stopped, turned and looked back as a wild, frenzied cry of stark agony shrilled across to him.

For a moment he stood frozen, petrified at the sight.

Where, a brief moment before, Mark Oliver had stood, blasting at him with the Colt, was now a scarcely distinguishable outline of a human figure cloaked from head to foot in writhing red.

The shrill, weakening cry of agonized horror persisted. Mark Oliver's ant-covered arms flayed. The Colt, lost from his grip, slashed through the air, lit almost at Henley's feet. The canvas package of money followed, going past Henley's head with the frenzied force of the flaying arm. Another shriek of terror poured

from Oliver's mouth, smothered, muffled, as the ants poured into his throat. Henley could barely make out the shrilled words:

"Henley—God!—Shoot me! Shoo—"

Henley stooped, snatched up the Colt from the sand. As he stood up again, the horrible, unrecognizable form of Mark Oliver sagged, staggered, groping blindly, and slumped down into the seething mess of ants.

Henley's Colt roared once and Oliver's hidden body jerked. He fired again, saw the terrible figure stiffen, shudder, and collapse. He stood for a moment, holding the gun, watching the mound of ants mount higher and higher over the tortured body, burying it in seething red.

THEN he turned away, holstered the Colt, and, picking up the canvas-wrapped money, plodded across the bleak plateau toward the rim of trees, muttering grimly.

"Blood!" he said over and over. "Blood would draw those ants! And I didn't believe 'em at the museum, even when they warned me. Blood!"

At the edge of the wall of trees he paused, turned and looked back.

The ant hill, still visible across the plateau, was diminishing. And even as he watched, awed by the sight, the red, swarming bier of Mark Oliver disintegrated, flattened, became once again the strange stretch of reddish gray sand he had thought was a mirage. Only a few visible streaks of white, fresh bones glistening in the late afternoon sun marred the illusion.

Pete Henley turned away, tearing himself from the sight, and hunted out his discarded pack. Then, holding his pocket compass and some matches, with the stolen money slung at his back, he slipped, with a final shudder, into the dank coolness of the thick trees and began the trail out.

Bill the Conqueror



A wizeden desert rat weaved a .45 in his hand

*There's A Real Punch—And a Laugh—in this
Unusual Story of the West*

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

Author of "The Ghost Patrol," "Hoodoo Hack," etc.

"**D**RY?" A sparkle came into Bill Tanner's china-blue eyes and he made smacking noises with his wide, humorous mouth. "Why, yuh ding-busted ole buckaroo, if I don't wet my whistle, I'll jest nachally dry up an' blow away!"

A skeptical glint came into Ed Sather's gray eyes and his heavy, gray-streaked eyebrows knitted as he looked first down the deserted board street flanked by bleached buildings and then up at the three

tarnished silver bars over the door of the bar.

"Takin' a bunch o' critters tuh the city shore dries a hombre up," Ed conceded. "But yuh'll only get one nip, yuh long-laigged cow-teaser! Yuh ain't responsible with more'n that under yore belt!"

Ed pushed open the swinging doors of the Three-Star and Bill eagerly followed. Inside he saw Ed reach for the ceiling. Bill's china-blue eyes bulged and his rangy body stiffened as he quickly observed that

everyone in the saloon had their hands similarly raised. The reason was swiftly evident to him.

Back to the bar was a wizened desert rat with bleared blue eyes and a business-like .45 weaving in his gnarled hand.

"Stick 'em up!" he snarled at Bill. "I been comin' here tuh spend my diggin's for nigh ontuh twenty y'ars and now this-here town's goin' tuh pay back some o' them diggin's. Pronto!"

BILL'S big, powerful hands were twitching; but they didn't move either for his gun or the ceiling.

"Do as he tells yuh," Ed muttered out of the corner of his mouth; "cain't yuh see the 'rat's loco?"

Still Bill stood frozen. He was thinking; and that was a slow process for him. Ordinarily he would have obeyed. But a strange transformation had taken place in Bill's simple soul. After accompanying the cattle train to the city, he and Ed had gone to see a fortune teller.

The fortune teller had informed Bill he was a reincarnation of William the Conqueror. He had been greatly impressed, though he didn't understand too well what the prediction meant. Now, faced with death from the gun held in the wavering hand of the desert rat, it occurred to him that he might accurately test the truth of the fortune teller's words.

Someone shuffled uneasily in the back of the saloon. The desert rat's bleary eyes shifted just momentarily. And in that moment Bill's twitching hand went for the gun swinging at his hip. His hand closed on his hawleg but his twitching fingers were working overtime.

The .45 cracked, jerked the holster at Bill's hip as it fired through the leather, and crunched through the

floor. The crash of sound split the ominous silence of the bar, working on the taut nerves of the men who had faced death from a madman. Everyone jumped—everyone, including the desert rat. His revolver slipped from his nerveless fingers, clattering on the floor.

He dived for it. Ed Sather was familiar with the etiquette of such occasions. He disregarded the gun, but hurled himself at the desert rat as the latter's hand touched his gun. A bullet ricocheted from a beam in the ceiling with the thin, high-pitched wail of a speeding arrow.

And then Ed's hand closed on the desert rat's wrist, twisting it viciously, and the gun dropped to the floor. A dozen willing hands assisted Ed, and the struggling desert rat was soon overpowered. Four men were delegated to escort him to the sheriff's office.

"**Y**OU shore took us out o' a ticklish situation," the bar-keep grinned at Bil. "How about you and your pard havin' drinks on the house?"

"Sure," said Bill, throwing out his chest like a pouter pigeon's. "Yuh ain't seen nothin' yet, hombre! It's lucky for that rat I didn't lose my famous temper!"

Ed wiped the perspiration from his scrawny neck with his bandanna, and his gray brows converged.

"Yuh mean it's lucky yuh never got yore shootin' iron out o' yore holster or yuh might tuh shot yoreself in the hoof," remarked Ed sarcastically. "Danged if I didn't think yuh had palsy!"

"Huh!" snorted Bill. "I didn't see yuh pullin' yore gun!"

Ed grunted. "Some of us gotta have sense! But thar are times when a guy with a number six sombrero has his uses!"

The subtlety of that remark was

lost on Bill Tanner. He shrugged and up-ended his glass.

They walked out, got the brons they'd left in town when they'd departed on the cattle-train, and started out across the parched, undulating range toward the Bar-Y.

"That thar fortune teller shore knew what he was spealin' about when he tole me I was a carnation o' Bill the Conqueror and could conqueror whatever I come up agin!" said Bill.

"YUH mean he tole you yuh was the *reincarnation* of William the Conqueror," corrected Ed. "Reincarnation's a word some o' them fakers use tuh make yuh believe yuh got the spirrut o' some dead an' gone hombre in yore veins."

"All right," agreed Bill, irritable at having his knowledge questioned, "but I got the blood of Bill the Conqueror in my veins an' nothin' can stop me now that I know it. Did you see me wing those two big hombres back thar in the Three-Star?"

"They was only one an' he was a miserable critter an' drunk," interrupted Ed callously. "Besides, if figgers don't lie, 'bout ten million people got William the Conqueror's blood in thar veins an' so thet thar card-sharp prob'ly didn't have tuh juggle his paste-boards none tuh give yuh thet result."

"Huh!" grunted Bill. "Yore jealous!"

They rode the rest of the way to the Bar-Y in silence. After Ed had reported to Brad Upson, his boss, he went to find Bill.

Bill was sitting on the steps of the bunk house with a group of gaping cow-pokes about him. He was waving his .45 about to emphasize the points in his yarn.

"—An' jest as me an' Ed steps off the train, thar rides down the main

street a band of about twenty masked bandits. Hardest-lookin' bunch of bad hombres me or Ed's ever seen. Wall, right in front o' the bank, they draws rein, and six o' them runs intuh the bank. Five or six men tries tuh stop 'em. These bad hombres drop 'em in thar tracks. *Bang—bang—bang—*

"Ed, he ducks for cover behind the Three-Star, chased by a flock o' lead. But me? I jest stands thar in the center of the street, and my trigger-temper's up."

"Wasn't yuh scared?" demanded "Shorty" Quillan, a barrel-shaped, snub-nosed cow-hand.

Bill's guileless blue eyes widened, and he tapped his chest with his .45. "Me scared? Say, ain't I jest been a-tellin' yuh that thet thar card-sharp in the city tole me I was the carnation o' Bill the Conqueror. After knowin' that, nothin' couldn't raise no goose-flesh on me!

"I jest unpacks my ole shootin' iron in the midst of that swirl of lead, and begins pickin' off them bandits, careful-like. I knows some-one has tuh have courage if they's tuh be stopped; and I seem tuh be the only one around.

"WAAL, I drops six men in about six shots, and then things commence tuh get hot. Back down? Not the carnation o' Bill the Conqueror! I jest reloads thar in the center o' the street, and starts bangin' away agin. One guy after another drops from his hoss, until twelve hombres lay thar in the dust. The other two turn tail."

Shorty Quillan's snub-nose wrinkled. "What about the six in the bank, Bill?" Bill lowered his lashes with becoming modesty, and rose.

"Waal, I had tuh go intuh the bank and throw lead intuh them, too. Of course!—Ain't thet right, Ed?"

"Shore 'nough!" replied Ed sar-

castically. "But yuh fergot tuh tell 'em how yuh ran out o' slugs an' had tuh grab a hoss an' bring back the two *bandidos* who escaped, with yore bare hands."

Bill's wide, humorous mouth tightened. "Waugh! Did those hombres put up a scrap! But it clean slipped my haid at the moment."

BILL nodded solemnly to himself for several seconds as if mentally reviewing the stirring events of that day. Then: "See yuh all later, hombres. I got tuh water my hoss now."

As he ambled away, a lean, awkward figure in his high-heeled riding boots, a clean-faced youngster said admiringly: "Whew! Ain't he a maverick for yuh, though? I allays kindda thought Bill was full o' wind. All cackle and no egg!"

Shorty Quillan rubbed his hand across his snub nose, and steered a stream of tobacco juice across the porch. "Jim Boyle," he addressed the youngster, "yo're new here and yuh got a lot tuh learn." He turned to Ed Sather. "Was thar a mite o' truth in that pack o' yarns he was a-givin' us, Ed?"

Ed grunted and sat down. "Bill's gettin' wuss since he met that thar card-sharp! His yarns was bad 'nough before!"

The youngster asked quickly: "Yuh mean thar wasn't no truth a-tall in his yarn?"

Ed snorted. "I wouldn't say that, Jim. Bill jest makes 'em taller and taller, that's all! He starts with facts but his imagination's too durn active. He come intuh the Three-Star an' a desert rat who'd got too much likker under his belt was holdin' everyone at bay. Anyone but an ijjit would 'a' reached fur the ceiling."

"No tellin' when thet desert rat's hawgleg might go off! But Bill's so hepped on what the fortune teller tole him that he goes for his gun.

His han' shakes so that his gun goes off in his holster. The desert rat's so surprised thet his hawgleg goes off, an' I hop him. Thet's all!"

"I thought so," grunted Shorty.

"Why not pretend we believe his yarn, an' have some fun with him?" demanded Jim, his blue eyes glowing.

Ed Sather chuckled. "Not a bad idee!"

So the cowboys got their heads together and plotted ways and means of stringing poor Bill.

From then on, Bill was asked daily to repeat his yarn of how he'd saved the bank. The yarn grew with each telling. Finally it developed that Bill had attacked forty bandits single handed, killed twenty, driven the other twenty out of town, only to discover that they'd run off with the pretty store-keeper's daughter, which necessitated another fight in a well-protected box-canon.

The girl had fallen in love with him; but he had told her he couldn't marry her because he was faithful to the memory of a past dead sweet-heart.

THE more the boys on the Bar-Y kidded Bill about his exploits, the bigger they grew. He lacked the sense of humor which might have enabled him to see he was being made fun of. He gloried in his new-found admiration; and began to believe himself "*un muy valiente caballero*"—a very courageous fellow.

They sent him on all sorts of idiotic missions to save damsels in distress and free neighboring ranchers from a siege by bandits. But still Bill was too dull to realize he was being made the laughing-stock. Brad Upson finally had to put a stop to sending Bill out on quixotic missions because he was getting no work done. But the kidding still continued as a welcome diversion from the usual ranch routine.

For weeks before the Star-City Rodeo, the cowboys instilled into Bill's head that he was the only one on the ranch who had a chance to win the Hagenback Trophy for the Bar-Y. The Hagenback Trophy was given to the best all-around cowboy.

"Don't keep a-worryin' me about this Hagenback Trophy," Bill finally protested. "Don't yuh realize a carnation o' Bill the Conqueror couldn't fail tuh bring back the trophy?"

"Waal," said Shorty, "we jest want tuh be sure!"

"Yeah," agreed Ed Sather solemnly. "Bar-Y's never won the trophy, and we're the joke o' the other ranches hereabouts."

"Don't yuh worry," said Bill confidently. "I cain't lose!"

SO it was with some delight that the other cowboys followed Bill into the Star-City rodeo office, and insisted that he spend his year's savings on entering every event listed except those open only to cowgirls and Indians. Bill was very pleased at the confidence they expressed in him before the man who took the fees; and he boasted that the Hagenback Trophy was as well as Bar-Y property for the coming year.

So the Bar-Y aggregation sat together in the stands to watch the fun. They didn't think much of Bill's ability on a bucking bronco, and they anticipated he'd take a good many nasty falls. Shorty wasn't taking place in any of the events, having broken his wrist two weeks before; and Ed Sather felt he was a little too old for the broncs.

What was their disappointment when Bill, trying as no entrant at the rodeo was trying, came out second in the calf roping contest.

"Jest fool's luck!" snorted Shorty.

"They give him a easy calf!"

Bill came in second in the 1½ mile relay race, due entirely to the first rider's cayuse jumping the fence and the second rider's bad luck in losing his horse when he was making his last change, thus moving Bill up two places.

Once more Shorty complained that Bill had gotten a small steer in the steer bulldogging contest, thus enabling him to come in third for the last prize.

"IF they didn't collect our guns at the gate, I'd like to stir some dust under Bill's hoss and give him something to think about," said Ed in disgust. "To think of that ijjit takin' three prizes! Waal, we'll see some fun yet."

"What's the idee of takin' our guns at the gate?" demanded Shorty.

"No one cain't carry 'em this year," retorted Ed. "Last year some o' the boys in a Siwash spirit o' fun nicked one o' the jedges. Just a stray—but jedges is sensitive. So no one's carryin' guns."

"Bill is," said Shorty.

"Oh, Bill!" grunted Ed. "No one pays no 'tention to Bill! Everyone knows he's jest a harmless cow-poke."

"Let 'er buck!" cried Shorty. "I want to see that big buckaroo land on his neck. What'd I come here fur?"

But Ed's face and Shorty's grew longer and longer as the day dragged to its end without Bill being thrown. He did nothing spectacular; but the breaks seemed to be with him. He had three third prizes, two seconds and one first.

"I'm tryin' tuh uphold the honor of the Bar-Y," Bill said solemnly when he joined them.

"Yo're doin' great!" said Ed sourly. "Jest keep it up, cowboy."

The breaks continued to be with

Bill. The cowboy who had taken the most firsts on the opening day broke his arm on the second day of the rodeo. Another heavy contender for the Hagenback Trophy was internally injured by a fall and was turned over to a saw-bones. And Bill went blithely on, believing the Bar-Y was strongly behind him. He took second and third prizes in every event he entered that second day.

"**M**EBBE he's better than we thought he was," said Jim.

"Naw!" snorted Shorty. "He's jest luckier!"

But on the third day, they looked forward to one of the last events. Riding of the bucking man-killers. Outlaw horses that had never been ridden after numerous trials. The riders in this event were selected as a result of their showings in previous trials.

Bill Tanner, on the basis of quantity of placings, rather than because of any proved excellence, was included in this group of riders.

"That'll be William the Conqueror's Waterloo," grinned Ed, whose history was a trifle weak.

All that day, they waited for that event.

And when the numbers were drawn, they learned to their delight that Bill had drawn Undertaker, a big black horse with the meanest, shortest temper of the whole group of man-killers.

The event before the man-killers was a chuck-wagon race. The assorted chuck-wagons thundered about the track, stirring up clouds of dust, the horses urged forward with cracking whips. The chuck-wagons stopped before the judge's stand, and the cowboys piled out of the wagons and began setting up the kitchens. One stove and paraphernalia was ready for cooking to be-

gin; a second; a third. That event concluded, the announcer bawled into his megaphone:

"The next event on the program, lad-ees and gentle-men, is the riding of man-killers. Undertaker coming out of the chutes, ridden by William Tanner!"

Undertaker came out, jack-knifing, his nostrils dilated, his teeth bared, his eyes showing the whites. And on his back was Bill, waving his sombrero, but not looking his usual cheerful self.

All eyes were on him as the man-killer bucked with squeals of fury, pawing the ground, swirling dust from the arena floor, Ed and Shorty sat on the edges of their seats, their mouths open, their eyes intent.

And suddenly their attention was diverted by the sharp crack of a pistol. A white mushroom of smoke rose above the judge's stand, and one of the three judges was crumpled across his stand, blood trickling down the side of his face.

THEY saw what had happened. One of the chuck-wagons was manned by strangers to the region. These strangers had stored guns in one of the stoves. They had known that thousands of dollars in cash prizes would be kept in the judge's stand for distribution on that final day, and had laid their plans.

When Bill Tanner had come out of the chutes on the man-killer, all attention had been diverted for a long enough space for the drivers of the outlaw chuck-wagon to gain the judges' stand unnoticed. They had planned to take the money quietly; but by force, if necessary. It had proved necessary; one of the judges had refused to give them the cash prizes. He'd paid with his life!

Ed's heart turned cold within him as he saw the robbers brutally club the remaining two judges, and rifle

the drawer in the stand containing the money.

Unconsciously, he reached for his gun, only to remember that it had been checked at the gate as he had entered.

Weaponless! Not only he, but every man in those stands! Thousands of witnesses to a brutal crime which everyone was powerless to prevent because there was not a gun in that crowded arena.

Not a gun? Ed thought of Bill, whom everyone considered such a clown that no effort had been made to take his weapon. Let a clown have his moment of bravado! That was the popular attitude of those who knew Bill—and he was well known. One gun in the whole place, and that was carried by a cowboy at this moment riding a man-killer!

Ed's eyes darted back to Bill, and cold fingers of terror crept down his spine. Bill had had two assistants to help him off the man-killer should he find himself unable to manage the brute or to keep the vicious Undertaker from stomping Bill to death should he be thrown.

WHERE were Bill's assistants now? Down at the end of the field! Paralyzed into inactivity by the unexpected trend of events! A lump choked up in Ed's throat, and his eyes glazed. "My God!" he muttered brokenly. "When Bill's thrown, that man-killer will mangle him!—And I liked the big hombre, liar though he was!"

