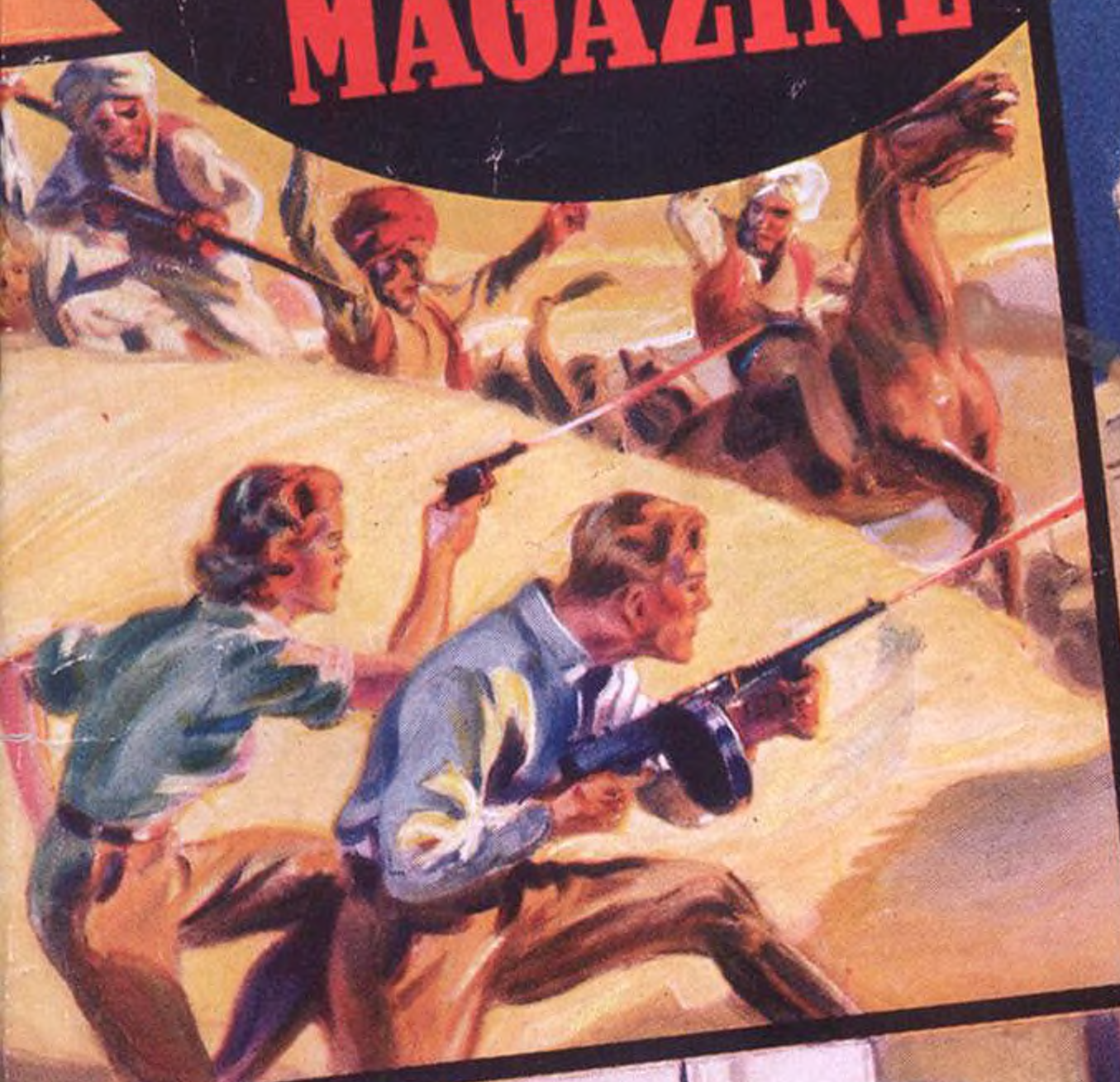




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On that grim desert trek, Ted Bryant found himself involved in a desperate blood revolt. But before he dared strike against his comrades' treachery, he had to solve the mystery of a golden blonde.



TOO MANY FLAGS Ronald Flogg 36

All pawns of conquest they were—all caught in a maelstrom of murder. The red-hot key to war lay in Don Cooper's hands—if his life span could stretch from his hands to a gun.



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Hal North fell into a nice soft piloting job. But when he decided to quit, he found that it led along the direct route to hell—and was a one-way trail.

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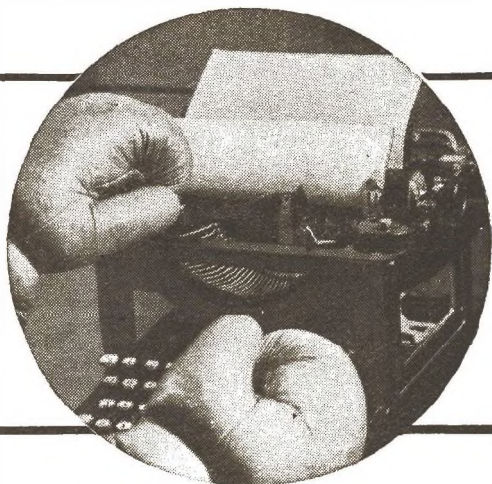
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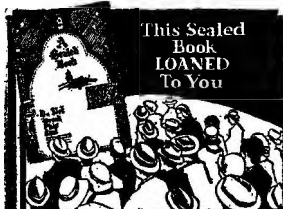
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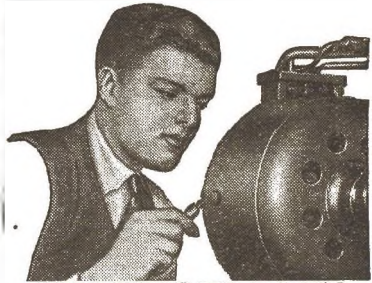
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• Adventure

The

By

Norman A. Daniels



Abu Kadaar bit off sharp orders to his men. With wild shrieks they drew steel and lunged for the white man. Bryant let go with a right and knocked one of them down.

Crimson Caravan

In Mecca, Ted Bryant made one friend—and one enemy who trapped him into a desperate blood revolt on which the fate of all Arabia hinged. Launched on a horror trek, he had to solve the mystery of a golden blonde before he dared to strike against his comrades' treachery.

CHAPTER I

MECCA MYSTERY

TED BRYANT sipped syrupy black coffee and sprawled—all six feet two of him—in a corner of the Arabian coffee shop. Outside, the streets of Mecca on the Red Sea coast of Arabia teemed with excitement. Wandering sheikhs and their wild tribes were pouring into the city to replenish stores not included among the loot their raids had brought them. Here gold, stolen from caravans, would be turned into bullets and steel blades, and other weapons of warfare.

Directly across the room from Bryant sat another white man, obviously a German from the cut of his military mustache, his light-blue eyes, and his straw-colored hair. He was attacking a plate of steaming Arabian food, but every moment or two he glanced up, stared at the American as if to make sure he was still there.

Some one banged open the door of the coffee shop, and Bryant saw the dusky little serving girl behind the bar shrink back. A burly man, tall, dressed in dirty robe and burnoose, strode across the floor. He wore a curved sword and had a modern holstered pistol strapped to his side in defiance of British regulations about firearms.

Behind him strode the somber-faced members of his personal bodyguard. Ted Bryant grimaced. Sheikh Saad abu Kadar was a particularly vicious brute,



said to be a desert raider, but few could prove it, for survivors were very rare.

He leaned far over the counter and grabbed the girl's arms. She squealed, and Bryant half arose, then shook his head and settled back. After all, it was none of his affair. And abu Kadaar had the same temper as an abused cobra. Why should he stick out his chin?

"Come, little flower," the Arab half snarled. "Abu Kadaar has need of thee. Many months on the desert have made me lonesome for thee."

The girl couldn't talk. Her eyes, shining in fear, darted about the room and centered on Bryant. He swore softly, wondering just why an Arabian wench, in distress, should mutely plead with an American to help her.

HE arose this time, stretched his lanky body and ambled forward. He was a rather conspicuous sight. The whites he wore were offset by a ten gallon sombrero, the like of which Mecca had never seen before. For Ted Bryant had been bred in Texas and wore the stamp of a westerner. Without that sombrero he'd feel naked.

Abu Kadaar was cursing the girl fluently when Bryant moved to his side. The Arab cast a dire glance, growled a warning, and then turned his back on Bryant. He made a lunge, grasped the girl by the shoulders and laughed.

"By my beard," Ted said in passable Arabic, "thou art a strong one. And versed well in the arts of love making." His voice changed and he spoke in English. "Let her go, you big ape."

Abu Kadaar didn't understand the English, but he sensed the gist of Bryant's words. He let go of the girl, drew back, and his right hand dropped to the hilt of his saber. He snarled a curse; began to draw the sword.

That was when abu Kadaar afterwards swore the bolt of lightning struck him between the eyes. He catapulted backward, fell on top of a flimsy table and smashed it. He rolled over on his side until his brain cleared. Then he sat up and bit off sharp orders.

There were five of his men in the

café. With wild shrieks they drew steel and lunged for the white man. Bryant let go with a right. He knocked one of them down, kicked another halfway across the room, and assumed the offensive. This was more than the Arabs could stand. None but the cursed of Allah would have done such a foolish thing as to charge five armed men. They fled, shrieking in terror.

A shot crashed out. Bryant whirled, the grin on his face vanishing. His right hand moved like a serpent's strike. A long-barreled gun appeared in his fist. It spat once and abu Kadaar's weapon flew a dozen feet away while the astounded sheikh stared at a bleeding, bullet-torn hand.

Bryant stepped over to him, yanked him up by the neck, and propelled him none too gently toward the door. His foot helped the sheikh in making a wholly undignified exit.

Then Ted Bryant walked back into the coffee shop, picked up the sheikh's gun and whistled softly. It was a modern Luger pistol with an oversized magazine. A sinister weapon in any hands, and potential murder when in the possession of an egoist like abu Kadaar.

He stuffed the gun into his coat pocket and smiled at the girl. She was weeping softly, her big black eyes regarding him with something akin to awe.

"Allah's peace," he told her kindly. "If abu Kadaar returns, I shall pluck his beard from his chin, whisker by whisker. Now give me more coffee—mine has grown cold."

The girl wiped her eyes and hurried to fill another cup. Bryant walked back to his table, found it occupied by the Teutonic looking man and stopped short. Then he smiled.

"Howdy, stranger. Like the excitement?"

The man arose and proffered his hand. "I am Bruno Jaeger," he said. "It was a pleasure to watch you, *ja*. A great pleasure. You can—as they say in America—take care of yourself, *nein?*"

Bryant grinned and sat down. "I manage to get around. In town long?"

Jaeger shook his head. "I look for a

man who will work for me. You are that man. I offer you two hundred pounds if you will guide a party of my friends to Qatar."

TED BRYANT wrinkled his nose. "Not me, brother. Qatar is as far across the Arabian desert as any place can be. It'll take a month of fast, hard riding to do it, and—well—I don't like the way things are happening in the interior. Take abu Kadaar for instance. He pulled a gun on me—a Luger—which he certainly shouldn't have in his possession. No—I can think of better ways to commit suicide."

"Five hundred pounds," Jaeger offered hopefully. Then he exploded into a loud laugh. "But you are the man I wish. Why should I haggle? One thousand pounds. Five thousand of your American dollars for a month's work. I know you, Bryant. No other white man could lead the way across the desert. One thousand pounds."

Bryant chewed on that one a moment. Then a glint of suspicion came into his eyes. "A thousand pounds is a lot of money," he admitted. "What's the catch?"

"But there is no catch. You will meet three friends of mine tomorrow morning. They are in a great hurry to reach Qatar—on business. They will come in a launch to land two miles away from Mecca. You will have horses and supplies ready. You will be off at once. And the moment they enter Qatar, one thousand pounds will be handed to you."

"You're on," Bryant made a snap decision. He needed money, and that figure wasn't to be let slip through his fingers. Above all, however, he craved the desert, the heat, the dunes; the wadis where once fast streams had ripped ditches in the countryside. The desert to Ted Bryant was very nearly like a drug to an addict.

"Good!" Jaeger beamed. He pulled a fat wallet from his pocket and threw a sheaf of bills on the table. "There is plenty to get horses and supplies. I will meet you at four o'clock tomorrow morning and lead you to the meeting place. *Ja*—you shall not be sorry."

He arose hastily, as if he wanted to get away. But he paused, leaned down and whispered: "Not a word of this. My friends travel with wealth, and if those devils hear of it—well you know what that means. I have your promise of secrecy, *ja*?"

"*Ja*." Bryant grinned. "For five thousand bucks I'd lose my tongue for six months. I'll get busy on the horses right away."

Jaeger waddled out of the coffee shop. Bryant arose and ambled toward the door. He felt a soft, gentle hand on his arm and smiled down at the dusky-faced girl.

"May Allah go with thee," she said. "And I—I am thy slave, O infidel."

He laughed and patted her cheek. "Forget it—and do not worry. I shall yet spit in abu Kadaar's teeth."

He pressed a coin into her palm, closed her fingers over it, and hurried away. There was much to do. Horses to buy, pack animals to arrange for. Guns, supplies, water casks, and food.

Bryant made his way directly to the English military headquarters. Two men on sentry duty recognized him and saluted. He walked in and draped himself on a corner of Colonel Keslake's desk. He shoved his hat to the back of his head and grinned.

"Howdy, Colonel. My pal, Saad abu Kadaar, been in yet? I smacked him one and swiped his water pistol. Thought you might want a look at it."

Bryant felt in his pocket and frowned. The Luger he had taken from the Arab was gone.

"I'll be damned," he growled in amazement. "Somebody must have picked my pocket. Now I wonder—that girl. She may have been putting on an act."

Colonel Keslake twitched the tips of his mustache. "What's all this, old fellow? You raving mad or something?"

"No," Bryant said slowly. "No—I swear it. A few minutes ago I had a little argument with abu Kadaar. He pulled a Luger with an oversized magazine. I took the thing away from him, gave him a kick in the pants, and now—damned if I haven't lost the gun."

Keslake smiled. "More American mischief, eh, Bryant? If abu Kadaar makes a complaint, I'll have to haul you in. You know that. Dammit, man, you can't walk around smacking everybody you don't like. Ted"—he dropped his voice—"—you weren't lucky enough to break the beggar's neck?"

Bryant shook his head. "I winged him. Had to. Colonel, what's doing out there in the desert? Any excitement? Any trouble brewing?"

Keslake sighed. "How I wish I knew. Odd thing happened this morning, Ted. I received word that a camel corps was on its way to Mecca. And they're sending an armored-car division from up North. I don't like the looks of things. They must expect trouble."

Bryant laughed. "They're going to get it. I'm starting for the interior in the morning. Just a little private jaunt to stir things up. You British have been taking it too easy of late. I'll see if I can dig up a few rebellious sheikhs to snap at your heels. Colonel—I want to buy six horses and ten pack animals. All young, fast, and aching to hit the trail. Can do?"

"Why I think so," Keslake said. "We've an oversupply of damned good animals. Glad to get rid of them if—you have the money. This army can't be run on promises."

Bryant slapped a wad of bills on the desk. "Scare up those mavericks and have 'em ready in two hours. I'll come for them myself. Thanks, Colonel."

Keslake regarded the young man a moment in silence. "Good luck, old man. Really you know I'm rather glad you're going into the desert again. Keep an eye out, will you, like a good chap? Contact any of our outposts if you find something stirring."

CHAPTER II

DESERT DOOM

AN HOUR before daybreak, Bryant squatted alongside the road. Strung out behind him were sixteen horses, all sleek and strong. He'd never seen a better caravan. With those mounts they

could reach Ibn Sa'ud in about ten days, exchange the horses for camels at the army post, and proceed across the most dangerous and least civilized portions of the great desert.

"Here, Bryant," Jaeger called softly from a darkened doorway. "Proceed and I will follow. Hurry!"

Ted Bryant shrugged. It was no business of his if Jaeger wanted all this secrecy. He swung into the saddle of the likeliest mount, clucked, and began to ride slowly north. The other animals followed like a giant tail.

Not until they had left Mecca by a mile did Jaeger put in an appearance again. He was astride a black stallion and he wore cruel looking spurs. Bryant suddenly began to hate that hulk of a man.

Jaeger was nervous. He constantly peered over his shoulder. "We wait here," he snapped irritably. "Soon they will come, *ja*. You are ready to go?"

"All set. Say, these friends of yours must be in one devil of a rush. There won't be a flock of *gendarmes* after them, will there?"

"Bah!" Jaeger growled. "This is no time for fooling. Look! The launch. It comes."

And it did. Streaking across the Red Sea, a power launch was cutting the water fast enough to throw plenty of spray. Bryant shaded his eyes against the sun and peered intently. There were four men in that boat. No—five. Or was he seeing a mirage? That fifth occupant was a girl—with golden hair resplendent even through the distance that separated her from the shore.

He squatted on the sandy beach, waiting. The roar of the motor could be plainly heard now. It seemed to increase suddenly, and he stared out to sea again. There was a second launch behind the first one. A larger craft, loaded to the gunwales with men in uniform. Bryant gulped. His hunch had been right.

The first boat grounded. Three men jumped into the water and waded ashore. The fourth stooped to pick up the girl and carry her to dry land. There were no introductions.

The pursuing launch was rapidly nearing shore. Two men knelt in the prow, rifles leveled and blasted away. The bullets whined above Bryant's head. He turned to look for Jaeger, protests on his lips. But Jaeger was streaking back to town, spurring his mount mercilessly.

"What are you waiting for?" One of the newcomers vaulted into the saddle of the first horse. "Can't you see we're in a hurry?"

Bryant's smile was tight. "I see all right, but listen to me, brother. I'm not flirting with any stretch in prison to help you. The British are my friends. What's this all about? I got a right to—"

He stopped, for the girl was running toward him. More shots came from the launch.

"Please," the girl implored, "we must get away from here. Won't you help us?"

He looked at her for a fraction of a second. She had the bluest eyes he'd ever seen, the finest wavy hair, and cheeks that put rose petals to shame.

"Okay." He made a snap decision. "Hop aboard, miss. Explanations can wait."

They streaked away from the shore. A fusillade crashed out and the bullets whined overhead again. Bryant frowned. Those men were British sailors and they were in the habit of shooting accurately. With the high powered rifles they carried, it didn't seem possible that every bullet would miss. He leaned down low in the saddle, whispered a few words to his horse and she let herself out completely. The pack animals trailing behind were fleet and they rivaled his fast pace.

For an hour they tore across the countryside until the greenness of the coast regions turned into the yellow monotony of the desert. Bryant felt the hot sun beat down and he smiled. He loved the desert, though his life had been one continuous battle with these endless particles of sand. He rode into it, daring the gods, daring the sun, the threat of

thirst and hunger. But he didn't kid himself. Some day, though, he knew too well, he'd ride into the desert—for good.

The girl rode up beside him. "Thank you for having faith," she said.

RAISING his hand, Bryant called a halt. He dismounted, flung himself to the sand and rolled a cigarette. Then he took stock of his companions. One of them came forward. He was big, wide-shouldered and had massive fists. His face was scarred and brutal looking. He had the closely cropped hair adopted by German militarists, and a bull-like neck.

"I am von Kahn," he said in a guttural voice. "It is time for us to become acquainted, ja?"

"Glad to know you." Bryant shook hands with him.

Another man stepped up. He was smaller, thinner, but twice as deadly.

"My friend, Bey Heysid," von Kahn said. "You will from him take orders also. And here—this is Barton Joyce. He is English."

Von Kahn might as well have appended "cursed English" to his introduction. But Barton Joyce smiled pleasantly and shook hands. He looked much like the girl. They had the same eyes, the same blond hair and the features of each were identically shaped.

"Glad to know you, Bryant," he said. "We've heard much about you. I, for one, consider myself fortunate to have a guide as skilled as you are." He turned his head and beckoned to the girl. "This is Lela—my sister."

She smiled warmly and dropped to the sand. "May I thank you again for helping us? I won't forget it, Mr. Bryant."

Von Kahn climbed into the saddle. "We cannot loiter. Come—let us push on. There is no time to be lost."

"What's his big rush?" Bryant asked Lela Joyce. "He acts as though the British Navy was on his heels. Say—I'm not piloting a gang of jail busters, am I?"

Lela Joyce arose hastily, white as a ghost. She hurried to where her brother

was adjusting his saddle, and spoke in a low voice. Barton Joyce looked around, shook his head vigorously and helped her to mount. They were off, streaking after von Kahn and Heysid.

The fourth man came forward slowly. He was a thin wretch with neither chin nor apparent character.

"And you," Bryant said grimly, "are taking this little trip as a vacation, I suppose. Look here—you're not very fit, are you?"

"Neither would you be," the small man snapped in cockney accents, "if you been in—Aah—come on. That devil will ride back and smash us if we don't 'urry."

Bryant dusted sand from his clothes. He mounted and pressed his knees against his horse's belly. In half a minute he rode beside the cockney.

"Mind telling me your name?" he asked.

"It's Sneddon, gov'nor. Sneddon it is."

"And what prison did you escape from?" Bryant asked casually.

"Fulsom, gov'nor, an' a hell of a job we 'ad gettin' awy, we did. Sye—wait a minute. I been talkin' too much. Von Kahn will 'ave me 'eart fer this."

Bryant didn't answer. He urged his mount into a loping canter and drew alongside von Kahn.

"Before we go any further," he said, "I want this thing thrashed out. I'm not helping any gang of escaped convicts to get away—thousand pounds or ten thousand pounds. What's it all about?"

Von Kahn smiled thinly. Suddenly he leaned out of his saddle and started a vicious blow for Bryant's head. He missed by a foot, and the next instant wondered how he ever got off his horse to flounder around in the sand.

He saw Bryant, feet planted wide apart, standing near him. With a bellow of rage he arose and charged. But Bryant wasn't there when he reached the spot. A fist smashed out of thin air and crashed against his jaw. Another took him by surprise as it smashed against his nose.

"You asked for it," Bryant said coldly. "Now you'll talk. If you don't, I'll beat

the devil out of you first, and leave you here to rot afterwards."

Intent on watching von Kahn, Bryant didn't see Heysid, the dark-featured man step behind him. But he did feel a gun drilling into his ribs. He stood still.

"Do not be a fool," Heysid hissed. "Nor you, von Kahn."

THE GERMAN was approaching with his hands swinging stiffly at his sides. There was blood streaming from his nose, and savage hate shining in his eyes. With great effort he recovered his temper. He bowed slightly.

"I am sorry," he said. "You are right, Herr Bryant. Explanations are in order, ja. You will listen. It is true—we all have been in prison. But unjustly. We escaped—that is all."

Bryant's eyes grew wide. "Even the girl? Even Lela Joyce?" he asked incredulously.

Von Kahn's face became cunning. "Ach, no! The girl—she was our outside help. She arranged the boat, the guns, and the money. Fine girl, too."

Bryant made a wry face. He turned on his heel, oblivious to the gun that Heysid gripped. He stalked toward the girl and her brother who had watched the fight from a distance. Sneddon hovered far to the rear, taking care of the pack animals.

"Look here," he said curtly. "When I accepted this assignment, I didn't know the true facts. If I'm caught with you, it's prison for me, too. I'm not flirting with John Bull. Nor with the Tommies they'll send out into this desert. Can't you understand that we'll run into patrols? We'll have to visit garrisons? They'll nab us before we've covered one-tenth of the distance we must travel."

The girl stepped close to him, took his arm, and said softly: "Do I look like a criminal? You will finish the job—for my sake, and Bart's. I—I promise you won't be sorry."

Bryant sighed disgustedly. "Not twelve hours ago I had one hell of a scrap for the sake of a woman. It darned near cost me my life. Now you show up. What am I—jinxed?"

Lela Joyce turned away suddenly. Without a word she leaped into the saddle and was off, streaking across the desert. He watched her, and swore.

"Okay. I'll go through with it. Like the fool I am."

Bart Joyce put a hand on his shoulder. "Like the man you are, Bryant. And Lela can keep any promises she has made. Remember that. Also—don't trust von Kahn or that Egyptian, Bey Heysid."

He grinned cheerfully and turned toward his horse. Von Kahn and Heysid mounted slowly to vanish behind a dune. Bryant snapped his cigarette into the wind and waited for Sneddon.

"How's it?" he asked.

Sneddon shook his head. "I ain't so good, guv'nor. It's me lungs, it is. Never been strong. Doin' five years ain't 'ealthy, y'understand? But don't you go worryin' about me, sir. I'll myke it, I will."

"Great." Bryant found that he could muster a warm feeling for the timid, little man who had no business under this ghastly sun. Sneddon, at least, was human and not crammed to the ears with secrets. . . .

TEN DAYS later the party still was plodding toward its goal. All of them had settled down to routine traveling. But the heat burned into them; thirst cracked their lips. And tempers were getting short under the strain.

They camped deep in a wadi that night where the howling winds couldn't find them.

"No fires," Bryant ordered. "This part of the desert is alive with wild tribesmen. No telling when they'll strike if they should happen to spot us."

"Nonsense," von Kahn snapped. "I shall have my coffee."

"I tell you it's too dangerous, von Kahn."

"Bah! You're a coward, Bryant, tribesmen won't bother us."

Bryant's hand clenched and he retained his temper with difficulty as he watched von Kahn smash one of the packing cases and use the wood for fuel. The fire roared

moments later, throwing shadows against the steep banks of sand. Attracting attention was a fool's trick.

Ted Bryant settled down to keep silent watch. Soon Bart Joyce was rolled in his blanket sleeping soundly. Bey Heysid and von Kahn were curled up near the fire, nodding. Sneddon was somewhere out in the inky darkness with the horses. Then he saw Lela Joyce get up and walk slowly away, head down.

He caught up with her. "Don't go too far," he warned.

She gave a startled cry, and then a sigh of relief as she recognized his lanky form.

She said: "Oh. I—I thought—"

"You thought I was von Kahn? Tell me, Miss Joyce, if you don't like the man—and you don't seem to—why are you and your brother traveling with him?"

She touched his arm, frowned. "Let's not talk of them now—Ted. Let's talk of the desert. It's so—so peaceful out here, now the wind has died. Nothing but sand and sky and stars."

"And thirst and death and heat during the day." He looked across the black waste. "The desert is sleeping like a little lady, Miss Joyce. But don't let her deceive you. She's mean, she's vicious. She's death's own right-hand man, but"—he probed the darkness—"I love her. I knew her back in my own country—in Texas where there's plenty of sand and sky. But she's not like she is here—not so ornery or—or beautiful. I've been here ten years, and still—"

Lela's hand pressed his arm. Automatically they sunk to the sand. The silence closed around them. Down below, they could see the camp dimly in the dying firelight.

She said softly, "It's so lonely and weird out here. Yet—I could almost love it too. If—" Her voice changed, deliberately shook off the spell. "Ted—while I think of it, stop calling me Miss Joyce. I'm Lela—to my friends."

He let a handful of sand run between his fingers. He was glad of the darkness shielding his face.

"Won't you tell me the truth, Lela? About your brother—and these others?"

She moved closer to him. "Ted—I—I—Ted, you were hired by a man named Jaeger, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then I can tell you nothing," she said quietly. "I'm sorry. More than you can realize."

His hand found hers, held it firmly. "I'm sorry, too, that you don't trust me. I only came this far because—you asked me too. After the way von Kahn acted, I'd gladly let him rot in the desert. But with you along—"

"I believe you, Ted," she said softly. "But you see, it is not for me to explain. There are so many angles. That awful month while Bart was in prison. And all I had to go through. Now, I—I'm afraid of von Kahn. He's placed me in the same category with himself, which means I'm an outlaw and utterly at the mercy of any man who—"

She stopped short for his arms were around her. She raised her lips, found his and they clung there for what seemed an eternity. Suddenly Bryant put her away.

"Listen!" he whispered. "Don't speak, don't move. There's some one crawling over the sand. They mustn't know we are here. Quiet now."

She could hear nothing, nor could her searching eyes discover any motion. The desert seemed as empty and impenetrable as always. But she saw the alert tenseness of his hearing, and pressed close to him.

"Will we be attacked?" she asked. "Tell me the truth."

"Not now," Bryant said tensely. "That fool, von Kahn. I warned him. They'll wait until morning and then ride down like hellions. But they'll get a little surprise. Lela—tell Bart about this and no one else. Before dawn I'll awaken you. The three of us will set a neat little trap. Are you game?"

"Very game—darling," she whispered. "Shall we go back now?"

The camp was asleep when they slipped to their blankets. Bryant lay wide awake, staring at the stars. His mind moved in

a thousand channels, from Fulsom Prison in Cairo, to Mecca where Jaeger held sway; to the desert where two men sought to dominate the other members of the party. And then he thought of Lela, the warmth of her lips and the sheer loveliness of her. . . .

JUST before dawn he crawled over, awakened her and Bart. They didn't speak. Each gripped a gun and crawled over the sand, up the steep incline of the wadi until they found a high dune.

As the sun came up, Bryant made a quick study of the sand, saw tracks leading up and back from the dunes. He followed them carefully, then returned.

"We lie here and wait," he whispered. "The beggars are hiding just over the rim of the next dune. They're well mounted and there's about ten of them. Make every bullet count and remember, if we don't kill them, they'll kill us, and not nicely either. Get set."

About ten minutes slipped by. Then a band of wild looking Arabs came riding hard over the crest of a dune. They waved rifles and shouted war cries, bringing down the curses of Allah on the infidel. A gun cracked. The Arabs came on, rushing headlong for the brink, to ride down it at such terrific speed as to stun the defenders. They knew how to fight, these desert men.

"Now," Bryant said softly. He jerked the trigger of his rifle. One of the Arabs went down in a heap. Lela fired. Bart's gun sang its deadly notes. Only seven of the band were left in half a minute's time. The others turned swiftly.

Bryant gave a gasp of horror. One of the Arabs was unstrapping a modern sub-machine gun. He raised it to his shoulder and fired a burst of death. The sand rose in spouts to blind them.

Lela gave a little cry and rolled over, deep behind the dune. Bart Joyce swore and tried to dig the sand out of his eyes. Bryant just lay prone, rifle resting on a small mound. He drew a bead on the advancing gunman, jerked the trigger and sent a prayer speeding after that slug.

The bandit with the machine gun

slumped in the saddle, dropped the gun and fell to the ground. Another spurred his mount, leaned down to pick up the gun during his mad charge. Bryant shot him through the head.

One other dropped as von Kahn and Heysid opened up from the edge of the wadi. The tide of battle turned. The remaining tribesmen howled curses, but they rode away fast.

Jumping up, Bryant sprinted across the sand. Von Kahn also ran toward the same prize—the machine gun. Bryant reached it first. He picked it up and made a quick examination. There was still oil on the stock. The gun had never been fired before.

"Let me see it." Von Kahn extended his hand authoritatively. "Come—give me it."

"Wait a minute." Bryant's eyes grew narrow. "What's your interest in this weapon, von Kahn? And tell me, were you serving time for selling munitions to Egyptians or to Arabs? Are you one of that breed of lice who go about the earth dealing out death for gold?"

"Of what matter is that to you?" von Kahn bellowed. "The gun—give it to me or I shall take it away."

"Let's see you try," Bryant said slowly. "There are dead men out there on the sand. They died because of your stupidity. I told you not to light a fire. I know this desert. You don't. Do you suppose I wanted to kill those Arabs?"

"Bah!" von Kahn snorted contemptuously. "Of what matter are a few Arabs? There are many more of them. Too many. Give to me that gun, fool."

Bryant backed away a few steps. Then von Kahn's face spread in a broad grin. "Look, foolish *schweine*, at the girl you are in love with. Then hand me the gun."

He turned and pointed. Heysid had slipped up to where Bart and Lela Joyce watched. Bart was disarmed, Lela stood, silhouetted against the sky, her arms shoulder high.

"You win," Bryant said, "for the present."

He threw the gun to the sand. Von Kahn picked it up, slid back a section

of the magazine and grunted. Then he suddenly raised the gun and swung it. Bryant dropped without a sound. Dimly he heard Lela scream. A gun cracked and then blackness blotted out all else.

CHAPTER III

DEATH'S OUTPOST

SOME ONE was bathing his head in tepid water when he opened his eyes. Sneddon's wrinkled face broke into a grin. "I sye, mate, you been sleepin' fer a hour or more. You must 'ave been tired, eh?"

As Bryant struggled to sit up, Sneddon spoke in a whisper, his lips not moving at all. Sneddon had learned all the tricks of a military prison well.

"Tyke it easy, mate. One of 'em watchin' you, 'e is."

He sat up finally, took a long drink of water and looked around. Heysid, the Egyptian, sat on a small mound of sand with an automatic carelessly gripped in one hand. Fifty feet away, von Kahn was talking to Barton Joyce while Lela stood off to one side. The horses were saddled, the pack animals loaded. Evidently von Kahn was only waiting for him to recover.

Heysid arose and came toward him. "So you have awakened. It is about time. Up with you—we're losing time."

Bryant's lips curled in contempt. "You're an optimist, Heysid. Get von Kahn over here. Get him, do you hear me? I'm not going to be bluffed. If I refuse to guide you, every one of us is lost. I'm the only person in this group who could find the way back before the horses give out or the water is gone. Before I move one more step, von Kahn is going to do a little explaining."

Heysid's face grew dark. The gun he held came up an inch or two. Then he relaxed. He walked toward von Kahn, called him away and spoke briefly. Von Kahn approached with a cunning smile.

"I am so sorry, *mein herr*," he said. "I lost my temper and I apologize. Come—let us forget these things. Of course you shall guide us. There is the girl to

consider. Even now she complains of the warm water. There is a spring close by, ja? Where we can get cooling water? Women cannot stand suffering as much as men. We should hurry."

Bryant snorted. "Von Kahn, you ought to be a psychologist. You can pick my weak spot every time. But you haven't answered my question. Why were all of you in prison? Just how did you escape, and why do you wish to reach Qatar in such a hurry? Out with it!"

Von Kahn sat down heavily in the sand. "You ask a great deal, but I shall tell you. Heysid and I were arrested because the stupid British police thought we were trying to sell arms to rebellious Egyptians. That is a lie. Joyce—the girl's brother—was serving twenty years because he stole defense plans for new fortifications at Suez.

"Sneddon"—von Kahn shrugged—"is nothing. He murdered a superior officer in a fit of drunken rage. We had to take him with us because he knew the way out. The girl? She provided us with money, the boat, and help from outside. Sneddon worked in the hospital. We all were sent there, pleading sickness. After that—it was easy. Now are you satisfied?"

"I think," Bryant said slowly, "that you're a liar. Lela wouldn't do such a thing. I'll bargain with you. If she admits she aided your escape, then I'll carry on."

Von Kahn shrugged his big shoulders. "That is simple. Come with me."

Lela Joyce faced him, her face pale. Unconsciously she tore an unlighted cigarette into shreds.

"It is true," she said steadily. "I did help Bart and these others to escape. Why did I do it?" her eyes flashed now. "Because you don't know what British prisons are. They're foul holes—not fit for swine. Bart would have died in six more months. I had money. I used it to free him, and these others who helped us. I did it gladly and with my eyes open. All we ask of you is help to reach Qatar. After that we'll say good-bye. You'll have your money and we'll have—freedom."

STUNNED, Bryant turned on his heel, signaled to Sneddon, and vaulted into the saddle. He led the way, forging ahead at remarkable speed.

There was a British garrison eight miles to the east and he headed for it. The long trek beyond, without possibility of reaching water oftener than every two or three days, would make the horses useless. Camels would be needed, and only the British outposts would have them.

Lela dropped back to ride beside him during the middle of the afternoon. The heat was intense; the horses merely plodded along. Von Kahn sweated like a pig. Sneddon drooped in the saddle, more dead than alive. Heysid showed evidence of the extreme weather. Joyce rode in silence, avoiding the others studiously.

Lela said: "Disappointed, Ted? In me, I mean?"

He didn't look at her. "What do you think? I can see how you might want to help your brother escape—even if he is a traitor. But von Kahn and Heysid—men who deal in arms, who provide stupid men with guns to start revolutions—they're rats. Why help them?"

Lela Joyce held her head high. "Have you any right to condemn? You're being paid well for helping us. A man named Jaeger hired you. Did you know Jaeger? Do you know what he signifies? No—you wouldn't bother about that. All you want is the money. Well—you'll get it. So stop branding us as traitors—murderers—when you're as much in this as we are."

"I'm only trying to help you. After last night—"

"Forget about last night." She tossed her head and rode off to join her brother.

Bryant's shoulder sagged. Lela was right and that made it a bitter dose to take. He was tied up in this more than he liked. He had to go through with it, even though Lela now hated him. . . .

It was almost dark when they sighted the outpost. A low, square wall enclosed the arsenal and barracks. Atop the center building was a narrow flagpole, but no flag fluttered in the breeze.

Bryant held up his hand. "Something's

wrong down there. I'm going on alone. You others move up carefully; keep me covered. Notice there's no Union Jack waving above the fort? That means trouble."

He urged his mount forward until he reached a final high dune before the level ground about the fort. He had no gun, and cursed von Kahn for taking his weapon. But he dismounted and crawled to a point of vantage where he could study the fort.

There were absolutely no signs of life. Sentries should have paced the walls. The slanting rays of the sun should be gleaming against metal. Yet only an eerie silence and an utter sense of desolation prevailed.

He stood up, exposing himself completely. No gun blasted a warning shot. He broke into a run, heading toward the big doors in the east wall of the fort. As he neared them, he saw that they were slightly ajar. He pushed them open and stepped inside.

Ted Bryant began to curse softly. He saw the reason why he hadn't been challenged. Every member of the garrison had been cruelly murdered. They lay in hideous poses, some of them growing black under the intense sun.

HOOFs pounded against the sand outside. Bart Joyce slid out of the saddle and hurriedly entered the door. He stopped dead and turned deathly pale.

"Good heavens!" he said softly. "All of them?"

"Every last man," Bryant said curtly. "Somehow, they were surprised. Or some party they trusted got inside the walls. You can see that the door wasn't beaten down, so these poor devils must have had a lot of confidence in those who murdered them."

Joyce shuddered. "I—I know a few of them, Ted. There's Smiley—and Winters and Captain Farrington. They were nice chaps. I—"

"You met them near Suez, I suppose." Bryant spoke dryly. "Didn't think war was like this, did you? Well it is, and there's perpetual war out here in the desert. The poor fools of sheikhs listen

to every white man who harangues them. They get to believe they can become King of Arabia with the proper help. So they rob, murder, raid to get gold so these leeches who sell them guns can be fed."

Bryant looked around angrily. "Look! About a hundred men were wiped out here. What does that mean? The moment word of this reaches G. H. Q., a fleet of planes and a company of tanks and armored cars will sweep across the desert. More men will die. And why? To satisfy a lust for gold. Don't blame these Arabs, Joyce. They'd be content if fools didn't antagonize them. It's men like you and von Kahn and Heysid who are responsible."

"Why include me?" Joyce asked quickly.

"Because you are a traitor. You sold out to spies. Oh, don't fake it. Von Kahn told me. You're as bad as he is—possibly worse. And your sister"—Bryant turned away a little—"she's not to be complimented on what she has done."

Joyce stepped in front of him. "Say what you want about the rest of us. But you're wrong about Lela. And, I think you know it."

Bryant was too angry to answer. He stepped over the mangled body of a sergeant, made his way to the garrison and looked in. Everything loose had been stolen. Over in one corner of the room that served as headquarters, he found an Arab. All the other Arab casualties had been spirited away. This one had been shot between the eyes, and still clutched the weapon with which he'd dealt sudden death to the British troops.

Bryant picked up the gun. It was a Luger with an oversized magazine. He had seen the counterpart of that gun not many days before. Sheikh Saad abu Kadaar had possessed just such a weapon.

He slipped the gun under his blouse, made no comment, and moved on. In the small corral he stared at a dozen fast, fresh camels. His jaw dropped in amazement.

"Now why did they leave them behind?" he asked the world in general.

"Look at them! Sherari racers, pure bred Ateibas. Worth a fortune out here in the desert—yet they were left behind. It doesn't make sense."

Bart Joyce pulled at the lobe of his ear. Suddenly he turned about. "That," he said tensely, "is what you think." He walked out.

Joyce kept his sister away from the hideous results of the desert battle. Sneddon and Heysid helped lead the camels from the stockade. The horses were unloaded and their packs transferred to the slowest of the camels. The horses were turned loose in the stockade where there was plenty of feed and water.

Bryant carefully selected the only Sherari racer, a low-slung beast with a proud head and a rolling gait that could outstrip any other means of locomotion across the desert. He saw to it that Sneddon, Lela, and Bart also were provided with fast mounts while, unknown to them, Heysid and von Kahn had slower, clumsier beasts. Until there was need for great speed, the difference wouldn't be noticed.

Von Kahn was obviously nervous as they coached the camels and slipped into the hard wooden saddles. A moment later the caravan moved briskly away. Bryant took the lead now, with von Kahn closely behind him.

The German called and Bryant slowed his camel. Von Kahn said: "How close are we to El Hafr? When should we reach it?"

Bryant looked keenly at the German before he replied. "Tomorrow we'll sight El Hafr. How does it happen you know about that water hole, von Kahn? It's a small place—not on any map."

Von Kahn turned slightly pink. He mopped his forehead with an already sodden handkerchief and dropped back. Bryant rode on thoughtfully.

THE grim feeling that he was riding to his death had been growing ever since he saw the havoc at the outpost. There was something sinister going on in the desert. Raiding tribes rarely attack a garrison. And this time the killers actually gained admittance to the

fort before they struck. That meant a sheikh who was apparently friendly and trusted.

He checked them over, mentally. Sheikh Saad abu Kadaar ruled a part of these sands. Then there was Abd el Zuwaid, white-bearded prophet who led the largest tribe in the region.

But Zuwaid was trustworthy and as honest as an Arab can possibly be. He might renounce promises, send his men out on a raid now and then, or even invade the sanctity of some outlying town. But he'd never sell out. The British paid him too handsome an annual stipend to allow any thoughts of that. Under the British, Zuwaid was powerful, an autocrat. Under another rule he might become nothing more than a dirty desert sheikh with a small tribe incapable of securing booty or gold.

Nothing seemed to make sense any more. The priceless camels left behind by raiders. The manner by which the garrison had been tricked. Von Kahn's eagerness to reach Qatar, and his knowledge of a small, little-frequented water hole off the beaten track.

It did add up to concentrated danger. But when it would strike or how or why, Bryant couldn't figure out. He felt a little more secure with the Luger under his blouse. At least he could defend himself.

The afternoon wore on and the heat increased. Not a breath of air stirred and the sun played havoc with their eyes and exposed flesh. Sneddon was half dead, barely able to cling to his saddle. Joyce had taken over the pack animals. Von Kahn's temper rose with the heat. Heysid simply rode in sullen silence while Lela kept off to the left avoiding the others. Twice Bryant caught von Kahn eyeing her with more than casual interest, and his blood boiled.

Suddenly the American spoke softly to his camel. She stopped, knelt and he slipped to the ground. Hastily he examined the sand. There were the marks of many hoofs—unshod horses' hoofs. They meant swift moving raiders with a base camp not too far away.

"Von Kahn," he called out. "Look at

this. Those tracks were made not two hours ago. Now understand this—we're a small party, hardly able to defend ourselves. We can't look for trouble, so I'm going to avoid El Hafir. It means our water rations will be low, but it's necessary. I—"

"We shall go to El Hafir," Von Kahn grunted. "Those are orders. You are a weakling, afraid of your own shadow. I say El Hafir. And show me how to make this beast of mine travel faster."

Bryant didn't answer. He strode over to his own camel, patted her neck a moment before he climbed on her back. Then he turned about and headed toward Bart and Lela Joyce.

"This is a warning," he told them in low tones. "Von Kahn is insisting on going to El Hafir against my advice. I believe he plans to meet some one there. The three of us will ride well to the rear. I'll give von Kahn general directions and say I must lead the pack animals for a time. Let von Kahn reach the water hole first. Then, if it looks dangerous, we can run for it. Keep your eyes open because I've a hunch things are going to happen. Those camels were left behind at the fort for von Kahn's benefit. I'm sure of it."

CHAPTER IV

VON KAHN'S TALONS

TO BRYANT, it seemed that von Kahn and Heysid drove their beasts unmercifully, as if they wanted to put plenty of distance between themselves and the rest of the party. He turned the pack animals over to Joyce and rode ahead, making a wide circle of the route that von Kahn was following.

He caught a flash atop a high ridge, stopped and hastily couched the camel. Shading his eyes against the sun he looked steadily at the ridge. Some one was using a heliograph.