It came to Ed with a sense of shock that Bill had not yet grasped leather, though his head was being snapped viciously as the big black bronc jack-knifed, head down, rear feet kicking in the air. White-faced, white-lipped, Bill was sticking on. Sticking on! Ed's eyes blurred. Not only sticking on! He was beating that man-killer with his som-

brero! A fool stepping in where angels fear to tread!

"*Un muy valiente caballero!*" said Shorty, gripping Ed's arm until Ed winced. Shorty had called Bill that before in fun; but now there was a catch in his voice.

"LOOK!" cried Jim, his eyes shining. "*He's directing that man-killer!*" Something snapped in Ed's brain, and his mouth trembled.

Jim was right!

Bill was trying to direct the bucking course of the man-killer. Only one hand was allowed on the reins—but how he was using that one hand! The chuck-wagon containing the armed robbers was flying across the field toward the gate, and toward it was plunging the outlaw.

He saw the flying chuck wagon as some new kind of torment, and thundered toward it with a squeal which sent shivers racing down Ed's back.

The robbers saw it, too. They banged away point-blank at Bill as he charged down on them, and one bullet jerked his sombrero out of his hand. Bullets whistled and whined about his head, and still he bore down on the outlaws.

Jim clapped Ed on the back. "His gun!" he said vibrantly.

Bill's gun was in his hand now. They could see it flashing. The driver of the chuck-wagon crumpled in his seat. Another man grasped the reins as the horses started to plunge, terrified by the squealing man-killer.

And at that moment, there was a hopeless mêlée of horses and men. Undertaker crashed into the team—Ed saw space under Bill as they collided. Somehow, miraculously, Bill was still in the saddle, his gun in his hand, clinging to his bridle.

One of the team horses fell under the force of that assault. The two lead horses reared and plunged and

kicked—then broke away, running down the field.

Bill's gun flamed almost in the face of the new driver as a slug of lead pinged past his head.

The two remaining outlaws jumped out of the shattered wagon as it started to totter under the plunging of the two remaining horses in the team.

Undertaker saw them, and the whites of the outlaw's eyes shone as it bore down on them, squealing. One man was struck by the horse's chest, to be sent spinning fifty feet in the dust. Unconscious. The second outlaw was struck by flying hoofs, his leg broken.

And he would have been trampled into the dust if Bill hadn't jerked backward on his bridle, bringing the big black up on his hind legs on the verge of a backward fall. For a terrible moment, he balanced there. Then he fell forward, and started to buck and kick and squeal with fresh fury to dislodge the already shaken Bill.

But his assistants had recovered from their temporary stupor; they dashed down the field, and one of them lifted Bill clear of his saddle, while the other caught the bridle, and raced away with Undertaker.

THE stands thundered with applause. The announcer was talking with the judges. He stepped back to his microphone.

"In the opinion of the judges, any further exhibition after what has transpired would be not only anti-climax, but an affront to good taste. In view of the number of prizes taken by Mr. Tanner, and in view of his outstanding accomplishment in preventing the runaway of four desperate robbers, the judges are of the opinion that he should be given not only the Hagenback Trophy for the best, all-around cowboy,

but also the first prize of \$500 for riding man-killers. Is this decision agreeable to all those present?"

There was a moment of silence. Then shrieks of applause, a deafening thunder of stomping feet—ear-splitting in its intensity.

"Any opposed?"

Not a sound could be heard.

"Then Mr. William Tanner wins the Hagenback Trophy for this year, and with it, the heartfelt thanks of everyone present for the courageous way in which he has endangered his own life to bring four outlaws to justice!"

WHEN the Bar-Y boys escorted Bill to a bar to celebrate, Bill was a strangely humble cowboy.

"Yuh know, hombres, I don't think I'm no carnation o' Bill the Conqueror, after all. Bill the Conqueror was never scared and I was scared stiff. Honest I was! Yuh know, I couldn't 'a' gone through with it 'cept I knew every one of yuh believed I could ride that thar man-killer, and I jest couldn't disappoint yuh.

"An' I knew every danged one o' yuh was expectin' me tuh do some-thin' about them bandits. So I had tuh come through again because yuh was countin' so heavily on me. But I felt pretty shaky on thet man-killer with no one tuh take me off should he buck me. I reckon thar ain't much in what thet card-sharp tole me, after all."

Ed looked at Shorty. Shorty rubbed a big hand hastily across his eyes. Jim looked sheepishly at the ground, and swallowed hard. Ed's gray eyes glistened when he raised them to Bill's.

"Yo're a danged liar, Bill. Strikes me, after what I seen today, thet yuh got the blood o' about ten Bill the Conquerors in yuh. Ain't I right, yuh ding-busted buckaroos?"

DESERT *of* DEATH



"I saved this slug for you," Carey rasped fiercely.

*A Tense Drama of Man's Bitter Struggle Against the
Elements in the Australian Wastes*

A Complete Novelette

By BARRY BRANDON

Author of "The Speed Demon," "On to India," etc.

EVERY night, when the ruthless blazing sun went down, the five men crowded about the campfire and Masters divided the day's heap of dust and nuggets. Five ways; an equal share to each of the five partners.

On a tiny scale he weighed the dull yellow fragments wrested from the stubborn earth. Day after day they toiled, sweating, stifling in their frantic search for treasure, crowing craz-

ily as one or another stumbled upon some nugget big enough to halt every man in his tracks, his eyes bulging with the staring light that has looked on raw gold since the beginning of man.

Day after day they hacked and sifted, backs burned through their shirts, hands torn and bleeding, fighting the pangs of hunger and thirst. And night after night they hunkered around their tiny fire and gloated

like mad men over their spoils. Then Bergen died. The foothills of the Musgraves took their toll. Bergen never should have been permitted to come; he was a thin, frail fellow when they started on the journey across the devilish Australian desert.

That night the four men sprawled about the embers of their fire and a new light flickered in the eyes of each one. Bergen was gone. In a shallow gravelly grave they had buried him that afternoon. The same tormenting thought hammered now at the minds of those who remained.

Masters was the first to speak. For a long while there had been no sound. Only the tick and crackle of the fire, and the awed breathing of the weather-worn gold hunters.

HAL CAREY looked up from the red of the fire as Masters cleared his throat with a harsh rasping sound that grated on the nerves of each man there.

"Too bad about Bergen," mused Masters, his dark eyes gleaming peculiarly. "And there's his share o' the stuff, too. Jus' when we got about 'nough to stake us good. Oh, well—it only means we gotta split his share four ways. Huh, whadde-yuh say, partners?"

Carey said nothing. He waited for someone else to speak. He was watching Masters covertly, studying the bigger man's features as they were high-lighted by the flickering aura of the fire. There was something in Masters' face that Carey had not noticed before. What it was he could not decide, but it set him to thinking.

"Split it up, sure," agreed Winthrop. "It's too bad about Bergen, but that was the way of it, wasn't it—when we came in? If anybody cashes, the others divide his stuff. Come on, Masters, measure it out."

Hal Carey felt a strange sensation

creeping over him now. He was one of four; four men of various ages, types, and no doubt — characters. They were portioning out the dead Bergen's gold dust, all eyes riveted on the scales, on the hard, claw-like hands of Masters, who dropped the stuff from the blade of his keen skinning knife into the sacks, one by one. And Carey wondered as he watched if the others were thinking the same as he.

On the instant he caught the eyes of Winthrop he thought he saw the New Englander's face twitch, and the sharp gray eyes fix themselves on him like those of a wolf; a lean, gaunt, famished lobo. Did Winthrop's lips part, showing slaver's white teeth, or was it some weird trick of the firelight? Carey bent his head, picked up the makings and began rolling a cigarette. Was it possible that his own face had looked like Winthrop's, that the other man had caught the same half-savage gleam in Carey's eyes?

"Too bad about Bergen," said the fourth man, known as Storms, as if he had just remembered that one of their original five had gone over the Great Divide. "A man has gotta have guts to beat this damn game."

Carey said nothing; only reached for his thick canvas sack as Masters finished dividing the dead man's gold. That night, he knew, he was going to roll into his blankets with his pistol ready in his hand. Something had changed every man in the party. Something had stirred in his own brain.

MORNING came, and with it— with the flaming brightness of the rising sun—a deep sense of relief. It was mirrored in every face. By mid-day Bergen was practically forgotten. Such is the grip of the precious yellow god men have worshiped in every corner of the world.

For days the four of them continued to hammer and peck away at the earth, despite the warning of Bergen's death. Their food and water diminished all too rapidly, still they clung to the digging, reluctant to turn their backs on the fabulous wealth that lay hidden beneath the scarred surface of the Australian wilderness. Little by little they grew leaner. Half-starved, worn, their bodies burned almost black through their scanty clothing, they fought Dame Nature and their lust for gold. Until Storms shuffled off. For a week he had been talking to himself, and that afternoon, raving like a lunatic, he dropped his pick and ran blindly down the hill slope toward the desert.

WHEN they reached him it was too late. The tiny trickle of water that Hal Carey forced between Storms' cracked lips was wasted. Masters snarled at Carey for a fool.

"Couldn't yuh see," he hissed, his own mouth dry and thick. "Yuh wasted good water on 'im. He's dead!"

It was true. Storms had gone over to join Bergen. The others stared from his spare form to themselves, the fierce heat of the desert's edge making the others swim crazily in each man's eyes.

"I've got enough," said Hal Carey, soberly, his whole consciousness steeled against the argument he expected. "I came here to rip a stake out of this land and get back where humans can live. I'm going."

Winthrop squinted at him through half-closed lids, and then turned to Masters, the biggest man of them all. Masters glowered on them both, his lips working queerly, his big hands hanging from his waist by thumbs hooked over the belt.

"I'm with Carey," declared Winthrop at last. "We got enough, Mas-

ters. Let's bury him and pack the stuff outa here."

"An' God knows," added Carey, before Masters replied, "whether any of us'll ever get to Adelaide—alive."

"No guts," snapped Masters, shrugging his heavy shoulders. "I could pack it all out alone. What is it? 'bout twen'y thousan' dollars worth o' dust." He glared at his two remaining partners. It was a three-way split-up now. "Git a spade, Win, an' we'll shove him down under."

Carey could not get Masters' words out of his head. For hours at a time, as the three of them trudged wearily across the inferno called the Great Victoria Desert, he found himself glancing over his shoulder; backward toward the low hills of the Musgrave Range, where they had buried Storms and Bergen. Gradually the blue haze faded from their view and for miles, endless, invisible miles, they were surrounded by the white-hot, wavering sand, that in the distance seemed to sizzle and steam like the lid of a blazing stove.

Masters was the self-appointed leader of the little party. He was the bigger man, possessing a cast-iron constitution, tough and hard as rawhide, weather-beaten by the suns and winds of many South Sea coasts. Now he walked in the rear. One, two, three. Carey, Winthrop and Masters.

SELDOM a word was spoken. Each man's mind dwelt on the same narrow thought. Gold. Gold! Gold on your shoulder. Water. Water. Watch your water. Keep your canteen hangin' on your shady side. One of these days the Stuart Range would come into view, and they would be able to call out to the Government agents stationed at the lookout. All they had to do was watch the water and the starvation rations that were left. Masters was a tyrant now. The real man under his buckskin hide

was coming to the surface. He drove his two companions like pack animals.

"Keep ago'in' yuh laggards," he bel-lowed at Carey and Winthrop. "If we don't make the Station in a few days the sand flies 'll crawl yer bleedin' flesh. Pick 'em up an' lay 'em down there, Winthrop."

Winthrop tried to keep up the pace. He was carrying equal weight with Carey and Masters, but somehow he couldn't keep going. As the days passed he began to stumble, he staggered drunkenly under his load, and began to beg to be allowed to drink what water remained in his canteen.

"NIX," snapped Masters. "Lookit Hal Carey. Him an' me's bearin' it, ain't we? An' if you drink yourn, then where do we head in. We gotta share ours with yuh, huh? Keep your hands offa that, Winthrop."

"Let him take a swallow, Masters," said Carey dully, balancing himself against the physical impulse to hurl himself on the hot sand. "Maybe we'll come to some water. Anyway it's all your fault. We shoulda struck along the Musgraves to the Alberga River an' followed it down the water route to the Gulf."

"Yeah," Masters snarled. "My fault, eh. Think I'm takin' the chance of the water route and have our stuff stolen on one o' them damn crook scows. G'wan. Anybody but a ninny can cross this whole hellangone desert. Get up outa there, Winthrop."

The weakened man raised his head, and braced himself to rise from the sand. His eyes wandered away southward as if seeking something. Was it green trees in the Stuart foothills that he saw, or was it that deviled torment of the man lost on the whitened wastes—mirage? He shook his head feebly and his lips, parched and bleeding, moved listlessly. Then, with a desperate effort he climbed to

his feet and staggered drunkenly along, shaking his head like a man who tries to fight off the effects of a lethal punch.

That night they made camp beside a tantalizing shallow pool of tepid water crusted about its rim with crinkled ridges of glaring white salt. The desert night fell upon them at their tiny fire like a dark monster swoops down with silent black wings to carry off its helpless prey. At midnight Masters and Carey sprang to their dog-tired limbs at the sound of Winthrop's voice.

"Look!" shouted Carey starting to run as he shoved Masters. "It's Win!"

Aimless, yet strangely fascinating in its spinning, weaving pattern, they saw the figure of a man dancing across the darkened desert, his voice raised to the unresponsive blackness above, a voice broken into a babble of meaningless sound, hoarse croaking gutturals, high pitched screams.

Winthrop had gone stark raving mad. When they caught up with him Carey, first, they forced him to lie down. But Winthrop offered little resistance. He had passed the stage where a man comes back.

In the blue-black desert night Carey and Masters faced each other, solemnly. It was a waste of effort to speak. Each man knew that he was worth ten thousand dollars—if he could get out of the great salt desert alive.

THE added ounces of the precious yellow dust made the going worse for Carey. The bigger man, Masters, scoffed at the weight. Carey kept his eyes on Masters now. Sometimes he thought it was just imagination, that Masters was the same man who had started on this treasure expedition, the same Masters who had led himself, Bergen, Storms and Winthrop into the vast unknown wilderness of Australia's last frontier. Still he could

not get the idea out of his tortured brain. There was an uncanny, cruel something in Masters' eyes, in his every move, his manner.

Since there was only two of them, the last two, the strongest of the quintet that had started, they had plodded on together, doggedly. Somehow they had lost their bearings in a night march. No longer were the long shifting shadows that marked the hill range on the horizon on their left, the guide markers they had counted on to steer their course toward the Stuarts and the Government station. Now they traveled by the sun alone, checking their route by the stars at night.

THEIR food was almost gone. Of water there was but a swallow or two in the canteens. Ragged, burned a flaming red, sweat-streaked, their feet a mass of blisters, Masters and Carey halted in mid-afternoon of the seventh day. Falling where they stopped they propped themselves, their chins just clear of the desert floor. Carey was hard put to keep his eyes open, but he glanced sideways at his companion.

Masters lay with one hand canopied over his eyes, to shield them from the glaring sun as he peered into the southern distance. Somewhere in that direction, hidden by the wavering horizon line must be the peaks of the Stuart Range. There was a station there. It was outfitted by the South Australian government for the use of just such travelers as Masters and Carey. At the station there would be water and food and rest.

"Carey," Masters spoke as he took his hand from his eyes. "We're on the right line. I think I can see the peaks."

Hal Carey, his own eyes practically blinded by constant staring at the ever retreating horizon, was lying flat on his belly now with his face hid-

den in the crook of his arm. He shielded his head from the sun's burning rays with a remnant of shirt he had pulled up over his back. His answer to Masters was a grunt of relief.

"Good," he managed to mutter, "we ought to make it in a couple of days. If we can hold out."

There was a peculiar tone to his words, husky and strained as they came from a parched throat. Young and confident of his own endurance, he had no doubt of making the final leg of the trek himself. Or was he merely assuring Masters that they faced the worst part of the journey?

Masters was made of leather and iron. He had seen a lot of the world, and the world had made him hard—hard and cunning. He had seen his share of the gold grow from \$4,000 worth to \$10,000. And they were nearing the hills. What thought hammered at his brain that made his eyes narrow and small? Carey did not know the look in the other's eyes for the younger man slept. They were within arm's reach of one another and Masters crawled quietly until he was right over his unsuspecting partner. Something glinted and flashed in the sunlight as he raised his sunburned hand over his head. With a dull thud it struck the motionless head of Carey.

AND so Mister Carey," Masters grinned horribly as he struck. "I think I'll make it all right alone. I can use this twenty thousand very neatly." His words were followed by an hysterical sort of laugh.

He threw himself over the limp, unconscious form of his partner. One hand lifted Carey's revolver from its holster. The other wrenched away the canteen from the helpless man's belt.

There was a demoniacal grin on Masters' dirty, hairy face as he stood

up. He put the canteen to his ear and shook it. There was a faint tinkling inside. Water! His lips cracked with his smile, a diabolical leer.

"Very decent of you Carey," he said to the body at his feet. "I'm damn glad you saved it. Just enough. I'll make it now, sure."

He shuffled stiffly over to the sacks of gold and caressed them with a trembling hand.

"Mine," he said. "All of it!"

WITH a thick chuckle of triumph Masters tossed the bags of yellow dust together. He then deposited Carey's canteen with the heap, and with a sneer of satisfaction returned to his late partner's body. Carey's small knapsack was still on his back where it hung by its web harness. This Masters removed.

"All fixed up easy," he mused as he began transferring the bits of hardtack and some crumbly flint-hard prunes that had been scrambled in the bag with a handful of small dried beans. "A bit of a rest now an' I'll be ready to pack outa this hell hole."

Hurling his companion's empty canteen aside Masters finally rose to his feet. He never glanced at Hal Carey. The fanatical light in his eyes seemed to have softened somewhat. Carey was out of the way and if that blow hadn't finished him completely, he would never be physically able to overtake a man as fit as Masters. And Masters had twenty thousand in gold. The sacks were lashed together in a manner making it a balanced load, front and back over your shoulder.

Masters heaved them up and set his face toward the south. Then he paused, glancing toward the man on the desert's floor. The cruel grin returned to his face, and he jerked Carey's pistol from his own belt. Extracting the cartridges, all but one,

he flung the gun toward its unconscious owner. With a shrug, as if the action dismissed the incident from his life like a feather flits by on the wings of a wind, the last survivor of the Musgraves gold party bent forward, his feet kicking tiny spurts of sand.

He had gone a dozen yards, perhaps more, when he heard his name called. It was like a ghost voice dropping on him from the skies. But Masters spun about dizzily under the glare of the sun. It sounded like Carey and—by God! What manner of man is this by the Hell-bender of the Antipodes?