The flashing of the mirror against the sun came with startling rapidity, as if the operator were an expert. Bryant yanked pencil and notebook from a pocket and jotted down the signals as

best he could. Then he settled down to decipher them.

"If I only had glasses," he muttered, "I could see who is sending those signals. It must be Heysid or von Kahn, but I can't be positive."

Carefully he turned the dots and dashes into something tangible. It seemed to be ordinary Morse, but when he had those signals converted into letters, they made no sense at all. He stowed his notes back into his pocket and returned to the trail where he picked up the others.

He drew Bart Joyce aside. Showed him his notebook.

"This looks like code. Can you tell me what it means? You were an officer once and you should know something about this."

Joyce's eyes snapped fires. "Where did you get these?" he asked tensely. "Tell me, man. It's important."

Bryant shrugged. "Somebody was using a heliograph, sending those signals across the desert. I don't know who it was."

"It means," Bart said curtly. "that Zuwaid is a traitor. Those signals were meant for him. Undoubtedly von Kahn and Heysid sent them to warn of our approach. And Ted—this sounds incredible—the sender gave orders that you are to be killed."

Bryant grinned. "Now that's interesting. So I'm to be killed instead of paid for leading this very pleasant little party half way of the way across Arabia. I believe I'll have something to say about that."

Bart Joyce grabbed Bryant's arm. "It proves one thing to me, old man. You're not in with von Kahn or with that crafty Jaeger, who hired you. Now I feel free to talk. There's hell to pay brewing on the desert, Ted. You and I must stop it. We must—"

He paused for Bryant was staring straight ahead. Von Kahn and Heysid had appeared again, moving slowly now, and beyond them, a tiny patch of green beckoned alluringly. Sneddon alone failed to see it for he dozed in his saddle far to the rear. Lela speeded up her

camel's gait and rode close behind von Kahn and Heysid.

"I've got to get her," Joyce cried. He was off, urging his mount into a gallop. Bryant started after him, then he stopped short. From the water hole streamed a hundred men, shrieking a greeting and firing rifles into the air. Von Kahn shouted in reply just as Heysid rode over and caught Lela's camel.

Joyce had almost reached her side before he sensed a trap and tried to get away. Von Kahn turned in his saddle, raised the sub-machine to his shoulder and sent a burst after the fleeing Englishman. Joyce slowed, wheeled and returned, his hands in the air.

Sneddon awoke with a start and began to shiver. "It's all up with us, mate," he told Bryant hoarsely. "Them beggars'll get us sure."

"Not if we work fast. Follow me and give that camel all it has."

They rode furiously, the legs of their beasts stretching out over the sand. A horde of shouting Arabs pursued on fleet ponies. But they were no match for the long strides of the camels. The pack animals were left behind. Speed was what the two fleeing men needed most.

FOR TWO HOURS they raced back over the same course they had travelled before. Not until sundown did Bryant call a halt. They drank sparingly from their half-filled flasks. Bryant sprawled in the sand resting. Sneddon paced up and down.

"'Ow can we get away from 'em, guv'nor. It ain't possible, it ain't, an' I don't want to die. Not me. It's that bloody dog von Kahn who's responsible, I says. If I had a gun and a chance to shoot 'im, wouldn't I do it though."

"Stop shaking," Bryant advised. "There's a job in store for us tonight. A dangerous job."

Sneddon's watery eyes almost popped out of their sockets. He broke into a cold sweat. "You mean—we goin' to rescue 'em? Aw no, guv'nor. Not me. I'd rather die o' thirst, I would. Did you see 'ow many of 'em there was? 'Undreds I'm

thinkin'. An' we're only two, don't forget that."

Bryant said: "We'll wait until it's dark. Then we'll head for El Hafir again. They won't expect us. Only fools would try to attack over a hundred armed men, so we'll have the advantage of surprise. Got a gun, Sneddon?"

"Me—a gun? No sir. I don't want any part o' this mess, sir. I—I don't like it fer a fact, I don't. I ain't goin'."

"Yes you are. After all, you're an Englishman. I'm an American, but I'm willing to risk my life to save that girl and Bart. We owe them that much."

Sneddon was shaking, his face ashen, and his finger twitched nervously. Suddenly he made a dash for his camel. Bryant yanked him out of the saddle and flung him to the sand.

"None of that," he snapped. "You may be a coward, Sneddon, but so help me, if you try to navigate this desert alone, you'll die before noon tomorrow. The least you can do is pass out fighting. Now get some rest. You'll need it."

Well after dark, facing the gruelling high wind of the Arabian night, the two men toiled on foot toward El Hafir. Sneddon kept very close to Bryant and whimpered in terror.

"It ain't in me, guv'nor. I won't be no 'elp to you, I won't. I'm scared for a fact."

"Shut up," Bryant said quietly. "No more talking. They'll have outposts. We've got to reach one and pray like the devil there won't be more than three or four men in it. Watch for patrols, too. They'll shoot us on sight. Drop flat if you even hear a strange sound. They can't see you if you're flat against the sand. Be sure your face is covered. They can spot white skin."

Suddenly Bryant drew up sharply and dropped. He wriggled slowly up the side of a dune until he could peer over the top. He took one hasty glance before he withdrew his head. Then he patiently piled up a mound of sand, thrust his head to one side of it and remained watching while Sneddon sobbed in terror.

"There are four men down there. An

outpost," Bryant reported. "We're going to attack. But no noise, understand? We don't want the main body to hear us. They'll think we're streaking back toward civilization by now."

They crawled down the dune on their bellies. Both discarded their hats. Sneddon's fear had grown to a stage where he forgot to whimper.

In the moonless night, an Arab, singing softly, patrolled a short beat, his head swathed in his burnoose, his rifle slung across his shoulders. Clearly he expected no trouble. Bryant slowly approached, let the sentry pace by him, then arose. His inverted Luger swung once and the Arab went down without a sound.

Hastily he stripped the man of his clothing, donned the filthy garments and seized the rifle. He handed the Luger to Sneddon who crouched nearby.

"Don't shoot unless it's to save your own skin," he warned. "If you do, we'll have to run for it. The sound of a pistol shot travels across this desert. Watch our friend. If he recovers, smash him one. I'll be back."

CHAPTER V

TOWARD PRISON BARS

A SECOND SENTRY was awake, the other two were rolled in their blankets sleeping soundly. Bryant gripped the rifle and stepped up to the sentry. The man spotted the white skin beneath the burnoose folds, and raised his voice. He managed to get out a brief shout of alarm before Bryant crashed his skull with the rifle butt.

Running like a madman, Ted Bryant charged the two sleepy Arabs. He swung the gun in a vicious arc, disposed of one man, but the other whipped out a sword and charged. He sidestepped the lunge, tripped the man, and knelt on his back. Then hammered home a blow to the nape of the neck, rolled him over and finished the job with a punch to the jaw.

Sneddon came running up. "You did it, gov'nor. You're a bloody battler, that's

what you are, sir. Lemme give you a 'and, sir."

Together they tied up the prisoners and gagged them. Sneddon climbed into another robe and burnoose they took from one Arab. Like two shadows they crept toward the horses, mounted, and headed for El Hafr.

Sneddon's teeth began to chatter as they sighted the fires. Two score tents were erected. From a vantage point they saw that one was guarded by four men, one at each corner.

"They're in that tent," Bryant said softly. "Sneddon, I need your help. Got to have it. Here's the plan. I'll ride by the tent, swing out of my saddle and try to get two of the guards at once. It's up to you to cover the other two. They'll scare if you show them your teeth—but don't click them together. Come on. Don't think about it. You'll turn completely yellow if you do."

They separated. Sneddon rode toward the rear of the tent. Bryant kept his burnoose wrapped around his face. The Luger, which Sneddon had given back, was clubbed in one hand. A few Arabs looked up as he cantered by, but they paid no attention to him. The very numbers of the enemy gave him some degree of safety.

He dismounted casually and walked toward the tent. Instantly both guards jumped to their feet, rifles held ready. They peered through the darkness, sighed, and lowered their weapons. He strode up to them, swung his gun in a blow which had a fervent prayer behind it. If he missed, one of them would give an alarm.

The gun connected with a skull. The second man cursed, but Bryant's hand closed around his throat and the gun butt descended with savage efficiency once more.

Quickly he rolled both men into the shadows of the tent and stepped inside. There were two figures, prone on the sand, both tied. In a moment he had released them. He helped Lela to her feet. She clung to him, crying a little, and he kissed her.

"Careful," he whispered. "Sneddon's covering the rear. We'll squirm under the tent and make for the horses. Pick any guns you see on the way. Let's go."

They crawled under the tent and found Sneddon holding a rifle that wobbled rather badly, but it kept two Arabs from shouting. One turned his head slightly as he heard them approach.

As Bryant slugged him, the guard gave an involuntary squeal. It shattered the silence of the sleeping camp. Nearby, an Arab shouted the alarm as Joyce finished off the fourth sentry.

They reached the spot where the horses were corralled. With no time to pick selective mounts, they swung to the bare back of the handiest mount. Bryant fired his rifle, yelled at the top of his lungs, and the other horses bolted. Bart Joyce and Sneddon fired, adding to the bedlam as the Arabs ran toward them.

"**IDE!**" Bryant shouted. He wound his long legs around his horse's belly and glanced at Lela. She proved her accomplishments as a rider by clinging to the slippery back of the beast. They headed out into the night. Shots crashed behind them and bullets whined overhead. The Arabs were shouting curses, firing blindly, and trying to capture their terrified animals.

Joyce took the lead with his sister close behind. Sneddon suddenly gave a yelp as he slid off his horse. Bryant wheeled, raced back and jumped to the ground. Arabs were in hot pursuit now, a dozen of them lashing their horses madly as they tried to overcome the lead gained by their prisoners.

"Lemme be," Sneddon sobbed. "Run fer it, gov'nor."

"Don't be a fool." Bryant lifted Sneddon bodily, hoisted him on his own horse and jumped up behind. He applied his heels and the sturdy little beast broke into a gallop. At full speed he turned around once and sent two shots crashing from his Luger.

Those two shots served to slow pursuit, and an hour later three weary men and one woman slid gratefully to the

sand. Bryant unhooked his canteen and passed it around.

"Go easy," he warned, "there's only enough to last a day or so."

Lela Joyce crawled over to where he lay stretched out. "Ted— Thanks for saving us. And for—other things. Does it mean you've changed your mind about—us?"

He scowled. "Damn it, Lela, we're on different sides of the fence in this business. You're a criminal in the eyes of the law. Your brother will probably be shot when he's captured. Sneddon—well, at least he helped me some."

"And your position, Ted?" she asked gently.

"Mine?" he grunted. "I'm fighting for peace on these sands. You and your brother and Sneddon, too, only want to reach Qatar. You want to save your necks from the punishment you deserve. That makes us different, doesn't it?"

She moved very close to him. "Does it, Ted? You have ideals that you're willing to die for. Perhaps I have those ideals too—with a different objective. Perhaps my brother also possesses them. And even Sneddon. Have you ever thought of that?"

Bryant shook himself and rose. "I'm not wasting time on theories now, Lela. We've got to travel, and travel quickly. A hundred miles south lies Dhawahal. You wouldn't know about it, but that happens to be a strong fort. It's manned by enough troops to hold out against ten thousand Arabs. If we can reach it and—"

He paused in alarm at his own words. "What the devil am I thinking about?" he roared. "A military outpost means imprisonment for all of you. They'll throw you in jail, keep you there until they can ship you back to Cairo. No—there's got to be some other way."

Bart Joyce walked slowly up to them. "I heard that, Ted. Take us to Dhawahal. We'll chance whatever the British hold for us. I'd rather go back to prison than—than—"

"Have me fall into von Kahn's hands again," Lela broke in. "I know what you

mean, Bart. I—I feel the same way. Please, Ted, take us there.”

Bryant didn't answer. He rounded up the two camels, put Lela aboard one and Bart the other. He and Sneddon kept the two fastest horses, and the odd party headed out into the blackness of the night, guided only by a star.

Riding alone, Bryant tried to puzzle things out. Were they more afraid of von Kahn than they were of prison? Or were they risking Dhawahal for his sake—so that he could get out of the mess? He had helped them. Now, perhaps, they were doing this to repay—

“Damn it,” he told himself, “I won't do it. I'll keep on to Qatar. We'll get food and water somehow. And fresh camels, too. It's got to be that.”

He spurred his pony, urging her ahead until he rode beside Bart Joyce.

THEY rode on at a steady, space-eating pace until, at dawn, the sun slowed them. It beat down in a sort of gloating fury. Sneddon suffered worst of all. He lolled in the saddle of a camel, having changed mounts with Bryant when he found the fleet Arabian steed too difficult to master.

Lela Joyce rode close to Bryant, but they spoke rarely. All their energy was conserved in this fight against the desert. Not a semblance of breeze gave them relief.

They camped finally, and rested in the

heat of the day. And at nightfall went on again. Sunrise found them moving doggedly on toward their goal. They ceased to complain. Ceased even to keep watch for wild tribesmen. All they could do was plod onward and sweat and curse and sweat some more.

Into the third day they rode again, until Sneddon groaned and almost tumbled from his camel. Bryant rode up to him, couched the beast and handed Sneddon the water flask.

“Take a good swig,” he told him. “I've had mine and you need water badly.”

“Thanks, gov'nor.” Sneddon seized the flask and all but drained it.

Going without water was no new experience to Bryant. He tried to whistle as they resumed the march, but his lips were too dry, too cracked. So he hummed instead.

He forced them to go on all that day, not daring to waste more time. And by night they camped high atop a dune about four miles north of Dhawahal. Each took a short shift at guard duty.

Lela insisted that she share this work, and more and more, Bryant appreciated her. No ordinary girl could have stood that march. Lela had courage, stamina. And she could even smile when the going became almost unbearably tough.

“We'll reach Dhawahal early in the morning,” he told her. “There'll be water there—and plenty of cooked food.”

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"And prison bars?" She stared moodily across the desert.

Bryant cursed himself mentally for bringing up the subject.

"Damn it, Lela, I won't permit them to arrest you or Bart. I'll enter Dhawahal alone. I'll get supplies to reach Qatar if I have to steal them."

"Thank you, Ted," she told him, "for your confidence. But Bart and I are quite ready to face Major Willington."

He looked up quickly. "How'd you know Willington was in command at Dhawahal? He was only sent there recently."

She flushed a little, and walked away. When she joined her brother, he saw both of them smile, and he wondered how they could smile at such a time. . . .

CHAPTER VI

CITY OF MENACE

BEFORE the next dawn they were astir. Bryant sighted the fortress first. It was a veritable city in the middle of the desert. Two thousand troops were sheltered here, and many caravans sought refuge behind its tall, grey walls. There were machine gun emplacements, artillery cleverly set up for defense, and parapets which could shield a thousand men in the event of an attack.

The British took no chances with Dhawahal. It controlled one sixth of all Arabia, forming the nucleus of various other outposts, smaller and far flung.

He studied the fort, and gave a cheer when he saw khaki uniformed figures patrolling the walls. He brought up the others with a sweep of his hand.

"We're here," he said. "Because you insist upon giving yourselves up, I'll try to mitigate circumstances against you. After all, we did fight von Kahn and Heysid. And we possess information that might possibly be used to influence a military court's judgement of you. Remember—let me do the talking."

Sneddon rode up. "I ain't askin' for anythin', guv'nor. Just a drink o' cold water an' food. I'm willin' to go back to Cairo. You don't have to speak for me."

"You're as good as the next man," Bryant told him. "Perhaps a bit better, Sneddon, for you carried on even while you were scared to death. It takes more than usual courage to do that. But if you wish, you can hide. I'll sneak out water and food, and try to provide some one to guide you to Qatar. I owe you that much."

"Not me, guv'nor," Sneddon refused. "I'm taggin' right along with you—if you don't mind."

Bryant thumped the smaller man on the shoulders encouragingly. Then he rode into the dawn, smiling up at the sun in defiance. He'd beaten the desert again—at her own game.

As he neared the fort, he saw the men kneeling at the parapets, rifles at shoulder. That meant they were looking for trouble. The sun was rising just behind the fort, making visibility difficult. But he saw enough to reassure him.

The huge gates of the fort began to swing wide as they rode under the shadows of the walls. Then suddenly the open gates erupted a horde of men. They were clad in British khaki, yet they had the evil, dark faces of Arabs.

"Run for it!" he yelled. "Run—"

Two Arabs hurled themselves upon him. He was pulled off his horse, knocked to the sand. With shrill yells of delight a dozen Arabs pounced upon him. He grabbed a pair of legs, yanked and brought one man down. He jolted a terrific right, but he knew it was hopeless.

Even as he struggled, he knew that—like at the smaller outpost—the garrison at Dhawahal had been tricked. There was no question but they were wiped out to a man, and that a mighty force of Arabs had captured it.

"*Wallahi*," one of the Arabs shouted, "Allah is good to deliver the infidels into our hands. Kill the infidels! Kill! Kill!" A rifle butt crashed down against Bryant's skull. He emitted a low groan and went limp. Vaguely he knew that they all had been captured. And, as if from a great distance, he heard von Kahn's booming voice rise in triumph. He thought dimly that von Kahn must

have changed his plans. And must have traveled fast to beat them there.

He was carried, like an empty sack of potatoes, between lanes of shouting Arabs. His bearers stopped long enough for von Kahn to make an examination.

The German snarled in hate. "That is the man. I would rather have him than the whole British troop. And the girl—do not harm her."

He strode off importantly. Then saw Bart staggering between two guards, stepped close, and slapped him across the mouth.

"Fool—stupid ox—to think I haven't known your true position. And this stinking pup—" He hurried over to Sneddon and helped the smaller man along with a cruel kick.

Sneddon cowered, blubbing in terror. "I ain't done nuthin' to you, gov'nor, I swear I ain't. You an' me was friends at Cairo. Remember? I usta bring you good food. I—"

Von Kahn hit him with his fist, a sweeping blow that sent Sneddon to his knees. Guards jerked him up and dragged him along.

A minute later, Bryant was flung through a barred door to the hard packed dirt of the British guardhouse. Bart Joyce and Sneddon came hurtling in behind him. Bart was up, instantly, helping him regain his feet.

"Looks like you miscalculated, old man," Joyce smiled. "Instead of nice polite British officers to arrest me—you've provided a bunch of cutthroat Arabs, led by our one and only von Kahn."

"'E 'it me, 'e did," Sneddon wiped blood from his face. His eyes were narrowed, almost ratlike and they glistened in hate. "Once I killed a blighter for that. I'll kill 'im too, if 'e gives me 'arf a chance, I will."

"Don't be so optimistic," Joyce tried to be cheerful. "We'd all of us sell our souls for a crack at him. Here—help me with Ted. Tear a piece from my shirt, Sneddon. He needs bandage."

Bryant sipped a little tepid water gratefully. He looked up, eyes grim and hard.

"What are we up against?" he asked. "I want the truth. They acted so damned fast I really don't know what happened. Where's Lela?"

"Easy does it, mate," Sneddon said. "Don't you go worryin' now."

JOYCE walked over to the one barred window and leaned against it. "No sense in fooling ourselves, Ted. Lela's captured, of course. Von Kahn always did fancy her. By the looks of things these beggars surprised a small part of the garrison, wiped them out and took over. I can't imagine what's become of the main force."

"Tricked into the desert," Bryant hazarded. "That's why the Arabs are still here—waiting. They'll take the main troop by surprise and wipe them out. Bart, we can't just sit here and let that happen. There's Lela to think of, too. Damn von Kahn. And damn Jaeger. I was a fool to have trusted him."

"Don't worry about Jaeger," Joyce said complacently. "He's well taken care of. You see, Jaeger was arrested by the time he got back into Mecca. I saw to that."

"You did!"

Bart Joyce gestured hopelessly. "I didn't dare tell you before, Ted, because I was a fool. I felt that because Jaeger hired you, perhaps you weren't to be trusted. I served time in Cairo for stealing plans. But they were fakes—the whole thing trumped up. I had to reach von Kahn and Heysid. We suspected they were the kingpins behind the sale of thousands of dollars worth of ammunition in the desert. I was right, but I found it out far too late. Lela is also an accredited secret agent, Ted. She wanted to tell you, but I wasn't sure. In this infernal business you can't take chances."

"And Sheikh Zuwaid is a traitor, then?"

"Right. He sold out, and I'll confess we never expected as much. That's why I came into the desert. To find out whom von Kahn had contacted, and from what quarters we could expect trouble. But von Kahn was just a bit smarter."

"Luckier, you mean," Bryant grunted. "Well—do we stand here and talk while almost two thousand men move in to their death? They can hold this place, Bart. There's ammunition enough here to hold off ten thousand troops. A complete arsenal, dynamite, nitro, shells, artillery—everything. And von Kahn's got Lela."

Bart Joyce cursed futilely. "What can we do? This guardhouse looks secure enough. There are men posted at the door. There's only one window and I've tested the bars. It would take a dozen elephants to pull them loose. What can we do?"

Bryant walked to the door and kicked it, hammered on the thick beams until it finally was opened. The doorway bristled with naked steel as bayoneted rifles blocked his way. Above the crouching Arabs loomed von Kahn and Heysid. Both had satisfied smirks across their faces.

"Let him out—the big one only," von Kahn ordered. "He is going to tell me something."

Bryant marched out, heard the door slam behind him, and wondered why he alone had been chosen. They marched him across the drill grounds and into the offices of the fort's commander. Von Kahn sat down behind the colonel's desk, planked his feet on the surface of it and smiled.

"How would you like to die?" he asked. "That is not a choice of life and death, mind you, but only a selection of the means. For you are going to die."

The American said nothing. He watched for the slightest chance of escape, but none came. Von Kahn was too crafty for that now. He thumped his feet back on the floor, leaned across the desk and waved a pudgy finger.

"What has happened in Mecca? Why has not Jaeger reached us? You know, for you are nothing but a spy. A British spy like the others. Talk, *schweine*, or I shall have your tongue slit."

Bryant still said nothing. Von Kahn nodded curtly. Heysid stepped up. He held an automatic, and slapped Bryant across the mouth with the flat of it.

The prisoner's face never moved a muscle. Again the gun smashed him and nothing happened.

There was confusion at the door. Lela Joyce burst into the room, fighting off several women who tried to restrain her.

"Don't hurt him!" she cried. "He doesn't know what this is about. Jaeger told him nothing."

"Ah." Von Kahn smiled. "Then perhaps you will tell me, my dear. Speak—or shall I have this swine's head crushed to a pulp?"

Lela's tense figure faced him boldly.

"I'll tell you. Jaeger is arrested. By this time companies of armored cars and a camel corps are on their way. Your little revolt will fail, von Kahn, because we knew of it weeks ago."

VON KAHN slammed his fist on the desk top. "Let them come. Armored cars, camel corps and all. We can hold them off. Even now a caravan is due here. A caravan of munitions. We have the men and the guns. Let the cursed English swine come. I shall blast them from the desert."

"You," Bryant said very steadily, "are mad. They'll send planes to bomb you out of here."

Von Kahn arose, walked over to Lela and put a familiar arm around her waist. She tried to struggle free, but he gripped her tightly.

"While this lovely English woman is here? *Ach*, no. The fools of British pride themselves on being such great gentlemen. They will not shoot for fear of harming her. As for you—later I shall see to your death."

Bryant was jerked away. As he was pushed toward the door, he saw a brown face peering at him from beneath a copious shawl. It was the dusky coffee girl he had saved from Saad abu Kadaar. His eyes lit with a gleam of hope. But she quickly averted her eyes.

Back in the guard room, Joyce and Sneddon pressed him for information. He shook his head. "Lela is all right—so far. Von Kahn plans to hold her as hostage."

Joyce said: "We've got to get out of

here. Got to, understand? The troop will be coming back soon. They'll ride right up to the fort, and then those devils will open fire. It must be stopped!"

Some one moved outside the small barred window, blotting out the sun for a moment. Then a slender brown hand emerged through the bars and flung an object on the floor. Bryant seized it.

"A gun," he said softly. "One of those oversize Lugers. There're twenty slugs in this. Now we can do something."

"It's a trap," Bart Joyce said suspiciously. "That was an Arab girl. Why should she help us?"

"Because not long ago I helped her," Bryant explained. "I saved her from a mauling by Sheikh Saad abu Kadaar. It's possible he returned and kidnapped her, taking her out here on the desert with him. Anyway—we have a gun. Now to get out."

He reversed the weapon, holding it as a club. Joyce approached the door and began kicking it in a monotonous rhythm. The guards stood it as long as they could, then both of them unlocked the door and advanced with bayonets bristling.

One of them went by Bryant, chasing Joyce who kept backing away. Bryant swung once, and at the same moment, Joyce went into action. He lunged forward, missed the bayonet thrust by a scant inch, and his arms closed around the Arab's legs. As the guard came down, Bryant leaped for him. He didn't club the gun again. Instead he put the muzzle of it against the man's forehead.

"Dog," he hissed, "speak the truth or by Allah you will be a man without a head. When is the troop expected back?"

"At sundown," came the quick answer. "By my beard I swear it. Do not shoot me. I have no wish to die, infidel."

"When does the ammunition caravan arrive?"

"It has already arrived and has been unloaded."

"And the girl?" he persisted. "The truth, accursed one, and swear again by the beard."

The guard raised one hand and tugged at his beard, repeating the oath no Arab

dares to break. "She is safe and in the German infidel's house."

"Tie him up," Bryant ordered. "The other one too. We've got to get moving before they find the guards missing."

They hastily donned the burnouses and robes of the guards. Sneddon looked on a little sadly. In the excitement they had forgotten him. Bryant suddenly remembered.

"Sneddon," he said with a smile, "we'll have to go out and bag an Arab for you. Stay here until we return."

"Never mind, gov'nor," Sneddon said huskily. "I'll go like I am. Just gimme one o' them rifles with a sticker on the end of it. That's all I'm askin'."

He picked up one of the rifles and ran toward the door. He was gone before either of the others could catch him.

"Silly fool," Joyce breathed softly. "He'll get himself caught and then the jig's up. They'll search this fort high and low for us."

"Until then," Bryant interposed, "we'll work. Come on. Von Kahn first. Then Heysid and Saad abu Kadaar if he's here."

CHAPTER VII

A MAN'S COURAGE

THEY picked out the quarters which von Kahn occupied and walked boldly toward them. With robes tucked up well around their faces, they passed for Arabs easily. Bryant barged in the door first. Von Kahn was sitting behind his desk. Heysid slumped in a chair, and Lela Joyce sat dejectedly across the room staring at a blank wall.

"Up with 'em, Dutch," Bryant snapped and showed the Luger.

Heysid jumped to his feet and reached for his gun with the same motion. It jolted once. Joyce was slammed back against the wall as the heavy slug took effect in his shoulder. But Heysid didn't shoot again. Bryant's Luger exploded twice. Heysid simply sat down again, in his leather chair, then slowly doubled over. His gun fell to the floor.

"Hurt bad, Bart?"

"No Ted," Lela answered for her brother. "I'm taking care of him. Oh, Ted, how did you ever—?"

"Later, darling," Bryant smiled at her. Then glared at von Kahn. "Now Dutch you're looking into the end of my gun instead of me staring at yours. How does it feel?"

"Fool," von Kahn muttered. "Those shots will bring hundreds of my men. You shall be killed slowly. You shall become amusement for my men. They know how to kill a man and make it take a long time."

Bryant moved close to the German and prodded him in the back with the Luger. "Suppose your men do appear, Dutchy. You're going to tell them to run away again. Why? Because if you don't, I'll put part of your spine on the outside of your belly. Stay right here—"

Suddenly Lela raised her hands in warning. Bryant turned quickly. Sheikh Saad abu Kadaar was standing in the doorway, his gun covering Lela. A triumphant smile creased his fat, greasy face.

"By Allah," he cried, "the girl dies also then, infidel pig."

The Arabian sheikh stepped into the room and stood at the end of a long table covered with books and maps. He was watching Bryant: didn't notice Lela move forward cautiously.

There was a pile of heavy volumes at the extreme end of the table. Lela moved toward it like a sleepwalker, her eyes fastened on Kadaar. Suddenly one hand darted out, struck the pile of books, and Kadaar jumped aside to avoid them.

At that instant Bart Joyce charged. Heedless of his wounded shoulder, he made a flying tackle. Kadaar came down. His gun cracked, but the bullet only slashed through the ceiling. Another instant, and Lela had wrenched the weapon from his hand.

"Get up!" she snapped. "Over against the wall. Keep your hands up."

"Nice work, Lela," Bryant approved. Then he turned to von Kahn.

"You're going to order your men to lay down their weapons," he said fiercely. "If a single shot is fired at the British

troop when they arrive, you'll die one tenth of a second later."

"But I cannot do that." Von Kahn sweated profusely. "That part is out of my hands. Sheikh Zuwaid is in command. What does he care if I die—so long as he is in possession of the fort? I—I told him he would become King of all Arabia. He believed me."

"Set your own trap, von Kahn, didn't you? Just the same this still stands. Bart—can you handle these two?"

"I'll take care of them," Joyce promised. "But what the devil are you going to do?"

"Find Zuwaid," Bryant answered. "If that doesn't work, I'll think of something else."

Lela stopped him at the door. Her arms went around his neck. "Please, Ted darling, be careful. For our sake?"

He kissed her. "I'll bring Zuwaid's beard back to you on a platter."

He covered his face and walked out into the teeming drill grounds. By keeping close to wall shadows he avoided detection. He eyed the parapets narrowly, looking for Zuwaid to no avail.

Some one shouted. The cry was taken up, but not loudly, and it throttled down to a mere hum.

"The British pigs come. The infidels walk to their death."

That was the cry Bryant heard, and a moment later, rifles began to crack. It was too late now to deal with Zuwaid. Desperate measures were called for, yet he could see none to take. The British didn't have a chance if they stormed the fort.

"GUV'NOR," a voice hissed, and he spun around.

He saw Sneddon's skinny arm beckon him from a cellar window. He looked about carefully, walked into the cellar of the small supply shed.

Sneddon was inserting a cartridge belt in a machine gun. Not a small type, but one of those three-hundred pounders that could hold off a thousand men.

"Tyke the gun, guv'nor," Sneddon said tensely. "There's ammo 'ere. An' look what I found, I did."

He emptied his pockets to reveal four Mills bombs. Bryant's eyes lighted up.

"Sneddon—by Allah and all the gods—you've done something this time. Take a look out that window. See that tall building? It's stuffed to the rafters with ammunition. Now one of these bombs—"

Sneddon gave a squeal of glee. "Bless you, guv'nor, you got the brains I needed. I been wonderin' what I could do with the gun and them bombs. Now I know."

"Wait!" Bryant gripped his arm. "You can handle a gun. Set her up at the window. Cover me and I'll run for it. They're so busy shooting at the soldiers, they won't notice. I'll toss those bombs and get back. When that supply dump blows, it'll kill every man on the walls. There'll be holes enough for the troop to ride through. It's the only way. Now here are instructions. You—"

Sneddon suddenly gave him a hard shove, sent him reeling backward. Before Bryant could grab him, the little man was gone. The door slammed and Sneddon laughed quietly. Half a minute later he appeared at the window. Beyond, the Arabs were teeming on the walls.

"They ain't seen me yet, but they will. You cover me, sir. It's like this. I killed a man while I was drunk, I did. 'e was an officer, and so 'elp me, ten times better'n me. Now there's a chance to pay that back, see? 'Ere we go, guv'nor. Get the gun talkin'."

Bryant lifted the heavy weapon, set its muzzle against the window. Sneddon raced across clear ground. Then a gun cracked, and Sneddon tripped and almost fell. But he regained his balance and raced on. The Arabs had spotted him. Were turning to fire.

Bryant opened up. He kept the gun swerving in an arc, sending a hail of death along the wall, and across the whole drill ground, where Arabs began to appear. Sneddon was yelling as he raced onward. A man poked a rifle through a window high in the ammunition dump. Bryant blasted away, and that rifle never went off.

But there were hundreds of men on the walls. And more on the drill ground.

Many were firing madly at the British. But others had realized what was happening. More guns barked. Bryant raked the Arabs with the machine gun. Felt it grow red hot in his hands. Smelled his own flesh burning. But his jaw was set and the gun kept chattering.

Sneddon went down. But the wiry little man gained his knees. He held a Mills bomb in one hand, the ring in the other, and he crawled forward. The sand around him seemed alive with bullets, yet he kept going.

"Throw it," Bryant yelled, though he knew his words would be drowned out.

Sneddon suddenly seemed to gain strength. He was on his feet, reeling forward. An Arab stepped out of the ammunition dump shed, took one look at the grenade and fled howling in terror. Sneddon walked into the building. The last thing Bryant saw was the little man's right hand yank the ring free.

There was a terrific blast. The ammunition dump vanished. So did scores of men. Walls toppled. The ground shook.

The Arabs deserted their posts. Fled in bewilderment. An eerie silence settled over everything. Then, high above it, came the notes of a bugle, clear and vivid, sounding the charge.

Bryant let the machine gun tumble to the ground, and peered out of the window. His eyes were moist, his face drawn. Then he raised his hand very slowly in a military salute. A salute to the dead!

Through the breach in the wall, smashed open by the explosion of the munitions dump, came a wave of assault troops. They swept into the city with bayonets lowered. Arabs, maddened by the sudden turn of events, rose up with shrill cries.

"Kill the infidels. Kill! Kill!"

BUT the troops were too fast. Bayonets drove home, came away gory and dripping. Arabs took to the house tops and sniped successfully until machine guns began a rat-tat of death, and mopping-up squads hurled grenades. The sand turned dark with blood.

Bryant scooped up the machine gun

again, sent a burst of lead into the ranks of slowly retreating Arabs, disorganized them. Then he wheeled to attack the door of his prison. A short burst smashed the lock.

A husky British sergeant saw him and shouted a command to his men. Rifles began to level before he could shout out: "Don't shoot! I'm American." He tore off his burnoose while the soldiers gaped. He ran forward. "Come on! I'll explain later. We've got the master mind bottled up!"

The squad came willingly then, bayonetting their way when a few Arabs found courage enough to resist. They swept into the building where Bart and Lela Joyce stood guard over von Kahn. The German sat in sullen silence under the threat of the revolver. Joyce, himself, was near the window, peering out as often as he could and cursing his inability to get into the fray.

Lela ran up to Bryant. "You did it!" she cried. "Oh Ted, it was wonderful. You set off that ammunition dump. Bart told me it must have been you."

Bryant shook his head sadly. "It was Sneddon, darling. Small and weak as he was, that man had a brave heart. He blew himself up with the ammunition."

Lela shuddered and he held her closely.

Outside the firing died away except for the occasional snort of a sniper's rifle. This was answered almost at once by the rattle of machine guns and the dull explosion of a grenade. The mopping up was complete.

Within an hour the city was beaten into submission. English troops patrolled the streets. Houses, turned into temporary prisons, bulged with Arabs.

In one of the ornate palaces, two dozen officers stood in rigid silence. At a table, Major Willington sat grim-faced. Von Kahn stood before him, head bowed and fingers curled so tightly that flesh was severed and blood shone through the clenched fists.

Willington removed his hat. At a barked command the officers in the room snapped to rigid attention. The major spoke.

"Von Kahn, you have been found guilty of sabotage, murder, and inciting riot. The sentence of the court is death. Immediately."

Bryant watched the German marched out of the room. Ten minutes later the rattle of musketry broke the early evening silence. He was glad that Lela was with Bart in a distant part of the city. . . .

The sun was red against the sky when the British troops moved into position. They formed a compact square many men deep. A silence crept over the drill grounds. Major Willington and Bryant stood side by side.

The regimental color bearer stepped forward and his banner touched the sand. Bryant moved up to it, a medal glistening in his hand. His voice was tense, his face without the grimness that had seared it for many days.

The troops came to attention.

Bryant's words could be heard by every man. "To Trooper Sneddon—a mild man, and meek—who gave up his life that his brother troopers might live. To Trooper Sneddon who has wiped out any stain against his name—made it fair and to be remembered with respect. A name to go down among the honored heroes of this regiment. For Private Sneddon I pin upon the regimental flag this medal for valor. In Sneddon's name I bequeath it to those men whom he died to save."

The drums rolled, muffled. Muted bugles sent their notes across the sand and high above the clouds, as if to reach the man for whom this salute was intended.

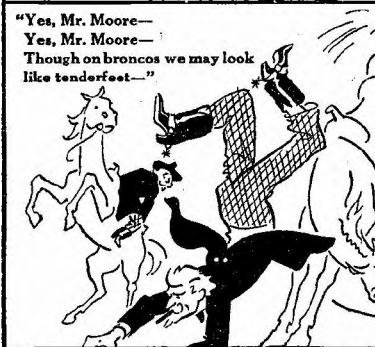
Lela sobbed a little. Her brother looked down at her, put an arm about her waist.

"No more tears, little sister. I've a proposition to make. May I be best man? You are going to marry the boulder, aren't you?"

She looked at Bryant, then, as he marched back to her side. A smile overshadowed the moist eyes. She spoke in a whisper.

"By the beard of the Prophet, my brother—you spoke a mouthful."

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Too Many Flags

His gun came up desperately and his finger squeezed hard on the trigger.



By Ronald Flagg

CHAPTER I

ASSIGNED TO KILL

DON COOPER breezed into the shabby little office in a corner of the State Department Building at Washington with a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

The tan of Asiatic suns still dyed Don Cooper's face. His last mission had taken him far. As he opened the door of the office, a square-rigged, bald-headed man

rose from behind a scarred desk and held out his hand.

A man without a title, Ben Rockwell made no pretensions. His office was bleak. It was a workshop, and the bald-headed man used it as the hub of a vast net into which the spies of peace-time flew, and were caught. Don Cooper was part of that net—a U. S. agent of counter-espionage.

"You're looking fit, Cooper." Rockwell's eyes swept the tall young man in swift appraisal.

Pawns of conquest they were—an Italian count, a munitions baron, and the daredevil daughter of a United States senator. The treacherous undercurrent of official Washington swept them into a maelstrom of murder. In the hand of Don Cooper, of counter-espionage, lay the red-hot key to war. And Cooper's life was measured from his hand to his gun.

Don Cooper grinned. "That's the way a man sizes up a horse that he's going to work to death," he drawled. "I know you."

"The tea brigade in Washington is recruited to full strength, Cooper," Rockwell's voice was dry, a little harsh. His eyes, however, were friendlier than his tone. He waved to a chair, and flipped a paper into the young man's lap. "Seen that yet?"

Don Cooper's eyes raced through the lurid headlines that set off the latest *exposé* featured in the Hirsch newspapers.

ACTIVITY OF FOREIGN POWER IN
SOUTH AMERICA VIOLATES MON-
ROE DOCTRINE, SAYS BUSHMAN

Hairless corpses mark path of gas bomb as little nations fight useless wars to test foreign devices of death.

There was a lot of it—a sensational story, under the by-line of a former munitions salesman, in which veiled charges were hurled at an unnamed foreign power, with a hint that the name of the power would be revealed in future articles. According to the Bushman statement, the South American nations were being used by foreign warmakers to test new war equipment. Revolutions were being financed, he said, by nations interested in seeing how newly discovered gas bombs would work in the field.

Special emphasis was laid on the gas bomb which was so powerful that it left the slain hairless. Bushman claimed to have one of these bombs to substantiate his charges.

Don Cooper raised his eyes. "I read something about this in the Chicago papers as I came through. They didn't take

it so seriously. They called this lad 'Babbling Benny' and—"

"I know. They wrote it up as the dan-druff bomb—"

"Because it causes the hair to fall out," Cooper finished, grinning despite the gravity of the underlying story.

Rockwell did not smile. "No one outside of the Hirsch papers takes it very seriously," he said, "but it's a build-up, and it isn't funny. Somebody is planting an idea."

"And the bomb?"

"Is bunk. We've investigated, and we can't find any evidence to support the belief that Bushman has such a bomb, or that such a bomb ever existed."

Don Cooper frowned. "And what nation is he going to name as responsible for wars in South America?"

"Italy."

"Absurd!"

"Of course. But there's a deep play building up. What it is, I don't pretend to guess. Hatred of Italy is being built up in other nations. If Il Duce loses their friendship, the time will be ripe. The United States will be compromised by some overt act here, Italy's enemies will leap at Italy's throat and before we know it we'll be in another foreign war ourselves, on the side of Italy's enemy. That's a hypothesis. I can be wrong."

"Okay. Where do I start?"

"With Paul Zeron."

"Zeron?" Cooper's interest sharpened at the mention of his old enemy.

"Yes." Rockwell smiled grimly. "That's why I picked you for this job. He's an ancient foe of yours—and he's the man behind Benny Bushman."

Don Cooper rose to his feet. "Who is behind Zeron?"

Rockwell shrugged. "He's anybody's for hire. He's played this game close. It may be a foreign power. It may be munitions interest. It may be that pack of international vultures who pick well on war—the professional spies. Somebody wants war, and Zeron is their tool. There's your job."

"Thanks. I've got a hunch that I'll like it."

Rockwell's unblinking blue eyes were on his agent. He put one hand in the drawer. When he withdrew it, something thumped hard on the desk. Don Cooper looked down at a short-barreled .38 Colt Detective Special.

Don Cooper picked up the weapon, hefted it, and slipped it into his pocket. There was no mistaking the meaning of that weapon and the manner of its presentation. For the first time since he had entered the service, Don Cooper was being sent out on a job—to kill.

"EVEN if a job threatens to be nasty, one can start it pleasantly," Don Cooper decided as he surrendered his coat to the check girl at the Carlton.

He eyed the main door expectantly. He had a dinner engagement with Marion Brill, and he could charge the time to business and pleasure simultaneously. The best woman agent in counter-espionage work was also the most beautiful. He was meeting her here to avoid her father, the Honorable Stephen Brill. The esteemed senator made too many speeches.

The elevator doors on Cooper's left slid open with a barely audible click, and an exceedingly short, insignificant man emerged. He paused for a moment, his dark eyes roving. Then he saw Don Cooper, and he was no longer insignificant. Something came into his eyes, lighting them. He slid across the floor at a glide rather than a walk, with the effortless forward movement of a professional dancer, perhaps—or an expert fencer.

"Ah, my frien'." The little man gestured to two chairs placed conveniently close together. "You await a party? We can sit down and talk—perhaps."

Don Cooper sat down, lighted a ciga-

rette and shared an ash tray with the little man. His talk with Rockwell was still fresh in his mind and he was wary. Officially, this man who called himself *Monsieur Zeron* (and pronounced the name, ironically, as Zero) was the purchasing agent for half a dozen republics below the Panama Canal. Unofficially he was many things, and served many masters. He was a realist, not a patriot; he undertook contracts only at a price.

"I am concerned about your health, my dear Cooper." Zeron's voice was dry, a little grating. "Washington at this season would be most bad for you. I have a little place in Maine. You could take it over for—let's say a month."

Don Cooper shrugged. "I haven't been ill in Washington yet," he said lightly.

Paul Zeron rose. "We cannot talk as long as I would wish," he said. "Your party has arrived. You will think of your health, no?"

"No." Don Cooper also rose. Marion Brill had entered the Carlton. He wondered how Zeron knew—but why wonder in this business? The little man was looking at him out of piercing black eyes.

"No?" he asked thoughtfully. "Perhaps not. But the young lady—you would suffer if she should suffer, perhaps." His voice was soft. He'd watched Don Cooper's eyes when they saw the girl.

Cooper whirled on him. "Meaning what?" His voice was low, ominous.

The little man's teeth flashed briefly. "I was just thinking that perhaps if the father of the young lady should have grave trouble—disgrace, perhaps—because you were rash, my frien'. Ah, that would not be so good."

The glances of the two met and locked. They hated each other in that moment. Don Cooper with a swift fury, and Zeron with a grim, long-nourished hatred.

The little man bowed. "I will not intrude further, but it is, my dear Cooper, mos' pleasant in Maine." He did a military about-face, and was gone.

DON COOPER didn't have time to figure it out, for Marion Brill was already crossing the lobby. Marion did not make entrances—she just appeared.

She seemed to float down upon him now, a slim vision in a black velvet dress. The skirt was slit audaciously, and a tiny jacket with a prim row of buttons fastened tightly under her chin.

"Don! It's been a long while."

"An age—nine generations. Time enough for you to be reincarnated more beautiful than ever."

"You're still nice, Don. Your work hasn't hardened you."

They moved toward the dining room, and many eyes followed them. Bronzed, and big, and keen-eyed, Don Cooper had an air of sea and sun about him. Marion Brill was the sort of girl that a good magazine cover artist would put in a picture with such a man. She did not look like the kind of girl who would write airy letters of love and light gossip that veiled diplomatic dynamite in code—but she had.

A three-piece orchestra was playing soft music as the head waiter seated them. The girl opened a black velvet handbag, looked briefly at the mirror that it contained, and laid it down on the table.

Before the bag was closed, Don Cooper had a glimpse of a tiny spool wound tightly with black paper, like a film roll for a miniature camera. His eyes gleamed. With his right hand, he spread his napkin flat on the table-top—full open. It was a large napkin.

"I saw a Jap agent do this one at a dinner in Darien," he said softly. "At-tend, *mademoiselle*."

Using only his right hand, he bunched the napkin with seeming carelessness. Then it seemed to flow through his fingers as though it would drop to the tablecloth, but it never quite dropped. Somewhere in the process of leaving his fingers, it vanished.

Don Cooper smiled with a sly air. "I believe that Jap was a scalawag," he said. "He was probably getting rid of dangerous papers."

The girl's smile matched his own. "Or acquiring some," she said lightly. "You didn't need to go to Manchukuo to learn tricks like that. You could always do them."

"Oh, but I've improved." Don Cooper smiled again. "And you, young lady, have become careless. You watch tricks too carefully."

He turned his hand over, stretched his fingers lazily. A neatly folded napkin dropped from his fingers. He spread the folds with one gesture and, gleaming darkly against the white of the linen was a tiny spool, wound tightly with black paper, like a roll of film.

"Tut, tut," he said. "Didn't I see that a moment ago in your bag?"

Marion Brill laughed. "You win, and you lose," she said. "You did a good job, but suppose you examine your trophy."

Cooper raised his eyebrows. He picked up the black spool. It unreeled easily, and there was white paper beneath the black. Fine script challenged him. It read:

Don Cooper—

I'll give you one glimpse of this and bet you more than you'll collect that you have it within five minutes. Or have you slipped, darling?

Don shook his head ruefully. "I've slipped," he said. "I should have let it lie and won the bet. I'm curious about the stakes." He rewound the black paper as he spoke.

His eyes were challenging, but she turned their charge lightly. "If you'd won that bet," she said mockingly, "you would never have known that it had been made."

THE three-piece orchestra in the corner broke softly into the "Blue Danube"—and a mood perished. Hauntingly beautiful the piece might be, but it was more. With the first strains, these two had to remember what they were. The aura of the Danube seemed to flow into the room with the melody—that fateful stream which flowed through the Balkan heart, where war forever had its red beginnings. The girl seemed to feel its spell most.

"That piece—it's like an omen, Don. I wish they hadn't played it now—here. You were talking to Zeron when I came in. He wouldn't beat about the bush. What did he want?"

Don Cooper hesitated a moment. He had a swift impulse to tell her of the hint against her father, then waved it down. He'd look into that first himself.

"He wanted me to go to Maine for my health," he said easily.

The girl nodded. "I thought as much. He's making another play, and he fears you, Don. You don't play according to the rules. He's got a big stake somewhere. I've been sniffing action, big action."

"Babbling Benny's dandruff bomb, maybe?"

The girl's eyes remained grave. "You think that's funny?"

"No, I don't. I've inherited the job, Marion."

The girl pondered that. "I've been expecting it," she said. "You know that Benny Bushman has a suite here in this hotel, I suppose."

"Yes. What else do you know?"

"Zeron has an assistant. Feminine gender, very deadly." Marion Brill was toying with a fork. Her eyes lifted. "She's supposed to be the niece of Mrs. Barrington-Dorchester."

"And isn't?"

"Decidedly isn't. Zeron has enough on Barrington-Dorchester to make him crawl, I guess. She's a plant, and she's going to be working under 'nice' auspices."

Don Cooper thought that one over. The Barrington-Dorchesters had millions that years of munitions manufacture had given them. They were not aristocrats, even in the American sense of the term, but they had influence in national affairs, and used it ruthlessly. If Zeron, in turn had the power to use them, he was going to be a hard antagonist to knock over.

The girl seemed to divine Cooper's thoughts. "You have to figure Walter Hirsch and his newspapers, too," she said. "Hirsch will play Zeron's game as long as it suits his purposes; and he'll play rough if it will serve to break up the new munitions probe. It hits his own pocketbook, and he doesn't like it—"

Suddenly, from some place in the hotel, there came a deep, booming roar. The musicians faltered, and the waiters

stiffened in their places. Don Cooper gripped the table edge.

Marion's eyes flashed him an unspoken message. "Benny Bushman! The bomb—it might be, must be. Get me at home later. I'll wait up."

Don Cooper rose hurriedly, pressed a bill on the head waiter and took the lobby in stride.

CHAPTER II

THE HAIRLESS CORPSE

THE third floor of the hotel was the scene of wild excitement. The house detective was up there, with several employees of the hotel to assist him in keeping guests at a safe distance from the door of Benjamin Bushman's suite.

The doors of that suite were closed, but an ominous wisp of grayish vapor was curling under one of them. As far down the hall as the elevators, there was a biting odor, like that of ammonia.

Don Cooper met Bill Russell of the Department of Justice in the corridor. The man looked at him sharply. "Howdy, Cooper. Haven't seen you in a while. You on this?"

Cooper nodded. They hit the corridor together. The house detective turned a worried countenance to them.

"That's gas, probably," he said. "No telling what it will do. We can't crash in. We've got the guests off the floor. They're moving them out upstairs and down. The fire wagon is well on its way."

Cooper waited for more details.

"There's a woman in the case." Russell was chewing licorice, his face expressing no emotion whatever. "Claims she saw the murder. All hysterical."

"Murder?"

"Yeah. So she says. Says he was stabbed before the bomb went off. Funny play, that."

Don Cooper nodded. The woman's story would keep. The firemen of the chemical squad were already in the room—weird figures in masks. The battalion chief came out into the hall.

"You can get a look at him now," he said. He was shaking his head. "For a

gas bomb, that one was a queer trick. More smoke than anything else, no thick fumes, and no consistency. Wouldn't last two minutes in the open air. We've got samples of the vapor for a test, but—" His shrug was eloquent.

Russell and Cooper moved forward. Russell grunted. "That doesn't prove a thing," he said. "It might be just a sample bomb—a capsule dose of the real thing."

"For a capsule it raised a pretty lively fuss." Don Cooper commented.

Lieutenant Dan Kling of the Metropolitan Police joined them before they reached the room; a short, red-faced man, he rolled when he walked.

The room was a wreck. A table in the center had been blown to pieces, and there was a gaping hole in an upholstered divan. All the pictures had been blown from the walls; there was a black hole in the rug, and a door mirror had been cracked twice across. The damage, however, seemed to be confined to one half of the room—to the area between the door and the stiff figure which sagged in an easy chair on the window side of the room.

Benjamin Bushman hadn't been a very prepossessing human when he was alive, and he wasn't a nice sight dead. He had met the Reaper informally, in his dressing gown and pajamas. Some back-draught of the explosion had torn the dressing gown and whipped it back from his flabby body. The pajama coat hung by one button, but it needed no buttons at all. It was fastened close to the man's body with a skewer—a stiletto buried hilt-deep in his chest. . . .

It was not death, however—nor the manner of it—that stopped the three men as they stepped into the room. Three pairs of eyes focused on the one startling, unbelievable thing about that sagging corpse.

It was bald—not shaven, nor burned, but hairless.

DAN KLING growled deep in his throat and crossed the room. Don Cooper was beside him as he dropped to one knee and loosened the one button on

Bushman's pajama coat. His own eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

There was not a bit of hair on Bushman's body. Pictured always with an unruly mop of hair on his head, and a thick mustache, he had been found by death with neither.

"It's no razor trick. You could tell. Looks like it just dropped out or—" Kling broke off, got up, scratching his head. His face showed that he would never laugh again at the so-called dandruff bomb which caused hair to fall out.

Don Cooper was frowning. Without moving the corpse, he made an examination of the man's pajamas, and the chair in which he was seated. There was nothing there which would explain the mystery. He straightened up. Russell was examining a battered piece of metal.

"Piece of the bomb," he said. "Light stuff, built like a cheap kettle."

Dan Kling was moving toward the door. "I'm going to get that girl," he said. "I want to hear somebody talk about this."

Don Cooper scarcely heard either of them. He was staring at a find of his own—a crushed bit of cellophane. He picked it up carefully by one edge. It was the odd shape that had intrigued him. Cellophane was common enough, but this piece had been shaped to something round, and not too thick; an oversized fountain pen or

He took a swift look at the corpse, then hurried after Kling. He caught him at the door and held the cellophane in his out-stretched palm. Kling looked at it impatiently.

"So what?"

Cooper shrugged. "I've got an idea that it would fit around the grip of that stiletto if it were smoothed out."

Kling stared. "But why in hell?" His manner was less truculent now.

Don Cooper shook his head. "Think of a good answer to that," he said, "and you've got a clue."

Dan Kling had received a jolt that slowed him down as he came in with his witness. As he entered the Bushman suite with the girl, he was walking wearily, resignedly, like a man playing out a hopeless string. By common consent, the in-

terrogation was to take place in a room of Bushman's suite adjoining that in which the murder had taken place. Kling waved the girl into the room.

"Miss Gaylord, this is Mr. Russell and Mr. Cooper. If you don't mind, we want a little information." Kling was perspiring, and mopping at his red face.

The girl took her entrance cue and paused with one jeweled hand lightly on the door-jamb. Her eyes, warily appraising for the moment, retreated swiftly behind excessively long lashes after one sweeping glance around the room. Definitely, decidedly, she was a woman dramatizing herself in a crisis.

"You are kind," she said.

She was tall and she moved lithely, her figure pencil-slim in gleaming satin, with a long, metallic tunic. There was something serpentine in the long train, and in the way the light was reflected in the gleaming satin. She sank gracefully into an overstuffed chair, and closed her eyes briefly as she posed with one white arm behind her dark hair.

Dan Kling made another pass at his red face with a limp handkerchief. He cleared his throat noisily.

"You say you saw this murder?" he asked hoarsely.

The girl's body moved. It was not so much a shudder as it was a ripple.

"Yes, I did." Her voice was almost a whisper.

Don Cooper took the play from the fumbling police lieutenant. "Suppose you tell us about it," he said. "It's easier than answering questions."

She threw him a perfect screen-test look of gratitude. "You are very kind," she said. She bit her lip lightly; then her lids shielded her eyes again. "I have always been indiscreet," she said.

She let that highly significant fact hit, and gave it time to stop bouncing before she extended her remarks. "Mr. Bushman was nothing to me," she said slowly. "But he was different. He was embarrassed by all the publicity recently given him. It was unkind. He invited me to dinner with him a week ago, but he asked me tonight if I would mind dining in his room. He was so upset about what people

were saying." She sighed. "I am very indiscreet. I accepted his invitation."

The story threatened to end there, to fall of its own weight.

Bill Russell grunted. "You were in the room when he was attacked, then?" he asked gruffly.

The girl put one hand to her throat. Her eyes got very big. "But no. I was merely coming in. I heard noises inside, and I knocked at the door." She paused dramatically.

Bill Russell grunted. "You heard a struggle and you knocked. Okay. Then what?"

"I opened the door. Mr. Bushman was fighting with another man. The other man had a long knife in his hand, or a dagger—I couldn't quite tell. Mr. Bushman was in a big chair, and he had something in his hand that looked like a thermos bottle."

"Then what?"

The slim body undulated again, and the girl moved her hands helplessly. "Then Mr. Bushman called out to me. 'Run!' he warned me. 'This is a deadly bomb.' Then the other man looked around—and I saw him bring that dagger down at Mr. Bushman. I ran and—" She was panting as though she were still running. Then she spread her hands wide, sat back limply. "That's all," she murmured.

Dan Kling's face was seven shades redder than usual. He dabbed furiously at his forehead with the handkerchief and struggled to keep the angry roar out of his voice.

"When the bomb went off," he said, "where were you? What happened to the man?"

THE girl looked blankly at him. "You confuse me," she said. "Where was I? Oh, yes—I ran. Then the bomb went off, and the man ran out of the room and slammed the door."

"You saw him?"

"Only vaguely—I was so frightened."

Kling swallowed hard. "He ran out of the room *after* the bomb went off?"

The girl seemed startled. "Perhaps it was before it went off."

"And you saw him—yet you had run

away from the room? Where were you when he went out?"

"I was running."

Kling mopped harder with the handkerchief. "Still running. Where did he go?"

The girl spread her hands again. "I don't know. I fainted."

Russell came to the rescue of the man from H.Q. "When did you faint?"

Her eyes turned tragically to him. "Why, I told you—when the bomb went off."

Kling made a gurgling sound in his throat. "In view of your value as a witness, Miss Gaylord—" he was gagging a little on that—"we'll have to ask you to view the body, to identify the man who was murdered."

"Must I do that?" She paled genuinely. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair tightly.

Kling nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so."

"Very well." She rose, drew herself to regal height.

Kling opened the connecting door to the other room, and Russell stepped close enough to take the girl's elbow. Don Cooper brought up the rear of the procession. He was smoking a cigarette, and he was very thoughtful. Irene Gaylord interested him. She was at once stupid and clever.

In the other room, the routine workers were at their jobs. The medical examiner had come and gone, and the body was booked for an autopsy. A plainclothes man was carefully making measurements of the room. Another was taking fingerprints. Outside, in the hall, there sounded the hungry growls of the press. The corpse alone was unmoved. It sat still in the big chair.

Kling stepped across the room and removed the sheet which had been thrown over the body. Irene Gaylord screamed from the back of her throat. The scream trailed off into a choked cry.

"Oh, how horrible," she moaned. "I've seen enough. It is he. It is Mr. Bushman."

"You're sure?" Kling's eyes narrowed.

The girl covered her eyes. "I'm sure—certain. I don't want to see any more." She turned abruptly, and all but fought

her way past Russell into the other room. The D. J. man started after her.

Don Cooper looked at Kling, then at the corpse. "Do we have to let her get away with that story?" he asked.

Kling laughed harshly. "I do. She's the niece of Mrs. Waldo Barrington-Dorchester." He laughed again, bitterly. "Hell, Cooper, it's always like that in this town. Everybody is always the niece or nephew or the maiden aunt of somebody important."

He stamped toward the other room. Cooper followed a little more slowly, thinking of Irene Gaylord. So this was the new Zeron operative! There was food for thought in that. He didn't believe in coincidences. This woman did not just happen to be here—any more than had Zeron.

In the other room, Irene Gaylord seemed to have recovered her composure. Kling rocked on his heels in the middle of the room.

"Miss Gaylord," he said huskily, "you saw the man who was in the room where the murder was committed. Did you recognize him?"

Don Cooper stopped in the connecting doorway. He watched the girl roll her eyes slowly toward the police lieutenant.

"Oh, I was afraid you'd ask that. I don't know. I'm not sure, that is. I'd have to talk to somebody."

"Who did you want to talk to?" Kling was still keeping his voice down, squeezing the boom out of it.

"I'll have to have time to think. It's all so sudden."

"But this is murder," Kling exploded. "You saw a man. What did he look like?"

"I can't tell you. My head aches. You are really cruel." The eyes were on full again, the hands pathetically moving.

Just then, a hard-eyed man in a gray suit came in without knocking, interrupting the scene.

"Lieutenant," he said, "we've got a man downstairs. He was sitting on the curb and is woozy as hell. He doesn't even know his own name." The man paused and moved his shoulders slightly. "He looks pushed around a bit—and he's bald as an egg."

Kling stopped rocking and almost lost his balance. "Bald? No hair?"

"No more than a baby."

Kling wheeled. "Wait for me, please, Miss Gaylord. Russell, Cooper." He was rolling for the door in the wake of the gray-suited man. Russell started after him, but Don Cooper dropped back.

"I'll see Miss Gaylord across the hall to more pleasant quarters," he said, "and join you downstairs."

The girl's face showed awakening interest. "You are very kind," she murmured.

CHAPTER III

THE TRAP IS BAITED

A BABBLE of voices came through the door which Russell had closed when he and Kling rushed out. Don Cooper smiled grimly. That, of course, would be the press. He crossed the room and made sure the door was locked. From the corner of his eye he could see Irene Gaylord as he did so. She looked interested. As he turned, her eyes dropped.

She seemed to be no longer overacting, now that she had only one man to play to—and because of that her acting was better. Don Cooper sat down where he could face her and offered her a cigarette. She took it and waited for him to light it.

Cooper squinted through the smoke. "Before I take you across the hall, Miss Gaylord," he said. "I want to warn you that the newspapermen will probably make every attempt to get a statement from you."

"Ah," she sighed. "The same newspapers who were so cruel to Mr. Bushman."

Don Cooper nodded. "Yes," he said gravely, "exactly the same newspapers."

She pondered that. Cooper inhaled slowly. "You, of course, will not tell them anything until Lieutenant Kling tells you that you may," he said quietly.

"Why?" Her eyes were wide.

"Because your story might be misunderstood, garbled." He reflected inwardly that it couldn't help being garbled, her story being what it was. "That," he said, "might work injustices on people

and make this case very hard to solve."

Her eyes went so wide that the lashes seemed to touch her thin eyebrows. "But," she said, "if I tell them my story just as it happened, they will be kind to me."

Don Cooper knew when he was licked, and he didn't go in for waste notions. "Miss Gaylord," he said, "I've given you an opinion, and I've got nothing else to give you except one more opinion. I do not think that the newspapers will be kind to you if you talk before the police department authorizes it."

The girl scarcely moved, but she shed one personality and coiled into another before he was finished with his little speech. He had anticipated that, and he had a stall ready. His body suddenly stiffened, and he looked past her toward the door of the murder room. That stopped her. On the point of lashing out, she drew back, her eyes following his.

Don Cooper was already out of his chair. His body blocked her line of vision for a moment, then bent at the waist. His right hand, all too apparently empty, groped along the floor close to the wall on one side of the door. His fingers seemed to close upon something there. When he straightened up, a tiny spool wound with black paper lay in his hand.

The woman came out of her chair as though propelled by springs. "That is mine," she said.

Don Cooper's hand closed over the spool. "What is?" he asked blandly.

The girl faced him. "That roll of films. I lost it. It is mine."

He shook his head slowly. "When could you have lost it? You weren't in here until we all came in. You didn't have it with you then, did you?"

She made a fluttering motion with one hand, and the other gripped his arm as though she needed that arm for support.

"I told you that I am very indiscreet," she said. "That roll of films is—well, not pretty." Her eyes dropped. "It would compromise me terribly."

Don Cooper shook his head, removed her hand gently from his arm. "I promise you," he said, "that if this is a roll

of personal film, it will never compromise or embarrass you. I will take care of it myself.

"And now, shall we go across the hall?"

IRENE GAYLORD knew a stone wall, too, when she met one. She flung away from him like a tigress, her lithe body crouched. "You give me that film," she said. "You locked the door and kept me in here. I'll scream and keep screaming. . . ."

Her fingers locked into the metallic tunic in a significant gesture, and there was strength enough in those fingers to demolish it in one tug. Don Cooper knew that with a hall full of newspaper men outside, she could count on one hundred per cent results from the trick. And her eyes left no doubt of her determination, and she was between him and the door. The act would start before he could reach it.

He smiled grimly. "You scream," he said, "and I'll tell them who threw that bomb in Benny Bushman's apartment."

The threat straightened her like a punch. Her hand rose involuntarily, the back of it to her lips. Her cigarette dropped to the floor, and Don Cooper stepped on it deliberately.

He was calm again, confident, after a windy moment. It was only a great actress, he reflected, who could rise above any tampering with the script. This woman would never be a great actress. She wrenched her hand away from her mouth violently.

"You—you're accusing me of—" She broke off with a gasp. She had overstepped his inference, and the slip made Cooper grin a little. It was his point.

"I didn't accuse you of anything," he reminded her. "I said merely that I'd tell them who threw the bomb."

She swayed a little, and then fury blazed in her eyes. He could literally see her remembering that she was still a woman and that she was still locked in with him and that the press awaited.

"Don't do it!" His voice snapped like a whip. "I'm going to walk out of here now, and I'm not giving you the film."

"You're not!" She threw herself before him fiercely. Her eyes were still blazing, but there was a little wariness behind them. She wasn't ready to scream yet. She was keeping that card to play, but she waited for him to call the trump. He called it.

"Where is the bag that you carried tonight?" he challenged.

"I didn't—" She let the denial trail off. She was remembering that her bag was across the hall where she couldn't check up on it immediately. His look reminded her of that, and for a moment there was panic in her eyes. Then it snuffed out.

She was remembering that evening bags are very small, and that this man was talking about bombs. She hoped that he was walking into something, and the hope showed in her face. Her dark eyes gleamed.

Don Cooper caught her triumphant expression in time. He had nearly walked into something. He'd been guessing desperately, of course. He, too, was remembering now that the bomb had been teakettle size. He pulled another idea out of the air, and spoke with a cold, confident smile.

"There was a thin layer of very fine grease," he said, "on the bomb fragments. You clutched your bag very tightly, and the grease from the bomb—" His voice trailed off. He shrugged the implication.

Fear leaped into her eyes. She seemed suddenly to realize that she had made a mistake, and that he had been bluffing. She stiffened, and her hand came up fast. She slapped his face and her whole body vibrated with fury.

"Go!" she screamed. "You're a brute to torture me so, after all I've been through tonight—"

"To say nothing of all you're going to go through."

Don Cooper smiled again, stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him.

THE combined efforts of the police and the hotel officials had not sufficed to lift the corridor-siege of the press. He waved the eager interrogators aside.

"No soap," he said. "Later. Miss Gaylord is upset." He grinned at the understatement as he made his escape down the stairs.

There was a tall, rather good-looking man turning away from the house phones as Cooper came down the stairs. He looked up, and with tight lips, and eyes steeled to a grim resolve, crossed to Cooper's side. There was an extraordinary number of people in the lobby, and since the young man and Don Cooper both wore conventional evening dress, they were not conspicuous. Cooper found himself crowded.

"Walk out of the hotel with me quietly or I'll shoot." The young man's lips scarcely parted as he spoke. Don Cooper looked at him, shrugged and started for the door. The other pressed him closely.

Paul Zeron was seated near the main entrance. He was engaged in conversation with a heavy-set man, and he did not look up. Don Cooper found that rather strange, and amusing.

"All right. I'm out of the hotel," he said. They were under the marquee in front.

The young man pushed him a little. "Not here. Walk down the block," he said.

They walked. Sixteenth Street was darker down near the Eye Street corner.

"All right. I'll take Miss Gaylord's films," the young man said briefly.

That was it, of course. There would be some lad like this planted at the house phone to take care of any little chores that the lovely Miss Gaylord might have to be done. Don Cooper looked at him with interest. The chap was built like a college halfback.

"And suppose, my friend, that you don't get those films—if any?"

"Then I'll have to take them."

The young fellow had a grim air of determination about him that was very young. Don Cooper sighed. He dropped his hand toward his trousers pocket, and it came up a fist—a fist that carried the weight of his body behind it.

The halfback never had a chance. He was wide open, and the right hand took him squarely on the button before he could pull in his head. Don Cooper

stepped in behind the punch and caught his man as he fell.

"Too bad, kid," he said, "but if you'd really had a gun, it would have been in a shoulder holster. Dress pockets aren't built for them." Cooper wheeled and dashed toward the Carlton.

Paul Zeron was still talking when Don Cooper reentered the hotel. This time he looked up sharply when Don passed him, but Don let him look. He was betting that Zeron was doing more serious thinking than he'd been doing when Cooper was headed the other way.

The supposed roll of films was working like a charm. It was making the enemy take the aggressive, and aggressors are prone to make mistakes. He fondled the spool in his pocket and thanked the fates that his hands were still quicker than most eyes. Marion Brill's little joke was paying dividends.

"At that," he said softly, "I wish it were a real roll of films, and that I had found it in Benny's apartment. It would be darned interesting."

Real or not, the bait had drawn the wolf pack—and they would stop at nothing to get it, and its owner. . . .

CHAPTER IV

THE RUMBLE OF WAR

KLING and Russell were in the manager's office. So were the house physician and a reporter from the *Herald*. They were all studying a short, compact man lying on the couch. The *Herald* reporter was jubilant. He'd got in by right of conquest. He was the one who had found the hairless man sitting on the curb. The doctor was shaking his head.

"We'll have to get him to a hospital for a more thorough examination. He seems to be suffering the natural reaction to a violent blow in the head."

Don Cooper wasn't paying much attention. He had a full look at the face of the man on the couch, and recognition came to him with a chilling sense of shock. Rockwell had said that Italy was the soft spot in the European muddle at

which the war-makers were hammering.

Italy was supposed to be the nation that Bushman would name in his South American *exposé*—and the hairless man who had been sitting dazedly on the curb was Paolo Luca, of the Italian Embassy.

Cooper could almost hear bugles calling in the room. . . .

Bill Russell caught his eye, and the expression on the D. J. man's face told Cooper that he, too, was hearing the bugles. Russell nodded toward the phone.

"I've been talking to people," he said. "Italian Embassy and others."

He broke off. There was a soft knock at the door. The man who entered did not need to introduce himself. He was Count Adolfo di Carlo, of the Italian Embassy. Tall, grave, broad-shouldered, he wore evening clothes as though they were a uniform. His white Vandyke was trimmed to a precise peak, and his scalp gleamed pinkly through his sparse white hair. Contrary to the popular conception of his race, he was neither excited nor excitable. For several seconds he looked at the still figure on the cot.

"I wish to hear about it," he said simply.

By common consent, the others turned to Bill Russell. He was the nearest thing to a government representative present. Before starting his story, he looked at the reporter from the *Herald*.

"Son," he said, "you won't hear anything that you'll dare print, and you're going to be in a tough spot if you stay. How about it?"

The reporter hesitated, then gave in. "Okay," he said, reluctantly turning to leave.

Don Cooper stepped out of the door after him. "Just a minute," he said. "I want to ask one question."

The reporter's eyes narrowed. "Shoot."

"Did you just stumble on that man, or were you tipped off that you'd find him?"

"I'm not supposed to tell—" The reporter was watching Cooper closely, appraising him. "We got a tip," he said finally. "Somebody phoned in."

"Thanks." Don Cooper turned back to

the room, a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

Back in the room, Bill Russell had just finished the story of events. The count stroked his beard, gestured toward the cot.

"He has been missing from the Embassy for three days," he said.

Kling stiffened. "The police of the District had no record of that, sir. If we had known—"

The count bowed. "I am sorry." He said it courteously, but it was just another way of saying that diplomats bury their own dead. Kling reddened slightly.

There was another knock, and this time it was the ambulance that the doctor had ordered. The doctor went out with his patient, and with a transparent apology, the manager withdrew. The count was alone with people to whom he could speak without embarrassment. He looked at them thoughtfully, and there were deep shadows in his eyes.

"GENTLEMEN," he said gravely, "I will speak with bluntness. This situation is most serious. A sensational story has been manufactured—built up—for your press. There is an evil background for the most unfortunate happenings of tonight, a background which your papers will not ignore."

He paced a little, with his hands behind his back, like a man thinking aloud, rather than a man making a speech. "There have been grave insinuations made against Italy without a shred of proof—absurd things. Italy has played no secret hand in South American affairs. That is fantastic. Yet people have been led to believe that Italy does play such a hand. This alleged bomb is one more trick. Italy has never had such a bomb. If Mr. Bushman had such an invention, he was most welcome to it. Italy had no interest in it."

He paused for breath, his thin hands opening and closing nervously. "Tonight a man dies who has insinuated that he holds secrets detrimental to my country, secrets that will cause a breach between your country and mine. He is murdered. Paolo Luca of the Italian Embassy is a

suspect in this murder, struck down and unable to defend himself from the charge. Meanwhile, your great newspapers are publishing a story which has in it the inflammatory sparks of war."

"You believe then, *signor*, that some other agency has planned this with the intention of throwing the blame upon Italy? To what purpose, *signor*?" Russell was doing the questioning. Don Cooper was content to sit back with his arms folded. He was very thoughtful.

The Italian clenched one hand. "The purpose? To give courage to Italy's enemies—or those who might become her enemies. These happenings fit in a chain. Secretary Dolfuss is assassinated in Vienna and Italy loses her most powerful friend, Austria. His Majesty, King Alexander, is assassinated in Marseilles, and Italy is cursed in Yugoslavia. Today—next week—something happens in America. The friends of Italy draw away—for who wishes the friendship of one with powerful enemies?" His clenched fist opened into spread fingers that had a strange eloquence. "Thus, my friends, does war come to the world."

"You have some suggestion to make to us?" Russell's voice was quiet, but there was a hardness to his jaw that betokened his understanding of the gigantic nature of the thing that was confronting that little group in the room.

Count di Carlo's lips tightened. "Only this," he said. "Your great people will learn from their papers tomorrow a tale that would be laughable in any group of informed officials. Your people will not laugh; on the contrary, they will read more than is printed."

When he finished, Kling sat very still and Russell was hunched forward in his chair. Don Cooper met the earnest eyes of the count.

"*Signor*," he said, "I have one path of my own that I'd like to follow. Can you get me a list of the persons on whom your *attaché* might have called on the night that he disappeared?"

Count di Carlo nodded. "It was a long list," he said, "but we were careful. All denied seeing him. We proved conclusive-

ly that only three out of the—let us say—suspects could possibly be lying."

He bent over the manager's desk to write the three names. There was a tap on the door, and the man in the gray suit beckoned to Kling. Kling mopped his forehead and strolled over to the door. He took the paper, and the gray-suited man withdrew. As he read, a change came over Kling. His jaw squared.

"*Signor*," he said, "suppose Bushman did have a bomb that was a secret, and suppose it were proved that your man was killed in a fight over that bomb. What then?"

Count di Carlo finished writing, passed the slip of paper to Cooper, and straightened. "Impossible," he said. "His duties were non-military. He had no interest in bombs."

Kling's lips tightened. "His fingerprints were on the hilt of that stiletto," he said brusquely.

As Don Cooper heard that grim, portentous statement, he was staring at the paper in his hand, and his eyes narrowed. The third name on the list was that of Irene Gaylord!

THERE was no formal leave-taking on the part of the three men as they left the manager's office at the Carlton. Each had his own lines to follow, and each worked best alone.

If anyone in the lobby was interested in his movements, the fact was not apparent to Don Cooper. He slipped into a booth, called the number of the *Washington Post*, snapped a name at the languid voice that answered, and waited.

When he heard a high-pitched squeak at the other end of the line, he relaxed. The years could not change that voice, any more than they could change the encyclopedic mind behind it.

"Jones?" he said. "This is Don Cooper. I need your help. Think fast, hard and accurate as hell. What white elephants do the Barrington-Dorchesters own around here?"

"White elephants?" snapped the squeaky voice. "Everybody with money's got 'em. Guess you mean real estate. Old Ralph B-D's worst dull-care is the for-

press out on the hill, the one they called International House. He'll always have it. Can't sell such a—"

"Swell. Never mind his other worries. I should have thought of that myself. Thanks, Jones, and keep this quiet, will you?"

He hung up and made another call.

The connection was made. There was a sleep-laden voice on the other end—Doctor Hugh Martingale. Cooper snapped his words through.

"Doc? Don Cooper. Wake up, and put the lateness of the hour on the bill. I'm going to describe a corpse to you, and you tell me what made him like that . . . I've got a hunch. Listen, this corpse was hairless. Yep, bald all over. . . . He had a blue line along his gums, and he was a little too stiff for a new corpse. . . . No! I'm not asking you what he died of. I know. He was stabbed in the heart. But what was wrong before that?"

He held the earpiece away from his ear patiently for a few moments while Doctor Martingale unburdened himself of a few explosive comments. Then Cooper took over the conversation once more.

"The point is that the stiletto only punctured his heart. It didn't shave him and give him a haircut. It didn't blue his gums, either. Now . . ."

This time he listened intently, and this time the doctor was not explosive. He was fully awake and interested. Don Cooper heard him through and shook his head, lips tight.

"Four months? No good, Doc. . . . Could it have taken place in three weeks?" He did a bit of calculating. "No, Doc. Come again." The doctor was explaining, a little more slowly now, a little more doubtfully. Don Cooper's face lighted up. "That's it, Doc. I'll thank you personally some day."

He swung away from the phone, with the bugles sounding in his blood. The only flaw in the case now was the fact that it didn't have a flaw. The men who had planned it were clever, careful and unscrupulous, and they were playing for high stakes, yet their plot had a hole in it that a man could drive a truck through—a hole they had left open on purpose.

They couldn't even stall past the autopsy on the case as it stood. There had to be another play . . .

He turned to cut across the lobby, stopped short and went toward the desk. He knew the clerk slightly.

"Was Mr. Bushman in the habit of dining here, or did he usually go out?" he asked.

The clerk looked interested. "He had dined in the dining room every evening until the last four or five days," he said. "He'd been ill since Friday, and he was taking his meals in his room."

"Did the house physician attend him?" Cooper asked.

"No, sir. He had his own physician. I might be able to find the doctor's name for you."

"Never mind." Don Cooper would have bet him—and laid heavy odds—that he wouldn't be able to find out, but it didn't matter. He was turning away when the manager came hurriedly from his office.

"Ah, Mr. Cooper. Senator Brill is on the wire. He has been trying to locate you. He says that the matter is urgent."

Cooper lost no time in getting to the phone. Senator Brill's voice boomed in his ear.

"Cooper? I've got to see you right away, as fast as you can get out here."

Don Cooper took a deep breath. "Marion—is she there?"

"Marion? No How do I know where Marion is? Probably at some silly social *soirée*. But this is no time for family salutations, man. A matter of the gravest import" The voice boomed on.

"All right. I'll be right out."

CHAPTER V

THE MAN OF MANY FLAGS

DON COOPER'S car was parked between Eye and K on Seventeenth Street. He'd left it while he was in Asia, and charged Marion with seeing that it got no dry rot or hoof and mouth disease. Despite the fact that she had a car of her own, she'd put five thousand miles on it.

It was a short walk over, and his footsteps echoed hollowly. The half-hour before midnight is quiet outdoors in Washington. No one was trailing him, and he was a little surprised at that.

There was little traffic on Seventeenth Street, and he was the sole pedestrian. He eyed the bushes close to the walk with interest, but they were a thin screen, and no one was lurking there.

The keys jingled in his hand, and he unlocked the door. The car was a four-passenger coupé, and it was old enough not to be conspicuous. He rolled down the window on the driver's side while his foot pressed the starter.

As the engine caught, a man loomed up from the ground, on the left-hand side of the car. A blue-barreled automatic came unpleasantly close to Don Cooper's eyes. The man who held it was masked, but he still wore evening clothes, and he was built like a halfback.

"I want that roll of film," he said, "and I don't want any argument."

Don Cooper cursed softly. He'd looked everywhere for lurkers except under his own car.

"You shoot and I'll shoot!" came another voice.

The challenge sounded clear, cool and confident from immediately behind Don Cooper. His eyes snapped to the rear-vision mirror. He'd known the voice, of course, but it was still a miracle when he saw her.

Marion Brill was in the back of the car, with a wicked little Colt in her right hand—and the Colt was pointed unswervingly at the man on the running board.

The halfback did several things at once, and all of them wrong. He looked hard to make sure that it was really a woman who had challenged him; he was surprised about it, and he went through a mad mental debate as to whether it was ethical for him to do anything about a pretty woman with a gun. Don Cooper relieved him of the necessity for decision.

With one quick, sure movement, he reached out and took the gun from the man's hand. When he removed it, he did

so with a twist—and he pushed. The car was already in gear, and he had nothing more to do than step on the gas.

For a wild moment, the halfback fought hard for balance; then he went off the running board in reverse and sat down on Seventeenth Street. Don Cooper whipped the car around the Eye Street corner toward Connecticut Avenue.

"Young lady," he said, "you shouldn't go around pointing guns at people—but thanks."

Marion laughed softly and came over the back of the seat in a tantalizing whirl of soft colors that straightened themselves out magically as she slid down into her place beside the driver. She was slipping the gun back into her bag—a wicked little short-barreled .38. There was a mate to that gun under Cooper's left armpit. As the car hummed out Connecticut, Don watched the long avenue.

"All right," he said. "You done noble, child. Explain it to me in words of one syllable."

The girl settled herself. "Nothing much," she drawled. "I saw Apollo come back to the hotel after you'd spilled him around, and I was sorry that I missed it. I was just coming back again after being home—briefly." Her lips came together hard, and she seemed far away for a moment.

"Apollo had just gone into the hotel, and there was a long, lean old duffer with a Ford who was explaining how one man knocked this handsome youth around and then passed him over as if he were a gift. He described you quite well, by the way. But of course, I knew who did things like that, anyway, and I watched Apollo."

"So what?"

"So after a while he went out and I went out, and he walked over to where your car was parked. Then he went down half a block to the Claridge Hotel, and I figured that he'd wait for you, but he had to phone his headquarters first. I laid my own bet that you'd use the car, and I didn't need to make any phone calls. I crawled in, and just a little while before you came, the lad crawled under." She spread her hands. "That's all."

"Practically all," Don Cooper nodded

soberly. "That's not explaining how you walked into a locked car."

Her smile was triumphant. "What kind of agent would I be if I had your car for a year and didn't make a set of keys for myself?"

Don Cooper let her have her minute. She'd earned it. There was a fairly stiff line of traffic rolling out Connecticut Avenue, and he had to play the wheel with precision, and do a choice bit of weaving to make any time at all. The girl lighted a cigarette from the lighter on his dash.

"Don," she said after a time, "you haven't told me a thing about tonight. And where are we going?"

"Your place. Your father called me and practically commanded it."

"We're not. Pull in to the curb, Don."

There was urgency in her tone, and Don Cooper knew her too well to ignore that tone. He pulled to the curb. Marion puffed hard on her cigarette.

"I—I—" She broke off with a shrug. "Tell me your version of the business, Don. I'll talk later."

He looked at her thoughtfully. Some new factor had moved into the piece. "All right," he said softly.

He was no orator, as Count di Carlo was, and he had never had time to tell stories that way. The narrative took him a minimum of time in the telling. Marion lighted another cigarette.

"I should have gone with you," she said. "You wouldn't have had to run away from Gaylord, and leave her with a nice little telephone to play with."

Don Cooper let that lie discreetly where it fell.

"Anyway, I'm glad I know about the little bedroom scene," the girl added. "It explains Apollo."

Don Cooper grinned. "I'm away ahead of you. He was too clumsy to belong to Zeron. His rôle was that of a noble youth who was glad to be a lady's trained seal."

"You reason well on some angles."

Don Cooper's eyes narrowed; then he grinned. "Let it go. We've got work to do, youngster—lots of it." His grin faded. "You're in trouble. Tell me."

"No, Don. I've got to think it over. I

don't get it myself, yet. Run along to the house, and flag a cab for me. I'll wait for you at the Carlton."

Something in her face stopped Don Cooper's protest. She wasn't herself. Something had hit her hard, and it worried him.

"On one condition, Marion," he said. "Your word that you'll wait there for me."

"I'll try." She evaded the promise deftly.

Don Cooper hesitated, then he stepped out and flagged a passing Diamond. As the taxi's brakes squealed, the girl slid out almost into his arms. For a few seconds she was very close to him.

"Don," she said, "they're mixing Dad up in this some way. He's full up on this 'preparedness is patriotism' hokey and—Don, I'm afraid. He'd be a baby in the hands of—Zeron."

His brows drew down at that. He patted her shoulder. "I'll look around," he said. "Just park at the Carlton—right out in the middle of the lobby."

THE Honorable Stephen Brill was mad. He was pacing the floor of his study when Don Cooper was ushered in, and he had a calm, patient audience of one—*Monsieur* Paul Zeron.

Don Cooper registered that picture, digested it, and laid it away behind a poker mask. The senator was drawn to his full height, a watch in his hand.

"You are inexcusably late," he said. "You have wasted the time of *Monsieur* Zeron and myself at a time when moments were never so precious. You—"

"Unfortunately, I had a serious matter on my hands, too. I'm sorry." Don Cooper hadn't the time to be tactful, and he had no time to listen to a senator being a statesman.

Stephen Brill froze into an attitude, his face a stern mask. "I'll overlook that," he said. "I've just learned of the work that you've been doing—and you're too young for it. With the cocksureness of youth, you plunge into matters beyond the comprehension of one of your years. You . . ."

There was more of it, and this was

from a man who ran errands for munitions manufacturers in the belief that he was doing his sacred duty to his country; a man who did not even know that his own daughter was an agent of counter-espionage. Don Cooper sighed wearily.

"Your time is valuable, senator. So is mine. Let's be specific. What does Zeron want that I have—or is he merely interested in shipping me to Maine?" The question rang out like a shot.

He looked at the man of many flags. Paul Zeron was relaxed in a big chair. His expression did not change.

Stephen Brill hit the desk with his fist. "Your impudence, sir, does not help your cause. You have in your possession a roll of camera film, which, I am told, is a source of potential disaster to a vital program of the United States. Mr. Zeron—"

"Mr. Zeron claims this film?" Don Cooper broke in.

"I do." There was no affability to Zeron now as he came into the argument.

Don Cooper raised his eyebrows. "It is yours?"

Zeron met his eyes. "By power of agent, yes."

"Well, you can't have it."

That was a bombshell. Zeron sat up straight. Stephen Brill looked incredulous. Cooper beat him to the punch. "Senator," he said, "if you found something, you'd make any claimant describe the object and give some reasonable proof of ownership."

He paused, leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. This was a laugh. The false bait was still working. Cooper's inward enjoyment did not show in his face. "There is only one way of describing film," he said. "If it is exposed, the claimant can prove his claim by describing the pictures taken." He looked significantly at Zeron, his face a mask of gravity.

Zeron rose. "That is impossible," he said. "Those pictures cover a confidential matter that may not be discussed with you." He was getting in deep over the pictures he imagined Bushman had taken. "The senator, in his official capac-

ity, knows well what that matter is. His word should carry weight. Against his word, you have only your own stubbornness."

"Plus some slight acquaintance with the claimant, my dear Zeron."

Obviously, Don realized, he had told Brill they contained munitions secrets. The eyes of the two men locked. The exchange had taken place a little too swiftly for the senator. Now he unlimbered.

"Cooper," he said, "this is outrageous. I insist—"

"You have no authority to insist." Cooper was still looking at Zeron. The little man drew himself up stiffly.

"Senator," he said, "this man will interpret what I say now as a threat from myself. You know that I speak out of experience and knowledge. If he walks out of here with that little roll, he will not live an hour."

THE senator was uncomfortable. He had found unexpected strength in Don Cooper, and his political training had taught him to walk wide of men with strong hands to play. Besides, he was in the middle, and he knew that, too. No good politician stays in the middle when two strong forces tangle—on the fence, perhaps, but never in the whipsaw area. Don Cooper saved him further embarrassment.

"Senator," he offered, "I'll compromise on this. I will permit you to keep the disputed object in your safe with the understanding that it is to be surrendered to no one until we have another meeting to discuss it."

The senator looked his relief. Paul Zeron studied Cooper curiously, then nodded his head. "I am satisfied with that arrangement," he said.

Don Cooper removed from his pocket a small spool that was wound in black. He could have that safe watched, if necessary. It might be interesting to see who would try to crack it. He smiled inwardly. It was not the first time that he had used bait, but he had seldom used such slight bait more effectively.

A little unsteadily, the senator picked up the dark object. He crossed the room,

moved a picture on the wall and twirled the combination. The safe door gave a little click. The senator reached into it with the little roll in his hand, then stopped abruptly. He gave an exclamation of alarm, laid the roll down and stepped back from the safe, staring.

Zeron and Don Cooper started from their chairs.

The senator turned halfway around. "My papers—I've been robbed!"

Don Cooper looked squarely at Zeron, but the man wasn't looking at him. There was an odd look on his face. Half-crouched, he stared at the senator. His eyes were very much alive now, some inner flame kindling them.

"The papers that I intrusted to you?" There was an unconcealed fury in his voice that was very unusual for Zeron.

"Gone, with mine." Stephen Brill seemed dazed. He looked back at the safe, then turned away again, bewilderment deepening in his face. "Impossible," he said. "No one could—"

"Who has the combination? Secretaries?"

"No one but myself. Absolutely no one."

Paul Zeron turned his blazing eyes for a second on Don Cooper; then they flamed back at Brill. "Your daughter," he said.

Don Cooper took one step forward. "Follow that line of reasoning into any action whatever, Zeron," he said, "and you've less time to live than you gave

me. That's not advice out of experience, either—it's a plain threat!"