Hal Carey was still lying in the sand, but his body now was half raised, propped on straight arms. And he was looking across the intervening space straight at Masters.

"Hey Partner!" called Carey in a voice that flattened out on the sand in a dead echo. "Masters!"

The deserting partner stood for a moment, as if under a spell, then slowly, with lagging steps he began walking back toward the dazed Carey. Twenty feet away he halted.

"WHAT happened?" demanded Carey stupidly. He blinked his eyes, and Masters saw him put a hand to the back of his head, to the place where the brutal pistol butt had thudded. Gradually the weakened man's eyes focussed on the picture before him. He was seeing the bags of gold that Masters carried. Swinging painfully around he looked for his own, then for his canteen, his revolver. Lastly his small pack. They were gone—NO. His pistol lay on the sand. And he grabbed it up.

"You—" he began, unbelieving, but forcing himself, that it was real, was the truth. It had happened finally. "You tried to—"

"No," shouted Masters, and at once his voice became calm. "And—yes.

It was me, Carey. Sure. I hit you over the head an' was leavin' you. But I left you your pistol—with one slug in it. There ain't enough grub 'r water for both of us. Hey—don't be a damn fool. You couldn't hit me with that in a million years. You're fog-eyed. That bullet's for you to use on yourself."

Carey stared at the man who had been his partner. This was no time to argue. It was time to think, and swiftly, of life or death. No Yank was going to lay down there in the Australian desert and die while a double-crossing skunk got away with his gold.

"YOU can't get away with it, Masters," said the grim Carey. "You may be a bigger man, maybe better, but the Montana Careys don't quit like this." He wiped a salty stream of sweat from his eyes. "I ought to burn your guts with this last slug, but I'm showin' you that I can match wits and tricks, as well as legs and heart, with you—you dirty dog."

Masters laughed openly, his cracked lips, hideous with their peeling skin and bloody scabs.

"All right," he said. "I gave you your chance to take the easy way out. Now I'm givin' you the chance you're askin' for. If you think you can get the best of Jack Masters you're further off your nut than I thought. Come on." He slung half of the gold sacks toward Carey. "Grab hold o' them, and begin walkin'."

The American rose unsteadily to his feet and as he straightened up his brain flashed him a warning, a message that crashed into his dulled consciousness like a driving spear point. Masters had him, had him beaten. He had the food and the water, and he was only snatching at this chance to let Carey pack half the dust weight—for as far as he

could drag his legs—without food or water. Well, all right. If he had to go without these, he was going without the gold.

"I can't, Masters," cried Hal Carey, letting himself fall back onto the sand. All the cunning in his make-up was called into the sham for Carey could not boast of slyness as part of his character. But he made it look good. "I was a fool," he half sobbed as he settled on the sand. "You win, Masters. Maybe you are a better man. Anyway you've got me licked—too smart for me—too smart. Go ahead, Masters. I hope the desert buries you."

"Quitter," taunted Masters, grabbing up the gold and starting off alone. "I knew you didn't have the guts for gold."

Carey slouched in the desert and saw him go, saw his ten thousand dollars melt away against the heat riddled distance. When Masters' figure became a mere drifting speck on the desert Carey crawled to wrinkle in the sand where he scooped himself a hollow large enough to offer some protection from the fast slanting rays of the brassy sun. Here he closed his eyes.

ANY man who has attempted to sleep in the heart of the great salt barrens of Southern Australia in broad day knows the ordeal that Hal Carey faced. The brassy sun was a cauldron of red flame. The glistening white salt pack of the arid wastes reflected the glare and magnified a hundred times. Sleep was impossible. Even to lie with his worn body half buried in the sizzling sand was hell on earth. Carey managed it only because he knew it was an absolute necessity. He *must* rest. Physical pain was nothing. He had Masters to defeat. For it was a battle now, a battle of wits, strategy and courage. A fool would have shot it out with

the ruthless devil. But Carey meant to use his head as well.

Masters still was to be reckoned with. His was a brand of raw cruel courage. He was crafty, cunning and his strength from the start had been the greatest of the five.

It would have been easy for Masters to send a slug into Carey's heart. That would have ended everything. But Masters' code was built on his own conceit. He was leaving Carey to the torturing heat and mocking desert.

AFTER all, Carey mused, it wasn't a bad bargain at that. Despite his lack of water and food, he felt that he had a chance to win through to the Stuarts. Masters, he believed, had forgotten that Carey still had the charts upon which they had mapped their trail across the barren wastes.

"I can make it," said Hal Carey, talking aloud to himself. "By traveling at night, light like I am. Then somewhere between the river and the Stuart Range I'll catch him."

When the sun had gone down Hal Carey was able to rest a little more comfortably. He even fell into a sudden, deep sleep, from which he was awakened some time later as if by a signal. He sat up stiffly, his body chilled and he surveyed the bleak terrain.

A moon like a thin disc of silver was rising off to the east. A lone cold star twinkled far away in the distance in the direction from which he and Masters had traveled.

Carey staggered to his feet, clumsily and stretched his arms and legs. He picked the gun from the sand, broke it and stared at the lone cartridge. He took it out of the cylinder and shoved it back again, smiling grimly as he clicked the cylinder back in place.

Then he slid the gun into his

holster, started off taking a lung full of the cool night air.

There were no landmarks visible on the dark desert. There was no sound, only the sloshing crunch of his feet in the shifting salt sand. On he went, steadily, methodically, his eyes fixed on the tracks of the man who had gone before him—Masters. His throat ached and burned. His lips stuck together and cracked when he pulled them apart, as he sucked in the welcome cool air. His tongue clung to the roof of his dry mouth. But a hard smile hung about his face. There was singleness of purpose in his heart. He tried to put the thought of water from his mind. Somewhere, somehow, he would drink again—and eat.

Carey's eyes never left the plain trail in the sand as he plodded on. All night he stumbled along. Morning came; the sun thrust a vivid scarlet splinter over the rim of the world to the east. By his own rough calculations Carey concluded that he had covered somewhere near twenty miles during the night. He was leaving the salt wastes behind.

"Gees, Christmas," he cried, looking around him.

Here and there were mangy tufts of grass. Far ahead he thought he caught sight of something moving. A kangaroo perhaps. His spirits rose. Could it be that he was approaching some unmapped water? He decided to keep on without a rest. So far there was no sign of Masters; only his tracks.

"HE'S finding it tough going," muttered Carey through bloody lips, as he noted the irregular footprints. For miles they led him on, staggering, even as he staggered, until late in the day he made out a speck far ahead. A moving speck. The black dot bobbed up and down on the hazy plain, bobbed and floated

like a cork on the rippling surface of a windswept lake. Carey started at the idea of water. Water! But, of course, there was no water. That was only the rising heat waves. The black dot must be—Masters. With a jerk Carey became calm.

He must put the yearning for water out of his head. He had to keep Masters in sight now.

The dot grew larger and took shape. The footing beneath Carey's burning feet grew harder. There were rocks now: here and there large boulders. A jack rabbit darted from behind one and ran with the speed of lightning.

AT sundown he came to the spot where his chart indicated a river would be found—but there was no river. Only a bone dry stream bed that crackled under his dragging feet. But there Carey listened, suddenly freezing tense. A sound issued from the dry gully where he could make out numerous flat rocks. A thick and muffled croaking. Carey started forward to the rocks.

With tingling nerves he lifted one of the stones. Sure enough, a frog leaped from under. He tried to grab it, but the creature escaped him. Carey was excited and stumbled to another rock. He was more careful this time, removing his ragged shirt which he held with one hand while he lifted the rock. This time he caught a frog in the folds of the garment. With a yell of triumph he went from stone to stone. His search yielded six more frogs. And—under the last rock he found a shallow pool of water.

"Saved," panted Carey, falling to his knees beside the tiny pool.

It was enough to slack his thirst and half fill the empty canteen he had carried these many footsore miles. It was fresh and sweet.

Further down the dry river bed

were taller rocks that stood like gravestones in a scattering of greasewood bush. With the wood he could make a fire and roast the frog legs. His brain ran riot at the thought of it. Water! Drink and food. He forgot Masters, forgot everything. He could have eaten the meat raw.

With the fire started, he sharpened a stick and spiked the legs on it. They sizzled over the flame. Carey's face brightened. He crouched there, a grim smile on his mouth, watching them as they browned. He had to wait a moment for them to cool. His fingers trembled and he was just putting one into his mouth when a sudden sound stiffened his body like a shock.

"No, you don't, partner," the voice rasped huskily like the bark of a Jackal, over his shoulder, "I'll just take them legs."

At the same instant Carey felt something pressed into his back. He turned his head and saw Masters.

Masters was sneering. His face was like a mask.

For a stifling moment Carey felt that age-old urge to whirl and tangle with the beast behind him, to risk his life with his bare hands. But instead he grinned, he stifled the urge, deceptively waiting the chance he felt must come. Masters had fooled him again, had back tracked and beat him to the draw.

"You win Masters," he said. "Take 'em. Help yourself."

HE flipped the roasted frog legs at his former partner.

"You look all in, Masters," he added knowingly. "Been lugging the heavy load, eh? Well, you wanted it. And you see I'm still alive."

Masters snatched up the frog legs and swallowed them like a starving tiger. He held his gun at Carey's ribs. When he had wiped his cracked lips on the back of his hand he took

the canteen from his belt and emptied it with a horrible guzzling sound. Then he backed off a few feet and stared sullenly at the younger man. His beady eyes narrowed and widened like lights winking on and off. His ugly festered lips moved almost imperceptibly. Meaningless jabberings sputtered like the rattle of dice in a cup. Indecision seemed to balk him. Suddenly the revolver jerked as if a spasm of pain had crooked his gun hand.

"I'm going to kill you Carey—now!" he grated with a sudden mad impulse.

HAL CAREY remained steady, motionless. He wanted to live.

"Go ahead," he said quietly. "But that—" he looked startled and whipped his gaze to a point behind Masters, "look—"

Masters surprised now and curious turned his head and Hal Carey dove for the protection of the nearest rock. With a shout that was both curse and denunciation Masters shot. The slug splattered against the rock and slithered off into the sand.

Masters cursed again and closed in after Carey, his gun weaving crazily in his hand. Carey slipped from rock to rock keeping them between him and his enemy. The big Masters fired again, dodging himself as if expecting a return. Then came the third shot and with an oath that woke the desert silence like the boom of a cannon he fled across the river bed to the opposite bank where he had left his pack. Carey came cautiously out from behind his shelter of rocks and watched Masters as he slung the pack and bags of gold over his shoulders and with a backward glance that baffled Carey with its expression started out once again—toward the goal they were aiming for—the Government station. Hal Carey knew then that Jack Masters was

mad—mad with the blazing fury of the desert—and gold.

Leaning against a wind-worn rock, Carey watched him fade from sight.

"Out of his head," decided Hal, "and a tough man to tame."

For his own part he was in no hurry. He took his time gathering more frogs, which he cooked and ate ravenously. When he did leave the river bed, to take up Masters' trail, he had some water in his canteen. His strength was coming back slowly. By midnight he was scrambling up the slopes of the Stuart's foothills, alert for a trick, and careful to keep far enough behind so that Masters would not see him.

When the next morning's sun rose to lighten the silent sweeps of the barren Stuart plateau, Carey was only a few hundred yards in Masters' wake. The twin peaks that marked the slope on which the government station stood were just ahead.

Scanning the rough country, Carey at last discerned Masters plodding along like a man possessed. The weight of the gold must have been staggering in his weakened condition, but he seemed to take no heed of it. Traveling light as he was, Carey again took up the pursuit, every step seeming to shorten the gap between them like the crawling of a slow fuse.

IT was some hours before Masters showed by his movements that he was looking behind him. When they climbed a steep rise and came in sight of the station, still in the far distance, the thieving ex-partner turned and halted. Carey saw him throw his burdens to the ground and drag out his gun. He was waiting for Carey to come up with him.

Carey grew cautious, realizing that he must think clearly and fast. He approached to within a hundred yards and shouted huskily:

"Go on, Masters! What you waiting for? Are you quitting?"

He waited for the words to sink in, and looked around for possible spots for protection if Masters should open up again with his gun. There were a few scattered boulders here. Few of them afforded adequate protection against bullets, but the thought brought an odd twist to the young man's trail-hardened face.

"Picking up what I leave?" Masters yelled, tearing at his hair with one hand, his revolver gripped in the other. "No, I ain't leaving nothing but your carcass. Stay away from me, you scavenger!"

Carey laughed aloud and waved his pistol in derision, at which the crazed man with the gold came leaping toward him.

FOR the first time since he had begun to trail his crooked, scheming partner, Carey now gripped his own gun seriously. He might need it at last. Retreating until he came to a boulder that would afford some protection, he warned the mad miner away. But Masters crept toward him like a prowling tiger, his eyes blazing, gun trembling in his hand, mouth working.

The Government station was in sight, some few miles ahead. This was no time to shoot each other over some bags of gold. Gold! Something snapped in Carey's head at the memory of the terrible ordeal he and—the others—had been through for this gold. And Masters, the renegade of the party, had played crooked. But Masters was crazy. It was the desert heat, the living hell. How could he shoot this man dead?

Masters' eyes flamed. His mouth oozed froth as he crept like an animal across the intervening space toward Carey. He had three shots left in his gun. He knew, crazy as he was, that Carey had only one in

his gun. More odds than that, Masters had never asked of any man. He was bent on destroying the man who was hounding his trail. Kill!

His finger tightened on the revolver trigger. The desert rang with the boom of the shot. The slug whistled past Carey's ear and buried itself in the sand far behind.

Masters cursed and scrambled nearer, his face distorted with the insane urge to slaughter his enemy. Carey shouted a warning:

"Another step, Masters, and I'll let you have it."

It was showdown now. No way out. Masters paid no attention to the command. He came on faster, goaded by a red fury, his hot breath whistling through cracked lips, his eyes mere slits in his face.

Carey rose from behind his rock. The revolver in his steady hand pointed dead center at Masters' heart. Masters paused and flung up his gun at Carey's head. That was target enough for any man. "Crack!" The bullet screamed through the still desert air, hit the rock and rolled into the sand. Masters' aim was wild.

Carey leaped erect, and his gun was leveled on the berserk Masters' heart. Ten full strides away. "Murder!"

"Stop, I've got you," Carey rasped fiercely. "I can't miss, Jack. I saved this slug for you. Stay where you are and let's talk this over."

MASTERS seemed at last to hear and understand. He stopped still. How he had missed Carey at dead shot range was puzzling him. His eyes went wide, were screwed into fiendish slits and his lower jaw was dropped. Like a man in a daze he stood there, rigid and silent. Carey came out from behind the rock, smiling confidently.

"I ought to gun you down like a

snake, Masters," he said, coming to within a few feet of the bigger man, his revolver steady in his hand. "You tried to leave me in the desert to die; tried to get away with my share of the gold; tried to kill me." Hal Carey's mouth was slanted in a sneering smile. He rammed his pistol forward suddenly into Masters' stomach. "I could kill you now," he added, coldly. "But I won't. You're picking up the gold and carrying on. Get me? Turn around, march!"

Masters stood immobile for a long moment. The thin blood drained from his gaunt face. His hands shook. His knees trembled. A strange happening was taking place behind his smouldering eyes. Finally he swung about and with Carey guarding him, he reached the bags of gold. With a shrug that indicated resignation, he slung them over his shoulder, and began walking, carrying them like a slave. Carey tramped behind him.

SLOWLY, laboriously, hot sweat streaking down his neck, drenching his thin clothes, Masters staggered on. Defeat was stamped in the dejected slant of his shoulders.

The slow miles to the Government station dragged interminably. Masters' feet grew leaden. His whole body sagged. He stumbled frequently. He wanted to stop and rest, but Carey's gun was in his back just above the belt, where a bullet will tear the insides out of a man.

But the goading was too much. Beaten and frustrated as he was, Masters' fury nursed a reeking hate in his heart. With every step it swelled. Then suddenly, in a barren gully, it sprang into flame. He dropped the bags of gold and spun awkwardly with a scream of rage. He had snatched his revolver from his belt and thrust it point-blank at his captor's stomach. His face was wreathed in a mask of deadly terror

as the trigger clicked. Then Masters' eyes went wild and staring.

A strange thing had happened. A hideous miracle!

Carey did not fall or cry out in agony. He only laughed, put his hand to his stomach and rubbed out the sparks of the powder burn.

"The desert got you, Masters," laughed Hal Carey. "Tried it again, eh? Thought I was fool enough to let you put it over?"

Masters stood weaving like a drunken man, rubbing his forehead, his eyes wide, blinking. He saw the scorched spot where his gun had fired against the shirt.

Yet, Carey still stood up—and laughing!

It was too much for Masters; too much for any man. It was uncanny. The big thief's brain reeled dizzily. His taut nerves went all to pieces, shattered like a dropped glass. He went clear crazy, and shrieking like a maniac he leaped at Carey.

"I'll—I'll—kill you!" he yelled, as he tore at the younger man with claws like a cornered wild cat.

In a flash the two men were locked in as grim a battle as the raw frontier has ever seen. Covered with the dust and grime of the desert trail, their faces streaked with blood and dirt, their ragged clothing hanging in shreds from their sun-burned bodies, they fought like demons, snarling as two beasts, clawing, punching, arms and legs twined, tearing, ripping, falling heavily to the ground, wrapped in each other's grips like twining snakes.

ONE fought to kill, to destroy, to crush the life from the man he imagined stood between him and golden wealth. The other to save, to rescue from the torments of hell a wayward ex-partner, who had broken the thread that held him to sanity.

Hal Carey panted desperately,

gasping for air as the bigger man pressed him downward. He smashed his fists into the seeming iron body of Masters, driving his punches with every ounce of strength left him from the nightmare of the desert days and nights. Both of their guns had been wrested from the fingers that held them, were far-flung now as the battle waged in a flurry of sand and stones, scattered bits of brush and the cutting blades of the coarse long grass that studded the arena-like bowl in the hillside.

"You—followed—me," blurted Masters, savagely, between deep gobs of sun-scorched air, "and—this'll—be—"

CAREY smashed a vicious blow in to Masters' belly that cut the words from the other's lips like a crash of lightning drowns the noises of the world. Masters fell backward, lost his maniacal grip on Carey's shirt-neck, and with a roar of frenzy Carey followed him, battering with both fists, wild with his sudden grasp at victory.

But his feet, like lumps of lead, betrayed him, and he stumbled, fell forward, shrieking, trying to right himself to catch his balance, but it was too late. Masters' half-naked legs were snaked around him as he toppled into the fiend's reach, and he saw the crazy man's fingers sweep up one of the pistols from the ground where they had almost fallen on it.

Grunting, snarling, mouthing thick, sticky curses on each other, they grappled for the gun. But Masters had it in his iron fist, and Carey knew the hell that sees a mad man's pistol muzzle crawling inch by inch into his face. His eyes grew wild with the terror of a chill weakness that gripped his body, but he held on like a dying man, held and struggled with the fierce determination to die from exhaustion rather than at the point of a gun in the hands of

the man who had once been his sidekick.

He held his tongue now, conserved his breath, and his fingers locked around Masters' wrist like the frozen claws of a storm-lost bird of prey. He steeled himself, as they rolled and kicked, straining every muscle in their numbed bodies, and with a sudden lunge he drove Masters downward, striking his head against a stone.

The pistol dropped from Masters' hand, and Carey tottered to his feet, like a crouching, snarling wild thing. He saw the gun, looked about him in a daze. Masters was down, moaning thickly. Carey clutched the weapon and raised himself with painful effort. He wanted to lie down and sleep—sleep—he was tired, dog tired, and his throat felt like the inside of a crushed stove pipe. It was hard to breathe. But—what was it that moved in his eyes, like a speck that the wind blows into a man's eyes. Balancing himself on the verge of complete collapse, he squinted into the higher distance—toward the heights of the lookout hill. It was a man.

HAL CAREY raised the pistol over his head. It was his own. Spreading his feet wide for support, he fired the gun. The roar of its explosion hit him like the recoil of an artillery piece, shook his very bones, but he had sense enough left to let himself down easily to the ground, on his hands and knees, facing Jack Masters. The pistol—what if it was empty—who'd know the difference—he steadied it in the general direction of Masters.

Masters was groaning, and Hal Carey drew his blood-stained hand across his sticky lips as he felt himself slowly flattening out. It was hard to keep his eyes open.

* * * *

It was one of the government

rangers who shook Hal Carey into sufficient consciousness to know that he was saved. He had beaten the hellish desert. He looked up into the friendly, weather-beaten features of the man from the station.

"Looks like you were mixing it up here," said the ranger. "What was it, mister?"

Carey looked across at Masters, who was motionless, flat on his back, like a dead man left to the ravages of nature.

"He went off his nut," muttered Carey. "Tried to murder me and steal my share of—that damned yellow metal— We got here—didn't we?—from the Musgraves?— You got any water, pardner?"

"SURE—sure," nodded the ranger. "All you want, right away now. Is he dead?" He walked over to Masters and examined him, shaking his head finally.

"He'll come through I guess. What was it—heat?"

"Yeah," answered Carey, with a squeak in his dry throat, "and the gold."

The ranger turned now and blew a whistle that screamed its message up along the slope to the station which they could see far away. Soon Carey could make out a small group of men coming down toward them.

Masters was carried, still raving in a semi-delirium up to the government post, and Carey, with the aid of a couple of the rangers, managed to cover most of the distance under his own power.

After a rest of a few hours and the rejuvenating effect of some warm food, Hal Carey asked for paper and pencil, on which he wrote with stiff fingers. He filled the page, chuckling softly to himself as he wrote, then signed his name. Passing the paper to the ranger chief, he stared out of a window, across the glaring des-

ert while the government man read:

"Jack Masters:

Thanks for lugging the gold across the desert. I had a hunch. When Bergen and Storms and Winthrop died I saw the change in your eyes and I couldn't trust you any more. I played my hunch and the cards as they came to my hand.

I needed my gold Masters for a purpose, a real purpose, not to squander in seaport dives as you will waste yours. So I doctored the cartridges in your gun, took out your powder load.

Your share of the gold I'm leaving here. When you can travel again I'll be—"

"Carey!" It was the voice of one of the rangers, who stepped into the room and halted the reader, and the man whose message he was deciphering. "This fellow, Masters—" The speaker paused and made a motion toward the other room. "He's gone."

"Gone!" repeated Carey, with a start. "Why—what do you—?"

"He's dead," explained the uniformed man. "Went out with a curse on his lips."

HAL CAREY stared from one to another dumbly. He could hear someone tearing up bits of paper and crackling them into a ball. The bearer of the sudden news came over and clamped a friendly hand on Hal's shoulder.

"Snap out of it, Carey," he heard the fellow saying. "Don't lose your head now. The desert is a tough test of a man an' you've come through. Remember the gold—it's all ours."

Hal Carey swallowed with difficulty and rubbed at his stubbled face with trembling hand. Masters—big brutal Masters, had cracked—had broken under the strain of the flaming desert inferno. He was gone. Only he, Hal Carey, was left—with the twenty thousand in gold. A wan smile crept into his haggard face.

The AIR BANDITS



He tottered, groping for support—then crumpled

Skid Larendon is Accused of the Wingtransit Holdups —And Gets Into Some Rough Action!

By LAWRENCE A. KEATING

Author of "344 James Street," "Peg o' the Ranch," etc.

THERE was a poker game in progress in the airport field house at Fortunalo, a pilot change stop on the southwest division of Wingtransit, Inc. "Skid" Larendon was in it, sitting to the left of "Nosey" Preigh and opposite Rainer, the airport manager.

Medium of height and slenderly built, Larendon looked the youngest man present, but his bland, boyish countenance topped by an unruly thatch of sandy hair belied the air-

experienced brain of the former Wingtransit flyer.

Now, although wearing his habitually cheerful manner like a mask, a faint expectant tautness hovered about Skid's blue-gray eyes as his gaze momentarily raised to that of his enemy. Number Four from Albuquerque was due in forty-five minutes, and Preigh would board and fly her with Holmes, already on the ship, to Kansas City.

Nosey's nickname derived from

his most prominent feature, which listed sideways since a bad crackup. His close-set glittering black eyes met Skid's. It was like the clash of armor, with instinctive reaction followed by another clash.

DERISION smoldered in the relief pilot's stare while a faint pallor overspreading Larendon's cheeks betrayed frank dislike for his former co-pilot on the K.C. run—the man who had not scrupled about getting Larendon fired from Wingtransit on a faked-up charge.

"Sink two bits, fellows," Jim Rainer challenged, sliding a chip forward. Earl Gow, a mechanic, frowned his indecision. Preigh glanced again at his cards, smiled confidently, and slapped down his contribution.

Suddenly the door opened. Everyone looked up as Sheriff Bud Blake, a strapping Westerner with red complexion and sharp, shrewd features, strode in.

Blake glanced keenly over the card players. He pocketed his buckskin gloves and unbelted the corduroy coat.

The deliberation in his manner betokened a serious errand.

"H'ya, Sheriff," greeted Rainer in a friendly tone. "Want to be dealt in?"

The official's eyes narrowed. "No," he returned briefly. "Now boys, sit tight. I got a tip that one o' the guys that's been pullin' these Wingtransit air holdups between here and Kansas City is in this room."

Amazed silence greeted the announcement. Then frowns and gasps of surprise. "Say, is this a joke?" came from Gow. Nosey Preigh frowned concernedly from the sheriff to his fellow players as he hunched back in his chair.

"Holdin' up air transports is no joke an' neither is my tip," Blake

growled. "I want you boys to line up against that wall. It'll only take a minute, and innocent guys don't need to worry. But I'm going to search you, so stand over—everybody!"

"But—" Rainer's incomprehension was plain.

"For the love of Mike, Sheriff, you don't think one of us is your man?" exclaimed Gow.

"Line up against that wall!" Accustomed to obedience, Sheriff Blake harshly overrode all protests. "It's only going to take a minute to find out what we can find out. Nosey, you're first."

A MID growls of indignation the official coolly proceeded to slap thighs, feel in coat pockets, slide his hand down pantlegs. One by one he examined the men without result. Finally arriving at Skid Larendon, he stepped back with pursed lips. A frown creased the lawman's forehead as he tilted back his wide-brimmed Stetson.

"Looks like you're on the wrong track, Larendon."

Nosey Preigh stepped quickly forward. "So he tipped you off, eh, Sheriff?" Contemptuously he measured Skid's athletic frame from sandy thatch to soles. Then Preigh turned to the others. "Boys, if we get searched Larendon does too. Isn't that right?"

"But—" began Skid.

"Sure thing!" Gow interrupted. "Go on, Blake, give him the once-over, too!" came from the others.

"No," said Blake. "It was Larendon gave me the tip."

"What of it?" insisted Preigh. "You searched the rest of us and didn't find anything. Now search this bird. You got to be fair."

"Well, Skid, I might as well, eh?" The official stepped to the pilot and began to rummage through his

clothes. Suddenly a change flooded over Blake's face as one of his big hands came out of Larendon's side coat pocket.

FROM his lean fingers dangled a lady's shining platinum chain studded with amethysts and twinkling diamonds. Then paper crinkled as the official unfolded something. He dropped back a step and gasped.

"Gosh! It's one o' the Pocantico Power bonds. I'm a lop-sided coyote's uncle!"

Skid Larendon started. His face went dead white and his lower jaw sagged in astonishment. Gasps came from the others. Staring fixedly at the articles, the pilot groped for words. His dilating eyes fastened on Nosey Preigh and a bitter, accusing look etched his wind-tanned face.

"You planted those on me!"

Nosey stepped forth angrily. "You're looney!" He appealed to Sheriff Blake, who stared blankly from the loot to Skid Larendon. "Guess your tip worked out, eh, Sheriff?"

Blake transferred his gaze to Nosey. "Prob'ly he tipped you off," Preigh suggested, "so as to get suspicion away from himself. Been hanging around this airport for ten days without any business here.

"Figured to plant this stuff on me, I suppose," he sneered at Larendon, "and then have Rainer here ask him to take my trick on Number Four when she comes. A swell chance to swipe those Fortunato Bank bonds we're carrying today, eh? Good-by bonds and good-by Larendon—if you ask me!"

Jim Rainer thrust forward. "Skid, explain yourself," he begged. "You're not mixed up in those holdups, are you? How the blazes did this stuff get on you?"

"You sure better spill it, young feller!" rasped Blake. Again he went

through Skid's clothing, but added nothing to his find. "I'm going to slip bracelets on you an' then we're heading for the jail."

"Wait!" Stung to speech at sight of the manacles, Skid Larendon fought through his daze. He sent an accusing look at Nosey Preigh. "There's your man, Sheriff—the fellow I told you about. I saw those things—"

"Boloney!" derided the swarthy flyer, and stepped threateningly forward.

"Hold on, Preigh." Sheriff Blake thrust his lank form between the two. "What the ding-ding kind of a game you playin' here, Larendon?" he demanded angrily. "Tryin' to make a fool outa me? Let me tell you, son, you can't do it. Three holdups and sixty thousand in loot'll put you away from now on. I bet—"

"Listen!" Skid's fists clenched determinedly and his blazing eyes returned the official's boring gaze. "I've got nothing to do with these holdups, Sheriff. Preigh is your man. He made me lose my job with Wingtransit—"

"G'wan, you lost it yourself. When we were piloting Number Four the first time it was held up, who'd they find that diamond ring on—you or me?"

A RED wave surged up Larendon's cheeks. "What's that?" cried Blake. "Loot found on this guy before?"

"Sure! Larendon and I were on Number Four to K.C. when the first stickup was pulled. The cops there searched us on general principles and found a two-carat diamond on Larendon that belonged to one of the passengers.

"Harry Murphy, the Super, fell for Skid's yarn that it must have dropped into his pocket by mistake. Murphy always was soft on this guy

—on account of Larendon fawning around him all the time," he added with a sneer.

"You lie! I'll—"

"Shut up!" Sheriff Blake turned to Nosey. "What else?"

"Murphy wouldn't prosecute Larendon. They fired him and let it go at that. And since then," Preigh finished pointedly, "Wingtransit has had two more holdups!"

SKID choked with anger. "You planted that ring on me, Preigh, and you planted this bond and necklace on me today when you saw Blake come into the room." His fingers itched to close around the other's throat. "Yes," he added bitterly, "you framed me after I did most of your flying for you the last two months because you were too darned drunk to do it yourself!"

Nosey Preigh thrust his chin forward. "You're a liar, Larendon!"

Blake shouldered them apart while they stared with open hatred. From their very first trip as Wingtransit co-pilots there had been friction between them. On that occasion, flying blindly through a snowstorm, Preigh angered Skid by covertly sipping from a pocket flask.

After repeated warnings that the ship was not safely above the mountains rising east of Fortunalo, the big tri-motored passenger liner had narrowly escaped disaster against a boulder-strewn slope.

Only Larendon's quick snatch at the controls saved the craft. Frightened and tense in the storm that made the world a sea of dribbling flakes, the passengers had failed to notice how close to death they had been.

Exposure of his carelessness infuriated Preigh. Twice he had appeared for work so stupefied by booze that Larendon had taken over his entire trick. The problem pre-

sented: should Skid report Preigh to Superintendent Murphy?

Many a night he debated the question. Army-bred to flying, Larendon was no believer in bearing tales. Secretly he hoped that Superintendent Murphy himself would notice the pilot. But Preigh stayed cautiously silent when Murphy was near, and no suspicion had entered the division official's mind.

Ultimately Skid concluded to keep an alert watch every minute he flew with Preigh, certain that sooner or later the man's carelessness would mean trouble and possibly an accident. Meanwhile Skid bore their mutual responsibility by performing two men's work.

Two weeks ago, while the air liner winged between Fortunalo and Kansas City, a masked passenger had forced Skid and Preigh to an emergency field at the point of two glowing automatics. Every occupant was subjected to thorough search.

FOURTEEN thousand dollars in gold belonging to the Big Strike Mine, on its way to Kansas City, was added to jewelry, watches, money and personal trifles. The masked passenger had escaped from the field in a waiting car.

At K.C., finding of the diamond on Larendon resulted in his dismissal. But since then Number Four had been looted twice. In one case the passenger-holdup disguised himself as a woman. Always he escaped the keen scrutiny accorded every person riding the lines, and no definite clue had been found as to his identity.

Skid Larendon, although without tangible proof, knew from the first that Preigh was in complete harmony with the holdup. Else who had slipped that diamond ring into Larendon's pocket? He had no other enemy.

Yesterday something he had seen caused the former Wingtransit pilot to seek Sheriff Blake. It was the amethyst necklace and the Pocantico Power bond just found on his own person. Skid had glimpsed them in a pocket of Nosey Preigh's flying suit hanging in an open locker.

TODAY while the men played poker waiting for Number Four, the sheriff was to search the players and in particular Nosey. The wily sleight-of-hand, however, had turned the tables catching Skid Larendon instead!

"Well, Sheriff"—Preigh's oily tones jerked Skid from his daze—"looks like you've found the man, eh? Probably the police'll get his accomplice sooner or later. Or you can get it out of Larendon what he did with the rest of the loot."

Skid's jaw sagged. "Blake," he pleaded with the official, "you're on the wrong track. Preigh dropped that stuff in my pocket when he saw you come in."

The sheriff grunted. "That's enough of your yap, Larendon. Stick out your wrists!" He clicked the manacles shut. "Now come on over to the jail. You can speak your piece there."

"And let this scoundrel take Number Four with twenty thousand in Fortunalo Bank securities?" cried Skid, holding back. "Sheriff, you're letting yourself in for plenty of trouble if you—"

"Come on, I said!" With a sharp tug at the manacles the lawman almost jerked Skid off his balance. And despite all the flyer's protests he found himself dragged from the airport field house and down the street.

Three minutes later Blake unlocked the manacles inside a cell of the Mountain County jail. "Now out with the dope: who's your pal?

Where's the loot? Out with it, Larendon, or there's plenty of ways to make you tell!"

"Sheriff," protested Skid, trembling with wrath, "do you think I'd have asked you to search those fellows if I had the loot on me? Say," he added, "what part do you think I had in those jobs, anyhow?"

Blake nursed his chin with thumb and forefinger. "Prob'ly played passenger after that first time," he guessed shrewdly. "Larendon, you take my advice an' make a clean breast of it. Then Wingtransit people'll probably let you off easy if you lead us to your pal and hand back the stuff you guys collected. What do you say?"

The heavy rumble of motors drifted from outside. His trained ears told Skid that Number Four was circling to land. There would be a ten minute stop for refueling, change of one pilot, and brief exercise for the passengers. Then Nosey Preigh would take the stick for Kansas City. And once Nosey got clear of Fortunalo—"Come on, make up your mind!" snapped Blake.

LARENDON hesitated. Then his eyes met the keen gaze of the lawman. "Let Preigh loose with that twenty thousand in Fortunalo Bank bonds, Blake," he warned in a low, tense voice, "and you'll never see him again. I tell you he's crooked."

The clang of the steel door answered him. Cursing, the official strode down the jail corridor, his boot heels tapping on the cement floor. "When you decide to talk turkey, call me," he growled over his shoulder.

Silence fell over the little jail. Discouragement gripped him and Skid Larendon sank onto the cot that was the cell's only furniture. He had to think this out!

It was a bitter blow to a man who

could become pilot for any one of several competing lines. But Larendon was proud.

He had determined to clear his name before Superintendent Murphy and to do the line a good turn to boot.

THAT was why he had flown his ancient Jenny to Fortunalo and hung around these ten days—in the hope of uncovering some clue. So far all he had done was to get himself into jail when Nosey Preigh, the half-drunken rascal, proved quicker thinking and acting!

Again the roar of motors attracted Skid. Standing on tiptoe, he could see through the barred window down the deserted street and out onto the flying field. Six or eight passengers waited in line to climb within the liner's glassed cabin. Refueling had been accomplished and Number Four would soon be off.

The three motors raised their roar to a high whine. An instant more and the air liner would be gone.

Desperation flashed a dim hope through Skid Larendon's brain. Whirling to the cell door he pressed his cheeks against the bars. "Sheriff! Hey, Sheriff Blake!"

"Huh? What's up?" There came the sound of a chair lowered on four legs, then steps scraped down the corridor.

"Come in here, Blake—hurry! I got something to tell you." While the man fumbled at the lock Skid returned to the window. The ship was still at her chocks, ready to race down the field.

"Oh, so you're ready to talk now, Larendon?"

Skid saw the official enter the cell. "Sit down. I'll talk."

Blake pursed his lips with a look of caution. Then as Larendon started to seat himself on the cot, the sheriff also made for it.

But he never got there. With a dive like a released spring, Skid's lithe form shot at Blake's knees. Crash! Back against the grilled bars flung the lawman.

Instantly Skid sprang erect and with a lightning right flared the other's chin upward.

But Blake was agile. One hand swished aside his corduroy coat to snatch forth a gun while his left arm jockeyed in defense. Larendon got through another uppercut that slammed dully on Blake's chin. The pilot's left hand fought at Blake's wrist. A sharp jerk and the revolver spun against the wall.