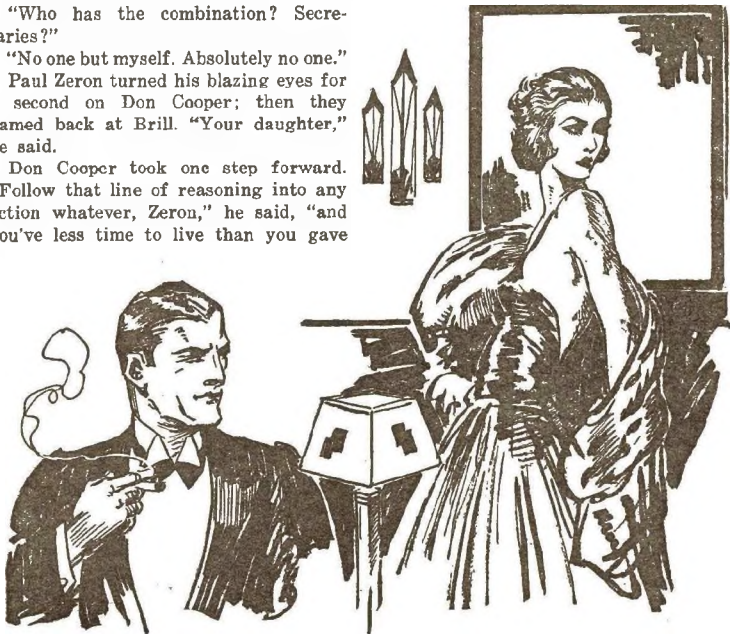
Stephen Brill's eyes were puzzled. "Gentlemen, I do not understand. My daughter knows nothing of matters in my safe." He looked at Don Cooper. "Just what do you mean by 'a threat'?"

Zeron all but spat. "He means that he is of the belief that your daughter knows more than you suspect."

Don Cooper took two steps, slammed the safe door and twirled the knob. "Senator," he said, "I'm leaving, and I'm holding you to your agreement on that object I entrusted to you. When another man speaks for me in your home, I leave him to continue."

He turned on his heel and left without a backward look.

Taking the steps of the Brill home at a bound, Don Cooper made for his car. It had been good to see the consternation in Zeron's face when he learned that his papers had been taken from the safe,



but this was no time for gloating. His smile was a bit thin.

The senator's childlike faith was touching. He had believed some story of Zeron's, and had taken papers from the man to keep in his safe. Anyone raised in Washington should have known better. Zeron would never trust papers of value in other hands—but he was capable of planting papers that would make Stephen Brill appear as a ringleader in a plot against his own country—a bribed hireling, perhaps, of Italy.

Don Cooper's car was streaking down Connecticut. It was passing the lights of the Shoreham, and he recalled suddenly that Paul Zeron could beat him to the Carlton by proxy if he used the telephone. It was a disturbing thought, but it was too late to hunt up a phone and try to beat him to it. He leaned harder on the accelerator and made time. But when he swung into the Carlton lobby, he knew that he had lost.

Marion Brill was not there.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEATH LIST

"MISS BRILL left a message for you, Mr. Cooper."

The clerk was holding an envelope in his hand. Don Cooper took it gratefully, managed a casual air and rammed it into his pocket. "How long ago?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes."

He nodded, gave the lobby a quick glance and found a quiet corner. There was a single page of script, and an enclosure. Marion had used the code which had carried most of her confidential messages to him in Manchukuo. Don Cooper could read it at sight.

You probably know by now that I opened Dad's safe tonight. I had to. Zeron was there when I went home to change. He was talking to Dad about you. Dad thinks that Zeron is just a fellow-believer in preparedness. He trusts him. Zeron mentioned the fact that he had entrusted father with important papers. I got them. I had to.

Father never read them, of course. Zeron knew he wouldn't. They link Dad up with every bit of bribery, corruption and conspiracy in the munitions deals of the last

five years. No proof. Just inference. The plot against Italy is just hinted at, but he's supposed to be in that, too. Those papers were meant to be found. It's the build-up of another newspaper sensation.

Look at the enclosed list. I copied it verbatim. It's a war-maker. Dad would be the goat, the possessor of murderous knowledge. I just called Rockwell. I'm going over. He's got to get behind this list before it's too late.

Marion had to be badly shaken to write like that. Don Cooper spread out the enclosed list and frowned. It was a list of the names of prominent people, in altogether different walks of life. Still, something about the list was familiar to Cooper. Suddenly he stiffened.

They were indeed prominent people—but all of those at the top of the list were dead. His face paled as he went over the list again. The dead were listed in the exact order in which they had died under the bullets of assassins.

Premier Duca, Rumania
Bronislaw Pieracki, Poland
Chancellor Dolfuss, Austria
King Alexander, Yugoslavia

His staring eyes were looking right through that paper of a monstrous conspiracy into which small groups were linked with the cold metal of greed. Here was a list of dead—among them, men who had served their respective countries so well that the war-makers despaired of setting the stage for private gain while these men lived.

Across Europe spread the trail of the assassins, small, stupid men who were privates in the army of intrigue without knowing it—warped, inflamed men who wielded the weapons of murder in the cause of the very forces which had made them what they were. And behind these men. . . .

Ah, there the trail would be hard to follow. The men who led soft lives while hard hands wielded weapons in peacetime were the same men who would lead soft lives while armies marched to war. There were the Paul Zerons who had craft and intelligence for hire, but behind the Zerons there were men who hired that intelligence and that ruthlessness.

His eyes dropped to the list once more and his breath caught again. The first shock had worn off, and he saw now the thing that had made Marion hurry to Rockwell without waiting for him. The next name on the list was the name of a living man, an American.

It was the name of Walter R. Hirsch.

Hirsch would be in Washington tomorrow. He would arrive while the excitement of tonight's dramatic murder was still at fever heat; while people were still speculating on the damning evidence of Italian intrigue that the war-makers had so adroitly planted. Walter Hirsch, head of the great newspaper chain that had published the Babbling Benny *exposé*, would be shot down in the street as the others had been shot before him.

And the war-makers would have some hopped-up imbecile do the trigger work—some dull-witted Italian gunman, no doubt, who would never realize that he was a tool used to discredit the country of his birth and make money for the munitions barons.

Don Cooper was on his feet in an instant, and across the lobby to the telephone. His own voice sounded strange to him as he gave Rockwell's private number. A click sounded, and then Rockwell's dry voice.

"No, Cooper, she isn't here yet. . . . I've been wondering. She's had ample time. . . ."

Don Cooper took a deep breath. "I'll find her," he said, "but get this—Walter Hirsch is getting in tomorrow. Throw an army around him. He's on the murder book. Details later. I'm heading for the Barrington-Dorchester fortress."

THE fortress stood bleakly outlined on a hill above Wisconsin Avenue, a touch of old Austria in the capital of a great democracy. About it spread acres of wooded estate. Don Cooper parked his car on the avenue, avoided the main gate and went over a particularly dark section of the wall.

There was no sound or sign of life, but he walked cautiously through the wooded approach. He cursed the dark

Chesterfield which hampered him, but he kept it on. It was preferable to the gleaming target of a white shirt-front.

As he approached the fortress itself, he caught a gleam of light through one narrow window a flight above ground level. The impatience dropped from him, and he moved like a ghost in the shadow of the towering pile. He could still be wrong, but he didn't believe so. He worked slowly around until he commanded the massive arched entrance; then he knew that he was right.

There was a man on guard there, a hulking, stoop-shouldered man who kept his hands in his pockets, and his sullen eyes on the narrow, private road. There was gunman written in every line of him.

Rear entrances to the fortress were out. The construction of it made any such notion impractical. It would have to be the front, and there was no time for finesse. Don Cooper groped around for a heavy stone that would not be too big.

He found one and hefted it. He had been a fair pitcher in his college days. He shed the overcoat, laying his heavy gun on top of it.

The guard was just standing there. Don Cooper's arm whipped back, and the stone went down on a line. He was charging in behind the stone, and he saw the agonized expression of surprise on the guard's face as the missile took him amidships.

The man never had a chance to draw his gun. He was off balance when Cooper hit him, and Cooper hit him swinging. A booming right stopped the cry on the man's lips; then Don Cooper's fist opened, and the edge of his hand snapped across the man's windpipe.

He'd brought that blow from Asia and he could have killed with it. It was enough to know that his man would be out for many minutes. He turned swiftly toward the door—and a gun boomed.

He felt the tug of the lead as it whistled past his body between his arm and ribs. Then he was doubled over and diving for the door. Hell was loose with that shot, of course—but he'd never

know how much hell if he stayed out there in the light to argue.

Another shot burned past him and smashed into the door.

He made the hall on his hands and knees, and scrambled up to charge the stairs, with his small gun in his fist. The big gun was a regret. He'd laid it down when he threw the stone. It had been too heavy in his pocket. He started up the stairs.

Oddly there was no opposition, no noise, as he ascended. Pale light gleamed up there, but it was not shining directly on the broad stairs. It was somewhere down the corridor. The main hall downstairs was lighted brightly. He was moving out of light to twilight, out of noise to silence.

Then something dropped on him out of the dark, and he tried in vain to pull his head out of the way. Great, glaring balls of intense light danced before his eyes and receded gradually until they were mere pinpoints. After that there was complete darkness.

CHAPTER VII

FIVE MINUTES TO LIVE

HE came back to consciousness with Marion bending over him. He was in a library of tremendous proportions. Shelves ran around the room from floor to ceiling, broken only in three places—by the door and by two high, narrow windows. The windows were barred and cross-barred.

"Don, Don, are you all right?"

Marion was on her knees, one arm around him. He struggled up groggily. It was bad enough to have played the fool, without being worried over by the girl he had come out to save. She had been crying.

"I thought they'd killed you. They just dumped you in."

"Who?" His voice was thick, husky.

"Apollo and some others."

He groaned. "I deserve even that. I walked into it."

"So did I." The girl's voice was bitter. "I was worrying about Dad, trying

to hurry. They took me as easily as if I were a little Campfire Girl."

Don Cooper was on his feet, swaying a little, but forcing the pain down by an effort of will that brought sweat to his forehead.

"Don, we've got to get out. Hirsch—"

"I know. I told Rockwell. But we've got to get out, anyway. You're in danger. You know too much." His head was clearing now. "Those papers, Marion—did Zeron get them?"

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "No. They're in the Carlton safe; but they don't prove anything on anybody. As long as Dad hasn't got them, it's all right—"

The door opened. Irene Gaylord stood there for the moment, posing. Even under circumstances such as these, with an audience that could not be appreciative, she made a dramatic entrance. Behind her was the halfback, with something of a swagger in his manner. He was the man who came back, virtue triumphant, the conqueror of his lady's tormentor.

IRENE GAYLORD was looking at Don Cooper with a curl to her full lips. She moved into the room, and behind her came first the college wonder, clutching a big Luger, and then a broad, flabby man with dull eyes. Don Cooper's gun had been taken away from him, and his expression as he looked at the halfback's gun brought a flush to the man's face.

As though he had just realized that the weapon was unnecessary, the halfback lowered it and tried to put it in his pocket. Cooper's gun was already in that pocket and the halfback had to transfer the smaller gun to his left side-pocket to make room for the Luger.

Another man entered. This man was decidedly an Italian, just as he was decidedly drug-soaked. Tomorrow Walter Hirsch would come to Washington. Here was a prime victim for the mob, the dull, dumb instrument destined for the label "assassin."

Irene Gaylord broke in on his line of thought.

"I had you brought here," she said

cuttingly, "because I thought that you might like to share a room with a woman who would not threaten to scream."

Don Cooper seemed to lose his head completely. He crouched, clenched his fists and charged at the woman, his mouth working. The halfback made a pass at the Luger, decided that there wasn't time for that, and threw his body in the way of Cooper's charge as the girl took a frightened step backward.

The bodies of the two men crashed, and for a few seconds they strained against each other. Then the Italian's gun was out and clubbed. Don Cooper wriggled free and stepped back out of range. One crowning was enough for an evening.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I lost my head." He ran his fingers through his hair, and looked at the floor. Irene Gaylord laughed at him.

"I was almost impressed with you," she said. "Come, Carl."

The halfback brightened and fell in behind her as she turned to the door. The Italian saw no more need for his services and went out into the hall. Irene Gaylord did not look back, but both Cooper and Marion stared steadily after her.

Then Don Cooper's eyes met Marion's. "They're waiting for Zeron, of course," he said.

She nodded. "We'll be here when he comes, too."

Don Cooper's eyes were thoughtful, distant. "I want to be. I've got one card to play."

Marion Brill smiled. "I know. I saw you get it."

"Get what?"

"The one card."



Don spread his hands and looked at them. "The hand is quicker than the eye, no?"

"No," she said. "It isn't."

DAWN was tinting the narrow windows of the old library when Zeron came. Irene Gaylord knew what his coming portended, and there was a greedy look of anticipation on her face as she entered the library behind the little internationalist. At her side walked a sleepy-looking college wonder. The Italian and the man who had guarded the door downstairs were ranged on either side of the exit.

Zeron ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. His eyes drilled the wearily defiant Marion Brill. There was no veneer of politeness covering his viciousness now.

"I cannot argue or temporize," he said harshly. "You have less than five minutes to live unless you tell me where you put the papers you stole from the safe of your father."

"They are where you can't get them."

"So!" The little man stepped close. His hand moved, and came up with a flat automatic gripped tight. He snapped a command, and the Italian took Marion by the arm and escorted her the width of the room from Don Cooper. Then he went back to his post. The other gunman had been vigilant. Zeron pointed the muzzle of his gun and lifted it on a line with the girl's heart.

"I count three," he said. "You will live that long. One!"

The girl was pale, defiant, looking out over his head.

"Two." She tensed, but did not flinch. Don Cooper stood like a statue, his unblinking eyes fixed on Zeron.

Suddenly the little man stepped back. "It is too fast. You do not fear it that way."

The girl swayed a little, caught herself and straightened. Don Cooper wiped his forehead. He had been sure—and yet he'd died a hundred deaths. Zeron could not kill quickly. He had to make a play for those papers before he killed. Don knew that, but he had watched every

muscle movement and every flicker of expression on the little man's face. He'd have seen the resolve to fire.

Zeron was holding the automatic up so that the girl could see it. "You see the sight on this weapon? It slashes most cruel—and this gun, it is heavy. You are beautiful, *mademoiselle*, but the first blow breaks your nose. And then—" His lips curled back from his teeth.

Marion Brill's eyes widened in terror. "You wouldn't!"

"No?" There was a flicker of movement in the man's tense body.

"Stop!" Don Cooper took a step forward, ignoring the fact that three hands moved to ready guns. Paul Zeron had half-turned. His eyes met Cooper's.

"That doesn't buy you a thing, Zeron." Cooper's voice was grim. "You're practically standing on the gallows now."

"So?"

"Yes. You killed Benny Bushman yourself. You didn't trust that job to anybody else. That finishes you."

Paul Zeron laughed. "With another man's fingerprints on the stiletto, and with that man bearing the marks of the bomb—how can I be suspected?"

Don Cooper was ignoring everyone else in the room. He was throwing the whole weight of his will on Zeron. He had one card, but the spot had to be right for the playing of that card.

"That bomb never marked anything," he said. "It was built to make a noise and a stink and a lot of smoke. It made nothing else."

Zeron's eyebrows went up mockingly.

"This bomb did not remove hair?"

"It did not. No bomb ever built could take the hair from under a man's armpits and leave his clothes on him. Benny Bushman took the bomb inside of him. That's why he was sick for days and had to take his meals in his room. That's why Paolo Luca disappeared for three days. You've got a quack doctor on your staff somewhere who'll scurry to cover and stay hidden when you fall."

"And the bomb?" A deadliness had crept into Zeron's voice.

"Is thallium acetate, the drug that reputable doctors use over a three-month

period to remove the hair in case of severe skin disease. You used a concentrate."

"And the fingerprints?"

"You wouldn't know about them if you hadn't put them on the stiletto when you had poor Luca helpless out here where your bomb-throwing girl friend lured him."

Irene Gaylord fairly leaped across the room. "That's the second time you've accused me of that!" Her hand cracked viciously across his face.

DON COOPER laughed. He had them coming at him again. "The police will say so, too," he said. "Your eyewitness account of a struggle will blow up when they get around to asking you why you had a dinner engagement with a sick man, and how you identified Benny Bushman so quickly without his hair, and failed to comment on it. You had nothing to do but flip a bomb into a room with a dead man and then tell a story. You boobed the story."

She slapped his face again, and he took a backward step. Zeron snapped his fingers. "Enough, Irene." The girl stepped back, and Zeron bent a cold look on Don Cooper.

"The police, too," he said, "will tell you that I would have destroyed the set of prints on that stiletto if I had clutched it to kill."

Don Cooper smiled at him. "That was good," he said, "but they have the sheath of cellophane that covered the haft of that weapon."

Zeron stiffened slowly. "You should have gone to Maine," he said frozenly. "You will never go now." His thin lips flattened over his teeth as he lifted the heavy gun. "First you will watch me break the nose of *mademoiselle* who does not speak. Then—"

He turned swiftly to Marion. Don Cooper's hand moved too fast for any eye to follow. The gunman who had guarded the door was vigilant, but his draw was too slow. Metal flashed in Don Cooper's hand, and a .38 slammed the gunman in the chest. The man grunted and went down like a knocked-out prize

fighter in slow motion, then was still.

Paul Zeron pulled his head down and crouched. He was out of position to fire, and he was a small target when he crouched. Don Cooper didn't risk his aim with the baby .38—Marion was too close. Instead, he swung his gun in an arc.

"Hold it, everybody!"

The mere fact of his having a gun had been a surprise in his favor. The Italian was glowering at him; Zeron's eyes had filmed over like a snake's; the halfback was wide-eyed, and . . .

"Look out, Don!"

The cry was wrung from Marion, and he knew what called it forth, knew suddenly, with a curse. He couldn't look out. Two of the men before him were tensing . . . A cold voice sounded almost in his ear.

"Just move. I'd love it."

He didn't need to wonder if Irene Gaylord was bluffing. He knew that she wasn't. She wasn't actress enough to get that gloat into her voice.

"I began to suspect your little act as soon as it was put on. You aren't the type to hit a woman. You just wanted an excuse to crash into Carl and wrestle with him—and get his gun." She shrugged, and gave way to the temptation to play the scene. Head tilted, she gave a long, soft laugh of elation. . . .

Marion Brill had been leaning back against the book shelves as though exhausted, her eyes half-closed. But when she moved, her body was like a snapping spring. Her hand closed on a book and released it in one continuous, flowing movement—and it came on a line, straight for that laughing face.

Few women know how to get out of the way of anything that comes like that—and Irene Gaylord was not one of the few. She broke off in the middle of a trilled note, gasped, dropped her gun—and took the book head-on.

Guns roared in the room. Don Cooper had twisted the instant he saw that book leave the shelf, but he was not quite quick enough. He felt a blow that was like the impact of the hardest, ice-packed snowball that was ever rolled, and he

went down with it, lights dancing in his brain.

Through the fog and the thunder, he saw Paul Zeron wheeling on Marion Brill, his gun coming up. Don Cooper fired from the floor, and the spy's gun stopped in mid-arc. The little man's body spun like a dancing doll, hit the bookcase and bounced. Dimly, Don realized that there had been other shots, but he didn't see what Marion Brill saw with horror-filled eyes. . . .

The quick shot of the drug-soaked Italian that had felled Don was instantly followed by another that missed him by a hair after he had fallen, smashing Irene Gaylord back against the wall. Then came the quick, impetuous dive of the halfback toward the girl—which took him into the gunman's third shot. . . .

All that Cooper had missed, but his eyes found the gunman in the split-second pause that followed the fall of the devoted Carl. His gun came up desperately as the Italian's gun came down. His finger squeezed hard on the trigger, but the icy stab along his arm told him that he had been hit. His gun flew from his hand, and he felt the bony hand of death reaching for him. Then his head cleared, and again he saw his antagonist plainly.

The Italian had not started to fall yet. He was drawn upright, his mouth half-open. One of his hands was gripping hard on his chest. When he went down, the crash of his fall echoed in the huge room.

Feet pounded on the stairs, and the door burst open. Don Cooper fought an impulse to lie down and forget it all. He wobbled upright, and stood on braced legs as Bill Russell and Dan Kling crashed the room with a small army of cops behind them. He smiled wearily at them.

"Everybody but the coroner," he said, "and he's the only bird we need."

But Don Cooper was wrong about that. Irene Gaylord and Carl went to the hospital together with less to worry about, as far as wounds were concerned, than

Don Cooper. He had two pellets of lead where the lead hurt, even if it didn't interfere with the necessary business of living.

Propped up on a hospital bed, with Marion Brill holding his hand, he heard the wind-up from the lips of Ben Rockwell. Ben had conferred with Russell when he heard nothing further from Marion or Don Cooper, and they had decided to follow up Cooper's visit to the fortress, in spite of his asking for a lone-hand play. Russell had taken Kling in on it, and they had just found Cooper's coat and gun on the grounds when the shooting started.

"And that's that." The bald-headed man stood up. "The Gaylord woman is scared to death. She's going to live, and it's liable to be tough living. The Barington-Dorchesteres have stepped out of it, with Zeron dead. They say he blackmailed them into sponsoring the girl. Maybe he did. Anyway, she's cracked wide open and so has the conspiracy. We're rounding up people now from a list of names that she's given us." He smiled grimly.

"It's enough to make Zeron turn in his grave, but that young Italian who was picked for the goat is liable to come out of this a hero. I've given a nice tale to some of the newspaper lads. And now—" he shrugged his shoulders "—I suppose I can't get any work out of you for a while. Where do you think you'll go?"

Don Cooper grinned. "Maine," he said. "I hear it's a healthy spot."

As the echo of Rockwell's dry chuckle died out in the corridor, Don Cooper looked up into eyes that gazed at him with unashamed tenderness. He lifted his one good arm slowly.

"Is the hand quicker than the eye?" he asked softly.

Marion Brill shook her head. "No," she said. "It isn't."

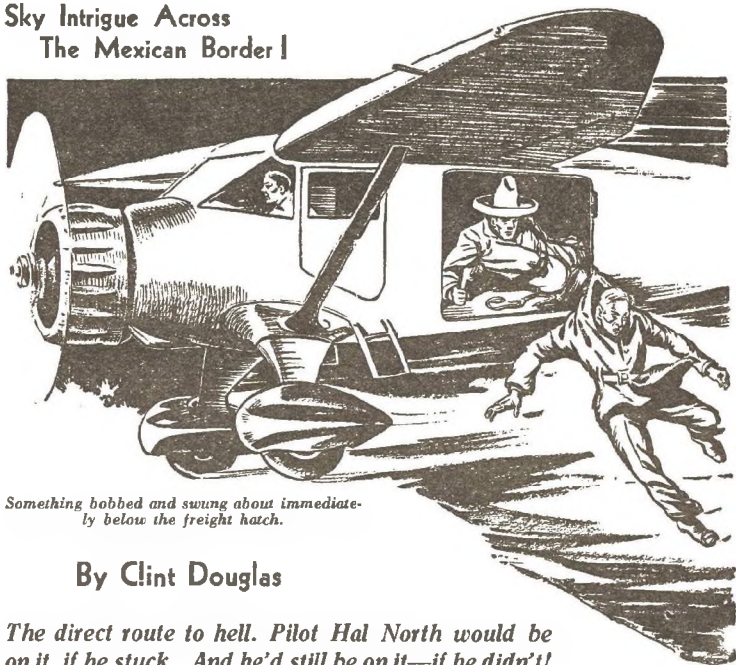
Deliberately, she closed her eyes.



• Flying

Border Vultures

Sky Intrigue Across
The Mexican Border I



Something bobbed and swung about immediately below the freight hatch.

By Clint Douglas

The direct route to hell. Pilot Hal North would be on it, if he stuck. And he'd still be on it—if he didn't!

HAL NORTH, proprietor of the North Aviation School, had just decided that his business was a flop. It had everything but pupils.

Hal had refused to buy interest in Tip Varney's Aero company because he wanted absolute freedom and a business all his own. Now he sat on all the furniture he possessed—a backless chair—and considered.

Before him stood his ship, a Waco two-place open-closed biplane powered with a 420 h.p. motor. It had taken Hal over two years as co-pilot with American Airways to earn money to buy this ship, and now the cash left over was gone. With

three more punches, his meal ticket would be a ghost. He wished he had thrown in with Tip, whose Columbia Air Cruisers were going strong; big money was in sight.

But that chance was gone. Still, he could go to see Tip about a pilot's job—that is, after his date with the local Waco distributor, who had phoned that he wanted to show Hal's ship to a prospect and perhaps make a flight. There was a ten-spot in it for Hal.

Hal waited for the salesman and watched the wind sausage over Tip's hangars fill and flop. Two bi-motored ships from the north landed on the field

and several smaller craft sat down before the Waco man rolled up in his big roadster.

With him was a raw-boned man wearing a corduroy suit, on whose head sat a ten-gallon sombrero which was a decided pink in color. The man's face was weathered a deep tan, and his eyes were deep in their sockets. When he got out of the car, he favored one foot, which Hal noticed had its shoe split to relieve pressure on some injury or infirmity. The stranger hobbled along, aided by a heavy cane.

The sales manager, Roy Blaine, introduced the man to Hal as Ira Boles. There came over Hal a feeling of awe which the presence of a famous millionaire brings to the young and impecunious. Blaine at once began to explain the points of the Waco, going over the ship from prop to rudder and wing tip to wing tip. The millionaire grunted and kept studying Hal to the latter's embarrassment.

"All right," said Boles impatiently. "I guess she'll fly. I'll take one of 'em."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Blaine. "As I said before, we can't make delivery for about two weeks. We're 'way behind."

Boles snorted. "Two weeks!" he shouted. "I'm going to have one today. Hear that? I'll pay a bonus."

"I'm sorry, sir," began Blaine, fluttering about.

"Get away from my game foot!" stormed Boles. He hobbled to the backless chair, sat down and glowered at Blaine.

"A fine business!" he snapped. He rested his hands on the cane and bowed his head. "Tear that down!" he barked at Hal, pointing to the sign which told the world the merits of the North Aviation School. "Looks to me, young feller," he continued, "like you ain't even got a flying kindergarten, let alone a school. I'll hire you for six hundred a month and your plane for two hundred, and pay all expenses. Take it or leave it."

Hal did some lightning thinking. Here was a chance to side-step starvation, he would still have his ship, and he might

save money enough to buy in with Tip.

"I'll take it, sir," he said.

Boles grunted. "Don't talk to newspaper men—*ever*. Phone for a taxi. Must go back to my hotel."

He spurned Blaine's offer of transportation and sat grouchy, humped over the chair. Hal ran to Tip's office and phoned. He told his friend the good news.

"Ira Boles, eh?" murmured Tip. "Pink hat and all? He's used our ships a lot. Last time had a fight with me because I wouldn't give him a whole cabin ship to himself. He sure burned me up. He's a sore head most of the time, but square as a die. I'll keep out of sight. How is he this morning?"

"He has a game foot."

"Probably got it," speculated Tip, "from kicking bankers off'n his front porch. Hal, you're sittin' pretty. Pay no attention to his yowls 'cause they'll be taken care of in the pay roll. Let me hear from you. Remember, if Ira gets too irate, there's a job waiting here. Good luck, buddy."

HAL rushed back. It took an hour for Boles to make the round trip to the hotel. During that time, Hal went over the Waco which, as always, was in perfect condition. When Boles arrived Hal helped him into the cockpit of the Waco and asked for orders.

The sunken eyes were focused upon him for a moment. "My place is north and east of Holtville, about sixty miles out on the desert," said Boles. "Fly north out of this field until we're out of sight and are sure we ain't followed. I have to be careful. Then take the course to Taj-e-Sahra, which is the name of my desert home. It means 'Gem of the Desert.' Make it in a couple of hours, can't you? It ain't more'n one hundred and fifty miles from San Diego here."

"Make it in an hour," answered Hal, as his employer exchanged pink sombrero for helmet and goggles.

After taking off, Hal avoided all towns, and then headed a little north of east in order to hit a low place in the Cutamaca Mountains, which separate San Diego County from Imperial Valley. They were

over the chequered greens of cultivated fields of the Imperial Valley, and the haza above the towns of El Centro and Brawley was in the distance.

"Young feller," yelled Boles, "fly around those towns by the north and come into Taj-e-Sahrâ from the east. The landing field is on the east side."

"Okay, sir," answered Hal, and turned into the new course.

The cultivated fields below became scattered, with the desert in between. They passed over the lower end of Salton Sea, crossed the railroad and then Hal turned south. They were over wild country—the uneven expanse of the desert with rolling drifts of sand here and there, and jagged rock outcrops buttressed with purple shadows. All marks of civilization were gone. They swung over a low ridge, and Hal noticed a peculiar thing. The sands on one side of the high ground were marked with dark splotches and great ribbons, in sharp contrast with the yellowish white in between.

"Mr. Boles," he called. The boss started as if roused from sleep.

"What are those dark streaks on the ground beyond that ridge we just passed?"

"Black sand," came the answer. "The wind uncovers layers of it which soon get mixed with the ordinary sand. That black stuff carries some gold values. Maybe some day I'll have a try at 'em. Yonder, young feller, is Taj-e-Sahrâ."

DEAD ahead, it seemed a mirage was forming, hanging in the air under the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. It would drop suddenly to earth, rise again, and then there were two, one on earth and the other hanging in the sky. It was a vision of long white walls with waving palms within, and there were gleams of red from tile roofs. At one corner of the wall, a minaret lifted high, and this gem lay shimmering in splendor amid the waste of the desert.

Hal circled the place once, and saw that the house, in the form of a hollow square, stood in the centre of a great garden enclosed by the walls. There was a swimming pool within the court of the

house, and about the garden were winding canals. He would have made the circuit again, but Boles spoke.

"The landing field is on the east," he said. "That black, oiled ground. Land from the east or you'll get in trouble."

There was a weather vane on the minaret, and Hal noted the wind direction. Coming in from the east, he was forced to make a cross-wind landing. He made a dandy on level wings, and all three wheels touched field at the same instant.

As he taxied along, he saw why he must come in from the east: On the north were the outer walls of Taj-e-Sahrâ; to the south was a deep sand gully, and to the west were low hangars. He had not noticed the buildings from the air, and wondered until he saw how carefully they were camouflaged.

He taxied almost to the wide doors and cut off. Then the heat of the desert settled upon him, crushing out the clear air of the upper spaces. He began to swelter in his flying clothes.

"Hi!" shouted Boles. "Hi!"

Two Chinese came running from the hangar. They helped Boles from the cockpit, and they were mighty careful about it. Boles said the men would run the ship into the hangar, asked for his pink sombrero, and then calling Hal to follow, led the way through a gate to the garden.

Hal stopped in astonishment. All about were strange, exotic plants—vines, shrubs, trees and palms. Small canals wound among the tree trunks, and the desert breeze, which outside the walls was like the blast of a furnace, cooled with the rustling of leaves. The trees, though vigorous, had not aged enough to attain much height. In an angle of the outer wall, the minaret stood like a slender finger thrust high into the desert air.

Boles hobbled slowly toward the house along a winding cement path. The house, as Hal had seen from the air, was square. Part was of two stories and roofed with red tile. The balance of the house was one story with a flat roof.

They passed under an elaborate arch to an entry. To one side was a large living room, Moorish in decorations and furnishings. All was in keeping with the

architecture. Boles led the way to a snug library. At the end of a hall, Hal glimpsed a billiard room.

"I hang out in this room when I'm alone," said Boles. "I'm going to stay here without the family until my foot gets well. Makes me lonesome in those big rooms. Glad to have your company, young feller. I'll call one of the boys and he'll show you your room." He pressed a button.

Hal was admiring the rows and rows of books when a young Chinaman slipped into the room noiselessly on felt slippers. He wore loose trousers and a blouse with wide sleeves. Boles spoke to the servant in Chinese.

"All light, mistah," said the Chinaman to Hal. "You come top side."

Hal followed his guide upstairs to a small bedroom. The Chinaman, who said his name was Ah Gin, gave Hal an appraising look and left the room to return with a light-weight gray suit, shoes, and all necessary articles for a complete change of raiment.

"Mebbe him fit," said Ah Gin. "You shavee, you findum things in bathloom." He showed all his teeth in a friendly grin, then slipped away on soundless feet.

AS HAL dressed, he reflected he had some boss and some job, and he lived in some house. Downstairs, Boles was at work over a desk in the library. He gave a hasty glance over his shoulder at Hal and turned attention again to the papers before him. Hal went into the billiard room and tried to make three-cushion caroms.

After dinner that evening, Hal and Boles sat in the library before an open fire—the desert nights are cool. Boles had placed a loose velvet slipper on his sore foot, which rested upon a cushioned stool. Hal remarked there was no roadway to Taj-e-Sahrā.

"You bet there ain't," said Boles, and chuckled. "All material was hauled forty miles over the desert by trailers. The only way to get in is by air. When I come out here, I don't want to be pestered, and I ain't." He chuckled again.

"Where does all this water come from?"

"A deep well," explained Boles, "and it cost plenty. It's under that minaret in a corner of the wall. First floor has the pumping machinery and the electric lighting plant. Above that is a store room, and over that a space with the water tanks. Alongside of the tanks is a ladder to the platform at the top of the tower. Got a beacon up there, but I don't use it. Flyers are getting too numerous. Don't want 'em attracted and dropping in at all hours, and that's why I had the shed camouflaged."

"I'd like to climb the minaret for the view," said Hal.

"No, you can't do that," answered Boles. "The boys around the place started that and I had to shut 'em off. Seemed to fascinate 'em. So you see, young feller, I can't let you do it and not them. Anyhow, you're up in the air enough to get all the view you need."

"Are all your servants Chinese, Mr. Boles?"

"Yes, I like 'em. You see, young feller, a Chinaman don't ask questions." And he chuckled at Hal's discomfiture.

The fire became a bed of glowing embers. Boles looked at the clock above the mantel and yawned. "It's early, but guess I'll be goin' to bed," he said. "Want to start early in the morning for Mexico. Own some raw land I'm putting in shape for cotton. We start at five. That all right with you?"

"Yes, sir. I'll get up early enough to go over the ship. How about flying over the Border, sir?"

"Just fly. I always wear my pink sombrero, so the Border Patrol will recognize me. Everybody knows my hat. Don't worry about that, young feller. Good-night."

As Boles hobbled away, Hal wanted to ask him if he owned any ships, but remembered the dig about questions. Hal was not sleepy. He sat and thought how quickly luck could change. Here he was, living in a palace and hobnobbing with a millionaire. He recalled to mind the few facts he knew about Ira Boles. The man owned estates all over the country. His

movements were rapid and kept from the public. He was liable to pop up any place, only to disappear as mysteriously as he came. The man was a philanthropist and an art connoisseur.

Hal was restless, and curious about Taj-e-Sahra. He had a desire to see the place by starlight. In the entry he found a white sweater coat, which he slipped on. He followed the winding paths, crossed several bridges over the canals and reached the gate in the outer wall. The iron grille shook under his hand, but did not open. It was locked.

The gleaming lanterns of the stars hung low in the clear air, and the land lay bright as with a new moon. There was a stinging coolness to the night which made Hal long to stretch his legs over the desert. With no other thought, he climbed by means of the bars of the grille to the top of the wall and dropped to the soft ground outside. He began to make a circuit of the walls. It was hard walking, and his shoes soon filled with the loose sand. He noticed that in places the wind had blown the sand in drifts, and if it had not been for the wall, the garden would have been smothered by the moving grains.

HAL came to the corner where stood the minaret overlooking the landing field, and stopped to gaze up at the cylindrical structure. It was so high it gave a false impression of its diameter. In the lower part were narrow windows which showed as dark shadows. Starting about a third of the way up, the wall was blank and tapering upward, and Hal surmised that part held the water tanks. A thin railing showed dimly at the top and above the railing was a swelling dome, gleaming golden in the starlight. The beacon was atop the dome. He walked out a distance and examined the structure from every angle. He whistled a few bars of a popular song.

Because it was so cold, he flapped his arms and shuffled his feet, and it was then that he noticed the white cloth fluttering from the highest upper window. It waved with a beckoning motion and wondering, puzzling, Hal approached

the wall. As he peered up at the window, the cloth disappeared. He waited and it reappeared, waved again and was withdrawn. Some small object dropped lightly to the sand near him. On hands and knees he felt for it, and at last his hand closed on a matchbox. Within the box he felt a roll of paper.

Hal buttoned the white sweater closer about him and began to run. He was taking the precaution of appearing to have made without pause the circuit of the wall. He didn't know how many eyes the night might have. He found that the wall had but the single entry, and when he neared it, he slowed down to regain his breath. Arriving at the gate, he started to climb the grille, and with the impact of his foot the gate swung open.

"Hello, mistah," a voice greeted him, and Ah Gin stepped from the shadow of the wall. "I see you go. Me wait fo' you come back. I no t'ink boss man likee you go fo' walk night time. Vely had fo' you."

"Thanks, Ah Gin," said Hal. "Do you always take so much interest in the new hired help?"

"That all light, mistah. I lockee gate now. You go bed pletty click?"

"Yes."

Deep in thought, Hal walked to the house and went softly upstairs. In his room, he locked the door and made ready for bed. Finally, he took the matchbox from his pocket and removed the roll of paper from it.

The paper bore a message, wretchedly scrawled as though written in the dark. The words had been formed with a very dull hard pencil which bit into the paper. "Help" was the first word he made out, followed by "Get Mr. Boles. Get Mr. Boles. Help. Send the call." There was a name scrawled at the end, but Hal could not make out if it were Tom, Tim or three initials.

He put the paper away carefully in a billfold in an inner pocket of the coat which hung on a chair by the head of the bed. He looked over the sweater coat he had borrowed. Sewed to the collar was the maker's tag, whereon was inked "L.A.C." The garment probably belonged

to some former guest of the Boles family, he thought.

Hal's first impulse was to take the message to Mr. Boles. But the hour was late and he did not want to disturb the household. Anyhow, why should one "get" Mr. Boles when the man was right there? Then there was the appeal, "*Send the call.*" What call? To whom? And how? These were the questions that came to him. It was possible the white sweater made the person in the minaret mistake him for some one else.

And about that call—Hal was certain there was no telephone. He was certain that no line of poles spanned the desert to Taj-e-Sahrâ. There remained but one method then—radio. If there were transmitting apparatus, he would like to know about it. Came another thought that the whole thing might be a hoax or a test, or even just plain foolishness.

The greatest virtues of the airman are caution and patience, combined with the ability to make and act on a decision in a split second or to hold that decision poised in mind, ready for instantaneous action. Hal decided he would wait and watch before revealing the knowledge he had. Forewarned was forearmed. If prisoner there was, it was likely he would not be harmed for a while. Else why keep a prisoner? The desert could hold a secret. Hal turned over in his bed and went to sleep.

HE dressed as the eastern desert sky **H**is first graying with the promise of dawn. He went downstairs with the idea of going to the hangar for inspection of his ship before breakfast, but Ah Gin, smiling as usual, met him in the entry.

"I know you getee up," said the celestial. "You come catchum glape-flute an' ham, egg, coffee. Vely fine ble'kfas'. Then you fixum fly-fly mo' bettah."

Hal was hungry and glad to sit down for breakfast. Ah Gin entered the room with a tray and placed a dish of canned peaches before him. "Vely solly," said the Chinaman, "glape-flute all gone. Mo' come today pretty click."

Hal looked at the fresh eggs and real

cream. "How do you get supplies, Ah Gin?"

"Fly-fly bling him. You see. He go 'way yestelday; come back today. You likee mo' biscuit?"

Hal knew Taj-e-Sahrâ had to be provisioned by air and he was interested to know another flyer was attached to the establishment. He would have somebody who talked his language. After eating, he went to the hangar where were the same two Chinamen who had met the ship the day before. He addressed them, but they shook their heads.

There was evidence about the hangar that other ships had been cared for recently. Hal noticed drums of gas and oil, and a spare prop. There was a pretty complete machine shop in one corner. He saw the oil and gas tanks of his ship had been filled, and went to a drum bearing the brand of oil he used, and kicked it. One of the Chinamen nodded. Hal concluded that Mr. Boles had a very efficient organization.

As Hal was going over his ship, he heard a faint droning which grew louder. He peered about in the sky and located a ship coming in from the west. The house force of Chinese came pouring through the gate. Hal counted ten, not including Ah Gin or the two grease monkeys.

The strange ship circled the field and turned to make the landing from the east. It banked, slipped, recovered, rocked, and came out in a long glide. The ship pancaked from about five feet and the wheels bounced.

"Not so good," murmured Hal.

The ship was a Stinson Reliant, originally a four-five place cabin job which apparently had been converted by Boles' own mechanic for flying freight. The Chinese swarmed about, pushing the ship to a place beside the Waco. The aviator climbed from the pit, said something to the nearest man and took off goggles and helmet. He was a young Chinaman. He looked the Waco over casually, gave a careless flip of a hand toward it, and strutted into the hangar.

"He allee time like that," remarked Ah Gin, who was standing near Hal. "He go up one time; no come down."

The freight hatch of the Stinson was opened, and Hal could see that the inner space was crammed with provisions. Boles hobbled along the path from the garden. He wore the corduroy suit and pink sombrero. The Chinese aviator went to him and held out a letter. There was some conversation between the two. Boles read the letter and his face turned grave.

"Young feller," he called to Hal, "some business just came up. I want to have a talk with Charlie Kow Kee." He indicated the flying Chinaman. "Go in the house and amuse yourself until I send for you."

Hal could see no necessity for the order, but he obeyed. The men were carrying supplies from the Stinson to the house. Ah Gin swung by under a quarter of pork.

Glancing outward toward the minaret, Hal saw an aerial suspended between the tower and a gable end of the house. So there was a radio transmitter in the house! Boles had told him to amuse himself, and he had been given the run of the premises. So with all else out of mind, he began to hunt.

THE great living room, the dining and breakfast rooms, and the library, all revealed nothing. In the billiard room was no trace of what he sought. He went back to the library, with the thought that possibly the apparatus was in the minaret. Idly, he turned over a pile of magazines upon one end of the table.

Under all the rest, one publication with a bright red cover caught his eye. It was a radio log giving call letters for each station, wave length and general information. He flipped the pages, glancing at the columns of letters. A penciled mark in a margin caught his eye, and opposite the mark was the listing: *IBDX Ira Boles, Taj-e-Sahra California.*

Hal began to think. There definitely was or had been a station at the place. But where? He remembered that along the hall between the library and billard room was an unaccounted for wall space. There was no door leading from the library, but there was from the billard room. Must be an extra room! Hurriedly he skipped through the house, taking keys

from all the locks, and rushed back to the billard room.

One key fitted the small door, which he opened to find a room fitted as a sending and receiving station. A fine layer of desert dust lay over the instruments and panels. As Hal bent to flip the receiving switch, a hand lightly touched his shoulder.

"Boss man wantee you, mistah."

Hal turned to see Ah Gin grinning at him.

"You savvy?" said Hal, pointing to the apparatus.

"No savvy," replied Ah Gin.

Laden Chinese were still scurrying back and forth when Hal passed through the garden. His Waco Whirlwind was already warming up. Boles was seated in his pit. He motioned Hal close to him and said, "Here's your map. There's a red mark around the place we're bound for. I've been delayed, so wish you'd make it quick as you can."

"Better wear a helmet instead of that sombrero if you're going to keep your cockpit cover open," suggested Hal. "It's liable to blow off."

"That's all right, I 'most always wear this hat."

Hal studied the map a few minutes to orient himself. He took off in an easy climb and at three thousand leveled off, putting the ship on a southern course. After about twelve minutes he concluded they should be below the Border. Far ahead was a range of hills which according to the map were well in Mexico. West of the range was a table mountain, and from these bearings he set a new course.

They passed over the range which marked the edge of the desert. The country became rolling, with more and more vegetation. They were approaching a small valley, and Boles began to make quick motions with an arm. Below was a square of ground where the brush had been cleared and the surface smoothed; one side of the field was bordered by a dense grove of trees.

When they landed, two Mexicans came running from under the trees, bearing a box between them. Boles was helped to earth with no damage to his sore foot.

"Better wait here, young feller," he said, and hobbled away to a shanty beneath a great old tree.

AMONG the trees, and invisible from the air, were several rough buildings built of new lumber. There was but little sign of life about. As the sun mounted higher in the heavens, Hal stripped off his flying clothes and lolled in the shade of the Waco's wings. It was hard work, just loafing there. He began to get thirsty. A few minutes after noon, Boles shouted to him from the doorway of the shanty.

Inside, a well-dressed Mexican sat before a table spread for lunch. He was introduced to Hal as *Señor Garfias*. The Mexican took his lunch very slowly and very seriously.

Boles finished and excused himself, and *Garfias*, full of food and puffing a long cigar, asked Hal haphazard questions about aviation. It seemed to Hal that the man was talking against time, and he was relieved when there came a yell from the field. Boles was already seated in the ship. The motor didn't need much warming under that blazing sun. Hal climbed as quickly as he could to cool air. At twenty-five hundred, he found a good following wind and held there. Boles sat slumped in his seat, with the sombrero pulled tight on his head. The ship had a new feel. There was a slight right tendency which puzzled Hal.

As they neared the border, a Coast Guard Waco plane on border patrol intercepted them. The pilot pulled alongside and looked them over. Hal could not recognize the pilot on account of goggles and helmet. Boles waved his pink sombrero in friendly greeting and the patrol ship flipped its wings and zipped back to duty. Hal smiled as he thought of the power of a reputation and a pink sombrero as trade mark.

The two grease monkeys were stolidly squatting on their heels before the hangar when Hal and Boles landed on the home field. Charlie Kow Kee, the Chinese flyer, was fussing about the Stinson's Lycoming.

Hal's first thought was to find out

what gave his Waco that slight right tendency, and he started to give attention to that. But as Boles was helped from the pit, another figure appeared in his seat, and as Hal blinked his eyes, the extra passenger leaped down and was welcomed by a group of the house Chinese who had come up.

One of the men climbed into the pit and passed down several matting-wrapped bundles. Hal wondered how so much bulk as the smuggled Chinese and the packages had been stowed in so small a space. Anyhow, he knew now what had caused the right tendency in the ship.

Hal began to see red! An airman who loves the game for its own sake is a pioneer, a crusader and a knight errant, which combination makes him a square shooter. And Hal was just that. He swallowed several times and waited until the red fog of anger cleared from his mind before he spoke.

"I'm through, Mr. Boles."

"Through! What d'you mean, through? Young feller, you ain't even begun."

"I don't care for your business, Mr. Boles."

"What d'you mean?"

"I'm not going to become a party to any smuggling."

"Aw, forget it! Come in the house. We'll talk this over."

"No use, sir. I have decided I don't want the job. That's all."

"Oh, come in the house."

"No. I'll take off and be on my way."

Boles grunted and uttered a few words in Chinese. The grease monkeys approached as if to turn the ship and passed behind Hal. It all happened in a flash. Both the Chinamen flung themselves upon the young flyer. One struck him a stunning blow over the head with a wrench and Hal passed out.

HE CAME to consciousness, lying on a wicker couch in the great living room. Ah Gin was bathing his head with cold water. "No bloke," said the Chinaman. "Jus' smackum litty bit."

Boles in a deep chair sat facing Hal. His sore foot rested upon a stool.

"Young feller," he said, "you got to listen to reason."

Hal sat up. He was dizzy and his head ached and throbbled. He did not answer.

"I'll lay all my cards on the table," stated Boles. "Charlie Kow Kee brought me a letter and additional information this morning that two hundred Chinese are on their way to that camp we flew to in Mexico. That's real money, young feller. Think of that?"

Hal made no sound.

"If it's money you're bothered about," continued Boles, "I'll double your pay and no more argument. I was going to do that, anyhow. Then you want to remember there's big profit in dope, too. That's what was in the small packages we brought back. It's a cinch, boy. I'm known all over this country, and we ain't going to be bothered. You saw how the Border Patrol plane passed us up? Sure, they know me and that pink skypiece of mine. I really own a cotton plantation down there, only it's fifteen miles farther down than where you went. What say?"

Hal shook his head.

"Come, come, young feller," wheedled Boles. "We got to work quick and get our men over while the goin' is good. I'll make your fortune. You stick with me six months—even three months—and you'll never have to lift a finger as long as you live. I tell you there's no risk. Come on, now!"

Hal groaned. Gradually strength came back to him and his mind cleared, but he continued to act groggy. He shook his head.

"What in hell is the matter with you?" demanded Boles. "I never saw a man yet I couldn't buy."

"You can't buy me."

"That final?" spat out Boles.

"Yes!"

THERE was silence then. Hal became aware there were many persons in the room. He could hear quiet breathing. Boles spoke Chinese and Hal heard the swish of loose garments in motion.

"A drink?" asked Hal.

Ah Gin slipped from the room to return shortly with a carafe and glass on

a tray. He stumbled over a rumped rug, and in recovering his balance, collided with Boles' invalid foot. Boles writhed in agony, his face contorted with fury, and when the first spasm of pain passed, he seized his cane and struck Ah Gin with all his strength. The Chinamen fell to the floor, trying to protect his head from the shower of blows. Hal jumped up, seized the cane and forced Boles back into the chair.

"You want to kill the man?" he snapped.

"Let go! Get out!" screamed Boles, writhing and twisting to break from the hands that held him. "I'll kill him, the damned clumsy chink!"

Hal held Boles in the chair until the raging man quieted. Ah Gin crawled to the door, slowly raised himself to his feet and wobbled from sight. Boles sat glowering at Hal and cursing under his breath. Hal knew that it wasn't altogether the accidental hurting of the sore foot that made the man so furiously angry. Hal waited patiently for the next move of the millionaire. Minutes passed. Boles ceased his muttering, but the hate never left his eyes. He pulled out his watch.

"Young feller," he rasped, "if you ain't open to reason, you'd better get out of here. Take your damn plane and keep out of my sight."

"That's all right," replied Hal. "I suppose it's the way a fellow feels about some things. Personally, I prefer to stay within the law. Good-bye, sir."

A snarl answered.

Hal gave a last look about the magnificent room, and he couldn't help but wonder why a man with everything his heart could desire should take to such a business as alien-smuggling and other things. He passed slowly through the lovely inner court and around the tiled swimming pool. He entered the passage which led to the rear door. He paused in the passage to look back at the beauty within the court, when he felt a light touch upon an arm. He turned just in time to see a door draw almost closed, staying ajar but a fraction of an inch.

"Thank you, mistah," whispered a voice,

"fo' save my life. *Fly low, mistah, fly vely fas', come down vely click.*" The door closed and a key grated in the lock.

IT WAS all Hal could do to keep himself from going into a mental tailspin. He stopped in the garden and studied the growing things in order to get back equilibrium. There was a tenseness in the air, an unstable feeling as when a distant gathering storm sends warning through the air currents. Yet everything looked all right as he came to the space before the hangar. The Waco's Whirlwind hummed a tune in perfect time with the idling prop.

The ship was ready to go. The two grease monkeys, like Buddhas in overalls, squatted by the tail. All he had to do was climb in and go. As he put foot in the step to mount into the pit, he noticed one of the grease monkeys lighting a cigarette behind the shelter of the rudder. The other Chinaman removed the blocks.

His one desire was to get far from that place as fast as he could. The warning whispered by Ah Gin rang in his ears. One fact was outstanding—his getaway had been too easy. Boles certainly gave the impression he was a man who wouldn't trust anybody, and he hadn't said a word to Hal about keeping his mouth shut. He remembered the parting glitter in the millionaire's eyes. Something was wrong. He gave the ship full gun, skimming but a few feet over the surface of the ground. The wind sang through the struts and wires, "*Fly low, fly vely fas', come down vely click!*"

He was approaching the ridge where the black sands over the white ones gave the desert a splotchy, tigerish aspect. He nosed down; he felt he had to. The landing he made was almost a pancake, so great was his hurry. The wheels ploughed deep into the sand and, if he had not been prepared for it, he would have been thrown against the instrument board. He leaped from the ship and scurried away. He tripped over a root and sprawled on the ground in a low depression. Then came the explosion.

The tail of the ship lifted and disap-

peared in the flash. The ship was thrown forward on the prop. One of the gas tanks must have been ruptured, for in an instant the wing fabric was a roaring mass of flames. Then the other gas tank let go with a great *whoosh* and a geyser of spurting fire.

In fifteen minutes, the Waco biplane was a blackened, smouldering mass of twisted metal, and odds and ends. The rudder had been blown clear of the wreck and Hal picked it up fifty feet away. Near it he found a piece of miner's fuse burned through its length. He remembered the grease monkey lighting a cigarette behind the shelter of the rudder. And he knew now why Boles had made no attempt to exact a promise of silence from him.

THE spot where Hal had landed was behind the ridge out of sight of Taj-e-Sahrâ. From that place, with the ship flying low, it would have been impossible for an observer to know whether the explosion had occurred in the air or on the ground. The detonation had been heard, no doubt, and the black smoke rushing high in the quiet air had been seen. The distance was about eight miles. The time was four-thirty by Hal's wrist watch.

He went to the top of the ridge and lay under a clump of mesquite. A little time passed, and then he heard the faint drone of an airplane motor. Soon Hal was able to make out the Stinson flying in from Taj-e-Sahrâ. It came slowly, cruised along the ridge, circled several times above the wreck, and its pilot apparently satisfied, it turned toward home.

From his concealment, Hal watched the ship until it merged into the white and green of Boles' home. He was up against a mighty tough proposition. The nearest habitation he knew of lay over forty miles of desert. Possibly the ranch of some dry farmer lay nearer, but it was only a chance. He couldn't make forty miles on foot in a night, and to be caught on the desert without water under the blazing sun was certain death.

He wondered if it was possible to get possession of the Stinson. Anyhow, in

order to live, he *had* to return to Taj-e-Sahra.

Going back to the wreck of the Waco, he felt as one does who has lost a true friend. Nothing gives a fellow that feeling of absolute independence as owning a good ship. Tears came to Hal's eyes, and the sands of the desert began to weave before him in so peculiar a manner his attention was attracted. What caused the illusion was the patches and stripes of black sand in contrast with the white.

He studied the queer formation, had a sudden hunch, and bounded to a patch of black sand. He slipped from his coat, filled the garment with the dark stuff and carried it to a large square of the white sand. Again and again, he made the journey. He finished his strange task just as night came over the desert.

Resolutely, he set out to make the hard trip of eight miles of desert. He was glad it was night, for during the excitement, his goggles and helmet had become unfastened and slipped unnoticed from his head. It would take three hours for the trip, he thought, but it was almost eleven when he came near enough to distinguish the shimmer of white walls in the darkness. He paused on the edge of the landing field to consider. The first thing he had to do was get a drink; he was parched and dry with labor and with the long trudge.

He entered the gully south of the field and walked cautiously near to the hangar. There were no sounds. Vaguely, the remodeled Stinson Reliant loomed before the hangar, and he wondered about that. Perhaps a night flight was contemplated—risky, he figured, for he didn't think much of the flying ability of the Chinese pilot. At the corner of the hangar nearest the wall was a faucet, and Hal drank deep and long. The hangar doors were open.

He began to make an inspection of the ship. He felt for the exhaust line at the side of the fuselage, and found the tube was cold. It was queer, all right. He thought of the excellent care the grease monkeys had given the Waco. He hesitated whether first to climb into the pit or take a look into the freight hold, the door of which was open. He was nearer the

cabin. His foot scraped on the step as he reached for a hold on the door jamb. A light flashed in his face and he was told to, "Stick 'em up!"

A SING-SONG order in Chinese issued from the cabin, and forms scurried from the depths of the hangar. More electric torches flashed and a flashlight was lighted. Six or seven Chinamen surrounded Hal. The fellow who had ordered Hal to put his hands up jumped from the cabin. He kept a heavy automatic pointed at Hal. He was the Chinese flyer, Charlie Kow Kee.

"We expected you," he said, grinning evilly. "You dropped your helmet and goggles halfway up that hill and we spotted your tracks in the sand going to that bush. You aren't a very bright boy. We knew you had to come back here. We left the ship out for bait."

He spoke English with the easy assurance of the American-born and educated Chinaman. Hal gave no answer.

"We'll go in the house. The chief is waiting for you."

The Chinamen pressed around Hal, and the flyer held the gun against his back, so Hal didn't have a chance in the world to do anything but go. The group entered the big living room where Boles occupied the same chair he had used that afternoon. Hal was pushed down on the wicker couch. The Chinese stood behind him. In the background was Ah Gin, who never gave sign Hal was in the room.

"Young feller," drawled Boles, "I see you're back." He eyed Hal keenly.

"Yes, I'm back."

"Tough luck you had," commented Boles. "We flew out there, but couldn't see no trace of you, so figured you had burned in the smash. What happened?"

"You know what happened, Boles, so can the innocent chatter. Next time you order your highbinders to gum up a motor, tell 'em to be more foxy about it. If the motor hadn't gone haywire, I'd sure been out of luck." That, thought Hal, ought to explain why he landed. If there was any suspicion in anybody's mind that he had been warned, he wanted to allay it.

"So that's how it was?" said Boles, nodding his head wisely. "Your engine blew up."

"No, the motor didn't blow up," denied Hal. "If I had taken time for inspection as I ought, I'd have spotted the motor trouble, but I was too anxious to get away from here. You overplayed your hand. What blew up was the dynamite you had planted in the tail."

"I don't know nothin' about that, young feller."

"You're a liar, Boles. I found the burned fuse. And that flyer of yours has already told me he spotted my helmet and saw my tracks in the sand."

As Hal expected, there was a roar from Boles, who tried to rise from his chair, but his sore foot hampered him. He started in on the slant-eyed aviator, and what he said in Chinese sounded a-plenty! Then he calmed down and turned attention to Hal again.

"Young feller," he said, "let by-gones be by-gones and sign up. You can't beat me. What I said about wages goes, and I'll buy you a new plane."

"You can go to hell," said Hal.

Boles' eyes flashed and his face twisted into a ferocious scowl, but he controlled himself.

"Look here—" he began, and that was when Hal kicked over the lounge, lunged into the aviator and sent him spinning, and straight-armed a couple more Chinese. He bounded to the hall, dashed into the billiard room and locked the door. Then he rushed to the radio room and locked that door, too. There sounded yells and thuds and scurrings from the hall.

With hope in his heart, Hal hurriedly switched on the power and waited impatiently for the tubes to heat up. Then, closing the circuit and twirling the dials into position, he picked up the mike.

"*Mayday! Mayday!*" Unconsciously he used the airman's distress call even over that ground station. "W2BQ calling Tip Varney — T-I-P—V-A-R-N-E-Y —Tip Varney's Air Cruisers. Call letters unknown. Emergency! Any W2 station picking up this call please notify Varney. Situation at W2BQ serious. Need immediate help. Border Patrol should—"

CRASH! That must be the library door going down. Yep, it was! Hal, tense and with hardly a glance around, rushed through with his call. "Notify Border Patr—"

Now they were at the door of the radio room, battering and plunging against it. One panel began to bulge. No time now to check as to whether or not the call was being received. Hal adjusted the set for more DX. Now to repeat . . .

The door gave way with a terrific splintering. Smashing into Hal, it threw him violently to the floor. He looked up into the muzzle of an automatic held by Boles. The man leaned on his cane and laughed.

"That's rich," he said. "That's good!" He stopped to laugh. "Young feller, I had the wire to that radio cut over a week ago. Don't think I'm such a damn fool to have that thing ready for some nut to blunder across and fool with. Hey, Charlie, you cut that wire like I told you?"

"Sure, chief," answered Charlie, crowding beside Boles. "I fixed it."

"Come out of that," snarled Boles then, and Hal knew from the steely tone of the man's voice that he would be shot if he didn't obey.

Hal stood with the pistol shoved against his back, while his arms were bound behind him and his legs secured. He was carried back to the living room and dropped on the wicker couch.

"What will we do with him?" asked Charlie Kow Kee.

"I was figurin' on giving him a ride first thing in the morning," answered Boles, and added after a moment's reflection. "Night is best, though. We'll give it to him now. You can fly at night, can't you, Charlie?"

"Sure," answered the Chinese. "Where you want to go?"

"We'll take him over his wrecked plane and drop him off with his arms tied and a parachute strapped on him. We can take the ropes off afterward. Think you can find that place, Charlie?"

"I can get near enough," the Chinaman assured his chief. "Why won't the mornin' do, Mr. Boles? He can't get away."

"Nobody buzzin' around at night, and besides, I'm not taking any more chances with this feller. I want him fixed. Go get busy, Charlie."

Hal, as he lay bound on the couch, thought of the tough breaks he had had in the last few hours. He thought of a good many things, and least of them, he pondered why a man should cut the lead wire of a radio transmitting set in his own house.

It didn't make sense, any more than why a man should keep a prisoner about the place or why a man like Boles should engage in the work he did. It was better to puzzle about such things than to contemplate that dizzy plunge through the night when with arms bound he—Hal shuddered involuntarily.

He wondered if there was any way to persuade Boles to postpone the ride until the next day. If that could be done, there was a chance, a slim chance. It needed daylight for the working of that hunch he had had by his wrecked ship. Few ships flew that country, and there was not much hope the smoke of the burning plane had been spotted. The smoke wouldn't mean anything to most people, anyhow.

Four Chinamen carried him out of the house. The chute pack was adjusted under Charlie's watchful eye. They changed the position of Hal's arms, binding them in front instead of behind, but there was no advantage to him in that. Hal looked for Ah Gin, but he was not in sight.

Charlie made a suggestion in his mother-tongue to Boles, who nodded. Two men at once began to take the Stinson's freight door from its hangings. The hinges were such as used on automobiles, and the leaves stuck out beyond the surface of the door. Hal's coat caught on the projection as he was hoisted into the compartment. Boles was in there.

Hal lay face downward with his head in the doorway. When the time came, all Boles had to do was lift his feet and tilt him overboard. It was very simple and very devilish. Boles was safe. All he had to do was sit tight and keep his mouth shut. He could let the discovery of ship and body be made by accident. If ques-

tioned, he could say the aviator had flown away and never returned. The desert is a good place for the "perfect crime!"

CHARLIE gave her the gun and the ship taxied out for the take-off. From the air all Hal could see was a faint luminosity—the desert, broken here and there by shadows; all he could feel was the vibration of the Lycoming and the rush of air against his head; all he could hear was the roar of the prop and the swish of wind; all he could smell was exhaust gas from some leak along the line. He could tell when the ship was rising and he could tell when she leveled out, but he had no idea of altitude.

He counted minutes by seconds, trying to estimate distance covered. His position was most uncomfortable, for he was lying on his bound arms. His legs were growing numb. He knew his murderer stood near, brooding, waiting for the time. He wondered how soon and how near Charlie could locate the wreck of the Waco, and what signal he would shoot back to Boles when he had—a flashlight probably.

The ship banked slightly in turn and Hal slid backward until his toes touched the other side of the cabin. Soon there was another turn and he slid forward. He surmised Charlie was hunting for the ridge.

Again and again the Stinson turned, and each time Hal would slide a few inches one way or the other. There was no way of telling where Boles was. Hal could imagine him braced against a wall of the compartment to relieve the weight upon his sore foot.

Judging from the evolutions, Charlie was having trouble finding the objective. It seemed to Hal that hours passed. He began to strain at the bonds.

Suddenly, the ship hit an "air pocket." With the bump, Hal's roped body slipped forward and came in contact with Boles' feet. The ship swayed and bumped again.

Boles fell down on top of Hal. Hal humped his body and straightened out as he rolled, and the maneuver landed him on Boles, who squirmed and flailed with

his arms. With gripping fingers, Hal got a firm hold on Boles' coat.

Boles struggled to his feet, dragging Hal with him. Tight together, they swayed within the dark freight hold of the plunging plane. Hal felt something touch his bound feet. Fingers clutched at his throat. Using his hand grip to obtain leverage, he hopped. Both feet came down on Boles' foot and a scream of agony rang in Hal's ears. He hopped again and once more found the damaged foot.

Boles fell, dragging Hal down. Hal drew up his legs and flexed his chest, opening and closing his bound body like a jackknife. He kicked with his feet and butted with his head.

There was a flash of light from the pilot's window. Charlie had found the ridge where Boles was to shove Hal off. The ship made a sharp drop. The two fighting men landed in a heap in a corner of the cabin. Hal glimpsed a swaying form in the doorway, blotting out the stars. He drew up his knees and launched a tremendous kick.

There was a terrible scream, the form swayed wildly and the stars came to view again. But although the doorway was clear, the screams continued, weaker and weaker.

Hal had no time to ponder about that; he was already busy at the ropes which bound him. His exertions had loosened the coils about his arms. Some of the loops over the chute pack had slipped, had given some slack. He worked away, twisting and pulling. He finally gnawed the rope about his wrists. With hands free, it was easy to untie the bonds about his legs. He threw aside the chute pack. The ship was flying level. Hal rubbed his legs, and when circulation was restored, began to explore the hold.

He picked up Boles' pink sombrero, and put it on in case Charlie flashed his light back into the cabin. Further exploration, and he found in a pocket a Very signal pistol and a handful of shells. He broke the breech and found the thing was loaded. As a gun, the pistol was about as effective as a Roman candle, but it would make a first-class club. Hal crawled to the doorway. Something bobbed and

swung about in the air immediately below! He investigated and found Boles—suspended by his stout corduroy coat to the projecting leaf of the lower hinge.

FORWARD, between the wings, Hal could see the floodlights at the corners of the field. He investigated Boles and concluded that since the coat had sustained him so far, it would hold until the landing. He pulled the pink sombrero tight on his head and took a firm hold on the signal pistol. Boles was suspended high enough so that his body would not drag when the ship hit the field. He would be discovered, of course, but it would take time in the darkness for the Chinese to discover the real state of affairs.

Charlie landed the ship with the usual series of bumps, the last of which shook Boles from the hinge. Hal didn't worry about that. He crouched inside the door ready to spring. One thing Hal had not counted on. A floodlight above the hangar made the field bright as day. Hal jumped to the ground and in just about three seconds was discovered. One of the grease monkeys broadcast the warning.

Charlie Kow Kee took a hand with an automatic. He chased Hal around the Stinson. Hal ducked under the prop at the second shot and ran around to the tail. They ran around the ship as Charlie fired recklessly. Hal was by the tail again. He had held the Very pistol as reserve, but now took a snap shot at Charlie. The signal ball whizzed; there was a flash, and the upper and lower wings on that side were enveloped in flames. Evidently, one of Charlie's wild shots had plugged a gas tank in an upper wing.

Hal let out a yell and charged for the gate in the wall. A Chinaman rushed at him, waving a rake. Hal discharged the pistol in the man's face.

The flames from the burning ship made the garden light as day. Excited yells and shouts sounded from the field. He bounded into the house—which seemed deserted. There was only one place where he would be safe, he figured, and he didn't want to be starved out. The best bet

he knew was to fortify himself in the minaret.

He switched on the kitchen lights and started plundering the pantry. A table cloth served as container for his loot. There wasn't much time, so he swept cans from the shelves at random, took bread from the box and salvaged a ham. It was a heavy load he carried across the garden.

He stopped once to consider going back for firearms, but did not know where the guns were kept. Sounds of excited chattering came from the other side of the garden, and he hurried on.

The door of the minaret was open and he found a switch just inside the door frame. As Boles had told him, the first floor was occupied by the pumping and lighting machinery, both plants powered with gas engines. The floor was concrete. Piled along the curving wall were bags of cement and fertilizer. His first act was to form a barricade against the door with the heavy sacks. He braced the barrier with two ladders and other heavy objects which the place afforded.

That done, he looked around. The windows were small and high above the floor, and he doubted if a man could crawl through them. An iron ladder led to the floor above. Boles had said that floor was a storeroom. That might well be; it was the place from where the message had been dropped. At the head of the ladder was a trap door, secured from below by a hasp and pin. Hal climbed the ladder, loosed the pin and raised the trap.

HE blinked in the darkness. The light from below shone around him. Gradually objects in the room were beginning to take form. Many things were stored there, pipe and pipe fittings, boxes, and kegs.

"Who are you?" A ghostly figure suddenly reared from the cot which Hal could dimly see across the room.

"Who are *you*?" countered Hal.

"Anyway, you ain't no Chinaman," remarked the figure with relief. "And me? Why—I'm Tim."

The voice was gentle, and from the quaver in it, Hal judged the speaker to be an

old man. "Yes?" he said encouragingly. "What's your other name?"

"Why—why, I reckon I hain't got none; I forget. I been out here on the desert fer so long. But say, who *are* you?"

"I'm the man who got the message you dropped out of the window last night—well, maybe it's night before last now."

"You be?" Tim jumped from the cot and pattered over the floor. He squatted by the side of the trap and peered eagerly into Hal's face. He shook his head. "Nope, you hain't *him*. Didn't sound like him." He sighed.

"Who's 'him'?" queried Hal.

"Why, Mrs. Boles' nephew, Lionel Collins. He uster wear a white sweater and prow around like you done, and I thought you was him. Him and me is good chums. I thought *he'd* come back. *He'd* help me."

Hal recalled the initials L.A.C. in the sweater coat and nodded. "What about that message, Tim? Maybe I can help you, instead."

"Will you? Will you?" The old man leaned closer to Hal. "Let's git right out o' here then. I'll git my pants and boots." He jumped up.

"You'll have to tell me why you dropped that note, Tim." There was a suspicion in Hal's mind that perhaps the old fellow wasn't quite right.

"Wouldn't you drop a note," demanded Tim, struggling with a boot, "if you was shut up by a scalawag and was oney half fed by Chinamen twicet a day? I like my vittles."

"What scalawag, Tim?"

"Why that drivelin' polecat what dresses like Mr. Boles, talks like him, and even looks like him—if you don't know the real one right well. Him with a sore foot!" Tim snorted.

"Do you mean that fellow with the game foot is *not* Mr. Boles?"

"Mr. Boles hain't got no sore foot. Mr. Boles has good feet, I tell you."

"Then who in hell is this chink-smugglin' dope runner?"

"So that's what he's doin'? I mighta knowed. He's a spike-tailed tarantuler." "Doggone it, Tim, be serious!"

"Hain't I? I dunno who he is. I uster be a prospector afore Mr. Boles gimme

the job of caretaker here. 'Bout ten days ago, this coyote comes floppin' along in a airypplane. He says he's a friend of Mr. Boles an' he wants to look over the place. Mr. Boles went to New York to buy pictures; he's allus goin' some place fer sumpin. He never tells nobody where he's goin'. Anyhow, this slinkin' bobcat give me a good seegar, prowled around and went off. I thought he was all right 'cause he knowed a lot 'bout the place and where Mr. Boles went." Tim brooded in silence.

"What next?"

"He come back in two-three days in his airypplane and with a lot of Chinamen. That flyin' machine made a lotta trips. They moved in the house; started right in livin'. I tried to kick 'em out. But shucks—next I knowed I was cooped in this here tower! They didn't seem to figger me wuth killin'. And in a fix like that, wouldn't you drop a note if you seed a friend?"

Hal agreed.

"An' now, son," continued Tim, "you look like you got some news. Gimme some; you tell me how come you got invited to this here party."

OUTSIDE all was quiet. The only sign of life about the place was a light in the second story of the house in the room occupied by the alleged Boles. Hal told as quickly as possible his dealings and adventures with the man. Tim listened attentively, studying Hal as he talked.

"No, I didn't hear the shootin' and the racket a-tall," Tim claimed. "When I sleep, I sleep. But we'll jine up," and he extended his hand.

They went down the ladder to the machinery room where Tim examined the barricade and approved of it. He went to a large water pipe and closed a valve, and then to the electric lighting plant, where he pulled a switch.

"What's the idea?" asked Hal.

"I've shut off the water supply and the juice. Reckon that'll annoy 'em some."

"They have plenty of water," said Hal, "a whole swimming pool and all those canals in the garden."

"That water is loaded with pizen copper sulphate to kill the bugs. I done it 'cause Mr. Boles told me. 'Nother thing, that's a 'lectric stove in the house an' 'lectric coffee pot an' 'lectric everything." He grinned owlshly at Hal. "But we got plenty water an' juice, an' with the grub you brung in, we're all right fer a while. Too bad you didn't find some shootin' irons, 'cause we could find use fer 'em."

Hal was staring at the electric generating plant. "Tim," he said, "you say we have juice here in the tower? Is that beacon on top in working order?"

"I reckon."

"How do you light it?"

"I'll show you. This switch here." He indicated the one.

Hal grasped the switch and began to close and open the circuit. "I never worked a blinker," he muttered, "but here goes for a try."

In Morse code, he was flashing out a "S-O-S—S-O-S," again and again. From outside there was a yell, and the report of a gun rang out. More yelling and shooting followed until the firing was in full blast. Then it ceased; one more shot crashed and then came silence.

"Guess that's the end of the beacon," said Hal.

"What was you doin'?"

Hal explained.

"That was pretty cute," said Tim.

"Say, there's a lantern over there on the wall we can take turns wavin'."

"It wouldn't be healthy, Tim. That gang is watching us pretty close. They're being directed. It must be our sore-footed friend wasn't hurt so very much."

"He's a tough hombre," commented Tim.

HAL was tired and sleepy. At Tim's suggestion, he went to the room above and flopped down on the cot. Tim kept watch. Hal dreamed he was pursued through space by the fake Mr. Boles, who clung to a speedy chute and kicked at him with feet the size and shape of props.

It was dawn when he awoke. There was a buzzing in his ears. A queer kind of sound for a mosquito, he thought. The

buzzing persisted at an even pitch and he opened wide his eyes. There was no insect.

He bounded to a window and peered about the sky. A rifle cracked and the bullet zipped through the window. Hal ducked as more bullets whizzed. He was sure that in the sky somewhere about Tal-e-Sahrá a ship was cruising. But when the racket outside stopped, he could hear nothing. Sound carries far in the clear desert air, and the ship may have been miles away on the Border Patrol. He looked at his watch; the hour was six o'clock.

Tim reported several Chinese dipping water from the canals at the rear of the house. Some time later, a flag of truce approached from the house.

"It's that fresh Chinese squirt," said Tim.

Charlie Kow Kee came on waving a handkerchief. He showed no fear and approached close to the minaret.

"Hey, in there!" he shouted.

"What's wanted?" returned Hal, standing close to the window, but cautiously keeping from view.

"The chief wants you to turn on the water and electricity. He says do that and he will let you go."

"And how?"

"Well, he didn't say."

"Listen, Charlie. Tell your boss he'll get water and current when he radios the Border Patrol and we see their ship come in."

"Nobody knows how to work the set but you."

"All right, splice that cut wire and bring the mike out here on extension wires."

"I'll tell him what you say." Charlie blew his nose on the flag of truce and turned toward the house.

"They got a nerve," remarked Tim, "after all that shootin' they done at you."

Hal laughed. "You know how far we'd get, Tim? Just outside the door, we'd start collecting lead."

"I reckon. There's quite a mess of 'em. 'Nother day an' their tongues will be hangin' out. They'll knuckle under."

"Sure, they have to have water, but can we hold 'em off? We haven't any guns?"

"Maybe that wigglin' you did with the beacon might bring help."

"Not much chance of that being seen at two in the morning."

"You don't sound so hopeful, son."

"Still, there's one thing—but this place is off the transport lines; ships don't pass this way. No use counting on that." Hal scowled through the narrow window at the blue sky.

"What's on your mind, son?"

"Oh, I just followed a hunch over by my wrecked ship and—"

"Hey!"

Hal answered the hail. Charlie Kow Kee stood before the minaret. "The chief says," he stated, "if you do not turn on the water and electricity within five minutes, he will smoke you out." He glared at the window whence Hal's voice had issued. "You better do it, too," he added as an afterthought.

"Tell that crook to get his smoke ready," answered Hal.

"It wouldn't be the fust time," said Tim ominously, "that there was killin's on this here desert for water."

THE two besieged men looked at one another. The situation was desperate and must follow a struggle for life. If Tim and Hal were to survive, they must hold the minaret for an indefinite time, until the attackers were vanquished or rescue came. And the latter possibility was a pretty long shot. They looked to the barricade, for the attack would center on the door. Outside in the garden, no person was visible, nor was any sound heard. It was the lull before the storm.

Hal prowled around the second-floor room where Tim had been held captive. He examined the odds and ends of supplies, paying particular attention to several lengths of pipe. He brought a ladder from the first floor and climbed to the upper portion of the minaret where were the water tanks. The gauges showed the tanks to be full.

From below came Tim's quavering voice raised in desert song:

"Oh, the tarantuler jumped on the scorpion's back

"And his soul was filled with glee-e-e-e.
"I'm agoin' ride you," he howled with a growl.

"Or b'gosh, you're agoin' ride me-e-e-e'."

"Oh, Tim," called Hal, "come up here."

Tim crawled up the ladder singing the second verse which dealt with the "tarantuler's" technique.

"I want to do some pipe fitting," said Hal. "I want to unbolt a joint of the house supply line, put in that sixty-degree bend and put back the joint. That will bring the end right over the trap. See?"

"Yeh, I see, son. An' if we git chased outer the engine room, we come up here an' turn on the water from the tanks. Say, a six-inch stream of water in the chist oughter discourage anybody. I'll go git the wrenches. We'll give 'em water, you bet!"

It took strong arm and back work to make the change in the line, but they managed it. Hal stood in from the window and looked out. Six Chinamen were crossing the garden, bearing by short ropes a heavy timber, and several more followed, armed with rifles. The smuggler chief, foot and head bandaged, was carried out in a chair and made comfortable under a palm, where he had full view of operations. Under the leadership of Charlie Kow Kee, the attackers came on, secure in the knowledge that their quarry was not armed.

Some little time was consumed in preparation before the battering ram thudded on the door. The reinforcement of bags of cement and fertilizer was not even jarred. Cries of rage went up. Again and again the ram thundered on the door. The garrison did what they could to counteract the effect of the blows, and the barricade stood.

The enemy stopped. By a cautious peek, Hal saw them gathered under the trees. Charlie was conferring with his chief. The snipers got busy and kept up a random firing at the windows of the minaret. Hal attached a small pocket mirror to a stick, and by means of this crude peri-

scope got glimpses of outside activities. Charlie came back, waving his arms and working his mouth. The men ran to the ram.

Fifteen minutes of steady battering and the enemy retired to rest. The door had been reduced to splinters, and the bags somewhat compressed. Hal and Tim worked with levers to move the bags into the original position, but the weight of their fortification was a hindrance in this. They did *some* good, though.

On the emery wheel, Hal ground to a fine point one end of a thin steel rod, which he thrust between bags and even with the outer face of the barricade.

"Might stick one of 'em," he commented, "when I jab with it."

Tim held his hat on the end of a broom handle and raised it above a window sill. The snipers got busy.

"Yah!" cried Tim, dancing about and waving the hat. "Can't hit nothin'! Never see such rotten shots. Can't hit a flea!"

A ricochet glanced about on the cylindrical walls of the room and nipped close to Tim's head.

"Not even on the second bounce!" jeered Tim.

"Pipe down," cautioned Hal. "Save your pep. When they bust these sacks and the stuffing runs out, we're all through down here. They're coming back."

BY MEANS of the mirror, Hal caught a few squints at progress outside. The fake Boles had been moved nearer the conflict, and his voice was heard, urging on the attackers. This time, the men were armed with pickaxes, hoes and shovels. Now that the door no longer hindered them, they could hack the sacks to pieces and grub away the contents.

With the end of the steel rod in hand, Hal waited until he could hear the blows of the tools and grunts of the workmen. He thrust with all his might; the rod met resistance, and there was a scream. The spear was snatched away, and work stopped.

The attack began with redoubled energy, but the men were cautious. Gradually, the lighter fertilizer sacks were hewn

away at the top of the barricade. As soon as the opening was made, the snipers began to fire steadily through the hole, which steadily grew in size.

"Come on," yelled Hal, and forced Tim up the ladder.

Shouts of triumph resounded as the enemy burst into the machinery room. Bullets pierced the closed trap door. Hal and Tim piled all the material in the room over the trap. They had a breathing space and ate lunch.

"What next?" asked Tim.

"Sit tight for a while," said Hal. "Next, they'll try for the trap. That's the only way up here."

"I bored them holes like you told," said Tim, "and I made some spears like you did. Maybe we can harpoon 'em while they're bustin' the trap."

But that plan went wrong. The Chinese did not try any hand work to force the barrier, they commenced to shoot out the wooden trap. Also, the snipers kept up a continual fire through the windows. Glancing bullets whizzed all about, and Hal and Tim had to climb to the tank loft, where they perched near the rim of the trap.

Gradually weakened by gunfire and aided by the weight of supplies upon it, the trap gave way. The firing through the windows ceased. Hal sprang down, grasped a keg of nails and rolled it through the trap. There was a scream. He glanced down and saw that two men had been injured.

The enemy began to swarm up the ladder, firing as they came. Hal beat them off with a length of pipe until they hammered together a shield which they thrust ahead of them. Hal signaled. Tim opened the valve, and under a good head the six-inch pipe delivered its stream through the trap. The Chinamen were crushed and swept away by the torrent. The ladder was clear.

Instantly, the riflemen commenced pouring their shots through the trap. Tim joined Hal. "Shall we pile this other stuff over the hole?" he asked, spitting on his hands.

"Not enough of it, Tim. We'll stick here as long as we can and make it interesting

for them. They've got possession of the pump and can get all the water they want. Maybe they will lay off for a while."

"That they won't," declared Tim. "They can't use that pump; I put it on the bum. They're in jest as bad a fix as ever."

AGAIN bullets whizzed through the windows, and they were forced to ascend the ladder to the space above. When the firing ceased, Hal jumped down and grasped his pipe. He held the attack for a very short while. He gave the signal for the water, but none came.

The besiegers were crowding up the ladder. Hal drew the signal pistol from the bosom of his shirt and discharged the thing in the face of the foremost man. That halted the attack for a moment.

But still the water did not flow! Shoved from below, the topmost men were forced through the trap. Hal landed a haymaker on one jaw, but they were too many for him. He swarmed up the ladder, pulled it after him and slammed down the cover as the room below was filled with the yelling celestials.

Tim was tugging away at the valve. "It's s-stuck," he panted. "Jammed here when I closed down. Gimme a hand."

"Too late now," said Hal.

The enemy began their former tactics of shooting out the trap. The two were safe, crouching behind a steel water tank. The pungent acrid fumes of smokeless powder drifted up to them. The firing was continuous. That trap, being smaller than the first one, was soon splintered away, and then came a lull.

"What now?" asked Tim.

The answer came in a wisp of drifting smoke. Hal sniffed, grasped Tim by the collar and yanked him to his feet. The fumes came thicker, faster.

"Get up that ladder," shouted Hal. "Go to the top!"

Tim needed no urging. He sneezed and started up, nimble as a squirrel for all his years. Hal followed. The minaret, with no wall openings above the second story, acted like a chimney. The smoke was swirling up faster than they could climb. Tim stopped to sneeze, and Hal prodded

him on. He held his breath, struggling to climb faster. The fumes were deadly, strangling, and Hal blindly reached hand over hand. He could feel himself weakening, smothered by the hellish stuff. He groped for a handhold and felt nothing. His strength was ebbing away. One more exertion, and Tim grasped his arm.

Hal lay on the projecting platform which surrounded the top of the minaret. Above him was the dome with the shattered beacon atop. The floor of the platform was steel. Tim crawled around from the other side of the minaret. They lay still, breathing heavily. In the platform was the hatch where ended the ladder. The fumes continued to pour out in greater volume.

"C-can't it—b-be—closed?" gasped Hal.

Tim shook his head. "Left open—to ventilate—keep the tanks cool," he wheezed. "This is—gittin'—wuss."

The deadly fumes seemed to settle about the top of the tower. Hal breathed through his handkerchief, but did not get relief.

"My head—is buzzin'," came from a great distance.

With an effort, Hal aroused to realize Tim was speaking.

"Head buzzin'."

Hal flopped over on his face. His own head was buzzing, and it was a peculiar buzzing. It was in his head and yet it filled all space. The buzzing became louder. The first breath of the afternoon breeze cleared the air. The buzzing persisted.

Hal shook his head to stop the noise. And then he saw—a V of ships sailing down the western sky! The sky seemed full of ships. Waco J2W-1's—Coast Guard ships on Air Patrol with the border forces. Hal grasped the signal pistol, raised it as high as his failing strength would allow, and pulled the trigger.

HIS first impression in returning consciousness was that his chute had failed to open. He felt around for the rip cord, and a deep voice bade him, "Lay off."

Still the chute wouldn't open. He made

an effort, and after much blinking of eyes, knew he was being half lowered, half carried, down the ladder of the minaret. The floor of the second story was covered with a slimy mixture of ashes, sand and water, and there was still that deadly smoke about. The machinery room was in a mess, too.

Two men in flying suits carried Hal and set him down under a palm. He closed his eyes.

"Has he landed yet?" asked one of the men.

"He ought to be coming in soon," answered the other. "Here comes the doc."

The doctor examined Hal and gave him orders. "You sit right here and rest a while," he said. "You've been nearly asphyxiated by that Chinese incense, and I want you to get it out of your system."

Hal was glad enough to rest. Pretty soon he found out his seat under the palm was as good as a box at the theater. Under another palm, two men were questioning the alleged Mr. Boles, but they were not having much luck. The smuggler looked as if he had been riding a kite tail over ploughed ground. He had his sore foot and his head bandaged, and one arm was in a sling. Finally the two men helped the bogus millionaire to his feet. They passed close to Hal.

"Young feller," rasped the prisoner, halting, "I'd like to know how you did it."

"Did what?"

"Sent word to your friends."

"I've been wondering about that myself," said Hal.

"Come on!" interrupted one of the guards, and the smuggler was led away, limping.

Tim, ambling along one of the cement paths, shouted when he saw Hal. He was chewing tobacco and smoking a long black cigar at one and the same time. He grinned at Hal and commenced to talk a blue streak.

"Ain't that doc a sap?" he began. "Anybody been pi-rootin' round the desert long's I have hain't feazed by a little smoke. Mister Lane, what bosses all Mr. Boles' Californy properties, is here. He come in a airypplane. And a lot of the

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Border Patrol guys are here. Mister Lane says I can keep my job, an' he give me a lot of seegars an' he's goin' to see you.

"Say, they got all them Chinees tied up out in the flyin' machine barn. Yeh, they had a lot of fun, they tell me. I gotta go get that pump fixed. See you later, son." And he bustled away, leaving a long trail of smoke behind him.

Hal knew if he didn't sit up and take notice, he was liable to miss something. The next visitor he had was Lieutenant Brooks of the Border Patrol, whom he knew slightly. After greetings had been exchanged, the officer said, "Can't get a thing out of that chink-smuggler, North. Would like to have your story, if you feel like it."

"All right, lieutenant," and Hal gave his information and answered the officer's questions. "There's one thing," said Hal. "That Chinese boy, Ah Gin—he saved my life. He rates a break. How about it?"

"Ah Gin, eh?" said Brooks, and consulted a notebook. "He claims to be American-born and says he was hired as servant. Gave his occupation as waiter and cook. Need a waiter, North?"

"Yes!" Hal grinned.

"If he isn't in too deep, guess I can fix it."

"That will be great. And lieutenant, how did the Border Patrol get in on this?"

"Had a request from Boles' Los Angeles office to send some men out here, so we came. That's all I know about that. Thanks, North, you've given me plenty of tips. Think I can arrange to take care of the Mexican end. So-long."

Then the peace and serenity of that quiet place was shattered by a cry. "Hal, oh, Hal, where are you?"

"Hi-yi! Over here, Tip!" yelled Hal, and jumped to his feet, but his legs were ground-shy and he dropped back into his seat.

TIP VARNEY came on the run, knelt beside Hal and pawed his back. "They told me you were in the house," he exclaimed. "Been huntin' all over the dump. How are you? Boy, I'm proud of you! You rounded up the slickest bunch

of crooks, chink and dope smugglers, in the business. Got old Sore Paw himself dead to rights. They found enough evidence to send him up for three hundred years!"

"What are you ravin' about? Sore Paw what?"

"The bird who palmed himself off as Boles. There's a reward for that geezer big enough to pay off the national debt—and you cash it!"

"You seem to know a hell of a lot. What I want to know is how all this fleet got here in time to save my hide. My little radio broadcast must have gone through, after all, or that beacon—"

"You're ravin' now," declared Tip. "Stump Morley told me what I know."

"Morley, the Coast Guard pilot with the border boys?"

"Yes."

"How did he get wise?"

"Listen, can't you? Stump phoned me your ship was down on the desert. He said you were mixed up with a bunch of dope smugglers and were having a hell of a time. I asked him for details, and that was all he knew. He said the Waco people had identified your ship, so I called them up. They said Stump had given them the information.

"Then I called up Boles' Los Angeles office to see what they knew. Three or four of that outfit told me I was crazy, and then I got hold of Lane, the manager. He said something was wrong, as Boles was out of the state. So Lane said he'd fly right down to investigate."

"What I want to know—"

"Shut up till I get through. I tried to get hold of Stump, but his outfit said he had left on special duty. The least I could do was grab a ship and come down. A Douglas was all set on the line, so I shooed in some of the gang and started. We all met up out a-ways and came in together."

Then there was an interruption. Lieutenant Brooks came up in company with a quiet lean man whom he introduced to Hal as John Lane, manager for the real Boles. Following these was a group of airmen, among them a sawed-off, chunky pilot who went to Hal and wrung his hand.

"Say, Stump," said Hal, "did you get my radio?"

"No," answered the chunky chap. "I didn't get any radio. Do I look like a receiving station?"

"Did you see the beacon blinking?"

"What beacon?"

"On top of the minaret over there."

"Didn't know there was one."