The sheriff ducked. Skid's next blow missed, but with instant recovery he shot his left at the already bruised chin. This time the flyer's hard knuckles met bone squarely. Up flared Blake's face, draining of blood. His eyes fluttered madly as he strove to retain consciousness. Relaxing, the official crumpled helplessly to the floor.

SKID bent for the sheriff's revolver and thrust it within his ripped-open shirt. Snatching up the ring of keys, he sprang to the cell door. The largest key fit and a second later Larendon scuttled down the corridor, through the dingy office, and out into the street.

A swift glance around showed him unobserved. He raced for the airport. The two blocks were covered in record time, Skid's legs working like pistons.

On the edge of the flying field his excited eyes widened. Suddenly he understood Number Four's delay.

A brown coupe whirled alongside the air liner. Two men leaped out, one carrying a rifle, the other a black Boston bag. He rushed to the still-open cabin door and extended the bag upward. Nosey Preigh's face

was visible as he leaned to take it. Then the men fell back, the cabin door swung shut, and the motors raced for the take-off.

THAT bag contained twenty thousand dollars' worth of Fortunal Bank securities, bound for the Federal Reserve Bank at Kansas City!

Larendon was within thirty feet of the big tri-motor as the coupe darted off and she began to move. A thick cloud of dust swirled in the plane's wake and the gale from the props flung it stinging into Skid's face. But he kept doggedly on, striving to board the ship before she left ground.

Faster and faster moved the liner. Skid's fingertips strained to touch the tail. Still the big monoplane gained speed. Then, with a sudden twist of her tail, she careened and darted in a new direction down the field. The suddenness of it slammed Skid Larendon off his feet, and he hurtled spinning and somersaulting away. When he got up and dug with scratched fists at the dirt in his eyes a slowly lessening roar told him that the ship was gone. Then he saw her circling the field. A face peered out of the pilot's window. The features changed to derision, and, thumb to nose, Preigh contemptuously defied his enemy.

Skid gave a long sigh. But he tensed at remembrance that Blake would soon come down the street charged with blood-lust. Again Larendon broke into a run, this time toward the end hangar of the airport. Its door gaped wide. Along a side wall stood a dilapidated, dejected-looking ship that was his Jenny. Wing-patched and ancient, it made tenuous hope throb in the fugitive's breast.

He raced for it. Two hundred yards back Jim Rainer peered from his office window. Earl Gow came

trotting out of another hangar and, seeing Skid, shouted a question and started toward him.

Larendon began shoving his plane out. Then he scrambled into its cockpit. "Hey, Earl!" he yelled. "Wind 'er up, will you? For John's sake, give me a hand!"

Gow halted before the plane. His face clouded. "Yeah, but—"

"Go on, twist'r! Hurry!"

Something taut and appealing in the pilot's face won Gow. With a determined nod he strode to the prop. "Contact!"

"Contact!"

The blade ticked, then stopped with a jerk. Earl hung his weight on it while Larendon, white-faced and anxious, searched with straining eyes the expanse of street leading to the jail. He caught his breath sharply.

A LANK figure lurched from the office door and now raced toward them uttering hoarse shouts. The staccato bark of a shot followed soon after a puff of gray smoke. Sheriff Blake was after him! And with another gun.

"Contact!"

"Contact!"

Again Gow hung his weight on the prop. He jerked it down and leaped away as a soft purr rippled from the cold motor. Nursing her with pleading fingers, Skid slowly advanced the throttle. With Earl clinging to the wingtip the Jenny trundled around with scraping tail and onto the tarmac.

"Beat it—Sheriff'll jug you!" cried Larendon. He gestured thanks for the aid, and shoved his throttle wider.

Blake gained the edge of the flying field. He seemed slightly puzzled as to the identity of the man in the Jenny, but gestured for the ship to wait. Skid grunted inwardly. He

did wait until the last possible moment so as to give his engine the needed warming.

WHEN Blake paused a hundred and fifty feet away for another shot from his Colt, Larendon jerked her wide open. Instantly the ship bumped down the tarmac. Picking up speed rapidly, she was tearing along when Skid jerked his stick back. Obedient to his demand, the Jenny fought in a climb.

As he circled the airport Larendon saw Blake with lifted gun shooting angrily. But the slugs merely plunged through wing fabric without harm. Evidently concluding he could not bring down the plane, Blake turned away.

He seized Gow by the sleeve and seemed to be demanding something of him. Skid grinned craftily. If he knew Earl—and he thought he did—it would be fifteen minutes before the lawman could take the air in a commandeered ship.

The Jenny straightened out. A dim speck in the distance identified the tri-motor. With all speed Larendon headed after her, but his flimsy ship was in poor condition. Her cylinders were choked with carbon and Skid knew he was losing compression. Despite top speed the speck ahead grew fainter. The best he could do was to keep on the trail of the Wingtransit liner—and hope.

An hour slipped by of steady flying. With the suddenness peculiar to mountainous country the sun slid under a cloud and the heavens were turning black as if gathering a storm. Visibility became heavy and Skid Larendon pondered with knotted brows whether the pinpoint ahead really was a ship or some product of his imagination.

He pressed on. Flying as low as he dared over the semi-mountainous terrain, he was able to follow the

liner's route through his previous experience flying her. Maps he had none, not even a scrap. Nor so much as an earth inductor compass. The Jenny was on her last few thousand miles and Skid hadn't wanted to throw good money after bad—especially since his pilot's income had ceased.

The jagged outlines of higher mountains rose and he climbed to six thousand feet. Now he winged amid muggy clouds saturated with moisture that beat sullenly against the peaks. The storm would break at any minute.

Larendon's frown intensified. He swam out of one black cloud and into another. Straining his gaze overside, he sought to gauge his height, to determine whether he was up sufficient to avoid crashing into some desolate slope.

THOUGHT of the Wingtransit tri-motor was temporarily forgotten for the immediate problem of his own safety. This was the worst stretch of the trip from Fortunato to K.C., and it struck Larendon like a cold chill that if he became lost or smashed up hereabouts, no searching parties would make a great effort to find him.

It would be supposed that he escaped into Mexico. A man could starve on those lightning-torn pine and boulder-strewn slopes!

Carefully estimating his height, Skid fell to calculating his distance thus far. There was an emergency landing field with Gunsight Peak as a mark. The pilot stared about him with fixed, scowling concern. He must be near that field now.

Suddenly he banked sharply, came around, and straightened. The soupy banks of cloud had almost led him to hurtle against a towering rocky upthrust! With utmost caution he throttled down to venture closer.

Then Larendon breathed relief. He had almost collided with Gun-sight Peak, and the emergency field was directly beneath him in a narrow valley.

HE idled his motor—and it died. Apprehension rose in his breast as with keen, probing eyes Skid circled the brief square of the field. Landing here was difficult at any time, but unusually so now because of the clinging gray mist that made his maneuvers like groping in the dark.

The Jenny's wheels shivered against the ground, rebounded and touched again. Spinning her sharply around, Skid checked momentum and soon brought his ship to a halt at one end of the allotted space. With a sigh of relief he climbed to the ground.

"Shut off those engines, you mutt! I don't know if I'm hearin' things, but it seemed like I heard another motor. Did you?"

A moment of quiet. "No, you got the jumps, that's all. Well, come on, we got to load this stuff and beat it. Now, folks, drop your valuables in this bag as you pass by. No funny business or somebody gets hurt!"

"B-but how are we to g-get home?" The tearful voice of a woman passenger carried to Larendon.

The first man grunted. "You'll get home some time, lady. Come on, step lively. Pard, did you find the stuff?"

"It's in the ship. Hurry with those dubs. We got no time to monkey around here!"

Skid Larendon felt a cold thrill traverse his spine. The last speaker was certainly Nosey Preigh.

Swift comprehension swept over the pilot. They were in the act of looting Wingtransit again—Preigh and his unknown confederate!

For an instant the blood seemed to cease coursing through Skid's body.

He had guessed this move on the part of the miscreants, but forced to land here, had all but given up hope of finding them.

Suddenly the odds against him loomed tremendous. Two men, desperate and armed, with plans carefully laid, against one. Yes, and their tri-motored air liner against his rickety Jenny!

WHERE was Holmes, the co-pilot? In on the scheme, or laid out unconscious? Well, Skid had come too far, had too much at stake to quit now. Peering through the mist he thought he determined the spot from which the voices floated. Holding his breath he listened.

"Well, you're getting away with it now, but you'll get caught!" That was Holmes talking angrily. "It's a damned outrage—"

"It certainly is!" snapped a passenger. "A holdup this day and age! I tell you I won't stand for it; I'll—"

"Keep your hands high!" snarled the voice of Nosey Preigh. Skid's eyes glinted.

"Yeah, keep 'em up, brother, unless you want to go home in a box," threatened Preigh's unknown pal. "Got everything aboard?" he added.

"All set. Come on, let's hike. These fools haven't a dime left on 'em. Besides, that fathead of a Larendon's just fool enough to run into us somewhere—"

"Him? Naw, he's back in Blake's hoosegow. Even if he did get away he'd crack up somewhere. Say, you could knock over a mountain in this country and never know what hit you."

"Well, anyhow, hurry. Stand back

there, you! I'm warning you, see—stay away from this ship or you're going to get run over!"

"But, sir," again came a woman's voice, "you don't mean to leave us in this deserted place?"

"There's grub in the shanty over there. You won't starve—soon. Now we're off. And mind, no monkey business!"

CROUCHING, Larendon broke into a run toward the spot where he judged the air liner to be. Suddenly out of the mist loomed the bulk of it, her three engines ticking slowly, her cabin door ajar. A form loomed near-by and in panic Skid crumpled to the ground. Another passed so close he feared the fellow would step on him.

"Get in, Nosey. Hurry up!" growled the strange voice.

Preigh, the last to enter the cabin, mounted. "It's going to be tough getting off the ground, Jake. A guy can't see ten feet ahead. However, she's headed down-field and I guess we can do it."

"Sure we can do it. We did it—"

The closing of the cabin door cut off his speech.

In desperation at the likelihood of being left behind a second time, Larendon probed his brain for an idea.

He had meant to slip into the ship's cabin before the pair of rascals entered, but there had been no time to do so. Suddenly the motors speeded and the ship began to move. Skid Larendon hurriedly resolved on desperate measures.

He scrambled onto the fuselage back near the tail. Clinging frantically as the ship quivered and rumbled over the ground at heightening speed, he slid stealthily forward. Just abaft the rear wall of the cabin was a small baggage compartment, he knew.

If he could gain that before they hurled him off—

His probing fingers slid over the fuselage, groping for the trap of the compartment. Now Nosey Preigh had her off the ground and was corkscrewing for height.

The motors sucked the damp air greedily and sent it in a stinging gale back at the unsuspected passenger. Desperately maintaining a hold by pressing his knees against the canvas covering and lying forward, Skid groped for the trap door.

The queer feeling of insecurity, as when one stands on an uncovered beam of a new building and looks twenty stories down at the street, assailed the youth. Then, with a gasp of thanks, he felt the ring of the trap. With muscles strained to the snapping point he hauled it open until of a sudden the gale sent it smashing back.

THE square was large enough for a man to enter. But as Larendon started to do so he encountered baggage. A moment of indecision, then with difficulty he lifted a suitcase and dropped it overside. A second and third followed. After all, his mission here was more important to Wingtransit, Inc., than passengers' personal belongings—

Plunging headfirst, he plopped into the compartment. For an instant he struggled for upright position and sat fighting for breath. The air rushing through the opening choked him, but he could not hope to get the trap closed again and must abide it somehow.

The tri-motored ship swam higher and Skid felt her straighten out, as if Nosey had determined on his course and was winging away at top speed. Skid guessed they were headed south—the bandits undoubtedly would make for Mexico.

Now what? Prisoner in the bag-

gage compartment of a speeding plane in possession of desperate men, Larendon shook his head as if to drive away muddled thoughts and to discover some means of gaining the cabin proper. He still had Sheriff Blake's revolver; that was his only consoling thought. If he could break open the door into the cabin without being noticed.

Fumbling, he brought out a pocket knife and opened it. The door, he knew, had a flimsy catch on the other side. Skid inserted his blade and pried. There came a sudden loosening of his hold; the blade had snapped off.

He opened the smaller blade and tried again. Using it with great caution as a lever, he felt the door give slightly. Presently he stopped to listen, but only the muffled drone of the motors reached his ears. Determinedly he pried again. The second blade broke off!

For a moment discouragement attacked Larendon. But this would not do; he jammed the end of his knife handle into the somewhat widened crack and with fingers tense, twisted. It gave. Again he tried. Suddenly came a sharp metallic ripping sound. The door burst open.

SKID held his breath, waiting. Gently he shoved the door wider. Ten or twelve feet ahead he saw two backs as Nosey Preigh sat at the controls and his accomplice sat in the co-pilot's seat. Skid fumbled within his shirt to produce Blake's gun.

Wriggling through the low doorway while his heart pounded furiously in his breast, he was preparing to rise when—

"Nosey! There's a guy—"

Wham! Skid's revolver split the comparative quiet of the liner's cabin. A spattering tinkle of glass showed he had missed. Again he clenched

the trigger, but again missed. Scarcely had he time to jerk erect when a stockily built form rose and dove at him.

Before Skid could fire again the fellow struck, and then went slamming into a rear seat. Larendon's gun loosed from his grasp as a pudgy fist boomed on his chest. His back curved so that he was all but powerless, but he squirmed and twisted and fought on in panicky doggedness.

A crashing uppercut grazed his jaw and he toppled again into a leather seat. His assailant bored close atop him. Suddenly a thunderous roar paralyzed Skid's eardrums and the heat of the other's shot seared his cheek. Instinctively he jerked up his knees and caught his antagonist in the midriff.

In the ensuing rain of blows, Skid scrambled free. But no sooner was he up and groping for his weapon than the other whipped up his own revolver and fired point blank.

AHOT jab of pain sliced through Larendon's left side. Then his own gun went off. A mighty kick crippled Skid with a blow on the shin. Again the pair grappled desperately, lurching up and down the narrow aisle.

"I got him, Jake—look out!" shouted Nosey.

Larendon's right fist shot out; it landed on Jake's chin. He reeled, the automatic dropping to the floor as he plunged backward through the open door, clutching at empty air and then was gone.

An ear-splitting crash again sent the youth's ears numb as Nosey Preigh fired from four feet away. But his bullet thudded into the wall of the baggage compartment. Two more shots roared after the first.

Skid's weapon was gone. He caught up the blue automatic drop-

ped by the fellow called Jake, then whirled. A jaw-smashing blow deflected from his left cheek and hurled him half off his balance. Suddenly the plane rocked in an air pocket, but allowing her to fly wild, Preigh pitched down the aisle to grapple with the intruder.

GUNS scuttling along the floor, the two panting, hard-eyed men fought with grim hate. Nosey was thick-set and powerful, but Larendon's lithe build and deft movements tended to equalize their strength. Like a pile driver the pursuer's fists flayed out, his left weakened by the shoulder wound but doing its best, his right slicing at Nosey's tilted face in short-arm jabs.

The pilotless ship throbbed onward. Flashing through the back of Larendon's mind was fear of crashing into some mountain. He must get to the controls—at once!

Suddenly Preigh dove. His shoulder struck Larendon's legs above the knee. The shock dropped him sideways and Nosey slammed to the floor. Larendon leaped over them for the controls.

He was in the nick of time. Slanting upward dead ahead was the desolate motly-colored granite of a rugged peak. Skid plopped into the leather set, snatched the stick, and with his feet on the pedals, jerked the ship's nose higher. Now they would clear.

He sensed danger behind. Whirling, he received a tooth-rocking smash from Preigh's hard fist. Black and red spots swam before Skid Larendon's eyes, but he shook his head like a terrier coming out of water, and groped for a wrench.

Still the tri-motored liner climbed, her engines thumping dully but with confident purring that registered on Skid's brain as satisfactory. Preigh scrambled to his feet. The wrench

struck downward, hit the edge of the pilot's seat, and glanced off.

Nosey closed in. They fell to the floor in the open space between passengers' and pilots' seats. Preigh writhed atop his foe, one knee jabbing at Larendon's groin.

The impact sent air bursting from the under man's lips. His face drained ashen. With his last strength he arched his back as Preigh's gun butt struck the floor close beside his ear. The fellow's stocky figure lifted. There came a dull *crunch!*—and Nosey's skull met a cabin wall support. The wrench touched Skid's fingers and he whipped it up. As Nosey slashed again with the empty gun, Larendon crawled free and rose. The men faced each other like snarling cats; then Preigh charged. Skid snapped his wrench-hand back.

PREIGH closed in. Before he could deliver a crippling blow Skid struck. Swaying drunkenly, Nosey's face swept pallid. He tottered, groping for support—then crumpled in an unconscious heap.

The sputter of one motor missing snatched the pilot back to the present. In a single bound he reached the controls and with prayerful tenderness nursed the ship to a level. Suddenly the tri-motored liner shot out of the gray-black cloud and into blinding sunlight. Skid shot a glance at his instrument board, veered sharply, and headed back toward the emergency field.

Twenty minutes later he accomplished a neat three-point. Behind him, Preigh was beginning to stir. Fearful of a fresh attack the pilot cut out his motors to check as much as possible their air speed. Thump! The tail scraped—she bumped along—and rolled to a halt.

Almost before he could stumble to the cabin door it jerked wide. "What

the—"Skid Larendon plunged head-first into the wide arms of Sheriff Bud Blake.

Two minutes later, amidst an excited crowd of passengers, he had gasped out details of what had happened. "Jim," snapped Blake to Rainer, Fortunalo airport manager, who had brought the officials here, "take a look-see for that mess o' bonds from the bank."

Rainer thrust his way through the crowd. Grunting, the lawman manacled Nosey Preigh. He looked at Skid Larendon, and then nodded.

"Never knew a piece o' work like it in all my twenty years sheriffin'," he said. "We found that feller who fell out of the plane. He was the passenger that pulled them stunts, pretty well smashed up, dead when he hit the ground, but I recognized him. Jake Dangler, fresh out of State's Prison. Sent up for robbin' the Western Transport Lines over Missouri, and up to his old tricks right off."

"Sheriff! Hey, look!" The ex-

cited tones of Jim Rainer made everyone turn. In the doorway of the Wingtransit liner's cabin the airport manager was holding an olive metal box. At his feet were two canvas sacks and the Fortunalo Bank's Boston bag of securities.

"Loot!" he cried. "It's all here—must be eighty thousand bucks' worth. From all four jobs. They were making their last getaway. Blake, we got it all!"

SKID looked at Nosey Preigh. The man's shoe-button eyes gleamed beside his weirdly bent nose with unspeakable hate. But under the pilot's accusing gaze they wavered and dropped.