"Then," declared Hal, "that hunch I had over by my burned ship did—"

"Naw," interrupted Tip. "Stump used a wee-jee board."

"We're all very much interested, Mr. North," put in Lane, "in how you managed to get in touch with the outside world. We found the radio wires cut and one of the Chinamen, Ah Gin by name, said the beacon was shattered with the first shot and hardly gave more than a wink or two, but they kept the firing up."

"I'll tell that," said Stump. "After the patrol yesterday afternoon, Jones and Halley reported smoke on the desert east of the Boles' place. They couldn't investigate because they had spotted a pack train hidden in the chaparral near the line and had to report. I was on the morning flight, so I was ordered to go look see. I found the wreck just the other side of that ridge east of here, the place with the funny black streaks and blotches."

"Yes," said Lane, "I know the spot."

"The rudder was clear of the wreck, and from the shape of it I knew the ship was a Waco job. Then I saw the ship's

numbers stenciled on the rudder and got near enough to read 'em. When I got in, all I had to do was phone the Waco outfit, and there you are." He stopped and began to fish in his pockets for a smoke.

"Aw, hooley!" burst out Tip. "And from the way the grass grew, you knew the kid was in trouble and likely to be murdered, and from the way the—"

"Cut!" said Stump. "North here gave me the rest of the information himself. He was pretty foxy. He'd made an arrow with black sand on the white with the rudder at the feather end. On one side of the arrow was the word 'Dope,' and on the other side was the old 'come-and-help-me' sign. The arrow was pointed to this joint. Savvy, Tip?"

"Go to hell!" said Tip, looking proudly at Hal.

"That was very clever, Mr. North," said Lane. "You airmen seem to be very much alive. I am sure that Mr. Boles—the right one, you understand—will appreciate your services in unearthing the mischief on his property, so I am going to give you a check for the replacement value of your plane."

"I can certainly use it," said Hal. "With that and the reward, perhaps I can buy into a certain business. Tip, can Columbia Air Cruisers use some additional capital?"

"Whoops!" howled Tip. "Put 'er there, partner," and he extended both hands.



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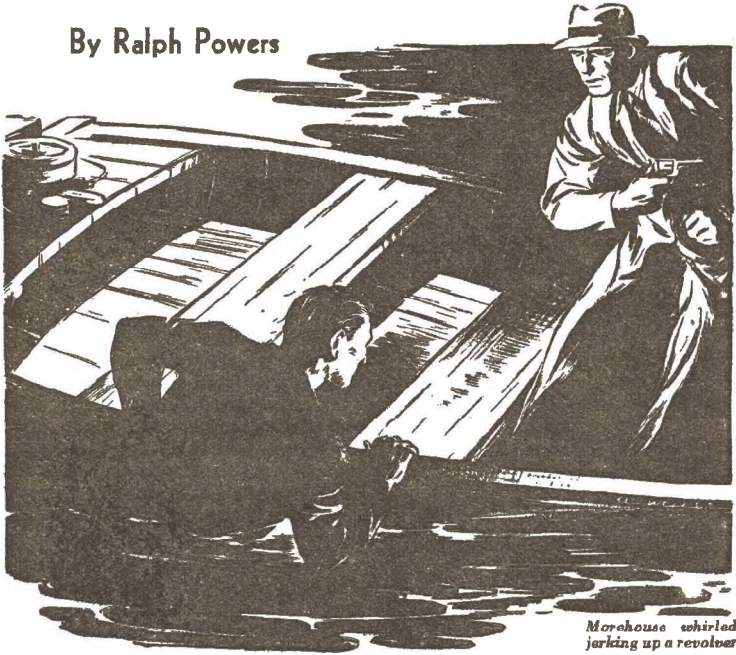
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FOR GEM AND EVER READY RAZORS

• Detective

Hangman on High

By Ralph Powers



Morehouse whirled, jarking up a revolver.

Floating down from the sinister sky came a parade of corpses. Each hung from a diabolical gibbet which only a madman could fashion. A madman executioner who condemned each victim to hang—himself.

CHAPTER I

DEATH FROM THE SKY

A LONG line of luxurious cars filed past the entrance of the Cornwall Ball Park, stopping one by one to discharge a glittering array of wealth

and fashion. Great red and white posters beside the gate announced a charity performance of *Aida*.

Dan Porter, lolling back on the cushions of his Daimler sedan, watched it all through grave, narrowed eyes. There was a sultriness like Egypt in the air, and

black night pressed close upon the sparkling gaiety. Voices were subdued, the fretful impatience of auto horns seemed blunted. Dan Porter unfolded his long body, stepped nonchalantly to the pavement. His broad-shouldered height was emphasized by the black and white formality of full evening dress.

He nodded casually to several acquaintances—the governor's party was just passing—and sauntered toward the gates. Masses of people were held back by police beside the entrance. Porter's eyes skipped over the faces, spotted no one dangerous.

He moved on toward the gate and was presenting his ticket when a running, writhing murmur swept the crowd. It was a whisper at first. It deepened rapidly to a clamor, swelled to an excited roar.

Porter turned away from the gate. Damn this heat! Even the shout of the crowd was blunted, as if all were intimidated before the marching horror of some terrific catastrophe. Striding to the curb, Porter gazed at the crowds. Faces were upturned, stiffened upthrust arms gesticulated, and mouths were strained open in a vast, inchoate roar.

The closeness of the night seemed to rise up within Porter. His throat choked. He threw back his head and stared where the crowd pointed. Vagrant gleams of light thrust up into the dark funnel of the night picked out a round, gleaming shape. Porter narrowed his eyes. It was a parachute with a man dangling from it!

Suddenly white light blazed behind the figure, outlined it vividly. The man of the parachute swayed loosely and Porter made out a floating magnesium flare, such as is used in emergency landing of planes, drifting down on a smaller parachute behind him.

There was something odd about that swiftly descending figure. Something odd aside from the robes that flapped about it. A man in robes, descending in a parachute! Suddenly Porter cried out, dived into the crowd.

"Make way!" he shouted. "Make way!"

Frightened faces jerked toward him. A shudder ripped the packed masses. A few

people shoved and pushed to get out of his path, then others struggled out of his plunging way.

Dan Porter raced to get under the parachute. From the swaying limpness of the body, he knew the man must be unconscious. And landing unconscious in a parachute meant at least broken bones and bruises.

The parachute was dropping more swiftly now. It was within the white circle of the many lights about the Ball Park so that Porter caught a gleam of white hair above the rustling black robe. Some air current had caught the parachute now, making it sidedrift, so that Porter had to run to keep pace with it. It was up only fifty feet now, now forty, now thirty.

The dangling body whirled around. Screams of horror tore from the crowd. Porter felt his throat tighten and he muttered a curse, and halted his race to get under the parachute.

The face of the dangling man leered down at the crowd. It was terribly white in the glare of lights, the tongue thrust far out between the teeth as if in leering mockery. The eyes, bulging and awful, seemed to glare down with an independent light, and the neck seemed inhumanly stretched.

Porter realized suddenly what had struck him as odd about the figure hanging from the parachute. No harness was strapped about the black-robed figure. The shrouds converged higher up. They converged at the man's neck!

The body thudded to the ground. Wind caught the parachute and swept it aside. Only half collapsed, it dragged the robed man.

PORTER sprang forward, seized the parachute and forced it flat, darted back to the body. He dropped on a knee beside the man, ran his hand underneath the black robe, thrusting aside a white placard that dangled there.

No heart beat. Well, he had expected none. He drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and spread it over the horrible glaring eyes and the mockery of that

strangled tongue. He glanced then at the shrouds of the parachute.

As he had seen from the ground, they converged on the man's neck. Underneath his left ear was a hangman's knot. And the rope about the man's neck was a noose.

Porter straightened, took off his high silk hat and ran a hand up over the high forehead and into the dull hair.

Police had fought their way through the crowd now, formed a circle around the body. Numbly Porter's mind switched back to the white placard he had thrust aside. He stooped and turned it over, laid it upon the black-robed chest. In large black letters was printed on it:

A CORRUPT JUDGE—NUMBER ONE
MOREHOUSE

One of the policemen knelt beside the body, lifted the handkerchief. He sprang up suddenly to his feet.

"By damn!" he cried. "It's Judge Sidney!"

Porter watched him narrowly, and gazed again at the placard, at the signature, "Morehouse."

Somehow the name struck a familiar note, but he could not quite place it. A hand touched his shoulder and Porter turned, recognized a member of the governor's staff. He nodded briefly: "Hello, MacHenry."

"Listen, Porter, what's this over here?"

Porter said: "A murder."

MacHenry's young, florid face paled. "Murder?" he cried.

He heard his name called, turned and saw the stocky, broad-shouldered figure of the governor. He had raised a hand and was gesturing impatiently.

MacHenry turned. "Mr. Porter, would you mind coming over to tell the governor about it?"

MacHenry led him directly up to the governor. His young voice was thin with excitement. "Your Excellency, Mr. Daniel Porter."

Porter removed his hat, bowed.

"Mrs. Samuels," MacHenry went on.

Porter bowed again to a gracious, dark woman, the governor's wife.

GOVERNOR SAMUELS moved a hand jerkily, cutting short the formalities. Thereby, the impression of dynamic power was increased. He had a barrel chest, a wide body that tapered down to narrow hips. Immaculately creased trousers ended in small, gleaming shoes. The whole man seemed to run down to those two points. He had a fighter's bulldog jaw, a stubby pugnacious nose. Black eyebrows were heavy above gleaming eyes.

"You were there, Mr. Porter. You can tell me about it?"

Porter bowed.

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"Get going then," the governor bit out.

Porter explained in detail the manner in which the man had been killed but when he came to the placard he paused.

"It's Judge Sidney," he said.

The governor cried, "Sidney!" in a low, tight voice. "He would have been the next presiding justice of the supreme court!"

Porter said grimly: "Our murderer strikes high. There was a sign on Sidney's chest that read, 'A corrupt judge, number one'."

Governor Samuels stared at him bitterly.

Porter went on, "And the signature—"

"What! Did the murderer sign his name?"

Porter said grimly, "He did. The name he signed was 'Morehouse'."

The governor's face did not change, yet his eyes were like those of a man who has been struck violently in the face.

"Morehouse," he muttered.

Porter saw the governor's wife put a white hand on his arm. "John," she said, and her voice was tight, "John, isn't Morehouse the name—"

The governor turned toward her with a jerk. "Never mind, Nellie."

He turned back to Porter. "Going in now?"

"A little later," Porter said. "There are a few more things I want to check up on."

MacHenry, hovering at the governor's elbow, put in hurriedly: "Mr. Porter is a private detective, you know, governor."

The governor stared at him fixedly with his small fighting eyes. "No—no, I didn't know that," he said, continued to look at Porter for a moment or two, said: "Join us in our box, won't you?" then turned and thrust toward the gate.

MacHenry delayed a moment. Now that the governor's party had moved off, Porter saw a girl who had remained in the background. She came forward now, a pale blue, fur-edged cloak drawn about her shoulders. In the dark V of the fur her face was vivid, lips like poppies, hair like black silk. She said severely to MacHenry:

"You haven't introduced me," and her teeth gleamed in a dancing smile.

MacHenry's florid young face flushed. "I'm so sorry, Miss Ballin. May I present Mr. Daniel Porter. Miss Ballin is secretary to the governor."

The girl held out her hand, man fashion, raising her chin as she smiled. The light fell upon her eyes and Porter saw that they were bright blue.

"I am afraid I must ask you to excuse me," Porter murmured. "I'll see you presently."

He bowed and MacHenry fussily offered the girl his arm and they moved off toward the gates. The girl turned her head about and smiled slowly with her red mouth.

Porter momentarily forgot the urgency of his business. He stood, a lone, aloof figure in the midst of the crowd; tall and distinguished, broad shouldered, head slightly bowed. Under his brows he watched the retreating couple. The girl's movements were lithe as a wild animal's, like a cheetah stalking.

Then an ambulance clanged and Porter struggled again through the crowd. A white-coated interne knelt over the body of the judge. Porter bent beside him. The interne looked up, recognized Porter.

He said: "This is the most fiendish device I've ever seen. The man's arms were tied. A hangman's noose about his neck. Evidently he was tossed out of some plane and the ripcord jerked. When the parachute opened, it snapped his spine."

Porter straightened and stared almost

apprehensively up into the black vault of the sky. He shook his head sharply, once. He felt strangely that this was not the end of the affair. The sultriness of the night, mingled with the horror of this murder, put his hair on end, sent chills of cold dread racing over his body. He muttered a curse, turned to a policeman.

"You know where to get hold of me if they want any of my evidence about this thing."

The cop said: "Sure, I know."

PORTER strode off toward the gate, threaded his way along the ramps, through a tunnel, and down to the governor's box, where a place was made for him between Samuels and the girl, Miss Ballin.

The governor jerked an alert, somewhat worried face about. "Found out anything new?"

Porter said slowly, "The interne said death was instantaneous."

Governor Samuels turned back toward the pageant before them. He grunted. "That's a lot of help."

An usher touched Porter on the shoulder.

"Beg your pardon, sir. A gentleman here wants to see you."

Porter excused himself, walked swiftly to the mouthway of one of the entrance tunnels. A man with snow-white hair above a wrinkled young-old face, stood there. A soft black hat was in his hands. He had piercing blue eyes and there was a youthfulness about his face despite deep lines of care.

Porter said slowly: "You wanted to speak to me?"

The man stared at him with frosty eyes. "I heard you mention Morehouse," he said, "and I thought of something that might help you."

Porter nodded his thanks. "Go ahead," he said.

"It's just this," the white-haired man said. "I'm an old newspaperman, and I remember a connection between this Judge Sidney and a man named Morehouse. It was ten, maybe fifteen years ago. A woman named Amelia Morehouse was on trial for murder. She had killed

a politician. Judge Sidney was the trial judge. The present Governor Samuels was the prosecuting attorney, and Amelia Morehouse was hanged."

Porter's eyes sharpened. He nodded swiftly.

"This woman's husband swore vengeance," the man went on. "He had to be expelled from the court, shouting justice."

Porter said: "Yes, yes, there might be a connection. Thank you a lot. Now, if you'll just give me your name—"

The man shook his young-old head slowly. "It would be of no service. The information is sufficient."

Porter stared a moment and said: "Thank you." The old man turned away. His shoulders were bent, but there was a swing of easy power in them. Porter took a swift path paralleling that of the gray man. Near the gate he found two detectives.

"Listen," he said swiftly. "That man with bent shoulders and white hair. He just gave me some information about the murder that makes me suspicious. Could you tail him?"

"Aw, let's just pinch him," the man suggested.

Porter shook his head swiftly. "That would do no good."

A police car drew up in front of the gates and a lean man with a brown, intent face clambered out. Porter strode rapidly toward him.

"Inspector Littleburn."

The police inspector glanced up. There was no welcome in his face. He scowled. "What do you want, Porter?"

Porter said rapidly, "Can you put two men on that man's tail?" He pointed toward the bent old figure. "I think we might get valuable information from him about this murder."

Littleburn met Porter's stare for a moment. There was no love lost between the two, but each respected the other, and after a moment Littleburn ducked his head.

"Okay," he said, called two plainclothes men to shadow the man.

Porter nodded. "See you later," and whirled back toward the gate, sauntered

to the governor's box. The girl turned mocking blue eyes upon him.

"It must be awful to be so popular you can't even see an opera," she said, "without being interrupted."

There was merriment in her voice and Porter turned a frown into a smile.

"It is especially troublesome," he said, "when the company is so charming."

He turned to the performance. The first act was drawing to a close and a robust tenor was bellowing into the dark night air.

Suddenly Porter's eyes flicked upward. Was he seeing things or was that a parachute? His eyes focused on the white blur in the air and abruptly again a magnesium flare spread its dazzling light, outlined a dangling body that hung limply by a too-long neck!

CHAPTER II

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

SCREAMS tore into the night at the sight of this new horror, this parachute-swung corpse. Dan Porter heard Governor Samuels curse under his breath, heard MacHenry start up in muttering excitement. Porter hurdled the front of the box, sprinted across the field. The roar from the stands drowned out the music. The tenor faltered on a high note, gazing wildly into the blank sea of faces before him. Then he stared upward, spotted the floating parachute almost over his head, and fled with a shout that was half a scream.

The body was rotating slowly as it drifted down and at every turn the white corpse face glistened in the white light as if drenched with dew. The blackened, out-thrust tongue was horribly suggestive of an impertinent child mocking its elders. It was as if the corpse knew what terror it created, as if the murderer had sent a mocking message to police, to possible further victims.

When the body thudded down Porter was upon it at once, easing the parachute and the noose around the man's throat. The neck dropped loosely to one side at an impossible angle and Porter

abruptly ceased his efforts at resuscitation.

The man's neck was broken. It would be, of course.

Porter straightened slowly, stared down at the corpse. A placard lay upon the breast of this one also.

It read:

A BRIBED JUROR—NUMBER TWO
MOREHOUSE

Porter felt the crush of the crowd behind him, heard the angry shouts of policemen holding them back. The orchestra was blaring unheard music into the night trying to slow the panic rush.

Porter could not force his way through the pack, and it was three-quarters of an hour later that he regained the governor's box. It was empty.

Frowning, he strode swiftly along the darkened ramps of the stadium, made his way to his car.

"Home, Giulio," he ordered.

He sat lost in thought, smoking cigarettes end to end, and was totally unconscious of the streets through which the Daimler slid so smoothly. He glanced up in surprise as the chauffeur swung open the door before his apartment building. He entered a private elevator that shot him to his penthouse.

Porter unlocked the door and snapped on subdued lamps around the room. They spread a luxurious glow over the quiet elegance of the room—low, comfortable chairs and divans, small tables and the rich, deep nap of silken Chinese rugs.

He tossed off hat and coat, slipped hurriedly into a silk lounging robe and strode immediately to his filing cases. He had here a record of the world's criminal life dating back two-score years. He dug through the index rapidly. Ah, here it was. Morehouse, No. 12,579. Porter snapped out a fat envelope, hurried to his desk, and tumbled out a neatly printed card, bundles of yellowish newspaper clippings.

He skimmed through the records of the Morehouse murder, snatched those of the trial.

It had been fourteen years ago and the reputation for integrity which Sam-

uels had established as district attorney in that case had been a powerful factor in thrusting him toward the governorship.

Hurriedly Porter scanned the slips. He was convinced now that revenge for the woman's death was behind the series of murders and he sought the name of the next possible victim.

He could see but one answer: Governor Samuels must be the next man to die.

FROM the story it seemed the trial had been fair. The woman had been a member of an anarchist group, and the killing had been an assassination. But this, of course, would have no influence on the disordered mind that had planned these atrocities. Undoubtedly Morehouse, for it was certainly he, had waited until his intended victims were at the apex of their careers before he struck.

Porter snatched up a phone. The wire led directly to his office, where some one was perpetually on duty. A voice answered instantly.

"Porter speaking," he said. "Locate the governor, get him on the phone. Ring me back at once."

He hung up, drew out a platinum and enamel case and selected one of his private brand of cigarettes from it. He lit up with a lighter that matched the case, stretched out a foot and drew a footstool to him, rested his heels on it. He threw back his head gazing with narrowed eyes through the updrifting smoke. A bell buzzed at his elbow and the governor's voice challenged him over the wire.

"Porter speaking. Governor Samuels, I want to warn you."

The governor's voice was choppy. "I know all you're going to say. I knew it couldn't escape your keen mind. And you're right, Porter. That Morehouse has marked me to die. I'm at the Carlton. Will you come here at once and organize these numbskull police into an efficient guard for me?"

"Name your own price. I've heard enough of your wonderful work before this and I believe no other man could protect me. You don't know the fiendishness of this Morehouse."

Porter said grimly. "I suspect it at any rate. I'll be over in three-quarters of an hour."

Porter hung up slowly, got to his feet, and turned. His eyes narrowed against the rising smoke of his cigarette. There was no start, no jerk of muscles as he beheld what stood behind him; yet any ordinary man must have cried aloud at the sight of that ghastly, horrible figure, at the threat of a revolver levelled at his body.

PORTER took the cigarette from his mouth and deliberately surveyed the tall, black-robed and hooded figure. There was a mad gleam in the eyes that peered through the black holes of the hood. The hand that held the gun was like a rock.

Porter asked calmly, "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

The man said nothing, but retreated two paces, beckoning with a bent finger and raising the gun threateningly.

Porter looked down at the tip of his cigarette. Somehow it made his forehead seem even higher.

"I take it," he said calmly, "that you want me to go with you?"

The hooded head nodded.

Dan Porter began talking. "I'm sorry but I have an engagement," he said. "I don't really see how I can go with you."

He watched the gun rise slowly and level at his heart.

"In fact," he went on, slipping his right foot underneath the footstool. "You come at a most unfortunate time. I was chatting over the phone with a friend and he asked me to join him for a late party. Can't we postpone—"

With a swift heave of his right foot, a smooth precision that years as a juggler on the stage had given him, he threw the footstool sharply into the air. At the same time he plunged forward and to the left of the hooded man. The stool caught the gun.

Pow—w!

A bullet plowed harmlessly into the ceiling.

The stool had been hurled with considerable force. Striking the gun did not

stop it. It slammed the gun into the hooded face.

The robbed man fell back a pace.

Before he could level the gun again, Porter was upon him, an arm clamped about his throat from the rear, his right hand gripping the gun wrist.

In the vise of Porter's hand, the gun arm was drawn up and back in such a way that the elbow was turned inward toward the man's head. A groan squeezed from the man.

Porter's teeth were clenched tightly. He put all his strength into the upward heave. The breath of the man labored beneath the hood, came hoarsely.

Suddenly his hand relaxed, and Porter, with a heaving twist, hurled him half across the room, snatched the gun. But the man phenomenally recovered his balance. His reeling tumble across the room increased his speed, and he darted through the outer door just as Porter fired . . . and missed.

Porter plunged across the room, saw by the dial that his private elevator was moving downward. To use the stairs would be useless, he knew. The man would discard his robe in the elevator and when the door opened below would be gone.

Porter whirled, shrugged, stared down at the gun and went to his apartment dressing room. He rapidly changed into dark tweeds, thrust the captured revolver into a drawer, and slipped his own heavy automatic into a clip beneath his arm.

Grimly, he slipped to the outer door and peered through a tiny aperture in its middle, searching the hall. It was empty. There was no doorway where a man might hide except the fire exit. That was closed.

Gun in hand, Porter crept out into the hall, pressed the button for the elevator. His eyes never left the fire exit. He heard the whine of air escaping under pressure from the elevator shaft, heard the click of the elevator stopping, the door sliding to one side.

Eyes still on the fire exit, he yanked open the elevator gate and stepped inside. A hand seized his wrist. Porter sprang backward and at the same time his

elbow jabbed against the buttons that operated the elevator.

His enemy's grasp was on his gun rather than his wrists. Porter heaved backward, suddenly released the gun, and slammed the elevator door. Instantly the cage was in motion, dropping downward.

PORTER darted back to his apartment, got another gun and began to race down the fire stairs. It was fifteen stories to the street. He took two steps at a time, one hand gliding along the rail to balance himself. He knew his best speed must put him on the ground floor far behind the elevator, but he plunged on, darted out into the small private lobby in which the elevator had its exit.

The cage was down. The gate stood open. It was empty and the hall was empty.

He smashed the light in the hall and crept through utter darkness toward the outer doorway. A car sputtered into motion. Lead smashed through glass.

Porter threw himself flat, opened the door from that position, and snaked through, moving gingerly on fragments of glass. He raised his automatic and blazed away at the fleeing car. The auto rocketed on, skated around the corner into Fifth and was gone.

Porter darted out, gun in hand, eyes shooting desperately up and down the street for a taxi. None in sight.

He ran with quick breath to the corner. The nearest cab was blocks away. The fleeing car had already twisted another corner and disappeared. He heard a police whistle skirl in the distance. Radio patrol sirens already were whining.

Porter shoved his gun back into its clip, walked rapidly toward the trundling taxi, flagged it. The cab snaked him past shrieking police autos and deposited him a few moments later at the Carlton.

Porter's jaw was angrily clenched as he strode into the lighted doorway and a bitter ugly light lurked in his eyes. He strode into the governor's suite without ceremony, his usual suavity gone.

Samuels started to his feet, strode for-

ward. Porter bit out words: "I want to see you alone at once."

The governor met the bitter, narrowed eyes. His gaze narrowed, but he nodded. MacHenry was with him, and the girl, Miss Ballin.

"Come, Kathleen," MacHenry muttered to the girl, his young florid face excited. The girl, raising bright blue eyes to Porter's face, smiled at him.

"Ooo, is the dreat big man all excited?" she mocked.

Porter did not look at her. When the door closed behind the two, he said to the governor: "There is a leak in your office, among your present staff."

He told briefly what had happened.

"Obviously some one knew your intention to engage me before you phoned, for when I turned from the phone there was a gun levelled. It could not have been coincidental."

Governor Samuels rolled his broad, pugnacious shoulders, stood erect with his head thrown back. "Couldn't it have been an echo of some other case you've worked on?"

Porter smiled grimly. He said slowly: "Most of the cases I work on are murders, and murderers rarely survive my cases. In fact, I can't recall any—survivors."

Samuels stared at him. The beginning of a smile twisted the tight corners of his mouth.

He seemed pleased, said slowly: "I'm not willing to concede a leak in my staff yet. I called your office and home five or six times in the half hour before you phoned me. It is possible the leak might have been at the switchboard of the hotel, or even in your own office."

Porter glanced up fiercely, saw Samuels was smiling. The governor said: "I'm sorry, but it's just as easy for me to imagine a traitor in your office as it is for you to find one in mine."

Porter acknowledged that briefly. "Nothing we can do now. Are we leaving at once?"

"Only waiting for you to arrange our escort," Samuels said.

IT was half an hour later the governor left the hotel. Ahead of them rode six motorcycle police. There were two automobiles ahead of the governor's car, and two behind him. On the running board of the last car three men were clinging, detectives with guns ready in their pockets. A decoy car.

The governor was in the midmost car of the train, a man on either side of him. Porter in front beside the driver. In this fashion, with the sirens of the motorcycles whining a way through city streets, the motorcade travelled at high speed over the roads to Capitol City.

They were roaring along a stretch of highway with shallow ditches and woods on either side when white light blazed out ahead. Porter seized the wheel and sent the car jolting across the ditch, crashing through a wooden fence. The chauffeur shouted, but Porter plunged on until the auto was jammed among the trees. Governor Samuels sat bolt upright in the rear.

Porter leaped out, automatic in hand, darted through the trees. A magnesium flare was drifting down on a parachute and as Porter watched a man's feet descended into a circle of radiance. A man's feet, then his dangling body with a long stretched neck, with a white placard on its breast.

With a quick shot Porter blew the magnesium flare to bits, yelled to the automobiles to extinguish lights. Darkness like a coal mine descended over the road, absolute silence too. Through it came the distant powerful drone of overhead motors.

Porter moved cautiously forward, heard the thump and saw the ghostly white collapse of the parachute as the body fell. He did nothing until the overhead drone of the airplane had faded into silence. Then he flashed on his light, staring grim-faced down at this new victim of the vengeful Morehouse.

The placard read:

A TOO AMBITIOUS POLICEMAN. NUMBER THREE. SAMUELS, YOUR TURN IS COMING. MOREHOUSE.

Porter flashed the light on the man's face and started with a low oath. Despite the horrible contortions, he recognized this as one of the two detectives put on the trail of the bent-shouldered young-old man who had approached him at the opera!

CHAPTER III

VENGEANCE STRIKES

DAN PORTER whirled to the nearest motorcycle policeman. "Load this body into the first car," he directed. He darted back to the auto where the governor sat.

His Excellency's face was white; his bulldog jaw clenched. He said savagely: "You don't need to tell me. I saw it."

Porter said grimly: "There are some things about it you don't know yet. Listen. We won't wait for this car to get out of here. This may be some trick to delay us for an attack."

He organized a squad of men, whose bodies completely protected the governor. In dead, ominous silence they marched in a compact mass to another car.

Within a minute and a half after the body had been found, the convoy was speeding on again toward Capitol City. They reached the spreading white governor's mansion without further difficulty.

The place was turned into an armed fort. Every corridor had its pacing sentry. There were double guards outside the building, and no man entered it unless identified and approved by Mac-Henry.

Porter called the newspapers and gave them the information on the latest murder, told them that it threatened Samuels. The governor had protested, but Porter pointed out that publicity would make the movements of the murderer more difficult. A completely alert police force scattered throughout the state would make it easier to strike when the moment came.

It was now four in the morning and Governor Samuels went wearily to bed. His face was haggard. Even in so short a time he seemed to have lost weight. His face had become gaunt, the strong bones

outlined more rigidly. His wife showed her mettle plainly. Worried she was, but she held her head high. The girl, Kathleen Ballin, was quartered also in the mansion, as were all other members of the governor's personal staff.

When everything possible had been done to protect the governor from the threat of vengeance and death, Porter finally went to sleep, but every two hours he roused himself to make a circle of the guard, to check on the sentries pacing the halls. He did not neglect to have a state trooper behind him, at Samuels' insistence.

Porter was making the round again at ten o'clock when Governor Samuels came downstairs toward his office. He stopped the lean-jawed detective in the hall.

"Nothing happened last night, I take it?"

Porter shrugged. "All quiet. All we can do is maintain this guard while we try to track down Morehouse. Apparently he's working with at least one accomplice, because I'm positive it was Morehouse I talked to at the opera, and a few moments after a body was dropped into the street. I've given police a detailed description. Their efforts in tracing him would be more effective than my own."

Samuels said grimly: "You take care of me. We'll let the police take care of Morehouse."

Porter nodded, and Governor Samuels turned and strode off to his office. He jerked open the door of his office, started in and then fell back with a low, hoarse cry.

Porter was upon him instantly, jerking him away from the door, plunging in with a drawn pistol. Then he halted staring.

For, dangling from the high chandelier, was an effigy of a hanged man. Just a suit of clothes stuffed with straw and paper, but it was horribly threatening. The placard on its chest read:

A HANGING PROSECUTOR. NUMBER FIVE.

Porter whirled into the hall, mustered the sentries of the previous night. No one but members of the household had moved about, they insisted.

Porter turned to a sentry. "Get MacHenry down here at once."

GOVERNOR SAMUELS behind him said wearily: "There's no use doing that. MacHenry wouldn't know about this."

Porter paid no attention to him and the guard stumped off. A servant came to the governor's ring and was ordered: "Take that thing down." Samuels gestured stiffly toward the hanging figure.

The man stared at the thing with widening eyes, then muttered: "Yes, sir," and entering the office, began work on the figure.

Porter stood rigidly, eyes fixed on the stairway until MacHenry clattered his light-footed way down. He walked, smiling, up to the detective. "You sent for me?"

Porter's mouth shut grimly. "I did." He turned toward the governor's office, pointed toward the still dangling figure.

MacHenry ripped out a low oath.

"Exactly," said Porter drily. "That thing was swung there despite an impenetrable guard. You passed on every visitor admitted to the mansion."

MacHenry's fair face flushed. "Are you hinting I'm responsible? I thought you knew me better and were my friend," he said angrily.

Porter's grin was acid. "I'm a detective," he said shortly. "When I'm on a case I have no friends. Listen, whom did you let in yesterday to hang this thing here and terrorize the house?"

MacHenry drew himself up stiffly.

"That won't do any good," Porter said grimly. "Answer my question."

MacHenry's breath came swiftly. He said fiercely: "I permitted no enemy of the governor to enter the house."

"I asked you who hung this effigy of the governor?"

"I don't know."

Porter took two slow paces forward so that he glared down into MacHenry's face.

"I'm giving you one more chance to come clean, then I'm ordering your arrest as an accomplice in these murders."

MacHenry whitened. He opened his

mouth to speak, but no sound came out. "You're mad," he whispered finally.

Porter placed a hand on his shoulder. His voice became deep, formal, sing-song. "Arthur MacHenry, I arrest—"

Suddenly Governor Samuels jerked his energetic body up from his chair, thrust forward.

"Hold on, Porter," he said swiftly, "I think you're making a big mistake."

Porter turned his heavy gaze on the governor. "Well, I don't," he snapped.

"Please," said Samuels, "I'd trust MacHenry with my life. I'm sure you're mistaken about his being responsible. Why, one of the sentries might have been reached and done this thing."

Porter stared at him unbelievably.

"You gave me charge of this case," he said firmly. "I demand the right to handle it in my own way."

The governor lifted a hand wearily. "You're right about that, of course, but I'm sure that you're making a mistake about MacHenry. I don't blame you for being suspicious of him, of anybody for that matter, but please—"

Samuels looked squarely into Porter's eyes and the man's face was lined with worry. Porter hardened himself to insist, gazed into the governor's eyes again and cursed under his breath.

"Okay," he said. "We're both being fools, but I'll let you have your way."

He spun on his heel and strode off, found the sergeant of the guard.

"Hereafter," he said tightly, "I want one of your men to keep an eye on MacHenry at all times. Understand?"

The sergeant saluted wordlessly, strode off. Porter paced on up the hall slowly, looked up and saw a woman coming down the stairway. It was the governor's wife. She had a jaunty hat upon her head and a fur thrown about her shoulders.

"You weren't thinking of going out, Mrs. Samuels?" Porter asked.

She raised finely arched eyebrows at him. "Why not?" she asked. "Surely the danger threatening John does not extend for me?"

"Nevertheless," Porter said gravely, "I would much prefer that you don't go."

Mrs. Samuels drew up stiffly, threw

back her dark head. She was a dignified woman, just under forty, haughty, somewhat spoiled, and intent upon having her own way. She brushed by Porter, threw open the door of the governor's office.

"Really, John," she said, "this is too absurd. Mr. Porter is trying to insist that I do not leave the house today."

SAMUELS was seated at his desk, staring blankly at the papers before him, obviously without seeing them at all.

He said slowly: "I think it inadvisable to keep Nellie here. People must not think we are cowardly. She is in no danger at all and it does not seem to me that it would hurt for her to go out. If you insist, couldn't we send a guard with her?"

Porter's back was like a ramrod. There was anger deep in his eyes. Yet looking at Governor Samuels, he could not maintain his irritation. He thought to himself: "I'm a damn sentimentalist or I'd chuck this case and walk out." He smiled in self-mockery.

"Very well," he said aloud. Beckoned to a state trooper. "Mrs. Samuels is going out. Go with her. And never let her out of your sight for an instant. I hold you responsible."

The policeman saluted smartly. He had a sun-tanned, eager face. "Right, sir."

Porter smiled at his stalwart back as he marched off. He felt that Mrs. Samuels would be protected.

HE sent word then to Kathleen Ballin that he would like to talk to her. She came swiftly down the long high stairs of the hall, trim in a suit of heringbone gray. She alone of all the household seemed unworried. The smile on her poppy red mouth was mocking.

Porter refused to smile back. "Miss Ballin," he said coldly. "Mrs. Samuels has just left the house with a policeman guarding her. I want you to follow Mrs. Samuels also, keep her under close surveillance, and the moment you see any suspicious thing, call the police."

The girl's face grew grave. "You think she is in danger?"

"I think anyone intimately connected with Governor Samuels is in danger. This Morehouse is absolutely mad. Hurry."

The girl sped back up the stairs, reappeared a moment later with hat and furs, hurried out of the mansion.

Porter resumed his patrol of the halls, keeping the guards on the alert, glancing in every half hour to see that the governor was all right in his high, stately office. He was looking into the governor's office for the sixth time since the governor's wife had left, when the telephone bell pealed.

It was a long, sustained ringing, not ordinary automatic machinery buzzing. MacHenry, laboring at his desk in the corner, snatched up the phone.

"Governor Samuels' office."

His eyes widened then and he stared in horror at the mouth of the phone. His face blanched.

Porter crossed to him in two strides. "What is it?" he demanded.

MacHenry thrust the phone at him. The detective slapped it to his ear, said, "Porter speaking. What is it please?"

The excited jabber of a man came over the wire. Porter cut it short. "Speak more slowly." He caught words now. "Mrs. Samuels is kidnapped. Her guard was killed."

Porter said tightly, "And Miss Ballin?"

The voice jabbered back. "Struck over the head, unconscious in the hospital."

"How long ago was this?"

"Fifteen minutes."

Porter felt Governor Samuels' hand bite into his shoulder.

"What is it, for heaven's sake?" the governor's voice quavered.

Porter spat, "Just a minute," over his shoulder, barked into the phone. "Every effort being made to trace the kidnapers?"

"Yes," the man at the other end of the wire admitted. "There's small hope of success. The attack was made on a taxi on a lonely street. The taxi driver was out cold. Mrs. Samuels had been gone perhaps ten minutes when a policeman on the beat found the taxi, revived the driver, and found out what had happened."

Porter said, "Okay," turned to the governor.

His face was a rigid mask.

"Brace yourself, Samuels," he said harshly, and told him what had happened.

Samuels seemed to shrink visibly in stature.

"This is the end," he said dully.

Porter said grimly, "Yes, this is the end. But not the way you think. Morehouse has gone too far now. After all, it is not your wife, it is you he wants. Before long you will get a message saying your surrender is the price of your wife's life. When that happens we have them."

The governor's head came up slowly. There was the beginning of animation in his eyes.

"I'll follow you," Porter said swiftly. "We'll strike before Morehouse is ready."

A shout rang outside the window. Porter strode across, threw it open and leaned out. A guard saluted swiftly, pointed upward.

"A parachute, sir, with a man in it."

Governor Samuels staggered to the window. "Are you sure it's a man?" he croaked.

Porter stared upward. "It's a man," he said quietly.

Samuels groaned, "Thank fortune," and dropped heavily into a chair.

Porter vaulted the window sill, raced toward the spot where the parachute was settling. No mistaking the work of that madman. This corpse, too, was noosed about the neck. It lay stretched upon the sun-glaring roadway, a placard upon its chest.

A LYING WITNESS. NUMBER FOUR

An envelope was fastened to the placard. Porter seized and ripped it open. The letter began abruptly:

Samuels:

If you want your wife to live you must surrender in her place at 2 A. M. Drive your car alone along the Mulligan Road. If you are followed or permit the police to interfere in any way your wife will be hanged as you hanged my wife.

MOREHOUSE.

Dan Porter strode back into the mansion, put the letter in Samuels' hand. The

governor looked up heavily. "You were right."

Porter nodded. "I'm convinced Morehouse never means to turn your wife loose. Consequently whether I follow you or not makes no difference at all. I am going to follow you, alone. I believe that way we will have much better chance of success than if we threw a dozen police patrols along the line, because Morehouse will not suspect. He will take you to wherever their hidden headquarters are."

Samuels agreed dully. "Whatever you say. Every time I have disagreed, something terrible has happened."

Dinner was a morose and terrible affair that night. Afterward, Porter and the governor talked for a short while, then Porter went up to his room to sleep for a few hours. Nothing could be done before 2 A. M.

Porter had been under terrific strain. He felt enormously tired. His feet dragged, and without undressing he dropped upon his bed. When he awoke, early red sunlight was streaming through the window. He leaped from his bed, ran through the halls. It was six A. M. Governor Samuels had disappeared!

CHAPTER IV

TRAIL OF DEATH

IT took Dan Porter ten minutes to check the sentries around the house and learn that Governor Samuels had left the house at 2 A. M. exactly as Morehouse ordered, that he had forbidden police to follow him and gone off alone in his car.

"Four hours' start!" Porter muttered. He clenched his fists at the hopelessness of pursuit.

His first thought was MacHenry. He called the sergeant of the guard, learned from him that not a man in service overnight had left the grounds. The same was true of the servants. Kathleen Ballin, MacHenry, and the governor's other employees were all in the building. The only persons missing were the governor and his wife.

Porter's eyes grew narrow. MacHen-

ry. He opened his mouth to order the secretary's arrest. But wait. There was a better way. He spoke abruptly to the sergeant of the guard, a Scotsman with a dour, long face.

"Sergeant," he bit out words, "I have an unusual order. I want you to keep the night guard on duty all day, too."

A slight frown crossed the sergeant's wrinkled brow. "That'll be hard on the lads, sir. Is it necessary? I have a relief."

Porter said grimly: "It's necessary that these same men stay on duty."

The sergeant's lips tightened. "Very good, sir."

"One more thing," said Porter. "I have no objections to any one in the house leaving, but he must leave by this front door. Furthermore, no one is to know that this order comes from me. Understand?"

The sergeant saluted, marched away.

Porter went slowly down the wide front steps of the mansion, entered a small hotel across the street and got a room on the front. He put through a call to his home office and ordered that seven of his best operators fly immediately to Capitol City and come to his room.

He next ordered a car hired and parked out front for him, sent for breakfast, and, sitting well back from the window, watched the entrance of the executive mansion.

In a little over an hour his seven operatives were trickling into the room. They were as queer a group as ever assembled under one leadership.

There was a stocky, bandy-legged little Jew, not more than twenty years old.

There was a bronzed Westerner with a horsey roll still in his legs, and a predilection for wide-brimmed hats.

There was a gravely polite Japanese whose protruding upper teeth were perpetually bared in smiles.

Another had the broad-toed shoes and stocky, red-faced impassivity of a policeman.

A tall weathered man with squint eyes and a mop of black hair was the pilot.

He lounged next to a square-built ruffian with a broken nose and a cauliflower ear, who spoke with a meticulous Oxford

accent and exchanged gay badinage with a girl in a trig blue dress piped in red, with a silver fox scarf across her shoulders, and a pert sauciness of face that matched the blazing red of her hair.

The girl said pertly: "Well, chief, the gang's all here."

Porter was cold-faced. His jaw was hard and his gray eyes were unamused. Beneath the high sweep of his forehead they moved individually from member to member of his force.

He said briefly: "The governor's wife has been kidnapped. Samuels went away at two this morning to ransom her with his own body. I was to trail him, but my dinner was drugged last night and I woke four hours after he had left. Every trace of him is gone now."

Each of the group showed sharp interest.

"There have been repeated evidences of inside work," Porter went on. "Some one in that house drugged my food last night—unless it was the governor himself. That I do not believe. He had gone counter to my judgment on several occasions and trouble resulted every time. He said last night that he was satisfied to follow my way. I believe he meant it.

"I suspect the governor's secretary, MacHenry, but we absolutely cannot let any chance slip. Therefore there is this to do. Whenever anyone leaves that house today, one of you will follow him. He will save Samuels and his wife at all costs. These murders are crimes of vengeance. I do not believe that vengeance will be exacted on Samuels and his wife until that person comes to the scene. Understand the situation?"

Quick nods answered his individual glance. Porter turned back to the window.

It was twelve o'clock before the front doors of the mansion opened and one of the governor's secretaries came out. Porter, without taking his eyes from the window said: "Jordan."

The tall, tanned pilot strode out.

A HALF hour later a flustered woman came from the mansion door. Her dress indicated plainly she had been

used to the servants' entrance. Porter said: "Cholmondeley," received a "Righto," for answer, and the broken-nosed man stepped forward.

Three more operatives were despatched behind two more office employees and a servant, and then MacHenry came from the mansion. Porter called, "Jo," softly, and the redhead crossed to his side.

Porter said swiftly, "That man is MacHenry. Don't lose sight of him, Jo."

The girl's hand rested lightly on Porter's shoulder. Her heels tapped out of the room. There were left now only Porter and the tall Westerner. Porter said: "Buck, I'm a little worried about Jo and this lad MacHenry. Suppose you follow Jo. I'll be here to take charge. If you get a break, call me."

Five minutes later Kathleen Ballin strolled out of the mansion across the street. She was dressed as on the day before in chic gray. Porter rose immediately, drew on a soft brown borsalino. No help for it. He'd have to go. He left a brief note to Jordan to take charge and hurried to the lobby.

The girl strolled along toward the hotel and Porter slipped into a cigarette store which opened off the lobby. The girl walked past the cigar store. Porter bought a pack of cigarettes. The girl still stayed outside. The man behind the counter peered through thick glasses. "Was there something else you wanted?"

Porter looked blankly about, spotted a can of fuel for cigarette lighters and purchased that. He hung around, filling his lighter, and when he finally had done that he saw the girl was moving off up the street, swiftly now and with apparently definite purpose.

Porter dropped the can of fuel and lighter into his pocket, slid back into the lobby of the hotel and entered the car he had hired and parked out front. He hopped in, slid slowly forward. If his guess was right the girl would soon take an automobile or taxi, and it was with a feeling of elation that, an instant later, he saw her enter a garage.

He drove on slowly past and within two blocks the girl's swiftly driven car passed his own. She shot directly for the

open country, took the Mulligan Road, the one Morehouse had told Samuels to follow!