"Well, Nosey," observed Skid Larendon as exultation pulsed with delicious warmth through his veins, "I won't see you on Number Four any more. But when I fly over that Leavenworth prison rockpile, I'll think of you. Shucks!" he added magnanimously, "watch for me, Nosey—I'll wave!"

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Sabers of Vengeance



Paul redoubled his efforts, though conscious that he was gradually weakening

You'll Thrill to this Breath-Taking Story of Hard-Fighting Men in the Glamorous Days of Captain Walker of the Texas Rangers

By CAPT. J. WINCHCOMBE-TAYLOR

Author of "Unofficially Present," etc.

CURSING with sheer, impotent rage, Lieutenant Paul Warner spurred Queen onward in the rear of his three cavalymen. Behind him Juan Serrano galloped at the head of his band of horsemen. Serrano who, under the guise of patriotism, hovered on the flanks of the American army, cutting off stragglers and the unwary, and doing them to death with inhuman ferocity.

Nominally *rancheros*—members of the Mexican militia—Serrano and his men were actually bandits. Preying upon the Mexican and American troops alike, they were known to have slaughtered numbers of defenseless Mexican civilians. It was these fiends who had murdered Paul Warner's closest friend and superior in the 1st Kentucky Volunteer Cavalry, Captain George Peyton.

Every fiber of Paul's being urged

him to wheel and meet Serrano face to face, but he dared not. He was returning from a scout with vital information. If he failed to deliver it as soon as possible, it might be fatal to General Taylor's little army lying encamped near Buena Vista.

HE must report that, while two thousand picked Mexican cavalry were moving to outflank the American force, Santa Ana in person was nearing with twelve thousand infantry to crush it by sheer weight of numbers!

The pursuers were now barely a hundred yards behind. A ball raised a tiny whirl of dust on Paul's right side. More shots cracked. The Mexicans were now close enough to use their *escopettes*—cavalry carbines.

Private Marks' horse dropped, throwing its rider over its head. A glimpse of the man's haggard, imploring face made Paul pull Queen back on her haunches.

"Take him up behind you, corporal!" he shouted. "I'll hold them off. Make for those rocks yonder!" His trained eyes had picked out a rocky clump close ahead, where they could make a stand. "If you can, make a run for it later. Whoever gets in first, report to the general."

But as he faced around, while Harrison was helping Marks up behind him, Jennings, the third trooper, gave a choked cry and rolled from his saddle. A bright red splotch on his back showed where a ball had hit. His excited horse careened wildly away.

Whooping victoriously, the mass of pursuers came on. It was then that Paul was thankful that among his friends was the famous Captain Walker, of the Texas Rangers. For the bluff Texan had recently given him a pair of newly-invented weapons called Colt's revolving pistols, each firing six shots instead of the usual

one. Only the Rangers were armed with these new, deadly weapons.

Drawing them now, Paul prayed that one of their balls would find a billet in Serrano's evil body. Yet, fearless though he was, he flinched involuntarily at sight of the oncoming horde. Fully thirty riders were charging down upon him; each one merciless and all savagely brave when together.

But he hoped to hold them back until Harrison and Marks gained the rocks. He would rejoin his companions there. Then he would send one of them on alone to the camp, while he kept the other to help defend the position.

Paul's first shot knocked a screeching Comanche Indian out of his saddle. His second and third missed, but his fourth hit the horse of a man who wore parts of an American infantry uniform.

A SHOUT from behind made him glance around swiftly. Harrison and Marks, now mounted double, were riding away, but slowly.

Shot five was a miss. But already the *rancheros* were swerving aside, unused to facing pistols that fired repeatedly without reloading.

Serrano, yelling angry orders, fired back at Paul with his *escopette*, and the bullet struck Queen's near shoulder. The horse neighed with pain and became unmanageable.

"Steady, old lady!" Paul soothed, and fired his sixth round at Serrano himself. When he looked back once more, he saw that his two men had almost reached the sheltering rocks. He began using the second pistol, but Queen was now rearing so badly that he could not aim properly. Wheeling her around, he raced for the rocks.

Then a groan escaped him. For the *rancheros*, ignoring him for the moment, concentrated upon the

double-riding troopers. They literally blew them to Eternity with a torrent of balls.

THIS was disaster, for now Paul must escape alone; escape upon an already wounded and frenzied animal. As he sped past the bodies of his two men, his hand arose automatically in a final salute. Amid a hail of deadly balls, he raced for the rocks.

Reaching them, he dismounted thankfully and slid the reins over his shoulder. Cautiously he peered around the side of one large boulder. The Mexicans were spreading out, and he realized that they intended getting around on either side of him. He must, therefore, pick off these outflanking riders first of all.

He hoped that Queen might quiet a little while here in shelter. In any case, it was not possible to reload these Colt's pistols while in the saddle. And there was the prospect that the firing might be heard in camp and bring a rescue party.

He fired the remaining cartridges in his second weapon methodically, trying to locate Serrano among the main group. These had now dismounted and were firing from behind whatever scanty shelter the ground afforded. One rider, out of range on the right, was circling to come up in Paul's rear.

With only one more cartridge left in his weapon, the lieutenant saw the tip of a sombrero and a portion of gay-colored serape showing from behind a small clump of stones ahead. Serrano!

Kneeling, Paul took steady aim. Boom! He shouted exultantly as the sombrero was whirled away. Had he killed its wearer?

But there was no time for speculation. The disadvantage of these Colts was that they must be taken

apart in three pieces in order to reload them. His fingers seemed stiff and clumsy as he inserted cartridges in the cylinder of the first. He succeeded, then reassembled it.

Firing one shot from it to warn off the too-venturesome, he began to reload the second.

But now luck turned against him. The cylinder slipped from his fingers and rolled under Queen's feet. Already panic-stricken, the little mare reared up as she stepped upon the unfamiliar, rolling object. A blow from a hoof, and she had sent it spinning away.

Paul dared not waste time searching for it. He intended now to fire two more shots, then remount and ride for life.

Balls flattened against the rock behind which he sheltered, proving that his position was accurately known. Whether Serrano had been killed or not, these guerillas had still plenty of fight left.

THEN something whirled through the air from behind, and there followed a savage jerk on the Kentuckian's neck. A reata! The outflankers had tricked him, after all, and had taken him from the rear.

Frantically he emptied his pistol at the spot where he imagined his captor to be lurking. A burst of mocking laughter answered him, and an instant later a second rope looped over his head and pinned his arms helplessly to his sides.

Then half a dozen men swarmed around him, their savage faces grinning. Bitterly, Paul realized that the foremost must be Serrano himself. Even though the latter was sans sombrero or serape, there was no mistaking that insolent, tigerish walk of his, or his cruel, moustached face.

"Welcome, *teniente!* This ees a grreat pleasure, eh?" the leader

greeted satirically and in fair English. "Caramba! Two of my gallant patriots can no longer devote their lives to poor, stricken Mexico, because you, *señor teniente*, have keeled them!"

HIS teeth flashed in a fiendish grin. "Of that we weel speak later, eh? Now we ride away, in case your Americano soldiers arrive. Come!"

The reatas bit cruelly into Paul's neck as he was dragged out into the open. He clenched his jaw and strove hard to think. He must escape, somehow! Every minute counted; for every hour saw that great body of Mexican cavalry—lancers, *carabiniers*, and irregular *rancheros*—closing in on old Zack Taylor's small force.

Paul was led past the spot where he had shot at Serrano. True, the sombrero was there—a bullet hole testifying to the Kentuckian's marksmanship—and also the bright serape. But they had been merely placed adroitly behind the stones to draw fire, while their owner had crawled away to take Paul from the rear.

Serrano was amused at the success of his ruse. "Eet was a good treeck, eh, *teniente*?" he roared wolfishly. "You theenk you keel Don Juan Serrano, eh? But he ees not so easy to keel by you accursed gringos. Now, my frien', mount!"

Hoisted upon a scrawny mustang, Paul's arms and legs were bound so cruelly with leather thongs that he almost cried aloud with the pain.

Queen was in charge of one of the band, and Serrano was eyeing her with all the appreciation of a true horseman. There were but few animals in the entire American army of such good blood as she, and clearly the bandit leader realized her value.

The man looked, Paul had to ad-

mit grudgingly, the picture of a fine *caballero*. His recovered sombrero and serape set off his alert, powerful frame and hawklike features. But Paul saw something else that made him stifle an oath: Serrano wore an American cavalry officer's jacket, the left side of which was patched with slightly darker fabric!

Paul recognized it. That patch covered a bullet graze which Captain Peyton had received during the storming of Monterey! And if further proof were needed, Serrano wore a sword and belt, the last bearing the insignia of the Kentucky Cavalry! Peyton's body had been found, horribly mutilated, just after Serrano's marauders had been driven away from the outpost line. That Serrano himself was the actual murderer, Paul now felt sure. It would be like him to wear the uniform of the man he had slain.

ALREADY some of the *rancheros* were donning the clothes and accoutrements of the slain cavalrymen. Harrison's jacket, with its two broad chevrons, now covered the torso of an Indian who was otherwise naked, save for loin cloth and moccasins.

When the party started off at a rapid pace, Paul saw that some of his captors were obviously American outlaws and deserters; men who knew that capture meant summary trial and execution. Others were peons of the lowest type; while others again were clearly the scourings of towns, with here and there a few in the uniform of the regular Mexican army—also deserters. These, with a negro and four Comanche Indians, made up this truly desperate band.

An hour passed, during which the party retired a full ten miles. Paul, in agony from his thong-bound ankles and wrists, and feverish at his

failure to deliver his report, cursed the American outposts for not having heard the firing and following in pursuit.

THE band halted at last on the fringe of a cottonwood clump, where it was welcomed by a few more nondescripts. Paul was dragged from his saddle and lashed firmly to a tree.

Almost immediately the *rancheros* began preparing a meal over a large fire.

It seemed that Serrano had found the lost cylinder from Paul's second revolver. The leader had thrust both these weapons into his belt.

"We talk now, *señor teniente*, eh?" he smiled softly. "You were in a ver' grreat hurry, eh, with your *soldados*? W'at you find, that ees so important? You tell the grreat Don Juan Serrano!"

"I'll tell you nothing!"

"No? Ah, we weel see!"

At a sign from Serrano, two men untied Paul from the tree. His hobbled feet were released.

"I theenk you know too much for the good of my countree, my frien'," the *ranchero* almost purred. "I am a ver' grreat patriot, and I weel make you speak. *Si, señor.*"

Indolently, Serrano ordered his prisoner to be dragged toward the fire and his boots pulled off. "Yes, *señor Americano*," he continued thoughtfully. "I theenk you had better tell me why you were in so grreat hurry. Perhaps you learned news of our magnificent army, eh?"

Paul blenched. Peyton's body had been found with its feet badly scorched. Clearly he had been tortured to make him betray military secrets. Well, if the captain had suffered and died rather than disclose them, so could Paul.

The jeering men thrust him so close to the fire that already his pro-

testing soles felt the hot bite of the flames.

"Eet is not pleasant, eh, my frien'?" mocked Serrano. "Ah, but this ees but a beginning."

He gave a quick order in Spanish. Paul was thrust closer, so that his feet lay upon the fringe of white ash surrounding the fire.

When the Kentuckian felt he could endure the agony no longer, there came a welcome interruption. A group of horsemen burst upon the scene. In their midst they bore a young Mexican captain, a man who seemed to regard his surroundings and companions with philosophic disdain.

SEEING Paul, however, he spoke rapidly to Serrano in Spanish. The bandit answered angrily in the same tongue, whereupon the captain merely shrugged. Deeply Paul regretted his ignorance of the language which they employed.

Dismounting, the officer walked leisurely over to him. When he spoke, it was in excellent English. "I fear we are companions in misfortune, *señor*," he began. "I see that you are about to be 'persuaded' to give a little information. It is a whim of our host to sell it for money to my general.

"I was foolish enough to ride from my command without an escort. It was a simple matter to induce me—at pistol point—to join the brave caballeros rejoining their so gallant leader, *Señor Serrano.*"

His tone was mocking and bitter. He continued, more formally: "This, *señor*, though enemies, circumstances force us to be friends. If victory awaits my general, then I shall be set free with many protestations of regret. But if not, then, I fear, my only hope is that our courteous host will deign to accept a big ransom for me.

"Señor, I am *Capitaine* Diego Tenorio y Avesta, at your service."

From his position on the ground, Paul stared up at him. "I am Lieutenant Warner, of the Kentucky Cavalry, *señor capitaine*," he continued the introduction. "As you, too, are a prisoner, I cannot demand your protection from this torturing fiend."

"I REGRET my inability to assist you, *señor teniente*," Tenorio smiled carelessly. "But, you are a man. Doubtless you will bear his gentleness."

With a shrug, he turned away. Taking a guitar from one of the men, he began strumming and singing a soft Spanish song of love.

Paul was disgusted. Tenorio, a regular officer, should at least protest against Serrano's torturing a defenseless captive. Even if it were true that he himself was a prisoner. The American closed his lips firmly. Well, he'd show them that a Kentucky gentleman could bear pain without whimpering.

Ceasing his strumming, Tenorio casually picked up Paul's scabbarded saber. Drawing it, he examined it curiously and made a few passes in the air. Then he crossed to Serrano and spoke to him, laughing and swishing the blade as if facing an opponent.

Serrano drew his own saber. The two men examined and compared the weapons, all the while speaking rapidly in Spanish.

The captain strolled back to Paul. "Señor, I have been examining your beautiful saber," he smiled negligently. "It must be an old and trusted blade, for the date shows it was forged in 1800. I presume it had seen much service during its forty-seven years?"

"My father carried it in 1812, in the war against the British," Paul

said curtly. "I trust I have kept it as spotless as he did."

"And have you, *señor*, made it taste blood?" Tenorio mused.

"No—not yet," Paul's tone was wry. His face suddenly hardened. "But there is one of your countrymen, *señor capitaine*, whose blood it longs to drink—our captor's."

"Perhaps that is why I asked," the captain almost whispered. "Our friend considers himself a swordsman of note. I have taken the liberty to suggest, therefore, that before he incapacitates you by 'persuasion,' he give us an exhibition of his skill."

Paul's eyes flamed. To meet Serrano blade to blade! Having accepted the fact that he could never escape with his news, he did not care what happened to him now. But if only he could settle with his enemy before he died!

He glanced over at Serrano. The man was swaggering boastfully before his henchmen. The men seemed to be urging him to prove that the gringo captive, cavalry officer though he was, could not stand before their leader's blade.

Laughing contemptuously, Serrano strode over to Paul.

"BEFORE you become incapable of movement, *señor teniente*, I weel have some amusement weeth you, yes," he gloated. "I, Don Juan Serrano, weel do you the honor of crossing blades weeth you."

His teeth flashed cruelly. "I weel give myself the pleasure of seeing you cry for mercy before my sword point."

The men crowded around. Paul's remaining bonds were eagerly cut. He chafed his numbed wrists until they seemed on fire with the pain of returning circulation.

Despite the odds against him, he was wildly happy. Whatever be-

fell, he prayed that he might first avenge Peyton's death.

A level piece of ground was selected. The whole party took up points of vantage from which to view the contest.

Tenorio took charge of the preparations, his soft, black eyes gleaming with pleasure and excitement.

"Señor Serrano, the Americano seems weak from exhaustion," he suggested. "Deal kindly with him, I beg, and do not finish him too soon. Else we shall have no amusement."

SERRANO, who had discarded Peyton's jacket and was now in his shirt sleeves, spat on the ground. "Bah, I weel cut off his ears!" he growled, with sudden savageness. He made his blade sing in the air.

Paul, still flexing his bruised wrists, did not quail. The outlaw leader was using Peyton's saber, and with a bitter stab of reminiscence the Kentuckian remembered how often, in the past, he and the murdered captain had practiced together with these very blades. Could it mean that now, when they were crossed again, Peyton would be avenged?

"And now, señors," called Tenorio, "*en garde!*"

With the barest of salutes, the duelists closed to engage. At once Paul realized that Serrano was no amateur. He was surprised that such a man, without real military training, should know every regulation cut, thrust and parry.

As for Paul himself, he had been acknowledged the best sabreur in his regiment. It did not surprise him that despite stiffened muscles, he soon began making Serrano give ground.

The Mexican's eyes dilated and a curse spat from his lips. He made a sudden, terrible thrust that almost ended the fight there and then. Paul,

though he managed to ward it off, had to give ground in turn.

"I weel keel you, American fool!" Serrano threatened. "I will treat you as I treated that other cursed officer of your regiment."

As though expecting his threats to frighten his opponent into weakness, Serrano began reciting the tortures he would inflict upon him: the bastinado, the burning of feet, the cutting off of eyelids and, finally, the pegging out on an ant hill.

But Paul did not flinch. Peyton's sword! It seemed natural, somehow, to feel it sliding and clashing with his own. As if he were having a practice bout once more with its dead owner.

But this was no mock fight. It was a fight with Peyton's murderer—his torturer!

Paul redoubled his efforts. He was sickeningly conscious that he was gradually weakening before the savage onslaughts of the more powerful but less cool Serrano.

BUT a sudden opening presented itself. Like a flash the Kentuckian's blade slid past the other's guard and brought a bright crimson stain to his right shoulder.

"Gol dern it!" roared Serrano, and came on like a madman. Infuriated by pain and the jeers of his own men, he plunged in like a whirlwind. But their cries suddenly made him change his mind. He shouted for a guard to seize Paul and break off the fight.

The lieutenant sobbed impotently as half a dozen hands gripped him and held him helpless. For an instant he thought that Serrano would kill him in cold blood as revenge for that slight wound. Then, however, he learned the reason for the interruption.

Tenorio, the smiling one, was speeding across the plain upon a

horse; was already a mile away and headed back, no doubt, to his command. Paul laughed aloud. He understood the captain's reason for suggesting this duel—so that he himself could escape during its excitement!

Goaded on by Serrano's oaths and orders, a few of the *rancheros* mounted in half-hearted pursuit. It was clear that Tenorio had little to fear from them.

PAUL, temporarily neglected, stood with his saber point on the ground. He had time to think over the events of the past few minutes.

Suddenly two things came to him: That Serrano's eyes were as blue as his own; and that no Mexican who habitually spoke broken English could ejaculate "Gol' dern it!" with a distinct New England accent!

Paul almost cried aloud at the realization. *Serrano was no Mexican, but an American!*

A cold and bitter rage flowed through the Kentuckian, bringing with it renewed strength and a calm will to win.

At last Serrano turned back, cursing. "He ees gone," he tossed at Paul, "but you, my frien', are still here. Come, we resume the combat! Afterward you weel geeve us good amusement, eh?"