Porter frowned heavily. There must be some mistake. This lovely girl with the murderer? He shook his head, but trailed behind, falling far back when the road led through remote sections, closing up when they passed through small towns. When dusk, hours later, began to creep from the valleys toward the hilltops, Porter closed up. The towns were left behind now and the girl was penetrating into the mountains.

He was alone on the trail, no chance to send for help. Porter shut his lips grimly as he drove on. Well, he had played a lone hand before.

IT was a mile and a half farther that he saw the lights of the car ahead switch sharply to the right and slant downward, flash among trees. When he reached that point he saw that a narrow private road wound downward. Two miles away in the depths of the valley, he caught the black gleam of a lake. Porter had no way of telling how far down this road the girl would drive, but he could tell that the road was rarely used. His guess was it would not lead farther than the lake shore.

He drove a hundred yards back down the highway, parked the car on the side, then strode briskly down the narrow road toward the lake.

Beneath his arm the heavy pistol nestled, and in his hand he carried a flashlight which he used sparingly now and then to be sure he was on the right track, and that the marks of the girl's car were in the road.

The way was lonely, rough, and dark. Kathleen Ballin must have been forced to cut her pace to a crawl. Porter had been walking about twenty minutes when he heard the sound of a motorboat on the lake below. It was no more than a half mile distant now, and he hurried down the road, afraid to use the light, making his way by watching the gap in the trees overhead.

Minutes later he brought up violently against the back of a parked auto, threw

himself to the ground, and snaked out his gun. But in the car all was silent. Slowly he got to his feet, examined the car by intermittent flashes of his pocket torch. It was empty, and it was the car the girl had driven.

He turned to the right and, slowly through the dark woods, groped his way to the lake shore, gazed out across the water. The pattering of the motor boat died.

Over the black water Porter made out a dim yellow gleam of light that marked an island in its midst. It was perhaps a mile to the island. Porter could swim it readily, but it meant running the risk of ruining the cartridges of his gun with water, leaving him unarmed.

He groped along the edges of the lake where a small stream trickled into it, and hidden under the branches of the trees, found a rowboat. It was a dinky thing, tied only with a rope, but there were no oars and no paddle. Porter hurried back to the car, ripped out a floor board and climbed into the small boat. Using the floorboard as a paddle he propelled it laboriously across the lake.

It was a moonless night and only the pale stars cast down a glimmer on the water's surface. But the dim yellow gleam of light ahead guided him. It was slow work. He stripped off his coat, transferring the fuel can and lighter to his trousers pocket against emergency, and set to work in earnest.

Luckily the night was windless, there was little or no current in the lake. After three-quarters of an hour of strenuous work, he beached the small boat at a remote end of the island, fighting clear of the wharf that was near its middle.

Once on shore he slipped along the lake's edge until he reached the wharf. It was the work of a few moments to tear wires loose until the boat was useless, then he slipped toward the house, still guided by that vagrant gleam of yellow light.

The island was overgrown with trees and vines, but when he had struggled through these he came suddenly upon a clearing in which stood a huge gaunt pile of a house. The gleam of yellow came

from an uncurtained window and he circled, crept up on the house from its dark side, and clambering upon a ledge, raised his head slowly above the window sill.

The lamp which cast the light dangled from the center of the ceiling, an oil lantern. Porter raised up, saw the top of a man's head, the hair black and stubborn. Peering still more daringly, he gazed into the haggard countenance of Governor Samuels.

The man's eyes were staring, fatigue lined his face, and there was a look of utter despair upon it. He did not see Porter, his eyes were staring straight ahead.

Porter raised even further and saw that the governor's arms were bound behind his back. He was standing, very tensely and stiffly as if he dared not move, and then Porter saw the reason.

The floor had been totally removed from the room, and every rafter, too, except one in the precise middle. Across this a thick but narrow plank was balanced and the governor stood at one end. Porter frowned in puzzlement. Why was the governor standing so stiffly? What weighted down the other end of the plank at which Samuels stared with horror and despair on his face?

Porter moved his head slowly sideways and he saw!

At the other end of the plank on which the governor stood was his wife. She, too, stood in rigid immobility. Her arms also were bound behind her, but there was this difference in their situations. About her neck was a hangman's noose, fastened to the ceiling. If Samuels so much as moved, the board would teeter and *his wife would swing off into space, and be hanged!*

CHAPTER V

POISON PIT

DAN PORTER could not restrain a gasp of horror at the sight of the governor and his wife and the torture device that this mad Morehouse had rigged. He was forcing Samuels to hang his own wife!

There was no possibility of escape. Samuels feared even to shift his footing, lest the board on which he balanced shift and the tight rope drag his wife off. Her face was strained and white, her bodily pose was stiff. Obviously both Samuels and his wife had been standing for hours in this position. Obviously unless Porter effected a rescue, Mrs. Samuels was doomed.

But Porter could not see that, aside from a tumble into the dark pit, Samuels would be injured. He peered down into the depths below and saw something that made him shudder inwardly. The vagrant yellow gleams of the light overhead penetrated into the darkness. Suddenly Porter understood the musty odor that clung around the house. For the cellar beneath Samuels and his wife was a den of snakes!

Dozens of them writhed around the floor and coiled in iridescent folds. No man could fall upon them and live. It was a fiendish trap, a thing to stagger the imagination.

Porter stared fascinated at the two victims, saw hate writhe across Samuels' face, such hate and rage as Porter had never before seen. The governor shouted curses but retained the rigid pose of his body, lest some slight tremor of his might make it worse for his wife. When Samuels had finally raved himself into silence, the calm voice of another man called from a slight distance.

"You weary me a great deal, Samuels. You take so long to die. So I have rigged up a little bell which will permit my daughter and me to sleep, and yet allow us to pleasure in your death." The voice laughed. It hissed through the night like a snake.

Samuels' breast was laboring, his breath harsh between clenched teeth.

"Ah," came the mocking voice again, "I can see that you have guessed it. As you have discerned, Samuels, the bell is fastened to the rope that goes about your dear wife's throat. When her weight falls upon the rope the bell will jangle and my daughter and I will hurry down."

Mad, hissing laughter rang out now. Samuels' choking voice was raised.

"Morehouse, have mercy!" he pleaded. "Kill me if you will, but let my wife go free. She has done nothing to deserve this."

Morehouse's voice howled back at him: "Neither had my wife. She was a sacrifice to your ambition!"

Samuels said deliberately: "You know that wasn't so."

Suddenly Porter caught movement in the room and dropped to the ground. He heard the words exchanged a while longer, then silence fell upon the house. Porter slipped around toward the back of the building. He found an old rotting stairway and up this made his cautious way.

A DOOR at its top was closed. Through the keyhole, yellow light fell. Porter squinted through it. A huge negro sat in a chair facing an open doorway.

Porter grunted. That didn't help him, but it did explain something that had puzzled him, that was how Morehouse had managed to dump a body down on the Ball Park opera when both he and the girl were on the scene. Evidently this negro had done it.

Gun in his hand, Porter eased the door open and thrust inside. But the draft of the open door gave the negro warning. He sprang up, whirled with gun levelled. It was too far to leap and Porter dared not fire. It would bring the house down about his ears and Porter did not know how many men Morehouse might have above stairs with him.

Porter's juggling years, his amazing accuracy of eye and split-second judgment of action, stood him in great stead then. Like a flash he drew back his arm and hurled the revolver squarely in the face of the negro. It caught him between the eyes and with only a grunt of sound the negro stiffened, his arms went high and he pitched backward through the open doorway and vanished into the pit of snakes! His own gun and Porter's went with him.

Porter heard him thud below, darted across the room at top speed and checked in the doorway. He signaled frantically

to Samuels for silence and peered down into the pit. Cruel the negro might be, but Porter had no wish to kill him in this horrible way. But he saw that already he was too late. A dozen snakes, coiled, were striking viciously at the prone man. As Porter watched, one jabbed fangs three times into the negro's throat.

Grimly Porter stared down at him. He was beyond all human help now. One snake bite might be treated successfully, but dozens such as this man had received were beyond all hope. Porter smiled grimly at Samuels, put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

Hope beyond all believing blazed on the man's face. Porter stared around the room, saw that a narrow ledge ran across the wall toward the rafter on which Samuels and his wife were balanced. Along this Porter made his cautious way and finally the straining eyes of Samuels' wife could see him too. She had not dared move her head lest she disturb the balance of the plank.

She heaved a deep breath and whispered, "Oh! Thank heaven! Thank heaven!"

Samuels whispered anxiously. "You've got some one with you?"

Porter shook his head slowly and hope faded from the governor's face as if a sponge had been wiped across it.

"Then we are no better off," he said, "we are still doomed. It took two men to get us on this plank, one to balance each side. There is no possible way you can reach Nellie without overbalancing the plank so she will fall off and be—be—" He couldn't say the word.

PORTER smiled calmly. "There is a way," he said and made his slow way to the room where the negro had stood on guard. His torchlight flashed around the room then and picked up a huge butcher knife on a table. With this, he edged once more along to the rafter across which the death plank was balanced.

The rafter was narrow, but that presented no difficulties. Balance is part of every juggler's training, and Porter had

walked tightropes in his day. He made his way easily along the rafter until he reached the plank on which the two stood. Then he mounted that, with one foot on each side of the center of gravity, steadied the plank. He said quite calmly then, "You can relax your positions a little now. I am in a position to counteract what you do."

Gingerly at first, then more confidently, Samuels let himself relax, shifted his feet a little, and Porter with pressure of one foot or the other counteracted it easily. He turned to Mrs. Samuels.

"Kindly relax," he said. "I am going to cut that rope about your neck at the ceiling with this knife. You must not be so tense that the release of the slight drag of the rope on your neck would throw you off balance. You understand?"

Mrs. Samuels nodded wordlessly. Her lips moved in silent prayer.

Porter balanced carefully. Never in his life had he aimed with more caution. Many times had he outlined a young girl standing against a board with flashing thrown knives. It had been years since then. He hoped desperately he had not lost his skill.

He balanced lightly on his toes, drew back the knife and threw. The blade flashed cleanly through the air, somersaulted once, and its blade bit the rope where it was fastened to the ceiling. It severed but for one small strand which could be easily snapped in two.

Porter could have cheered. "Now both of you walk toward me slowly." He stood in the middle of the plank, with a hand outstretched toward each. Samuels and his wife took slow steps forward. The rope tightened about the woman's neck but she walked on, straining against it, and suddenly it snapped. There was a loud jangle of bells above and Carter remembered painfully that Morehouse had told them of an alarm that would go off when weight went on the rope!

But now he could reach out a hand and touch both of them. His pocket knife came into use and he rapidly cut their bonds, led the two of them back across the rafter, helping them balance, to the ledge and thence to the room where the

negro had stood on guard. Heavy feet pounded overhead.

Below them the negro twitched and moaned, and suddenly, coming out of his coma, reared to his feet, saw the snakes striking at him and went mad with fright.

He screamed, shouted, hurled curses into the air. He found his gun on the floor and blazed away at the snakes around him. Porter, unarmed, dared not wait to try conclusions with Morehouse. He did not know how many men were with him.

He shouted to Samuels. "Through the door, quick!" The governor and his wife reeled out, Porter right behind them.

As they dove down the steps, a gun blazed within and lead whined over their heads.

CHAPTER VI

A FOILED ESCAPE

THE detective led Samuels and his wife at a pounding run toward the end of the island where he had left the rowboat. Floodlights flashed on from the house itself, seemed to illumine the whole island. Porter crouched in underbrush, dragged the two down with him.

Feet raced toward the wharf, and finally, desperate Porter slid from cover and, braving the lights, led on to the wooded end of the island. A figure rose ahead of him. White light blazed into his face, and Porter dived forward. The person behind the light fell with him to the ground. Silk and soft flesh were under his hand and a woman's scream in his ear.

Porter cursed, snatched the light and leaped to his feet, throwing the light down on the woman on the ground. It was Kathleen Ballin. Her black hair was dishevelled and hung about her face, her red mouth was twisted. Scream after scream tore from her. She was unarmed and Porter left her lying there, raced on with the Samuels. The girl followed, screaming at the top of her voice. An answering shout rang out from the old mansion.

Porter was panting heavily now. The

governor and his wife were gasping for breath. Porter sent them on and turned back toward the girl. She kept warily just out of reach and continued to scream. Finally, in desperation, he ran at her. She dodged, whirled and ran, but he was upon her again.

He spun her about, clamped a hand across her mouth.

"Shut up!" he grated.

The girl bit his hand, screamed again when he jerked it away. Desperately Porter ripped a sleeve off his shirt, bound it around her mouth as a gag, and throwing her over his shoulder, jolted off after the governor and his wife.

The glimmer of water showed between the trees. Porter trotted toward it, smiling grimly. Success was near now. Morehouse and his gang would have plenty of difficulty finding wire to fix up the motor boat in time to do them any good.

At last he broke through to the small narrow beach, found the small boat he had left there.

Porter tossed Kathleen Ballin into the bottom of the boat, gestured to Samuels and his wife to enter, then stiffened, a frozen statue of amazement, listening. Unmistakably up the shore of the island he heard the splutter of an outboard motor.

It coughed once, died, caught again, roared out steadily. Porter cursed savagely. Evidently Morehouse, in addition to the engine, had an outboard motor for the boat. The girl in the boat raised her head, tore off the gag and screamed again. Porter turned swiftly to Samuels and his wife.

"Can you swim?"

The governor nodded.

"Swim a mile?"

"Three if necessary."

"Your wife?"

"She swims equally well."

"Fine, now listen." Porter heaved a breath of relief. "I'm going in this rowboat with the girl. Morehouse will think she and I are you two. While I decoy them with the rowboat, you two must swim ashore. You'll find an automobile at the head of the hill road. Here's the key.

When you get there drive for help with all speed."

"But you," the governor protested. "They'll catch you. You'll be dead before I could get help."

"You forget, I've got the girl for hostage. Now get going or all this work will be wasted."

Samuels hesitated a moment, then thrust out his hand. Porter gripped it silently, and then, with reluctance, Samuels led his wife out into the black water. They began silently to swim toward the distant shore. From the opposite direction, the bark of the motor drew rapidly nearer.

Porter piled into the boat and shoved off. The girl was screaming words now and Porter snatched up the torn sleeve and bound it across her mouth again, drew her hands behind her and used his belt to bind them. Then he thrust her forward in the boat.

"Stay there," he growled at her. He seized the board paddle and shoved off into the lake, stroking frantically.

He had not gone twenty-five yards when he spotted the motor boat curving out into the lake. A hand torch beam flickered here and there on the surface of the water, picking them up in a moment.

"Surrender," a man's voice boomed over the water. "Surrender or you die."

PORTER made no answer; paddled desperately on. He must delay capture as long as possible so that the governor and his wife might have plenty of time to escape.

So far as he could discover, there was only one man in the boat. But that man was armed, and Porter was empty handed. He paddled on.

The crack of the revolver whipped over the lake and lead whined overhead. Kathleen, forward in the boat, was struggling, kicking around. Finally she surged to her feet. Behind them the gun blazed out again. Breath gasped out of the girl. She swayed, then crumpled to the bottom of the boat.

Porter dropped to his knees beside her, felt hurriedly for her pulse, ripped the gag from her mouth. Breath rattled

from her throat and suddenly there was no breath at all. Porter felt frantically for her pulse.

The girl was dead.

Porter's mouth drew down in a thin line. Morehouse's vengeance was carrying him a little farther than he had intended. His move was obvious now. He would slip overboard from the boat, try to dive beneath Morehouse's craft, and take him from the rear.

A bullet plucked his sleeve. He rolled over the gunwale and slid down behind the boat, clinging to its edge. The pistol spoke twice more and lead plunked into the boat. The beat of the motor was quite near now, and Porter pulled his hand from the edge and trod water, waiting.

He heard the hollow thump of the boats colliding, heard Morehouse's hissing laughter of triumph. Suddenly the man gave a low cry, then a horrible shout of rage.

Now was Porter's chance. Taking a deep breath he ducked beneath the surface, pulled himself swiftly beneath the rowboat, under the motorboat, and finally popped up on the far side. He put his hands on the edge of the boat and peered over. Morehouse was crouched over the farther gunwale, his head bowed, shoulders bent with despair.

Porter sank low in the water, then yanked himself up and with a desperate heave swarmed into the boat.

Morehouse whirled, jerking up a revolver. Porter charged, striking savagely with a clenched fist. He slipped and fell flat on his back.

Morehouse levelled the pistol at his head.

Flame spat into his face. Red and white lights blazed within his brain. Black darkness settled upon him.

CHAPTER VII

PARACHUTE GALLOWES

WHEN Dan Porter came back to consciousness he heard the sound of a spade grating on earth. His head ached throbbingly, and trying to raise his hands to it he found they were bound

together. His feet, too were tied together expertly. Evidently Morehouse's bullet had only grazed his skull, knocking him unconscious but causing no serious injury.

The grating of the spade continued. Porter, rolling his head over, saw the slouched shoulders of the old man and his white hair, bent over a hole he was digging. Presently he straightened, lifted from the ground the body of Kathleen Ballin, and lowered it gently into the pit he had dug. He stood for a moment gazing down upon her, then slowly and methodically began to fill in the grave.

When he was finished he walked heavily back to Porter, stood over him with an electric torch blinding him. The back glare was in Morehouse's eyes, and they were mad, red with maniacal bloodlust. The young-old face was harsh with hate now.

"You have torn the governor and his wife from my grasp," he said bitterly. "By now they will be back in some city, will have the police on my trail. You, Porter, have caused me to kill my own daughter—Kathleen was my daughter, you know, the child of the woman Samuels hanged—and so it is you who shall pay the penalty in Samuels' place. You killed the negro—a good pilot. He dumped over the judge and the others."

Morehouse strode off, leaving Porter lying on the ground, and Porter rolled his head over again, saw a monoplane tucked back under the trees. The madman climbed upon its wing, reached into one of the two cockpits and drew out a parachute.

With this he came quickly back, detached the harness of the 'chute, drew out the ends of the shrouds, and to them fastened a quickly fashioned hangman's noose. This he looped about Porter's throat.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Porter," he said in mocking apology, "but the truth is I didn't think I'd have need of any more of these parachute gallows of mine. I had intended only four deaths that way, but, see, I'm thoughtful of you. I give you my own parachute, so that if

we should meet disaster, in the clouds, you at least will be protected."

He laughed again, and the hissing of it made Porter's flesh crawl. The man drew the noose tight, the knot under Porter's left ear. Then he lifted the detective's lean 180-pound body as casually as if he had been a child, put him upon his shoulder, and stalked off toward the air-plane.

He stuffed him into the front cockpit, the parachute behind him, and Porter realized then why his hands had been bound in front. The man was taking no chances with his meddling with the parachute and injuring it so that he would fall to his death rather than be strangled by the 'chute.

Still chuckling insanely, Morehouse fastened a light cord to the rip ring of the parachute, fastened a coil that must have contained a hundred feet to this, and then secured the other end within his own cockpit.

"You see," he said suavely, "you will be unable to pull the ring of the cord yourself, so I have rigged this automatic rip for you. It will insure safety in case you should be thrown out and in your—shall I say astonishment—be unable to locate the rip cord yourself."

Porter smiled mockingly up into the madman's face. "It is kind of you," he said, "to take so many extreme measures for my comfort."

Morehouse snarled and struck him in the mouth.

"Your comfort, bah! If it were not for the fact that I want Samuels to know of your death, to realize I am still free and will strike again, I would bury you alive there beside my daughter, whom you caused me to kill."

Porter said grimly: "I perceive that you, too, are a man of sentiment, Morehouse. I should scarcely have expected it."

The man contorted his rage-filled face but did not strike again. He climbed into the rear cockpit.

throttle of the machine. It bounced across the field gathering speed. Porter felt its tail pick up suddenly and the madman jerked the nose into the air, climbed a moment, then levelled off until the plane picked up speed again.

Porter did not know whether Morehouse intended to drop him over Capitol City or over Cornwall, but he suspected it was the former. If his guess was right, Porter would have a little more than an hour to contrive escape. He squirmed in the cockpit seat. The unaccustomed parachute at his back was uncomfortable and, in moving about, something pressed against his side, something in his trousers pocket.

Suddenly Porter remembered the cigarette lighter he had dropped into his pocket "for emergency." He strained his bound hands and tugged at his coat. After minutes of awkward twisting he managed to get hold of the lighter. He bent forward now in his cockpit, his body almost completely filled the opening so there was little draft.

He maneuvered his fingers and flicked the lighter into flame, wedged it between his knees with the flickering yellow flame burning upward, then held the ropes that bound his wrists in the fire.

Three times he was forced to strike the lighter into flame, wedge it between knees before he could ignite the rope and his straining wrists snap it apart. It was only a few instants then before his hands were free and he had reached down and released his feet.

He was free of bonds now, but he still was in the forward cockpit, unarmed. The madman, out of reach behind him, had a gun. Was in a position to see any movement he might make. He peered over the side and beheld the twinkling lights of a city not far ahead.

His mouth was grim. If he had to die, he would take this monster with him, foil his further attempts on the governor. Eagerly he ripped what remained of his shirt into fragments, wadded it into a ball, then he dipped into his pocket and found the container of cigarette lighter fuel. They were over the city now and settling downward, the time was short.

AFTER a few moments of preliminary warming up, Morehouse opened the

Porter saturated the piece of cloth with the liquid. Using a small key he ripped open the seat beneath him which was stuffed with curled hair. He stuffed the saturated cloth into the opening so that half of it lay against the cloth side of the plane and half within the cushion. Then he got his lighter ready. They were settling low over the city now, circling wide and shooting back at top speed.

HE knew then that the madman was preparing to barrel roll and drop him to the ground. He struck the lighter, thrust the flame down against the saturated cloth. It burst into flame. Porter plunged over the side.

As he fell, he seized the rope about his neck, pulled it in until he found the spot where the cords of the shrouds came together. He twisted the ropes swiftly about his hands. Scarcely had he tightened his hands in the shroud, flexed his arms with all the strength of his muscles, when he felt the tug of the rip cord fastened to the plane. An instant later he heard the small explosion of the opening parachute.

The jerk on his arms snapped them straight out, ripped at his hands till the ropes bit into them. He felt the bones snap sickeningly. The noose tightened about his throat stranglingly, and half dazed, his arms strained and numb, Porter swung choking.

Desperately he fought against the paralyzing weakness; began to tense his arms.

Slowly, painfully, he drew himself up-

ward. The noose loosened and breath whistled through his clamped teeth. On and on until he twisted one arm through the shrouds, got the ropes under his armpits, and freed his tortured hands.

The city swam up toward him. For seconds Porter hung. Then, somewhat recovered, he twisted his head and peered upwards.

He could not see the plane from which he had jumped, but he could see the red flare of the fire lighting the sky. Then suddenly it streaked into view, plunging toward the river.

Porter drifted on downward, his movement scarcely perceptible, and watched the flame-wrapped plane dive on. As he gazed, he saw a dark figure rear up in the cockpit, suddenly fall clear of the plane. Body and flame streaked downward toward the river, then the plane veered sideways, struck Morehouse. There was a tearing scream, then they dove together into the black water.

Moments later the ground shot up and flexing his knees feebly, Porter landed in the street beside the river. He took his head laboriously out of the noose and staggered toward the bank.

The gleaming black bosom of the river was unbroken except for a few rippling waves still lapping from where the plane had crashed.

Porter leaned weakly against a warehouse, heard sirens wailing in the distance. Police and ambulances on the way. Staring out across the river he muttered:

"The sky has rained its last floating corpse."



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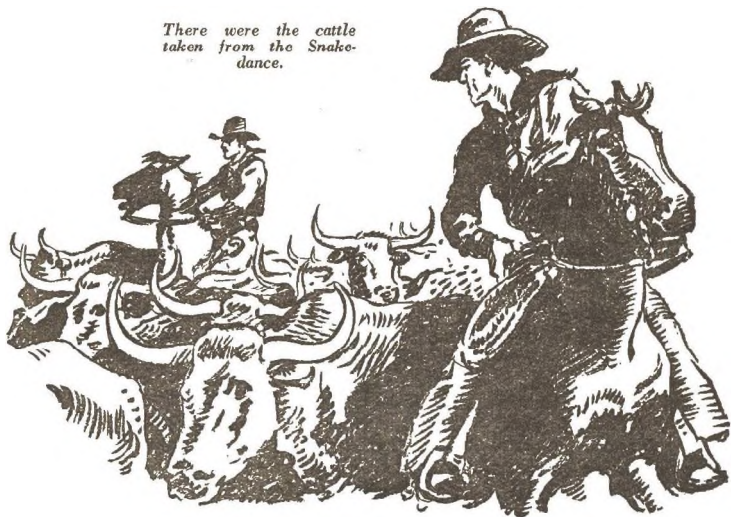
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*There were the cattle
taken from the Snake-
dance.*



By Cliff Howe

An outlaw hostage of death, Cole Patton rode home to find a flame-charred wasteland of doom. Only the dead were safe, for Wolf Spangler's brood gun-tortured the living. King Cole knew he was marked for the killers' guns, but he rode straight for the rim of hell. And at his side was a girl who had nothing left to live for.

CHAPTER I GUN WARNING

SUNDOWN lay like an exhausted wolf licking its wounds. All but one of its saloons were closed. Only a single store did not have boards nailed over the windows. The two-story hotel looked as though it were breathing its last. Silence shrouded the town. Even those whom necessity took outside ap-

peared to move furtively as if in an effort to regain shelter unobserved. Apprehension fathered the inactivity. The wolf, in the darkness of its retreat, awaited the return of its enemy with teeth bared in a soundless snarl of fear.

The rider entering the main street apparently sensed something of this. His attitude of habitual alertness became a trifle more pronounced. Man and horse were a striking pair. The animal was

coal-black, with the clean lines of a racer, a broad chest that spoke of a stout heart and powerful lungs, and a head in which were reproduced the beauty and intelligence of Arabian ancestry.

Like his mount, the man was clad in black, from low-crowned Stetson to gun-metal spurs. Black gun sheathes merged with the black chaps. Even a glaring noonday sun would reflect no bright flashes from the blued steel of exposed metal trappings.

THE newcomer swung from the saddle, draping the reins over the hitching rack in front of the Royal Flush Saloon.

A saddle tramp, seated on a keg beside the entrance, spoke out of the side of his mouth to his partner. "What a night-rider that hombre in mourning with the meat-axe face and ice eyes would make."

"Would make? Most likely is!" was the murmured reply.

There was a slight pause before the stranger shouldered open the swinging batwing doors and entered. During the pause his slit-eyed glance had darted over the interior of the room.

He walked to the bar along the right wall. One of two old punchers seated at a corner table, the only customers to be seen in the room, gripped his partner's arm convulsively.

"Look!" he muttered. "If that ain't 'King' Cole, I'll eat your spur chains. What th' devil's he doin' this far north? Me, I'm sorry we ever stopped over at this sink-hole. We're movin' on in th' mornin'. Wherever that hombre lights, bloody hell breaks loose."

The newcomer toyed with the glass in his hand, apparently unaware of the bartender's suspicious scrutiny.

"C'n you tell me where th' D Bar P spread is?" he asked quietly, looking up as he finished the question.

The bartender's eyes involuntarily jerked upward in a quick glance over the man's shoulder. The black-clad stranger's gaze shifted to the mirror of the back bar. The curtains in one of the booths of the short balcony behind him framed for an instant a face like a thin mask.

Pointed chin, vicious mouth, and unusually pale cheeks. But most remarkable were the eyes. In the gloom of the dimly lit room they seemed all black pupils. And those pupils appeared to have a peculiar phosphoric glow.

Only for a split-second was the face visible before the curtains were jerked together. The lines in the black-clad man's face seemed to have deepened suddenly. An imperceptible mask concealing an innate hardness had been whisked away.

"The D Bar P was near the center of the Snakedance Triangle, thirty miles south," the bartender replied in a voice that seemed a little louder than necessary.

The eyes of the stranger became cold, hard.

Heavy footsteps were descending the enclosed balcony stairway at the rear. And barely to be detected above the clump of the boots was the sound of softer steps accompanying them. Yet when the door leading from the passage into the barroom was opened only a single figure was framed there. Before the man stepped into the room, however, there sounded behind him the soft closing of a door that led to the outside.

"What do you mean by 'was'?" the newcomer suddenly snapped in a tone as harsh as the rake of a claw.

The bartender leaned against the back bar. "I don't know nothin', mister. It ain't healthy. 'N' b'sides, you're askin' too many questions," he blurted, and hurried toward the other end of the counter.

The man in black swung around.

"You're Cole Patton," spoke the one who had just entered the room.

It was not a question; it was a flat statement. And the attitude of the man made a challenge of it. His very appearance was a challenge. As tall as the black rider, he was at least fifty pounds heavier, and there was little fat in those fifty pounds. A jaw like a jutting rock ledge was thrust out beneath black, sweeping mustaches. Hands like small shoulders of mutton were covered with hair to the second joints of the stubby fingers, and those hands looked as though they could make

toys of the heavy guns holstered on the low-slung cartridge belts. In keeping with his big frame, his voice was but a slightly subdued roar.

One of the two old punchers watching the pair from the table at the other side of the room murmured something to his partner about a "grizzly and a cougar."

"Yeah? Who's this Patton hombre?" was the drawled reply.

The man at the bar was leaning back against it now. His left hand still held the glass; his right was hanging loosely at his side. The sound of horses heading southward drifted into the room.

"Your askin' where old Dan Patton's D Bar P was didn't fool me none, feller."

"That so? Then why all the talk? You a reception committee for this Patton waddie?"

"What do you want at th' D Bar P?" The roar was less subdued now. The giant's cheeks were coloring with anger.

"Might be huntin' for a job there, an' might not. Can't see as it's any of your particular horn-in."

The big fellow took another stride forward. The black rider's glance shifted from his angry eyes to the stubby fingers resting on his hips. The hands had opened; the fingers curved stiffly.

"Listen, tramp. If you're Patton, and you are, there's been a murder warrant out for you for about ten years. But just in case I'm mistook, strangers ain't welcome in this neck of the woods. Things've happened in the Snakedance country that just naturally make us insist on knowin' a stranger's pedigree and future plans. He might be one of the vinegar-rooms we're lookin' for."

"This warrant now—was you figurin' on serving it?" The black rider's voice had become almost a purr.

"Any warrant I serve on Cole Patton'll be with this." And one of the hairy hands slashed down to a gun butt.

THAT paw's return trip halted before it had little more than loosened the gun in the holster. The big man found himself looking down at the barrel of a forty-five whose muzzle centered the first shirt button above his belt buckle.

"I've seen you some place. I'll remember where it was before long. Just now I'm collectin' hardware. You know what to do next."

The big fellow's hand came away from his gun and he began to curse.

"Do it!" The crack of the command checked the flow of cursing.

The big hands moved to the belt buckles and unfastened them. Belts and guns dropped to the floor and he moved back. The black rider had stepped away from the bar to where he could survey the movements of every man in the room. The gun in his hand moved menacingly.

"You, Slick-hair, come out from behind there. Over to the other wall!"

The bartender moved. With the gun-belts over one arm, Cole Patton backed to the door, hesitated a second, then plunged into the night. In a few seconds his mount's hoofs were beating a dying tattoo. . . .

The town of Sundown, which depended upon the prosperity of the country to the south known as the Snakedance Triangle, squatted several miles north of a high ridge extending east and west to the mountains on either side. This ridge formed the base and northern limit of the Triangle. The town straddled the only trail leading from it. This trail crossed the ridge at its lowest point and continued down the benches into the Triangle proper. At all other points, low cliffs along its northern edge made the ridge impassable.

A mile from Sundown, where the trail commenced to climb, Cole Patton halted. There was no sound of pursuit. He wondered at it. He had thought the big fellow with the cowhorn mustaches would be thundering after him.

Then he recalled the face he had seen between the curtains of the booth. There could be no mistake, could be no two men with eyes like his; night-seeing eyes of a cold-blooded killer. He recalled the sound of other steps on the stairs besides those of the big man, and the sound of horsemen heading south immediately afterward.

When Patton again moved, both he and his mount advanced with little

more to advertise their progress than their moon-cast, silently shifting shadows.

He came to a growth of scrub pine. Leaving his mount, he circled to the cliff, above which the ridge rose to its crown. Here he moved cautiously forward until he had entered the grove at its southern edge. He worked through it to his horse. Satisfied no one was concealed there, he mounted. Before riding into the open, however, he paused in the shelter of the trees to examine the trail ahead.

The cliff separated into a short, low-walled canyon. The trail passed through this. At the other end it dropped steeply down the southern slope to the first bench. Boulders studded both rims of the canyon.

Cole Patton studied their shapes. One, particularly, looked like the crown of a Carlsbad hat. It extended just beyond the moon-cast shadow of a huge boulder. What lay beneath it, in the shadow, was indistinguishable. Once he thought it moved, but could not be sure.

He examined the other rocks. Then he returned his gaze to the hat-shaped one. It was still there, but its outline was slightly different. Its position with relation to the boulder beside it had changed. The carbine beneath Patton's left leg came out. He pressed the trigger as he cocked the piece. There was no click of the hammer to betray the action. He aimed at a point a full foot below the bottom of the hat crown.

With the sharp crack of the gun the crown of the Carlsbad disappeared and a faint curse sounded. Patton yelled in the black's ear. Like an arrow released from a crossbow, the animal shot toward the pass, gathering speed with each smooth stride. The carbine was back in its sheath and a six-gun was in one hand.

From almost directly above him came the flash of a gun. The first bullet whispered past his ear. The second tore at the shoulder of his shirt. Then Patton's string of four shots brought a strangled cry. Another gun thundered, but it was behind him now and the black was charging down the trail and into the shel-

ter of a clump of cottonwoods on the upper bench of the Snakedance Triangle.

Patton halted in the shelter of the trees and looked back up the trail toward the short defile. There were sounds, and movements, and voices there now. But none of the sounds came closer and the movements receded toward Sundown.

CHAPTER II

DEAD HOMECOMING

THE test Cole Patton had halted for at Sundown had been made. He had been recognized. He had, likewise, sensed the air of tension in the village, had noted its change from a thriving cow town. This change held for him a subtle warning of past tragedy and of trouble to come. And the trouble had started with his recognition and the brief glimpse of the ghostly face between the curtains of the balcony booth.

He left the trail and swung westward along the upper bench toward the rugged sky line of a range that marked one leg of the Snakedance Triangle. He halted beside a spring for a meal and an hour's rest. At daylight he turned south toward the open Triangle and finally arrived at what had been a nester's small holdings.

The fences were down. The windows of the cabin stared at him like sightless eyes. In the yard was the skeleton of a man picked clean by vultures. There was a bullet hole in the back of his skull.

Farther on he investigated a second nester's place. A like condition prevailed. But this time there were two bodies. One of them was a woman's. Cabin and small barn had been burned to the ground.

Leaving the shelter of occasional clumps of trees, he came onto the open range. Skulking coyotes and overfed vultures were plentiful. Not once did he see a live steer. He approached a water hole. A swarm of vultures arose, many slug-gishly, weighed down by their gorging. He found the half-eaten bodies of two bloated cattle. He boiled some of the water in a pan containing a silver coin. The coin turned black. Arsenic.

At a second water hole he found what

was left of a half dozen steers. A thriving valley, with fat herds swarming its rolling bottoms and roaming among its foothills, had been turned into a dead, poisoned world ruled by slinking coyotes and scoured by foul-feeding vultures. The words of the Sundown bartender took on accumulated significance. "The D Bar P spread was near the center of Snake-dance Valley."

It was evening when he reached what was left of the Patton ranch buildings. He dismounted before the charred remains of the ranch house and looked around. Not a building remained intact. All but the bunkhouse were heaps of ashes and charred log ends. Its log walls arose to a height of four feet, but the roof was gone.

Cole Patton walked through the building. Some pieces of range gear, a few old blankets, a couple of rusted rifles and a scattering of empty shells remained. He stepped to a wall where the glow of the sinking sun revealed pock marks on logs and bunks. Lead pock marks, many of them, and on all four walls.

At one side of the square, where the ranch house had stood, was a row of low, unmarked mounds. He looked at them for a long time before turning back to the front of the charred square. The old D Bar P had been wiped out, according to the signs, over a week ago. Some one had buried the dead defenders.

Darkness settled and, his supper finished, Cole stared into the glow of his little fire. Though conscious of a great fatigue, he felt no desire for sleep.

HOME! Cole Patton looked around at the ghostly walls of the bunkhouse and the charred ground logs outlining the locations of the other buildings, but did not see them. He saw, instead, the headquarters of a prosperous ranch. He saw his father, gray-haired Dan Patton, who had fought his battles under the stern code of the West and had carved from it a heritage for his two sons. He saw Jesse, eight years younger than himself, quick of eye and mind, slight of body, eager, alert, at fifteen already a top hand.

And there was the tall, quiet, buckskin-clad Ell Cameron, friend of his father and of himself. To this woodsman and trapper, Cole owed his knowledge of tracking and the training of his naturally keen eyes which had helped him survive those first months in a bitterly hostile country far to the south. Had Cameron, too, joined the rest of the dead in this valley?

Perhaps it was the softening glow of the fire, but at this moment the features of Cole Patton smoothed, and he looked more the man of thirty-five he was than the man of fifty the lean, bitter years since he had left this ranch had made him appear. The illusion lasted but a moment. The lines from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth deepened and those about his eyes reappeared. The angles of his features sharpened. He was recalling other faces and scenes out of the past.

The two big ranches of the Snakedance Triangle had been owned by the Pattons and the Spanglers. The Pattons held the northern half of the valley. But the ranch buildings had been built near the southern edge of their range. This was so the Spanglers could be watched.

"Wolf" Spangler and his four sons were their ancient enemies. At infrequent intervals there was a boiling to the surface of the old feud. Spangler's sons had grown up, two of them away from home, wild as their father and as intolerant and lawless in their dealings with others.

Then had come the day when Cole heard of the plan of young Ed Spangler, already a gunman in spite of his youth, to kill Jesse Patton in a framed card game. And that night in the Royal Flush, Cole had taken his brother's place and had been a fraction of a second faster in gun action.

There had followed the realization that if he sought sanctuary at home the D Bar P would be ruined. With a Spangler sympathizer as the sheriff at Sundown, old Dan Patton would never surrender his older son to be shot in the back for an attempted escape.

Flight! A thousand miles south into

a country that was wild and hard as the men who survived in it. The birth and increasing reputation of "King" Cole during the years that followed.

Finally, through the gossip of a wandering puncher, news had come that the Spanglers had long since deserted the Snakedance country. The longing to return had induced the trip home. And he had found only this land of desolation and death.

He glanced toward the frowning western mountains, whose wild fastnesses had ever beckoned to outlaws with a promise of secure and undiscoverable hide-outs. Somewhere in their depths might be the unknown men who had wiped out the D Bar P and laid waste the valley of the Snakedance. Who could they be? The Spanglers were gone.

He recalled again the face with the uncanny eyes, and the vaguely familiar features of the big man who had accosted him in the Royal Flush. He stiffened slowly. That pinched, venomous face in the booth could belong to no one but "Cat-eye" Spangler. The big one must have been Sam Spangler, oldest son of Wolf. Cole had never seen Sam, but had heard of him. It had been the resemblance to his father which had made the man seem vaguely familiar. And Cat-eye had identified him for Sam. That explained the big fellow's recognition in the Royal Flush.

The Spanglers had come back. Had they, likewise, gutted the valley? Their bold appearance in Sundown made this seem unlikely. Had their arrival been coincidence, and had some other ruthless outfit carried out the raid?

A possible solution occurred to him. It was born of knowledge he had absorbed during the years of his exile, and his teeth bared in a smile that was half snarl. South of him lay the old Double Ring Cross Connected of the Spanglers. That would be his next objective, though he already had an idea what he would find there.

In the yard of his ruined home, seated among the ghosts of the dead, Cole Patton died. In his place was reborn a product of lean and acidly bitter years, a

perfect foil for justice and revenge, King Cole, the dread black rider.

CHAPTER III

THE DRYGULCH

A SOFT thud on the ground near his ear jerked Cole's eyes open. The black was standing close to him. A fore-foot came down a second time in a gentle stamp.

"Sure you ain't mistaken, boy? Sure some one's coming?" Cole questioned softly.

The night wind stirred the dark mane slightly as the beautiful animal's head remained turned toward the north. It stamped again.

"Reckon that's enough, Arab. Never did know you to make a mistake. Been expecting them, anyway." King Cole slid out of his blankets.

It had taken him many months to train the intelligent black, but more than once Arab had saved his life by means of those practical lessons.

The valley floor was still dark, but on the heights to the west the faint light of approaching dawn appeared as he mounted. He headed south.

Mid-morning found him at the former Double Ring Cross Connected of the Spanglers. The ranch house had stood on the top of a rise with the other buildings below. Like the D Bar P, it had been burned to the ground, though there was no sign of a fight. On the contrary, everything about the place pointed to long desertion previous to the fire. A careful examination revealed that the destruction had taken place about the same time as that of the nesters' cabins and of the D Bar P.

"Burned their own buildings to stop suspicions from ever getting started," he murmured.

Four carefully spaced rifle reports, faint with distance, caused him to whirl and gaze into the north. Arab's head was already turned in that direction and his ears were pricked forward as though in recognition of the source of the sound he had heard just before dawn.

Eyes less keen than Cole's, or less practiced in searching scrutiny at long distances, would have missed the three traveling dots.

"Think those jaspers'll do a better job of catching us than the gang that tried it down in the Guadalupe, Arab?"

At the sound of the low voice the black horse nickered softly. A thin smile failed to part Cole's lips.

"Right, boy! I'm laughing, too. But—those shots?" he muttered perplexedly. "Sounded like they might be a signal," he added.

His keen glance swiveled over the field of vision. Other dots had appeared, more than a dozen of them, scattered in a far-flung circle, but drawing toward the old Spangler ranch as a focal point.

"Called out the reserves after the Sun-down failure, eh?" he murmured.

From the elevation of his mount's back, he again looked over the country to the south. There was the apex of the Triangle, formed by the junction of the east and west ranges that made up its legs. Jutting toward him from this angle was a long, high spur. Three of the new riders were approaching along the eastern base of this spur.

Patton headed toward the southeast. He grinned as, a little before a swell of ground ahead cut off his view, he noted the trio swing to meet him. Immediately he was out of their sight, he swung to the southwest and the shelter of the spur. With the exception of those three, the enemy were behind him. If he reached the edge undetected, he could disappear into the badlands before any tracker could decipher the maneuver.

Arab answered his demand for additional speed with a longer stride. They entered the foothills, wound in and out through their valleys, and faced the entrance to a dry, steep-sided arroyo leading directly along the western base of the spur.

WHY King Cole halted his mount before entering that dry water-course, he could not have told. The years of lone wolfing, with eternal vigilance as the price of life, had developed his pow-

ers of observation to the point where their recordings were intuitive. He possessed the sixth sense of a wild animal, an indefinable something that warned him of peril. He never ignored this wisp of warning. It had saved his life too many times.

Swinging from the saddle, he slipped his carbine out of its boot and started for higher ground at a crouching run. His objective was a thick clump of manzanita crowning a low hill near the rim of the arroyo. He had almost reached it when a shot plucked at the rim of his Stetson. He dove forward, crawled a couple of yards, and came to his knees in the center of the cover.

Yells jerked his attention to the east. The three riders, confident of the result of that shot, were charging across a low valley. They had not been fooled by his start toward the east, after all. Or had they been signaled by some lookout?

He shot a glance toward the high, bald tip of the spur. The figure of a man, with a white rag on the end of a long pole, stood up there. That pole was pointed in King Cole's direction.

And then he saw something else. Men had been crouched in ambush at the rim of the gulch down which he had been about to ride. Now they were easing toward his position, moving from cover to cover. He swung back and snapped the carbine to his shoulder. Two shots brought confusion to the riders. The leader pitched from his saddle. The horse behind him went down in a kicking, frantic struggle beneath the feet of the third.

Cole whipped around and caught one of those on foot racing for the protection of a boulder. The carbine barked a third time. The man did not reach his objective. His companions fired from their shelters, but failure to expose any part of themselves flung their lead wide. The King broke cover and charged back toward his horse. The manzanita hid his maneuver from the entrenched men at his back.

A swift glance to the north showed him a half dozen more of the enemy circling down, lashing their mounts to racing speed. Vaulting into the saddle, he

barked his command into the ear of the black. Arab broke into a full charge with his first leap.

The arroyo became a canyon. The canyon led into a nest of intersecting gulches. As a lad, Cole Patton had roamed these badlands, and as a man King Cole now called upon a memory which did not fail him. He swung into one of the branch canyons and headed for the heart of the broken country.

The pursuing riders converged on the base of the high spur. Here they split. Some headed north and west, apparently with the intention of leaving the Triangle from a half dozen different points. Four others, with a squat, dark-faced, sharp-eyed Mexican tracker leading, took the trail down the arroyo.