Though his strong accent was reassumed, Paul was not deceived by it. In sudden emergencies men use the tongue of their childhood. The lieutenant was certain now where this swaggering *ranchero* had learned his cavalry swordsmanship—in the American army!

"*En garde!*" someone shouted, and the duel recommenced.

Paul had now a new weapon as well as his saber, and he began using it. "Deserter!" he flung at his enemy, at the same time delivering a stroke at his head that was only just warded.

Serrano's eyes widened at the taunt. His lips curled back in a ferocious snarl. "I weel not kill you now, no!" he spat. "But later you weel wish I had."

Paul lunged ineffectively, but his word had more effect than his steel when he grated: "Renegade!"

An oath spat from Serrano's lips—an American oath. Paul began pressing him harder, taunting all the while. "Traitor!" "Army deserter!" "Outlaw!" A word like these accompanied every cut and thrust.

Fear dawned in Serrano's staring eyes. Sweat ran down his face and his breath came in short, spasmodic gasps. He dared not break off the fight now, his men must not know that he had been bested by his prisoner. His blows became wilder in an effort to end the fight once and for all.

Often he pressed Paul backward by the sheer fury of his onslaughts, but always the lieutenant sprang clear. It was he who was laughing now, even though he had received some painful but not dangerous wounds.

"YOU'LL hang when they capture you, you traitor!" he taunted savagely. Physically, he was almost exhausted, but grit and hatred were his sources of strength. His arm ached until he felt that he could no longer grip his hilt. Giving away before a particularly savage attack, therefore, he sprang aside and passed the saber into his left hand.

Again the blades rang and clashed. But his maneuver meant that Serrano must now guard against thrusts from a different angle. The man seemed bewildered.

"Maybe I'll let you go, Lieutenant," he panted under his breath, his crafty eyes gleaming. "I'll talk to-night, when we're alone."

Paul laughed back contemptu-

ously. Trust Peyton's murderer? Not this side of hell!

Serrano had not discarded the two Colts upon commencing the fight. Now his free hand stole to his belt.

For one black instant Paul expected to be shot. Then he laughed aloud. Unless Serrano had cartridges of his own to fit those guns and had reloaded them recently, they were both empty!

The bandit, almost whimpering now, jerked the pistol from his belt and snapped it full at Paul's face. Only a hollow click resulted. With a cry, he hurled it straight at Warner and hit his right shoulder.

But already it was too late. Fractionally he had lowered his guard and Paul's saber descended with terrific force upon his unguarded head.

Like a log he fell, and like a log he lay. In an instant everything was chaos. Men shouted in different tongues. Some cried with rage, but some merely laughed at the downfall of their chief.

PAUL stood staring down at his fallen enemy, scarcely comprehending that it was all over and that he had conquered. Then, somehow, he found himself running—running to where Queen was tethered.

How he mounted her bare back he did not know. His mind cleared only when he found himself galloping across the plain.

Yells and a few whistling balls indicated that his escape had not passed unnoticed. He was being pursued.

Queen's pace told him that her wounded shoulder was stiff, yet the gallant little mare answered gamely. On she went, giving the best that was in her.

Bent low over Queen's neck, Paul felt recklessly triumphant. He would, he expected, be recaptured even now and brought back to tor-

ture and death. But Peyton was avenged!

He covered a full mile before glancing backward again. His pursuers were strung out behind him, the closest about three hundred yards away. Queen's flanks were already lathered and he knew that she could not keep up the pace.

Yet hope was becoming stronger within him. He began thinking that he might escape after all, and deliver his report to old Zack in time.

THEN, with stunning abruptness, Paul Warner's hopes were dashed to zero. From behind a patch of woods barely four hundred yards in front, emerged a body of horsemen. Their tall lances showed that they were Mexican cavalry.

Paul swung to the left in an effort to escape. The newcomers immediately spread out to head him off. He was between two fires. Self preservation, however, made him gallop onward. At least the Mexicans did not torture their prisoners.

Then his eyes widened incredulously; for these troopers were wearing American uniforms. But there were no lancers in the United States service. He was doubly mystified until a loud cheer arose from undoubtedly American throats. Glancing behind, Paul saw that his pursuers had also taken alarm and were galloping back toward the cottonwoods.

Reining in, he waited for the mysterious riders to approach. He croaked a welcoming cheer when he recognized that some of them were from the Arkansas Cavalry. The remainder were Texas Rangers, under the command of Captain Walker.

A moment more and they surrounded him, shouting for news. Swiftly Paul asked Walker to send off a detail to report his news to the
(Concluded on page 160)



"SELDOM SEE AN I. C. S. GRADUATE OUT OF A JOB"

"IN ALL THE YEARS I have known of the International Correspondence Schools, I have seldom seen one of your graduates jobless."

A business executive made this statement in a recent letter commenting on the I. C. S. graduates and students in his employ and expressing regrets that it was necessary to reduce his personnel.

"However," he added, "all I. C. S. graduates and students will be retained, for I

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The reason so many I. C. S. men have jobs is because they are *trained men*! A recent investigation into the working conditions of 1000 I. C. S. students revealed only ten unemployed. You, too, can be an I. C. S. man.

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Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X:

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- ☐ Electric Lighting
- ☐ Welding, Electric and Gas
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints

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- ☐ Telephone Work
- ☐ Mechanical Engineer
- ☐ Mechanical Draftsman
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- ☐ Toolmaker
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- ☐ Plumbing ☐ Steam Fitting
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If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada



LAST month, in the columns of this department, Ye Olde Globe Trotter made the suggestion that all the readers of **THRILLING ADVENTURES** should get together and form an organization—*The Globe Trotters Club*.

The idea has taken on like wild fire. The suggestion has swept into life with all the speed of a running tornado. Ever since then we have been deluged with applications for membership and identification cards.

Even before the club idea found its way into print, Jack Summerill of 445 N. Poinsetta Place, Los Angeles, California, wrote in and asked us why **THRILLING ADVENTURES** didn't sponsor such an organization. He wanted to start such a club and call it the *Loyal Order of Globe Trotters*, using this department as the monthly meeting place.

Since publication of the suggestion Ye Olde Globe Trotter has been literally swamped with letters of praise and commendation. It seems that everybody wants to join up immediately.

That fact proves one thing. All adventurers are brotherly souls at heart and want some common meeting place where they can come together once a month and exchange ideas.

This department of **THRILLING ADVENTURES** is glad to serve as that common meeting place. Judg-

ing from the rate and number of applications that have already come in, we believe we are safe in stating that it will not be long before the club will have members in every part of the world.

So don't forget to sign and mail your own application as early as possible. Those enrolling before February 1st, 1934, will become charter members and receive a distinctively colored membership card indicative of that fact.

Letters from prospective club members will follow later on in the department. But right now Ye Olde Globe Trotter wants to break in on the discussion and give you fellows last minute news of some long lost adventurers which has just come to him by way of the grapevine.

LAND OF LOST EXPLORERS

Since our late President Theodore Roosevelt, who was as much an adventurer and explorer as he was a statesman, made his historic trek into the forbidding jungles of Brazil and discovered the River of Doubt; that grim, rangled area of jungle and swamps, pierced here and there by high mountain ranges, and known as the *Matto Grosso*, has held its lure for adventurers.

Covering a million square miles of territory and peopled only by fierce natives who have always been hostile to the penetration of their lands by the whites, the *Matto Grosso* still remains somewhat more of a mythical,

Who else wants to learn to play....

at home without
a teacher, in $1\frac{1}{2}$ the usual
time and $\frac{1}{3}$ the usual cost



Over 600,000 men and women have learned to play their favorite instruments the U. S. School of Music way!

That's a record of which we're mighty proud! A record that proves, better than any words, how *thorough*, how *easy*, how *modern* this famous method is.

Just think! You can quickly learn to play any instrument—directly from the notes—and at an average cost of only a few cents a day.

You study in your own home, practice as much or as little as you please. Yet almost before you realize it you are playing real tunes and melodies—not dull scales, as with old-fashioned methods.

Like Playing a Game

The lessons come to you by mail. They consist of complete printed instructions, diagrams, and all the music you need. You simply can't go wrong. First you are *told* what to do. Then a picture *shows* you how to do it. Then you do it yourself and *hear* it. No private teacher could make it any clearer.

As the lessons continue they become easier and easier. For instead of just scales you learn to play by *actual notes* the favorites that formerly you've only *listened* to. You can't imag-

ine what fun it is, until you've started!

Truly, the U. S. School method has removed all the difficulty, boredom, and extravagance from music lessons.

Fun — Popularity

You'll never know what real fun and good times are until you've learned to play some musical instrument. For music is a joy-building tonic—a sure cure for the 'blues.' If you can play, you are always in demand, sought after, sure of a good time. Many invitations come to you. Amateur orchestras offer you wonderful afternoons and evenings. And you meet the kind of people you have always wanted to know.

Never before have you had such a chance as this to become a musician—a really good player on your favorite instrument—without the deadly drudging and prohibitive expense that were such drawbacks before. At last you can start right in and *get somewhere*, quickly, cheaply, thoroughly.

Here's Proof!

"I am making excellent progress on the 'cello—and owe it all to your *easy lessons*," writes George C. Lauer, of Belfast, Maine.

"I am now on my 12th lesson and can already play simple pieces," says Ethel Harnishfeger, Fort Wayne, Ind. "I *knew* nothing about music when I started."

"I have completed only 20 lessons and can play almost any kind of music I wish. My friends are astonished," writes Turner B. Blake, of Harrisburg, Ill.

Pick Your Instrument
Piano Violin
Organ Clarinet
Ukulele Flute
Cornet Saxophone
Trombone Harp
Piccolo Mandolin
Guitar Cello
Hawaiian Steel Guitar
Sight Singing
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Drums and Traps
Automatic Fingering
Control
Banjo (Plectrum,
5-String or Tenor)
Juniors' Piano Course

And C. C. Mittlestadt, of Mora, Minn., says, "I have been playing in the brass band for several months now. I learned to play from your *easy lessons*."

You, too, can learn to master the piano, violin, 'cello, saxophone—any instrument you prefer—this quick, easy way! For every single thing you need to know is explained in detail. And the explanation is always *practical*. Little theory—plenty of *accomplishment*. That's why students of the U. S. School course get ahead *twice as fast* as those who study by old-fashioned, plodding methods.

Booklet and Demonstration Lessons—FREE!

The whole interesting story about the U. S. School course cannot be told on this page. A booklet has been printed, "How You Can Master Music in Your Own Home," that explains this famous method in detail, and is yours free for the asking. With it will be sent a Free Demonstration Lesson, which *proves* how delightfully quick and easy—how *thorough*—this modern method is.

If you really want to learn to play at home—without a teacher—in one-half the usual time—and at one-third the usual cost—by all means send for the Free Booklet and Free Demonstration Lesson **AT ONCE**. No obligation. (Instruments supplied, if desired—cash or credit.) U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC, 2942 Brunswick Bldg., New York.

Thirty-Sixth Year (Estab. 1898)

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
2942 Brunswick Bldg., New York City

Please send me your free book, "How You Can Master Music in Your Own Home," with inspiring message, by Dr. Frank Crane. Free Demonstration Lesson and particulars of your easy payment plan. I am interested in the following course:

Have You
..... Instrument?

Name

Address

City..... State.....

legendary land than it does as an actuality.

In late years it has become known as the land of lost explorers, because so many have penetrated into its innermost depths never to return again.

A LOST CIVILIZATION

Voltaire, the French satirist of a hundred years ago, in a purely imaginative tale which he wrote, located his mysterious Utopia, the *City of Gold*, in the then unknown wilderness of inner Brazil which was later called the *Matto Grosso*. Although his tale was purely imaginative, some authorities believe that it was founded on fact, that he had secret information from the early Portuguese explorers of that era.

Colonel P. H. Fawcett, the famous English explorer who had spent twelve years in exploring the inner fastnesses of the Brazilian hinterland, set out from Rio de Janeiro in the summer of 1926 to find this hidden civilization which he believed to be a fact and not a myth. That the fabled *City of Gold* actually existed, he expected to prove.

Upon some hidden plateau resting among the high mountain ranges thrusting up through the impenetrable jungles of the *Matto Grosso*, he expected to find a land of ancient people living now as they had lived for thousands of years before, in a land of remarkable civilization, cut off though it was from all the rest of the civilized world.

At about the same time Fawcett set out from Rio to follow the waters of the Paraguay River to its source in the heart of the *Matto Grosso*, Paul Redfern, in a Bellanca monoplane, took off from Brunswick, Georgia, ostensibly for flying to Buenos Aires in a non-stop flight, over the heart of the *Matto Grosso*.

Colonel Fawcett with his two

native Indian guides left the rest of his party just north of Rosario on the upper Paraguay and plunged into the black jungles. He was never seen again. That was seven years ago.

Redfern was sighted once when he circled his big Bellanca over a tramp steamer off the mouth of the Orinoco River. Then waving his hand confidently at the crew of the tramp, he straightened out and disappeared, flying in a line for the heart of the Brazilian jungle.

Rinkin and Burrell, two minor explorers who entered the *Matto Grosso* by way of the Amazon in 1921, were never heard of after they left the headwaters of the Xingu River and plunged towards the *Matto Grosso*.

RUMORS OF SURVIVAL

Were all these adventurers swallowed up by the jungle never to return, or are they still alive and biding their time for return or escape?

The question is still open. Most authorities believe them dead. Rumor persists, however, in anticipating their return, safe and sound, with information that will astound the world.

Commander G. M. Dyott made a rescue journey in search of Fawcett two years ago. Natives of the *Matto Grosso* reported to him that the colonel had been killed, and Dyott was convinced of the veracity of their reports. They said something about a mysterious white man, other than Fawcett, who was living with natives farther inland. But he, too, had been killed. Was this second white man, Redfern? From the natives' manner of telling the story, Dyott concluded that it was.

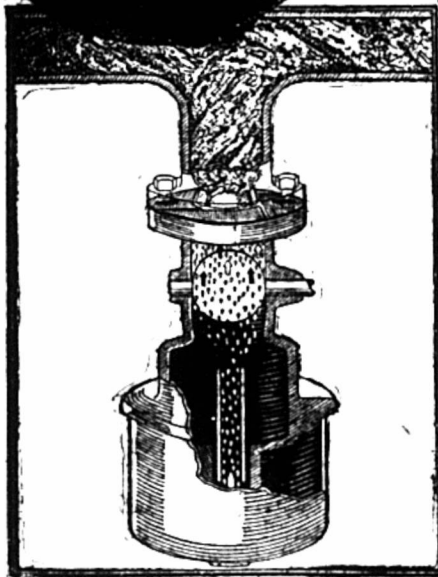
Albert Winston, another English explorer, wasn't convinced by either of these stories. He has heard that both men are still alive, and is leav-

51

MILES ON A GALLON of GASOLINE WINS ECONOMY CONTEST

49 MILES Takes 2nd Place

Winning Cars Equipped With WHIRLWIND GAS SAVERS



How Whirlwinds Save Gasoline

The principle of the Whirlwind is to slightly compress the partly vaporized gasoline as it passes thru the raised venturi. Extra air enters from four air inlets at such a tangent as to pick up the unvaporized gasoline particles, whirling them into action. The turbulence created breaks them into a vaporized gas, giving better, smoother power, quicker starting, cutting gasoline waste and carbon formation.

Car owners all over the world are amazed at the results of their tests. "I have more speed, power, and increased mileage," writes Henry Bomberger. "Hills I used to take in second I now make in high." Anton Wetsch: "I wouldn't take the Whirlwind off my car for any money. I am certainly convinced." W. B. Fountain: "My mileage has increased greatly. My car has plenty of pick-up and starts like a whip."

SALESMEN AND DISTRIBUTORS WANTED
To Make Up To \$100 A Week and More

Whirlwind men are making big profits taking care of local business for this fast selling device that car owners cannot afford to be without. Good territory is still open. Free sample offer to workers. Full particulars sent on request. Just check the coupon.

WHIRLWIND MFG. COMPANY
Dept. 937-A, Station C, Milwaukee, Wis.

Automobile owners who have been worrying about gasoline expense will be interested in an amazing test recently conducted by a Texas Motor Car Company. Twenty-three cars were entered in a mileage economy test, the winning car running 51 miles on a gallon of gas, the second car 49 miles on a gallon. When official test records were published it was found the two winning cars were both equipped with Whirlwind gas savers.

"Peak" Contest Mileages

The amazing results obtained in this mileage contest are naturally greater than those obtained in ordinary driving. Careful throttling, most economical speeds—no traffic hold-ups—and no waste of power thru quick stops, help to bring about these "peak" mileages.

A Test On Your Car

More power, faster pick-up, less carbon, quicker starting, and increased mileage is what users say in telling of their experience with the Whirlwind. Every motorist owes it to himself to test the Whirlwind to prove the results on his own car.

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In just a few minutes the Whirlwind can be installed on any make of car, truck or tractor. It's actually less work than changing your oil or putting water in the battery. No drilling, tapping or changes of any kind necessary. It is guaranteed to work perfectly on any make of car, truck or tractor, large or small, new model or old model. The more you drive the more you save.

GUARANTEE

No matter what kind of a car you have or how big a gas eater it is the Whirlwind will save you money. While we do not claim to produce 49 to 51 miles on ordinary driving, we do guarantee that the Whirlwind will save its cost within 30 days or the trial will cost you nothing. We invite you to test it at our risk. You are to be the sole judge.

*Mrs. C. P. Blalock,
contest winner*

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Dept. 937-A, Station C, Milwaukee, Wis.

Gentlemen: You may send me full particulars of your Whirlwind Carbureting device and tell me how I can get one Free. This does not obligate me in any way whatever.

NAME

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☐ Check here if you are interested in full or part time salesman position.

ing Rio de Janeiro this month to determine the truth of the matter. Late news has trickled out from the jungle indicating that both Fawcett and Redfern are still alive, held as captives by the fierce natives of the interior.

IS THE RUMOR FALSE?

Ye Olde Globe Trotter has learned through the *grapevine* that both Fawcett and Redfern are alive, and *not* held captive by the Indians, but voluntarily living there until they choose to return of their own free will. In fact, it is intimated that Redfern had told intimates of his before he took off, not to be surprised if he appeared to be swallowed up by the jungle and never heard of again—that is for a five or six year period.

He intimated that he might set down in the interior jungle, if he found the hidden civilization that was supposed to be there, and remain for a long period of time.

Seven years has passed now since the disappearance of Redfern and Fawcett, and Ye Olde Globe Trotter has it through the *grapevine* that both of them will return to civilization some time during the year of 1934.

Maybe Burrel and Rinkin will return with them? Who knows? The *Matto Grosso* holds many secrets, and possibly these secrets will never be revealed, but the chances are that some astounding news will come out of that region this coming year.