Much of Cole's course lay along rocky ground which would delay, if it did not entirely confuse, even an expert tracker.

A complete half circle brought him, late in the afternoon, back toward the western edge of the Snakedance Triangle. Concealing Arab in a pocket whose entrance was hidden by aspens, he climbed the eastern wall of the gulch.

Below and beyond him, to the east, stretched the rolling foothills and the more level ranges of the valley. Nothing moved there, nothing save the heavy-winged vultures and slinking coyotes. All sign of watchers or pursuers had vanished. Yet King Cole had followed the hoot-owl trail too long to feel any sense of security. His narrowed glance swept the foothills to the north and became centered.

A thin, scarcely perceptible column of gray wood smoke ascended in the still air from behind a low ridge. One corner of his mouth lifted in a half smile.

"Figure I'm skulking back in the heart of this devil's playground, eh?" he murmured, reverting once more to the habit of monologue, heritage of a lonely life. "Well, they started the ball. Reckon I'll just keep it rolling."

Returning to the black, he rode into a gulch which swung toward the northeast. Its walls became almost perpendicular as Cole neared the rim of the Triangle. This was one of the twenty or

thirty breaks in the cliffs surrounding the Snakedance which led into it from the outlaw paradise beyond.

From the crest of the brush-covered ridge which had previously concealed the source of the smoke column, King Cole Patton looked down into a little glade while a frown of puzzlement creased his forehead. To all appearance this was another nester's ruined homestead. There were the remains of the demolished pole corral, the burned barn, the walls of a cabin with the roof gone.

At the rear of the cabin was a long mound of fresh earth. From a fireplace inside the walls rose the smoke column which had drawn him to the glade. Beyond the cabin, near the opening into what appeared to be a valley, a single pony cropped the grass along the edge of a tiny stream. No other signs of life were apparent.

After a glance at the black which stood quietly at the base of the ridge behind him, Cole moved into the open and approached the cabin, cat-footed. He reached the windowless wall and listened intently. No sound other than an occasional crackle from the fire reached him. He eased along the wall and turned the corner. One hand balancing a six-gun, he stepped into the open doorway.

"Well, I'll be—" The gun went back into its holster as he breathed his surprise.

Seated on a bench in the midst of ruined furniture and scattered provisions, and staring into the dancing flames of the fire over which hung a kettle evidently containing food, was a young woman. Grief-stained cheeks, and hair and clothes which showed neglect, gave but a slight indication of what she had suffered.

At the faint sound, she turned and her dark eyes widened, then grew hard. One hand darted to the bench at her side and reappeared with a Colt gripped in it. There was strength and efficiency in the way she pressed back the hammer.

King Cole straightened, and stepped into the room. He leaned against the wall and regarded her steadily. "Who do you think I am?" he asked softly.

"Whoever you are, you can't be a friend. There aren't any in this country. You can only be one of the fiends who shot my husband in the back. You're paying for it right now!"

The woman's lips tightened and the gun muzzle steadied. A smile parted Cole's lips as he raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. The woman released a little of the slack she had taken up in the trigger.

"Ever hear of Cole Patton?" he asked.

"Yes!" Her eyes expressed interest.

"Who from?"

"Jesse Patton told me once about his brother. That was when the rustling began to increase and nobody seemed able to stop it. Said he wished his brother was here. Why?"

"He's here."

"You? Take off your hat."

Cole removed his black Stetson. The woman stared at a thin ribbon of white hair that extended from the left temple to the ear.

"That old scar you're looking at was made by Ed Spangler's bullet, just before he died, ten years ago. Jesse tell you I had this scar?"

The gun was lowered. The woman nodded slowly.

"You came—too late," she murmured.

"You mentioned something about payment a little while ago?"

"That's all that's left—for me," she spoke bitterly.

"And for me," Cole stated.

Light, as of a new interest in life, but a light that was fierce and hard, appeared in her eyes. With a graceful movement, she arose and held out her hand, man fashion. Her firm grip was a dedication of herself to the cause of reprisal.

CHAPTER IV

THE MOUTH OF HELL

THE woman motioned Cole to a seat on the bench and lifted the kettle of food from the fire. Cole moved close.

"Reckon, before I sit down, I'll just put this fire out. It brought me, and it

might bring some of the men who are hunting me."

Having scattered the fire, he stepped to the door and gave a single shrill whistle. As he turned back he met the young woman's inquiring glance.

"Just callin' my horse," he replied.

They ate in silence. Finally Cole looked across at his companion.

"I came back home for a visit. Looks like a cyclone struck the Snakedance. Want to tell me what you know about it?"

She nodded, but remained silent for a few moments.

"THERE isn't much to tell. I'm Fern Murray. Oliver, my husband, and I moved in here two years ago with a small herd which we turned into the little valley back there." She nodded toward the opening Cole had noted from the ridge.

"We got along. This year we'd have made a little money, in spite of the rustling. Then, for nearly a month the small ranchers in the draws and along the western edge of the Triangle noticed strange riders. Sometimes they would be in Sundown, sometimes riding the range. They always disappeared into the canyon country, but seldom by the same route. Only one or two appeared at a time and not much was thought of it. Then, just before it happened, none of them was seen for four or five days."

"Just a minute," Cole interrupted. "How long has the Double Ring Cross Connected, the Spangler outfit, been deserted? How long since any of them have been seen in this country?"

The woman shook her head. "It must be more than two years. I've never seen them."

Cole nodded and she continued.

"During this time my husband decided to round up some of our stock that had drifted back into the rough country. As he was to be gone several days, I decided to visit some friends in Salt Lake City. I came back yesterday. The place is just as I found it, except that my husband is buried—back of the—cabin."

She waited a minute, her lower lip

caught between her teeth. Cole did not speak. There was a clatter of hoofs outside and Arab thrust his head into the doorway. The diversion shifted the woman's attention for a second.

"I learned some of the details at Sundown before I passed through," she went on. "Just after I'd left, a gang appeared at the northern end of the valley. Reports of their number are exaggerated, but there must have been twenty or thirty. They split into groups, each group taking a different small ranch.

"They worked south, taking care that none of their victims escaped to carry a warning. The whole gang united to wipe out the D Bar P, and though they caught them by surprise, there was a fight. Not a man or woman who lived in the valley escaped. Only one man, a wandering puncher who was on his way out of the country, saw them, hid, and got out alive."

Again Cole interrupted sharply. "Did he recognize any of them?"

"Only a gunman he'd once seen somewhere in the north. It was night and some of them were masked."

Cole nodded. "Only some of them, eh? About what I expected. Now about the D Bar P? Do you know what bodies were found, and recognized, and who buried them?"

The young woman's glance dropped to her plate and she spoke softly.

"Your father, Dan Patton, was shot out at his line cabin. They found his grave there. I don't know about the others, or who buried them or your father. There were five punchers and the foreman, Jesse Patton. How many graves were there at the ranch?"

"Six." The word was scarcely audible. "What was done?"

"A big posse was formed the day after the man who escaped reached Sundown. Nearly all their horses were killed at the first water hole. The raiders poisoned each hole as they left it. They were driving the nesters' cattle ahead of them. By the time the posse returned to Sundown, got new horses, and again started on the trail, there was little to learn. The cattle had been split into small bunches

and driven into the badlands at fifteen or more different points.

"After that the posse did nothing but ride and search aimlessly, and finally give up. Nobody has been able to figure a logical reason for the wholesale slaughter. The outlaws made a rich haul of cattle, but they could have done that without murdering every one and destroying every ranch building."

KING COLE'S eyes were glinting queerly as he arose. "Not so hard to figure," he clipped. "The same thing happened before, nearly thirty years ago, in a secluded valley down in the Black Range west of the Rio Grande. Incidentally, this bunch has kept the water holes poisoned. Now then, did you ever hear of Ell Cameron?"

She nodded slowly. "Old trapper, isn't he? Lives back west of here some place?"

"I hope so. Pack what you need. We're moving out. I used to know where his main cabin was. We'll try to find it."

Cole took the lead. The young woman carried a rifle across her saddlebow, and about her waist was buckled one of the guns King had taken from Sam Spangler. Something in the way she handled them indicated to King Cole Patton that she had the knowledge of those weapons, as well as the endurance and the courage to survive in a hostile country.

They entered a maze of canyons and draws, towering ridges and saw-toothed outcrops. As the sun disappeared behind the spurs ahead, and before the short twilight had ended, she rode up alongside.

"I think there's a spring around the next turn. Shall we eat and rest the horses there?"

Cole glanced over his back trail and shook his head. "Three weeks ago, while I was still ambling north, a greaser I recognized passed me as though he wanted to get some place in a hurry. I think I saw that Mex yesterday. If it was Pedro Calderon, those killers have the best tracker between the Canadian and the Rio Grande. He also has another accomplishment they'd want, which gives me a

line on what they've been doing since they cleaned out the Triangle.

"Until we hit the pines to the southwest, we might not be able to hide our trail well enough to escape him. The only chance we have is night travel. We should reach them to-morrow. The pine mold'll hide our trail to Cameron's—I hope."

They kept traveling. Not infrequently Cole climbed some ridge or mountain shoulder and studied the land ahead as well as he was able. Half way between midnight and dawn they found a spring in a little, partially concealed canyon pocket. Fern's horse was exhausted, and even the staunch Arab showed signs of weariness.

"You can spread out something to eat, if you want to. I'll climb to the rimrock and take a look. We shouldn't be far from old Cameron's trapping territory right now. Better not light a fire."

She smiled slightly. "I'd thought of that," she replied with gentle ridicule at his slightly unflattering estimate of her foresight.

King Cole's faint grin was his only acknowledgment as he turned away.

The moon rode high, casting its silver light over a tumbled landscape, enhancing the blackness of the shadows, rendering indistinct and unreal the crags and rocky slopes it bathed.

To the southwest King could make out the pointed spires of a wooded ridge. His gaze slowly circled, became intent on a spot in the northwest. A strange glow shifted in the purple heavens. It was spread over a patch of sky in a lurid and angry circle. To his left the walls of the canyon rose to a hog-back. Cole hurried to that higher point.

When he reached it, he stared once more into the northwest. The reflection still bored its red hole in the sky, but from this vantage, he could see more. Directly below the glow was an almost circular spot of vermilion, brighter and more concentrated than that in the heavens. Almost, he could see the source of the weird light. Like a great flaming eye, the crater of an active volcano, or the mouth of hell, the flickering walls of the inferno

seemed to beckon, to challenge, to dare him to investigate the phenomenon.

He studied the territory between his position and the strange light. There was the usual jumble of rocky benches, ridges and spurs, and deep cracks and slashes in the earth's crust. But there were some he studied that bore distinctive characteristics. He memorized them. Just beyond the inferno three peaks of nearly equal height reached far into the sky.

Then, so faint as to have gone undetected by ears less keen than his own, came the nicker of a horse from somewhere down the canyon behind him. There accompanied it the faint rattle of shod hoofs over rock. A flash of the courageous young woman he had left in the pocket crossed his mind, and he whirled toward the rimrock.

He paused at the edge to stare over their back trail. At one point, a quarter of a mile distant, the gulch widened and twisted so that a small portion of its floor lay exposed in a pool of moonlight. As he watched, five riders, one behind the other, trailed across the patch of light.

They were not riding with the careless ease of men thinking only of arriving speedily at their destination. They were traveling slowly, cautiously, with the alertness of those who hunt, who expect to meet their prey at each turn of the trail.

Cole lowered himself over the ledge, reached the narrow trail by which he had ascended, and plunged swiftly down to the pocket. He looked around. At first he did not see her. Then he heard a soft voice over near the spring, close to one of the walls. She was by her pony, stroking it, ready to check any answering whinny that might advertise their presence.

"Some horse nickered. Somebody must be coming," she said softly.

Cole nodded. "Keep by him. If they find us and you hear shooting, take that trail to the rimrock. You can see the pines from there. Make for them. Keep going southwest then. Cameron'll find your trail, if I don't."

She did not reply and Cole could not see her faint smile.

Crouched on one knee in the blackest of the shadows beside the narrow entrance to the pocket, King Cole laid his rifle carefully beside him, drew his six-guns, and waited. The wait was not a long one.

A STONE clicked beneath the shod hoof of a horse. A rider came into sight. Four more followed in single file. They moved slowly, and did not speak. The shifting of the leader in the saddle warned the waiting King that he was examining the walls of the canyon for just such sheltered spots as concealed Fern Murray and himself.

They were nearly opposite his position when the leader halted and flung up an arm in a quick gesture. At the signal each man slid to the ground, keeping his mount between himself and the pocket entrance. Practice on other pockets along the canyon had made their teamwork perfect. Like moving shadows, they separated, two hugging the walls on each side of the entrance. The leader worked straight ahead, covering his advance behind boulders and clumps of brush.

King Cole flattened himself against the rock wall. He was watching the leader. The others were now out of sight. He wondered if one of them was the night-seeing Cat-eye. The faintest rattle of a pebble beneath a booted foot sounded at the right. His thumbs pressed against the hammers of his guns and he brought them to a balance, ready for deadly swift and accurate action. There was little chance at these close quarters that he would come through alive. Five to one and the first discharge of one of his forty-fives would disclose his presence and position. But more than one would take the long journey with him.

CHAPTER V

REUNION

NERVES taut, King Cole saw the first man on each side. With the one in front partially exposed, that made three out of five targets. There would never

be a better opportunity. A yard more and one of the three might detect his outline where its color varied slightly from the gloom about him. The muzzle of one gun was raised.

From far up the canyon came a single shot; then a second. There followed the rattle of three, closely bunched. Two more in spaced succession. The leader of the searching party stood up.

"All right, gang! We've been wasting time. Sounds like Wolf and his party caught him in that cross valley ahead. Had a hunch he had too much of a lead for us to catch him to-night."

The five men, careless now of how much noise they made, walked back to their horses, mounted, and clattered on up the canyon.

Cole released the breath he had scarcely been conscious of holding. He returned to the pocket. Fern Murray's features, pale and set, stared at him as she arose from behind a boulder at the edge of the passage. She was gripping her rifle, and Cole noticed that she was trembling slightly. But something about her bearing suggested that during the period of suspense, when she was waiting for the attack to commence, she had been almost as cold and nerveless as he himself.

"That shooting? What was it?" she asked in a low tone.

Cole shook his head. "We'll go easy, and let the bunch ahead clear out. Something funny's goin' on."

King Cole and his trained Arab picked the trail up the canyon. The perpendicular walls gradually became less abrupt. They finally swept back into pine-clad slopes where a valley crossed theirs at right angles. The ground was more open here, more exposed to the silver moonlight.

Where the first clump of timber afforded shelter, Cole dismounted and motioned his companion to wait. He found the scene of battle in the center of the pass entering from the south. Yet he was no nearer a solution than he had been before.

A dead burro lay just at the edge of the trees. There were three bullet holes in its body. Behind it the grass was flattened

where some one had lain. Twenty yards in front of the animal were the churned marks of a number of horsemen and evidence that some of them had been wounded or killed. The spoor of the men who had preceded him up the canyon continued along the main valley from this spot.

Cole looked up at the stars. The night was nearly gone. He returned to Fern and described what he had found.

"It'll be daylight in an hour or so. We want a lot of covered trail behind us," he concluded.

They turned south and were soon mounting the pine-clad uplands where the spongy, needle-covered floor left no tracks. Hour after hour they moved forward.

The young woman rode for the most part without speaking. Now and then she smiled a little wanly. Not once did she complain, though toward the last her features were drawn with fatigue and she seemed scarcely able to retain her seat.

By midafternoon they looked over a broad valley whose floor was a parkland of birch and cottonwood groves. At one point a stream curved behind a clump of birch and spruce. King Cole smiled faintly and pointed. From the center of the clump a thin column of smoke arose lazily in the still air. The parallel lines of a cabin wall could be seen through the trees. They rode into the valley.

Even Cole's keen eyes could not detect the presence of any one near until there came a sharp command to halt. Eyes slitted, hand alertly motionless not too far from his guns, he searched the shadows beneath the trees.

"You heard me," came the second command. "Git those hands up."

Cole grinned, then raised his arms.

"Come on out, you old catamount," he called.

FROM a shallow depression in the ground, concealed by a fringe of low brush, a strange figure arose. A head of graying hair and a mahogany-colored face wrinkled as an old squaw's topped a buckskin-clad figure whose square shoul-

ders and sinuous movements belied the years denoted by the features. The man stepped forward. A rifle lay cradled in his left arm, his right forefinger curled about the trigger, the thumb resting on the scored head of the hammer. Keen gray eyes searched the features of the black rider. The lines of the man's face relaxed in surprised incredulity.

"Well, I'll be eternally— All right, Beth. Come on down," he called over his shoulder.

There was a stir in the branches of a birch, partially hidden behind a thick spruce, and a girl, brown as an Indian, dropped easily to the earth. She carried a light carbine.

King Cole dismounted. "Howdy, Ell. I learned a few days back that I came about a week too late."

The tall trapper shook his head slowly. "No, Cole. From what I've heard of you during the past ten years, you come at exactly the right time. If you'd been here a week sooner, you wouldn't likely be in shape for the job that has to be done now."

The meeting of the two was as casual as if they had parted but an hour before. Only by the strength of their handclasp were their feelings indicated. Cole introduced Fern Murray. There was the faintest of twinkles in the old man's eyes as his glance shifted from the young woman to the face of his friend, but he gave no voice to the thought which had prompted it. He presented Beth, his niece. Her father had been one of the nesters murdered in the raid. She had been visiting her uncle.

"Not counting you and me, that makes three survivors those devils don't know about," Cameron said.

"Three?" Cole looked up inquiringly.

A faint call came from the interior of the grove.

"Yeah! An' you'll be mighty glad to meet the third."

Cole did not hear the last of that sentence. The call had been repeated and the vague familiarity of the voice had crystallized into certainty. He strode toward the cabin.

Ell Cameron held up a hand. "We don't

want to break in on the family reunion," he explained to Fern Murray. "That's Jesse Patton."

They found Cole standing beside a dark-haired young fellow who was stretched out in a chair in front of the log cabin. Bandages encircled his head, his left arm, and his chest. The presence of his black-clad, gun-slinging brother indicated the reason for the brightness of his dark eyes.

Cole faced Ell Cameron. "I learned dad was killed out at a line cabin. I learned also that there were but six other D Bar P men left, including Jesse. I found six graves at the ranch."

The trapper nodded grimly. "I got there the day after the fight. Found Jesse shot up and delirious. They'd left him for dead. I dug th' extra grave. Didn't want to advertise that one escaped."

"You buried dad?"

Cameron nodded.

"You're a better tracker than even Pedro Calderon, Ell. Did you learn anything there?"

The old man's glance burned into Cole's eyes.

"I learned that old Wolf Spangler shot him from behind. But he's paid for it. Yesterday I shot a doe for fresh meat and was packing it in on my burro last night. Four of those cat'mounts jumped me. Three of them didn't return. The first I dropped was th' drygulchin' Wolf. They got the burro. Maybe you think I done your job, Cole, but your dad an' me was partners before you was born."

Cole's thin smile stretched his unparted lips. "There are three brothers, Sam, Bat, and Cat-eye, left," he said softly.

"And the deadliest of these is Cat-eye," the trapper added.

Cole nodded. "Cat-eye had recognized me in Sundown and spread the alarm. In the dark those four took you for me."

THAT evening King Cole Patton and the old trapper watched the blazing logs in the fireplace. Fern Murray, exhausted, had gone to bed in one of the inner rooms. Over in a darkened corner Jesse and the youthful Beth were seated

close together. Cameron glanced at his stern-featured companion.

"Cole, how in blazes do they expect to get away with this? It looks to me like the act of a bunch of madmen."

"Yet I learned that it worked once," Cole said quietly. "Some thirty years ago, in the Black Range, and in a valley very much like the Snakedance Triangle, each of two big outfits tried to gain control. Suddenly one packed up and drove its cattle out of the valley. The other outfit took control."

"Eight months later a gang of twenty men swept down the valley at night and killed every man there. They drove the cattle south and sold them in Chihuahua. In less than a year after that outfit that had previously left the valley returned with a fresh herd and assumed control. There were none to testify that these men had had anything to do with the raid. Wolf Spangler, then a reckless young devil, was a top hand in that outfit."

The old trapper stared at Cole for a long moment. Finally he shook his head. "Those were hard days, and near Mexico. Stolen herds could easily be driven across the line and brands meant little. It won't work here. The Snakedance cattle may be hidden in some valley in the badlands to the north, but they can't be driven out and sold. Every trail is watched. What's their plan? Old Wolf was no fool."

Cole Patton leaned forward and lifted a charred stick from the fireplace. He began to draw lines on the floor. "While I was riding north, a greaser tracker by the name of Pedro Calderon passed me in a hurry. But besides being a tracker, he is one of the smoothest artists with a running iron I've ever seen. Look!"

Jesse and Beth came out of the corner and stood looking down at the drawing Cole was making on the white boards of the floor. First he drew the D-P of the Patton brand. Then he completed the circle around the D and lengthened the bar to produce a Cross P connected. Next he drew a circle that enclosed the P and coincided with the curved line of that letter.

"The Double Ring Cross Connected of

the Spanglers!" Jesse Patton exclaimed.

Cole straightened slowly. "They have never figured on driving the herd out. There was a chance that some one would escape alive so the Spanglers wore masks and carried away their own dead. They can appear in Sundown, already have, and pose as respectable ranchers who have come to consider the advisability of returning to their former range. When the excitement dies, the stolen cattle with the brands cleverly blotted will probably be driven north over some obscure trail and then brought down openly through Sundown in charge of the Spanglers."

Cameron swore. He looked at Jesse Patton. "Time for you to turn in, kid. You're not well yet. You, too, Beth. Crawl in with Fern Murray."

When the two had left, the old trapper faced King Cole. "Couldn't leave before, but Jesse's well enough to get around some now. I figured on hitting the trail in the morning to get a couple friends of mine trapping over on the Beavertail. That'll make four good men, without countin' Jesse. I'll be back in two, three days. Suppose you'll want to do some scoutin' while I'm gone?"

Cole nodded and told Ell about the red pit he had seen, describing its direction and the identifying peaks by which he hoped to find it. Cameron looked incredulous.

"Never heard of nothin' like that over that-away, but then I ain't been in the badlands for years. No fur, much, over there. I'm turnin' in."

Cole stepped outside before joining the trapper on the floor in front of the fireplace. He stared into the north and thought of the fiery bowl. To-morrow at this time he might be testing a theory he had formed regarding its source.

CHAPTER VI

THE VULTURE'S NEST

By the time the two girls and Jesse Patton had arisen, Ell Cameron had disappeared westward on a tough little cayuse. King Cole had packed a supply of food and was saddling Arab. Fern

Murray followed him to his horse and waited until he was in the saddle before she spoke.

"I overheard your talk to Cameron this morning. You'll not try anything where the odds are too great? You'll wait until all of us are ready to help, won't you?"

Her glance was level. King Cole's somber features changed under the influence of the smile that spread across them.

"I'm only going to do a little scouting," he assured her.

The young woman's hand pressed his arm briefly. "Good-bye, my friend—and good luck," she said quietly.

Cole did not take the trail he had followed the day before, but chose a more westerly route, one which led more directly toward his objective. He sent the black along at a steady pace, but not for a second did his alertness relax. His sharp glances darted over every foot of the ground ahead and on each side as he advanced.

Twice, as he dismounted and examined the country ahead before exposing himself against the sky line in crossing a ridge, he noted small groups of three or four riders. The third time he saw riders, it occurred to him that every outlaw must be combing the country for him.

About midafternoon he topped a ridge and saw the three-sister peaks almost directly ahead, and much closer than he had expected. Below him was a grove of spruce and beyond it the silver ribbon of a little stream. His wisest course now was to rest until dark before continuing. The grove offered excellent cover. He glanced in each direction. Nothing moved in the valley. He headed for the grove.

He had dismounted there and had unsaddled the black, when the horse suddenly looked back over its shoulder, ears erect in curiosity. It stamped a forefoot. Cole swiftly passed a caressing hand over its nose, then hurried toward the edge of the grove at a crouching run.

Three riders were coming up the valley. They had reached the point where Cole had crossed to the trees when the leader halted and studied the ground. Suddenly he swung down with his horse

for cover, and Cole noted his quick, nervous glances searching the grove.

The other two had followed their leader's example, but the color of King Cole's outfit blended perfectly with the dark green and black of the trees. Cole half brought up the carbine he had snatched from his boot, then lowered it, cursing to himself. In spite of his reputation for ruthlessness, he had never done a job of drygulching.

The three began to move cautiously toward him. Cole rested his carbine against the bole of the tree. When they were less than twenty yards away he stepped from cover. They stopped as though they had walked into a stone wall.

"Reckon I'm the one you're lookin' for."

His words barely carried to them. His relaxed pose showed none of the nervous tension of a man about to throw a gun. This very relaxation permitted his muscles to act with the blinding speed which had made him famous.

King Cole's glance had centered on the leader, a well-built man whose clothing and range gear appeared a little cleaner than those of his companions. Like himself, the man wore two guns. His arms crooked slightly at the elbows, but his reply was as calmly given as had been Cole's question.

"Don't know whether you are or not, but you're comin' with us till we find out."

"Sorry! Just unpacked and was preparing to spend the night here," Cole drawled.

The other two were shifting slowly to right and left, their movements cautious and unhurried. They knew that this talk was but a preliminary to gun action, a sparring, a delay for that split-second shift of attention which would give one or the other the shade of a break. Cole's glance darted toward these two.

"That'll be far enough. You—"

His sentence was never finished. It was not meant to be. The leader thought he had found the break he wanted. He thought just what Cole had planned for him to think. The race of his hands for his guns was a blur of speed. The other two jerked at their weapons.

Four hammering reports almost blended. The leader's guns cleared their holsters. A slug of lead above his buckles lowered them unfired. The second shot took the man at his right in the chest. The third of the trio had caught the blinding speed of King Cole's draw. He was driven by the picture of death to a speed beyond his natural ability. His shot cut the arm of the black-clad gunman. Cole's third shot crashed through his skull.

Cole stepped forward cautiously and looked down at the three. Only the leader was still alive. He stared up at King, and his words were pain-driven gasps.

"Who—in—blazes—are you?"

"The man you're hunting, Cole Patton."

"I—I failed—. My Father—failed. But—but look out for—Cat-eye—and Sam. They—won't fail."

Cole leaned forward and spoke tensely. "You're Bat Spangler, the other one I never met while I lived in the Triangle?"

"Yes—damn—you!" The eyes began to glaze as the lips ceased moving.

"Two," Cole muttered to himself.

He had removed the bodies and led the horses into the grove. He did not permit himself to sleep during the hours before darkness, however. He relaxed, but remained subconsciously alert. Others might have heard those shots.

WITH the first fading of light he turned loose the unsaddled ponies and was on the move. The three-sister peaks guided him as he rode cautiously forward. At length he halted where a bright patch of moonlight, unobstructed by steep banks, played over the gravelly soil of the barranca he was following. He discovered that he was on a well-established trail.

When he rode on, he passed a hand along the black's neck. It was a peculiar, caressing motion. The horse began to travel with a noiseless, careful tread, choosing its course where the shadows were blackest and pebbles would not rattle beneath its shod hoofs.

Soon the barranca walls widened, slop-

ing backward as the trail mounted steeply. Cole halted and looked ahead at the V they formed. To his right, and close, loomed the three peaks which had been his guide.

There was no evidence of the weird light which had played on the sky. Cole had not expected it. Its absence partially confirmed his theory as to its cause. Convinced that he had discovered the main trail to the place, he faced about.

He back-tracked until he found a way to higher ground. Another hour of traveling brought him to a lofty table-land. He again turned toward the bowl he was convinced lay at the end of the barranca. Arab halted suddenly. Cole looked down. Less than five feet ahead the bottom had dropped out of the mesa. Far below was a camp fire.

He returned to a grove of trees he had passed. Here he unsaddled Arab and then went forward on foot to the edge of the perpendicular cliff.

The fire partially illumined the walls of a log cabin. Figures of men moved in its glow. Away to the right he could detect the gray line that was the steep gradient of the trail where it dipped from the angle of the V formed by the spreading cliffs. The shape of the hidden bowl seemed to be oval, with a length of about a half mile. A perfect outlaw nest, hidden in the heart of the badlands, where only such a lucky chance as the red glow Cole had seen would have permitted discovery.

When daylight came, Cole learned more. He saw, almost in the center of the oval, a double line of blackened squares. His theory was confirmed. The fire he had seen had originated in a short street of fiercely burning cabins. At the head of the street and facing it was a large cabin. Spangler headquarters, he decided.

From some place to the west, a mountain stream came out of the rocks, flowed across the oval, and disappeared underground again at the base of the eastern cliffs. A half dozen men squatted around a cooking fire. A little distance from him, as he lay on the southern rimrock of the oval, was what appeared to be a break in the wall. Drawing back from the edge, he went over to investigate.

He found a deep fissure extending back from the cliff some thirty yards. Crumbling rocks had formed a high, steep talus of rubble at its base and this pile reached nearly halfway to the top.

At the inner end the crack was less than three feet wide. At the valley end the walls spread to a width of a dozen feet. Directly in front of it about thirty horses were kept in a huge pole corral. Cole took another look at the inner end of the crack, grinned slightly, and returned to his horse.

He slept until dark and then commenced his return trip. He made better time, taking a more direct route and traveling a little faster, though with little less alertness. Only once did he take to cover. Crossing a wide valley, he noted movement far ahead. He instantly sought shelter and waited.

A party of horsemen passed at too great a distance for him to distinguish details in the dark. There were at least a half dozen. He noted that several of the horses appeared to be carrying double. By daylight he was close to Ell Cameron's cabin.

An indefinable uneasiness settled over him as he approached the place. It was well founded. The door swung idly in a faint breeze. Nothing moved. There was no sound. The place was deserted. A sheet of paper was nailed to the door with an empty shell. He read the scrawl that covered it.

Cole Patton: We got some prisoners. If you and Cameron ever want to see them alive, ride unarmed down the canyon you entered by. If you harm the man who waits there to guide you, you'll never find them and they'll die very slowly, cursing you as long as their bleeding lips can move.

It was unsigned.

A GAIN he read the note. Then he entered the cabin, his sharp glance darting over the interior. Several overturned chairs. A piece of torn cloth. Blood spots on the floor. A rifle lying under one of the chairs. An empty shell close to it.

He went outside. In the yard were the marks of horses' hoofs. He discovered a

trail where some object had been dragged to one side of the cabin. He followed the trail. It led to a low, rectangular mound, poorly concealed. The handle of a spade lay exposed where it had been hastily tossed into a clump of bushes.

Cole got the spade and commenced to dig. His face was ashen, almost bloodless beneath its deep brow. The spade struck something that was spongily firm. He got down on his knees and removed the dirt with his hands. A man's shirt. There was a bullet hole and scarcely dried blood on the left breast.

He worked upward from the shirt. An unshaven chin, stringy mustaches and a flattened, twisted nose, and Cole arose slowly with a faint exhalation of relief. Jesse had apparently got in one good shot, at least.

He returned to the cabin. Righting a chair, he sat down at the table and placed his two guns before him. He cleaned, oiled, and reloaded them. There was a deliberate, fatal calmness about his manner. He searched among Ell Cameron's stores and helped himself to a box of shells that would fit his forty-fives. Then, with the stub of a pencil, he inscribed on the cover of a cardboard box:

Pedro Calderon, the imported greaser trailed us here. Fern, Beth, Jesse captured. See below outline of my trail. Follow. Cole.

Below the note he drew a careful map of the location of the hidden outlaw nest, with notation of landmarks. He tacked it on the door beneath the other note. Had the Spanglers looked into King Cole's face as he left the cabin, they would not have been mistaken in taking it for the face of death.

He employed but superficial caution. Only his swift glances ahead and to each side saved the journey from being a blind, headlong flight. The sun was an hour high when he left the black in the grove on the table-land. He crept forward to the rimrock and looked over.

There were more outlaws down there now. He saw no sign of the captives, but there was a man with a rifle across his knees sitting in front of the cabin and another at the back. Cole examined the

distant figures and finally picked out, as much by his arrogant bearing as by his size, the big form of Sam Spangler. He searched for Cat-eye. He might be any one of several small, wiry men. Then a movement at the eastern end of the oval drew his attention.

Three men were riding into camp. They swung down and unsaddled. One of the idlers led their horses to the corral. A little later four others appeared, and still later two groups of three each.

Then Cole understood. These were the men who had been searching the badlands for him. Confident that their captives would prove a sufficient lure, yet with enough respect for him to anticipate an attempt at a rescue, the two remaining Spanglers were preparing for his arrival. The entire gang was gathering for the showdown.

Cole noted two men with rifles walking to the entrance. None returned. That meant they were increasing the guard. None moved toward the western end, proof that there was but one entrance to their hide-out. King Cole grunted. The outlaws of the Guadalupes could have shown these men something. They would never have picked a retreat without a back door.

THEN, almost as swiftly as the extinguishing of a lamp, the low-riding sun disappeared in the west, and it became swiftly dark. An ominous distant rumbling throbbed through the heavy air. Unnoticed and unheralded, a bank of inky clouds had rolled into view along the horizon. As Cole watched, a sliver of blinding light flashed across its face and a moment later the rumbling was repeated. The bottom of the bowl was already invisible. Only the fire and an occasional shifting form within its circle of reddish glow could be seen.

Cole arose and returned to his mount. From a sheath partially concealed by his belt buckle, he took a heavy, finely balanced knife. He cut a six-foot length from a stout ash sapling. With this, and the rope from his saddle horn, he returned to the narrow base of the fissure.

Wedging the pole across the crack,

he tied the rope to its center and lowered it. It reached the top of the talus below. Before descending, he transferred the knife to a new position. Within ten minutes he was at the mouth of the fissure and gazing across the oval toward the winking fire.

It was little more than a quarter of a mile to the cabin, yet it took King Cole nearly an hour to reach a point where he could distinguish the log walls and the faint glow of a light through the drawn blinds of a window. And the answer was—Cat-eye Spangler, the little killer with the night-seeing eyes. Cole had learned where that twisted devil was located.

He waited flat behind a boulder less than ten feet from the rear wall. No rain had fallen yet, but the thunderheads had risen until they covered over half the sky. The faint glow of a cigarette revealed the location of the guard. Cole came silently to his feet and eased forward, six-gun in hand.

Half the distance was covered when a blinding flash of lightning laid bare the whole floor of the pot-hole. The guard caught sight of King. He swung the muzzle of his gun around. The black-garbed gunman was already leaping forward. The six-gun barrel connected with the outlaw's skull.

COLE reached for the door directly behind the guard. It was locked. He drew back, bunched himself, and charged. The plunge of his shoulder against the door and its sharp crack as the lock gave was drowned by the crash of thunder reverberating from the cliff walls and booming against the sounding boards of the canyon country.

Directly in front of Cole, across the darkened room, was a thread of light along the floor. He cat-footed to the door and opened it a half inch.

He could see the two girls bound to chairs. A pair of boots lashed together on the floor showed the position of Jesse's body. Across the room, facing the door, sat the heavy-faced Sam Spangler, toying with a six-gun.

"Guess I won't be able to wait for that

brother of yours, after all. I just naturally got to see if my hand's as steady as she used to be. Wonder how much of your boots are filled with feet?"

The grin on his thick lips widened as he swung the muzzle into line with the bound feet of Jesse Patton.

"Better turn that hog-leg this way, Sam."

The quiet voice came from the doorway where Cole Patton stood calmly caressing an ear. For a split-second Spangler's eyes bulged. Then he took in the unprepared right hand so far away from the low-slung gun.

With a sharply indrawn breath he started to swing the muzzle of his Colt. The movement failed of completion. The hand flashed out of sight behind the neck. There was a gleam of light on darting steel, a gurgling half cry. Spangler clutched at his throat as the six-gun dropped to the floor. The haft of a sheath knife protruded from his throat.

Cole darted forward, jerked loose the knife and knelt beside his brother, cut his lashings, and whirled toward the girls. Beth Cameron had cried out sharply and her lower lip was now caught between her teeth. Fern Murray, her face the color of chalk, was staring at him. By the time he had released them, Jesse was on his feet. Cole motioned to them.

"Out the back and straight down the valley, quietly," he rapped in a low tone. "Hang on to yourself, Fern," he cautioned.

The young woman took a long breath through clenched teeth, then arose and led the way. Jesse relieved Sam Spangler of his guns and cartridge belts.

The lightning was flashing with greater frequency now, exposing the whole floor of the bowl with its flickering, brilliant, intermittent glares. Using the coral fence as a guide, Cole took the lead and hurried forward. A few drops of rain fell. He paused a second to look back over his shoulder. The camp fire was dying. By the light of a flash, he saw the outlaws streaking for the shelter of the cabin. But the threatened deluge did not come.

"Run! Over to the left where you see

that dark streak. It's a crack. Get as far back in it as you can!" he cried, then headed for the corral.

They were lost in momentary darkness. Cole found the post he had been looking for and jerked loose a lariat hanging there. The horses were crowded near the gate. He waited atop the fence. A streak of lightning, and the noose was dropped over the head of one of the animals below him. He swung to its back and built a hackamore.

During an instant's lull in the thunder, a wild shout reached him. He glanced up. A flash of lightning revealed the gang running toward the three fleeing fugitives. They had entered the cabin, found Sam Spangler, and raced out the back. The crack of guns and the spurts of their fire mingled with the rumble of thunder.

COLE flung the gate open. The terrified animals streamed out. The three fugitives had already gained the fissure when King Cole dashed in the wake of the horses, riding wildly in an effort to keep them from scattering. It was useless, but a half dozen dashed straight down the valley toward the advancing outlaws. Cole swung in behind, lashing them to frenzied speed with the end of the rope.

A flash revealed the menace to the outlaws. They scattered. Some were too slow. Three went down beneath the hoofs of the charging animals. Two more dropped under the direct fire of King Cole's guns.

Then he was fighting to turn his mount. In a second of silence before he succeeded, he heard the rattle of gunfire from the pass. The sharp cracks told him it was rifle work and he wondered at it.

His mount turned. He dug spurs into its flanks and the animal again dashed through the scattered ranks of the outlaws. This time only one dropped from Cole's gunfire. One of their shots cut across his shoulders. His mount stumbled. He jerked its head up and the fighting animal made another hundred yards before dropping. King Cole landed running.

He reached the fissure, calling out briefly to let them know who he was. As he entered, a forked flash revealed his

brother kneeling on one side and Fern Murray on the other. Each had one of Sam Spangler's six-guns. Beth was beside Jesse. The flash also showed the pursuing outlaws their quarry's position. The killers were worming themselves forward.

Jesse fired twice. Cole moved over and put a hand on his shoulder. The lad was trembling with weakness.

"Go back to the end, kid. I can hold this pass against an army. When you're rested a little, climb that pile of rock. There's a rope hanging there. If you can make it, work your way up, and call me. I'll call Arab and you can use him to pull up the girls."

The younger man tried to object. Cole fired twice at a shifting dark spot. There was a sharp cry that ended in silence. Lead whined and cracked as return fire ricocheted from the walls.

"We got to get the girls out. It's up to you!" Cole rapped.

Jesse stumbled to the rear and up the talus of rock and dirt.

A flare of lightning and both Cole's and Fern's guns spat fire. Cole ducked and turned toward her. Like a veteran scout, she had immediately shifted her position after firing.

"I—think I scored a—a hit," she whispered tensely.

"You go back and join Beth and Jesse. I'll hold this entrance," Cole ordered.

She laughed bitterly. "Are you the only one who has a debt to pay? And suppose they decide to charge?"

As King was about to reply, she fired again and dropped behind a rock. A curse just ahead was the answer to the shot. A flash showed the ring of enemies had tightened. A concerted rush would carry the entrance. There was a moment's lull. A call came from above.

"I'm up, Cole."

Cole snapped two fingers into his mouth. High, shrill, piercing, his whistle split the silence, echoing from the rock walls and dying away in the distance. A moment later Jesse's call advised them that Arab had pounded to the cliff edge in answer to his master's summons.

(Continued on page 126)

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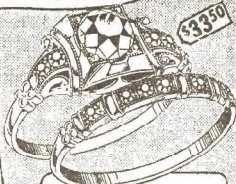
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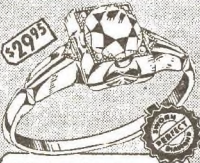
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(Continued from page 124)

"Go and help Beth. Then you follow. Hurry!"

There was no denying the command. Fern Murray shoved her gun into the belt of her shirt. "I'll hurry. You follow soon as I'm up. We'll cover you from there, Cole."

And then the bottom seemed to drop out of the heavens. The sky lightened a little, but the water made an impenetrable wall. Cole took a position behind the rock which had sheltered Fern Murray. He stared into the downpour and tried to make out the form of a man.

There were flashes out there, and the sound of firing. More and more flashes. But none of the lead was coming his way.

A high-pitched scream, like the magnified wail of a catamount, split the lashing sound of falling water.

King answered, and came to his feet. Only the old trapper, Ell Cameron, could have uttered such an ear-splitting yell. He and his companions were the answer to the firing he had heard coming from the pass.

Cole reloaded and advanced to the mouth of the fissure, firing at the flashes of the outlaw guns. The rifle fire of his friends he could distinguish by its direction and location. It came from four guns. There was a movement behind him. He swung around.

"Beth's up. I couldn't do it. I'm sticking."

It was Fern Murray.

Then a streak of lightning revealed a man striding straight toward him. There was no mistaking the squat figure, the twisted, evil face, the faintly phosphorescent glow in the malevolent eyes. He could see King Cole even through the downpour. He was walking in close for a shot that could not miss. One of King's guns snapped into line. He emptied it with a speed that blended the reports into one sustained smashing roar.

Fern Murray was firing again, carefully, methodically. King emptied his second gun in two small patterns about two separate gun-flashes twenty yards

away. The firing from those two points was not repeated.

A second flash of lightning, and King Cole looked down on a man who seemed to be staring straight up into the deluge of water. But the glow had gone from his eyes, and his forehead was a black hole.

The rain ceased abruptly. Stars appeared in the western sky. The flashes of lightning came more from the east. They revealed a half dozen men fleeing with all the speed in their saddle-bowed legs. And in their wake three tall figures ran lightly and swiftly and an upraised knife glittered in the hand of one of them.

A fourth figure was walking calmly up to the fissure. As he halted in front of the man and woman, he stated quietly:

"And that's about the end of this trail. I reckon your dad and them I buried out at th' old ranch are sleepin' more peaceful right now."

FIVE people were gathered in the little living room of Ell Cameron's cabin, staring into the flames, each occupied with his own thoughts. At length the battered corncob pipe came out of the old trapper's mouth.

"I ain't told you yet, Cole, but you ain't the only one who made the discovery of a hide-out. Me and my three friends that went back this morning found four."

Cole looked up suddenly. "More of the gang?"

Cameron grinned. "There was. They ain't now. But, the important part is that in four blind valleys, with their mouths closed by pole fences, was bunched all the cattle taken from the Snakedance. I looked at some of them. Your friend Pedro'd already been at work. I'll say he's an artist with a running iron—that is, he was. He happened to be on guard when me an' my friends crept up the pass.

"I figured you was right. Them Spanglers was goin' to wait till the smoke all blowed over and was then going to take those cattle over some trail that comes down through Sundown and into the Triangle, and take over the whole danged valley. Pretty scheme—if it'd worked."

Jesse Patton looked at his brother as




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Cameron finished. "I haven't told you yet, Cole, but that old murder charge against you was killed. After the Spanglers left the country, a half dozen witnesses came forward and swore Ed went for his gun first." He paused and his glance returned to the fire.

"Somehow," he continued after a moment. "I can't get much enthusiasm about going back to the old D bar P. That was dad's. He meant it for you, I know, if you ever came back. He and you built it up from almost nothing. I want to start fresh, build up a spread of my own."

He glanced quickly toward Beth Cameron at his side. Her hand stole out shyly and touched his. Old Ell chuckled.

Cole smiled slowly. "There's the old Spangler ranch, Jesse. Nobody'll claim that. As for me—I came home. I think I'd like to stay. I'm tired to death of the long years of roaming, sick to death of the long years of hoot-owl trailing. But still—"

"And yet, if it hadn't been for those years of training—" Fern Murray's voice checked. Her calm, steady eyes were searching the features of the black rider. "You've reached the end of a long trail and have earned the right to peace and contentment—and a home, if you want it. Your home may seem empty now, my friend. But—who can tell?" The last was so low that the others grouped about the fire scarcely heard. But Cole Patton heard.

"I'm staying," was his low-voiced decision.



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