Then the *Matto Grosso* will no longer be known as the "Land of Lost Explorers."

AUTHOR WRITES IN ABOUT "THE AMAITIO CURSE"

Dear Globe Trotter:

Some of the things in my story in this issue may appear unbelievable to the casual reader, but I assure you that they are all based on fact.

One time when I was flying over that country I was forced down in the state of Tabasco and had to remain there overnight. It was in an uninhabited area and I was unable to get into communication with any villages.

I knew better than to try and force my way through the treacherous jungle at night, so decided to stick around my ship until daylight. Although the night was warm, I paced around my ship for several hours in nervous worry. I had an inexplicable feeling of foreboding that something was going to happen, something that I wasn't prepared for.

Although I had flown over the country for several weeks I had never been forced down in the jungle area before and didn't know exactly what to expect.

I tried to get some rest in the cockpit of my ship, but found the attempt useless, so got out and walked a few rods away from the plane until I found a narrow gully in the patch of sand on which I had landed. Suspecting nothing would harm me there, wanting only a comfortable place to get a few hours sleep, I lay down and closed my eyes. Sleep came after a half hour or so.

But I awakened and stirred uneasily soon afterwards. My legs and arms itched. I leaped up off the ground. Tiny, crawling things which I could not see in the dark gnawed all over my body. In a frantic hurry I tore off my clothes and tried to sweep them off with my hands. Still, the gnawing mites clung to me!

Only then did I realize what I was up against. I rushed back to my machine, opened the gas tank drain cock, then ducked under the pouring stream of gasoline. The small, biting creatures fled from the sting of the burning fluid. It was a method I had learned overseas in combatting *cooties*. But the whole tank was drained before I managed to get them all off.

The rest of the night I spent under the plane's nose, keeping my feet in the gas-soaked sand. In the early light of dawn I saw grim, white bones, reminders of what I might have been *if*—Bones! Animal bones, human bones! The little sandy plateau where I had landed in the night was strewn with them.

And all around my plane were ants, millions of tiny white, carnivorous ants! The *amaitio* of Mexico. Believe me, I was glad when help reached me.

They didn't get me, but they very well might have if I hadn't been fortunate

(Continued on page 154)

"One Week from To-night You'll See PROOF that I can make You a New Man!"

**NOTE—No other man
in the world has ever
DARED make such an
offer!**

I GIVE MORE than "promises." I give PROOF! If you're sick and tired of half-baked ideas—if you really want a build like mine—then one week, just 7 DAYS, is all I need to prove I can give it to you!

You've got a body, man. Why not make it a real handsome man's body! There's NO good reason why you shouldn't have rippling cords of mighty muscle across your neck and shoulders. No reason at all why your chest shouldn't be strapping, big and husky like mine—your arms and legs powerful—your wind lasting—your vigor and pep 100%.

I used to be a sickly, half-pint runt weighing only 97 lbs.—a "laughing-stock" wherever I went. No fun. No friends. Right there I almost "fell" for some of these freak spring or weight contraptions to make me "strong." But THEN—by a lucky break of my life—I discovered Dynamic Tension.

Apparatus is OUT!

Look at me now. You don't see any skinny, flabby, no-account bag of bones here, do you? This is what my remarkable secret has done for my body. Twice—against all comers—I have won the title, "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." No wonder I've got no use for tricky weights, pulleys or machines that may strain your heart or other vital organs. I've found the natural way to build the husky, solid, fighting muscles that Nature means for you to have! And I've shown thousands of other fellows, many of them probably much worse off than you, how to develop themselves into champions MY way!

I'll give you clean-cut health inside, too—show you exactly how to get rid of constipation, poor digestion, bad breath, pimples, and other weaknesses that are robbing you of the good times and things in life that can be yours.

Now make me PROVE I can do it. Let me send you the FREE Book that opens the door to he-man living. Just tell me where to send it. There's no obligation. But—be MAN enough to send the coupon NOW!

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My big book, "Everlasting Health and Strength"—packed with actual photographs and vital facts every fellow must know to face life—tells the whole remarkable story of DYNAMIC TENSION. Privately printed for me, it's FREE if you act AT ONCE. Are you ready to learn my secret?—ready to learn how I can give YOU the kind of body that will make you a masterful leader. Then tell me where to send your copy of my book. Fill in the coupon and mail TODAY to me personally. Address

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Charles Atlas

My amazing discovery, Dynamic Tension, changed me from a 97-lb. weakling into the champion you see here—twice winner of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."



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I want the proof that your system of Dynamic Tension will make a New Man of me—give me healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name
(Please print or write plainly)

Address

City

State

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enough to have a tank of gasoline handy. The ex-banker in my story wasn't so fortunate, he only had a gun. And guns are utterly powerless against ants.

Russ Meservey.

Ye Olde Globe Trotter has heard about the carnivorous ants of Mexico, but not until Russ Meservey came in and told me about them, had I ever talked with anybody that had had actual experience with them. No thank you, I'll take cake instead!

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

THE SOUTHERN CROSS

Dear Globe Trotter:

Why is it that the constellation known as the Southern Cross cannot be seen from my locality. I have talked with some people who have seen it and they tell me it is most brilliant galaxy of stars in the night skies and for that reason is commonly used by mariners and travelers in ascertaining their true direction. But I have been unable to locate it. A friend of mine told me that it was not possible to see it where I live. Why not?

Willie Harold,

Bent Crossing, Texas.

Answer:

If you lived anywhere south of the equator, Willie, you wouldn't have any trouble finding the Southern Cross, but you never will be able to see it from Bent Crossing, Texas, unless this old world suffers a terrible cataclysm and turns upside down on its axis.

Neither can the people of the southern hemisphere see our North star, so it's fifty-fifty. The Southern Cross is almost directly above the South Pole, and due to the earth's rotundity, those living in the northern hemisphere are unable to see it, the bulge of the earth's curvature interfering.

ABOUT PEARLS

Dear Globe Trotter:

I am wondering if it is possible for a

young man my age, I am 25 years old, to make a living as a pearl diver in the pearl beds of the South Seas. I have saved up enough money by doing odd jobs to pay my passage down there. If I was certain I could make a living after going there, I wouldn't hesitate one minute. I am sick and tired of this well known depression. I am a mechanic by trade, but haven't had a steady job for over three years.

I am a good swimmer and diver and can remain under water as long as two minutes at a time, and I am not afraid of work. What do you advise me to do?

Burt S. Phillips,

Albany, New York.

Answer:

Well, Phillips, the only pearl diving I ever did was diving for dirty dishes in a second class restaurant, so I cannot say that I speak from personal experience when I answer your query.

But I'll wager I can make as much money that way as any white man can diving for real pearls in the South Seas. Pearl divers are born literally with oyster pearls gripped in their fists. A white man can't compete with the natives in that job.

My advice to you, Phillips, is to stay away from the South Seas if you expect to make a living diving for pearls. It simply can't be done—by a white man, unless he goes completely native and lives and works as the natives do.

THE CLIMATE OF BOGOTA

Dear Globe Trotter:

What is the climate one may expect in Bogota, the capital of Colombia? I have a chance to go down there with a Canadian firm and would jump at the opportunity if I thought I would be able to stand the tropical heat and humidity.

But I spent three months on Saba Island in the West Indies one year, and even though that is a long ways from the equator, the heat and humidity was almost unbearable in the summer time. Bogota is almost directly under the equator and if it is correspondingly worse than Saba I know I wouldn't be able to stand it.

Friends have told me that it is different in Bogota, but I heard the same kind of

a story before I went to Saba. I'd appreciate being set straight.

Very sincerely,

Thomas Alcock,

London, Ontario, Canada.

Answer:

Your friends are right in this instance, Alcock. Bogota has one of the most delightful climates in the world—if you can stand the high altitude. Although it is very close to the equator (5 degrees north) the city is set on a high plateau with an average elevation of 8500 feet.

The thin rarefied air at that altitude is very healthful and bracing. When the sun is shining at midday it is quite warm, but in the shade it is always cool, for the air is never very humid. At night when the sun sets it begins to get chilly, and even in summer, you will sleep very comfortably with two blankets.

There is, however, very little variety in the seasons. They are all much the same—spring, summer, fall and winter. But you can reach the snows of the surrounding Andes in little time if you must have it cold. And likewise it is but a short drop down to the valley of the Magdalena River if you must have it hot.

DIAMONDS IN ARKANSAS

Dear Globe Trotter:

In the October issue I note that you answered Wolfe Armstrong of Decatur, Illinois, somewhat erroneously. There are more than a "few" diamonds in this state, and not all that have been found are small.

From "Minerals in Arkansas," a booklet published by the State Bureau of Mines, I take this quotation:

"Over 20,000 diamonds, one weighing in excess of 40 carats, have been found in Arkansas, the only genuine diamond field on the North American continent. Gem experts declare that brilliancy is one of the real tests of a diamond. The harder it is, the more brilliant the stone.

"These experts assert that the Arkansas diamond is one point harder than those of South Africa and Australia, hence it exceeds them in brilliancy. Near Murfreesboro in Pike County, is the pipe of an extinct volcano. It is now filled with a

Vitality

Tablets For Men and Women

15 Days Supply **FREE**



Don't Send Any Money for this medicine. Just fill in the coupon below and send 10c to pay for postage and packing. A regular size \$1 box of Dr. Rainey's VITALITY TABLETS (2 Full Weeks' Supply) and a box of the Doctor's wonderful Laxatives will be sent without further cost or obligation.

NERVOUS DEBILITY

Dr. Jas. M. Rainey Weakness, jerking, excited, tired and worn-out nerves, causing melancholy, fainting spells, restless nights, dizziness, poor memory, lack of strength and ambition. Dr. Rainey's Vitality Tablets will by their tonic effects assist in eliminating those conditions which sometimes cause these ailments and symptoms.

DR. RAINEY'S VITALITY TABLETS with their tonic effects help to banish the blues and steady the nerves.

POOR BLOOD DR. RAINEY'S VITALITY TABLETS by reason of their tonic effects will aid in restoring strength to the blood so it will furnish nourishment to the whole body. Poor blood sometimes causes pimples, blackheads, sores, sallow complexion, blue lips, eczema, malaria, enlarged joints or glands chilly, feverish, weak and rundown condition.

HEART WEAKNESS —skipping of beats, palpitation, fluttering, shortness of breath, dizzy, sinking sensations, pain under shoulder blades, throbbing sensation, swollen feet, can't lie on right side or back, rheumatism or asthma. Dr. Rainey's Vitality Tablets (in those cases of heart weakness due to a rundown condition) will aid by reason of their tonic qualities to build up the system to a normal condition, thereby assisting in eliminating these ailments.

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Do you suffer from pain, headaches, heartburn, bloating, spitting of mucus, gnawing, empty feeling, bad taste or breath, lost appetite, pain before or after eating, sore mouth, coated tongue or indigestion? Where these ailments are caused by a weakened or rundown condition Dr. Rainey's Vitality Tablets will aid by helping to build up the system in removing these ailments.

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and contain no injurious drugs. The whole formula of these tablets is printed on the box. Take it to any Doctor or Druggist and ask his opinion before you take a single dose. The tonic qualities of these tablets help to build up the nervous system, creating nerve force and help to restore full strength and vigor so you can enjoy life's pleasure to the fullest.

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24x5.00-19	2.55 1.05	32x4 1/2	3.35 1.15
24x5.00-20	2.60 1.05	32x4 1/2	3.45 1.15
24x5.25-18	2.90 1.15	32x5	3.65 1.25
24x5.25-19	2.95 1.15	32x5	3.75 1.45
24x5.25-20	2.95 1.15		
24x5.50-18	3.35 1.15		
24x5.50-19	3.35 1.15		
24x5.50-20	3.40 1.15		
24x6.00-19	3.40 1.15		
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grayish green rock called peridotite, identical in its chemical properties with that of South Africa and Australian fields.

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"White, brown, yellow, canary and wine-colored diamonds have been found there. Diamond discoveries have been reported in several other parts of Pike county, and in Howard, the adjoining county."

Yours truly,

A Booster of Arkansas,

Conway, Ark.

Glad to publish this letter, and hope Wolfe Armstrong sees it. Ye Olde Globe Trotter did write that there were only a few diamonds in Arkansas and that most of them were small in answer to Armstrong's query in the October issue.

Of course, I had in mind the vast number of gems that come from the South African fields, a practically unlimited number which is controlled purely by the demand in the world markets.

But here you are, Wolfe Arm-

(Continued on page 158)

Application for Membership

The Globe Trotter,
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I wish to be enrolled as a member of the *Globe Trotters Club*. I am interested in adventure and will endeavor to answer all questions asked me by other members regarding the places with which I am familiar.

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strong, here is the straight dope from a fellow right on the field. That's just another reason why we have to get this new *Globe Trotters Club* off to a running start. Members can get their information direct from other members right on the ground.

Now, all you adventurers, don't fail to read the next issue of **THRILLING ADVENTURES** with its great complete book-length novel—**THE SULTAN OF HELL**, by Capt. Kerry McRoberts. This exciting story takes you to Borneo and will provide plenty of rip-roaring, hell-busting thrills! Well, you know Kerry McRoberts!

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The first list of members with correct addresses will appear in an early issue of **THRILLING ADVENTURES**, just as soon as they can be listed and printed.

Be sure to sign and mail the printed application for membership so that you may get in under the wire as a charter member of the already fast growing *Globe Trotters Club*. Remember that there are no dues, no obligations!

Hasta la vista, mis amigos,

—THE GLOBE TROTTER.

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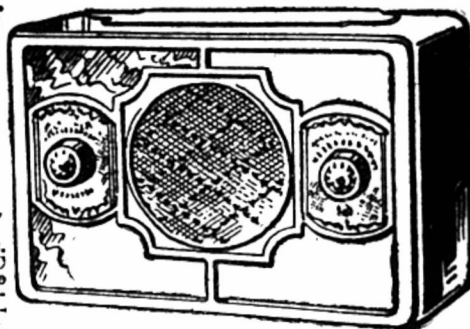
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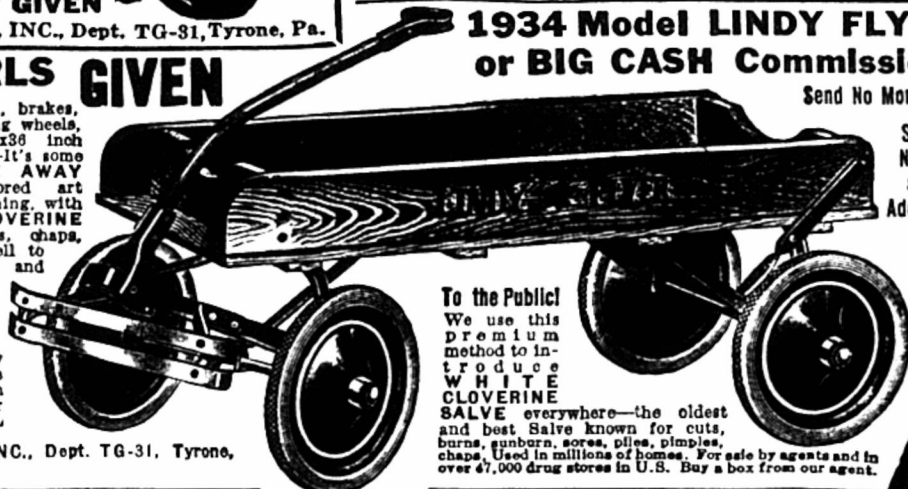
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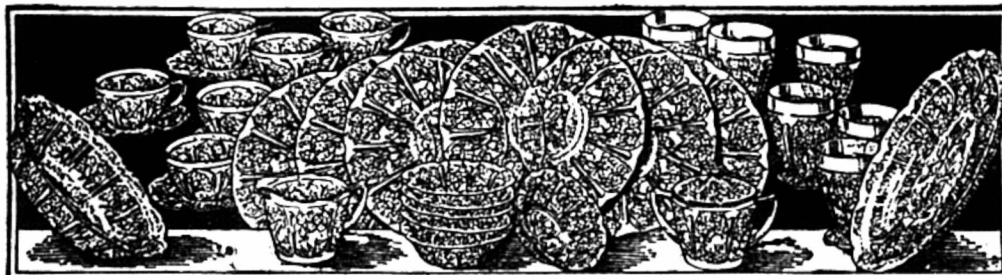
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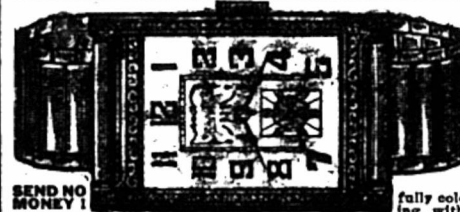


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SABERS OF VENGEANCE

(Concluded from page 146)

general. Then he pointed toward the cottonwoods. "Serrano's rancheros," he explained. "Hurry, and we'll get 'em all!"

As they dashed forward, Walker told him their own news. They had been out on a scout and, having encountered a small party of Mexican lancers, had attacked. Killing a few, they had dispersed the remainder and brought back the lances as trophies.

By the end of the tale the cottonwoods camp was visible. Many of the rancheros were running to mount and escape. Without a leader now, they seemed to have no order or unity. It was Paul himself, waving his bared saber, who cried out the ringing command: "Charge!"

Like a whirlwind, Rangers and cavalymen crashed into the rancheros. There were shots, groans, thrusts and parries. The horses, as wild as their riders, pawed and lunged at their opponents.

Within five minutes most of the rancheros were on the ground. A few had escaped by plunging into the wood, where they were being hunted down ruthlessly; the remainder were captured.

Walker, grimly taciturn, ordered ropes slung from tree limbs. "We'll make a good job of this," he commented dryly. "They all swing except them no 'count white reptiles. I guess old Zack'll attend to them when we get 'em back to camp."

Paul, unwilling somehow to watch the grisly proceedings, walked slowly to where the body of Serrano lay. Methodically he recovered his two Colts pistols and Peyton's sword and belt.

Lifting Peyton's saber in salute, he whispered softly: "I hope that you can know, old friend!"



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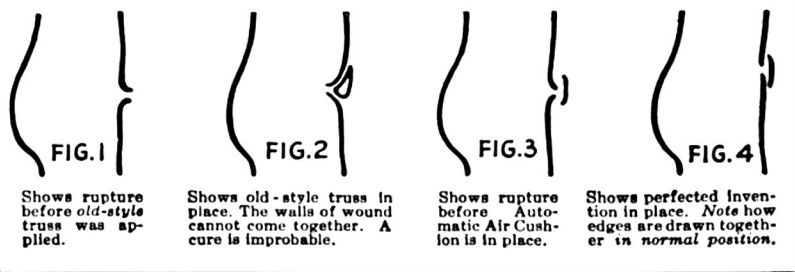


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