

Ron Embleton



Boys' World ANNUAL

1965 - Sabotage (ss)

1966 - Rimrock (ss)

The Flaming Frontier: The Battle of San Jacinto

The Flaming Frontier: The Horse Thieves

1967 - The Listening Trees (ss)

1970 - Hunter's Lance (ss)

SABOTAGE!

FIGHTER-PILOT TOM LAWSON scowled unhappily. It looked as if his luck had finally deserted him!

A moment ago, this tall, lanky, 24-year-old R.A.F. pilot had been streaking with confidence across the billowy, blue sky. His Spitfire cannons were blazing away at the target—a German convoy on the Danish road.

Then there was a sudden flash! A violent force slammed into the plane. An anti-aircraft battery below had fired off to good effect.

The engine shuddered and seized. Smoke—hot, acrid and blinding—welled up in the cockpit. Flames fanned out.

Tom instantly jerked open the shell covering the cockpit. Smoke, and a biting cold wind, lashed his face.

As the Spitfire nosed over in a screaming, deadly dive, Tom flung himself out. Dizzily, he tumbled over and over. He yanked the rip-cord and the 'chute responded by suddenly blossoming open.

Slowly, grimly, he drifted downwards—towards enemy-occupied territory. He felt like a condemned man, for he could already see a cruel-looking reception party below. Several German guards, rifles in readiness, waited for him to land.

A thunderous roar shattered the unearthly silence. Tom's Spitfire had crashed into a distant hill. A vivid ball of flame marked the spot. Tom clenched his fists bitterly. He knew that now he must either surrender—or die!

Ten minutes later Tom, having made his dismal choice, was brutally being herded towards the main road by two Germans. "Faster, you English pig!" grunted the one nearest Tom. As if to emphasize his words, the

by JAMES KENNER

sentry jabbed an ugly-looking Luger into Tom's ribs.

There was a waiting car on the road and Tom knew that once he got into it, escape would be unlikely.

Escape! The thought burned into his mind like a hot coal. But how? If there was a way, he would find it!

The guard carrying the Luger gave Tom another cruel shove.

A deep fury began to well up in Tom. They weren't going to get away with this—not if he could help it! He longed to plant a fist in his guard's face!

But as the road neared, Tom's hopes of escape grew even slimmer. What rotten luck, he told himself bitterly. After 40 successful sorties and seven German planes to his credit, here he was now—a helpless prisoner of war.

But suddenly the black, hopeless despair that was beginning to settle over Tom vanished. A gleam of hope made his eyes sparkle, for there, less than ten yards away on the roadside, stood an old, rusted bicycle. It was parked upright against a telephone-pole.

His guards, ignoring the bike, approached the waiting car and driver. They appeared more relaxed now—certain that their prisoner would not dare try anything. Still, they kept him well covered.

Tom began to pace each step. His jaw was set with determination. He kept the bicycle within the corner of his eye. Then, with precise calculation, he slowed down. The German again shoved the Luger brutally into his ribs. But this time Tom was ready!

Moving like lightning, Tom's elbow shot out, catching the German in the pit of his stomach.

Already Tom had whirled

about! His fist cocked, he unleashed a powerful upper-cut. The German with the Luger went sprawling head over heels backwards. He slammed into the second sentry, who momentarily lost his balance. The rifle fired wildly off into the sky.

Tom lost no time. With long, desperate strides he raced for the bicycle. He zigzagged along the road. A shot whistled overhead, dangerously close.

Flinging himself on to the bike, Tom hunched his shoulders forward and began pedaling furiously! More shots screamed past. One piece of lead, probing for its target, grazed the bike's metal frame.

The car's engine started up. They would soon be in pursuit. Tom's heart pounded as he pedalled on. He felt like a hunted animal.

"*Ach—halt, Engländer teufel!*" came a harsh shriek from down the road. Tyres screeched as the car tore around a curve.

Without looking back, Tom angled his bike off the main road down a narrow, twisting country lane where the car could not follow.

Several shots screamed through the brush. Then Tom

grinned in relief as he left his pursuers behind.

An hour later, his breath coming in tortured gasps, Tom stopped to rest. He had chosen a lonely, isolated stretch of country—a nearby railway line just off to his side. Perhaps, he reasoned, if he continued to follow the line, it might lead him to a town where he could seek assistance. He had heard about the fearless Danish underground movement. They often helped British fliers to escape. But how or where to contact them he did not know.

His situation was desperate. Without food, a map, a weapon of any sort, his chances of getting to England seemed slim.

At length he decided to wait until nightfall. And when the golden moon finally appeared in the sky, casting its eerie light on to the surrounding countryside, Tom stealthily moved on like a hunted animal.

He followed the lonely stretch of railway line for several hours. It was hard, laborious going. Then, abruptly, he stopped, for suddenly a new, menacing sound shattered the darkness. A train was slowly chugging up the line! Its headlamp was unlit, as

Tom unleashed a powerful upper-cut and the German went sprawling





Tom watched as wagon after wagon, loaded with equipment of some kind, creaked past

if some secrecy surrounded the train's movements.

The train chugged on about a hundred yards more, then jolted to a creaking halt. It seemed to be entering a fenced-in area by a gate heavily guarded by troops. Minutes later, a guard waved the train in. Tom watched as wagon after wagon, loaded with equipment, creaked past.

"What on earth is going on?" he asked himself, a puzzled frown tracing its way across his face. Why should a train stop here, in the middle of the Danish countryside? Perhaps it was a German base of some kind.

Suddenly, the light snap of a nearby twig made Tom wary. He whirled about.

Too late! He found himself looking directly into the cold, steel barrel of a revolver. "Don't make a move!" came a whispered voice harshly, "unless you're tired of living," it added.

But as he looked up at his captor he blinked in surprise, for this was no German sentry. The

man holding the pistol at Tom wore civilian clothing. He had a bushy beard and cold blue eyes that now bored questioningly into Tom's face.

Perhaps Tom's luck was finally changing for the better. The man with the beard turned out to be a wily, active member of the Danish underground, named Olaf. He and two other Danes, Henrik and Jorgen, had been scouting the area when they spotted Tom's suspicious-looking figure crouched nearby.

After a night's sleep in an isolated farmhouse where he had been brought, Tom had a million questions to ask. Over the breakfast table he put them to Olaf. "Why were you scouting the area? Is it a base? Why do trains stop there?"

Olaf grinned. "I think it's a new airfield that the Germans are building. But I can't be sure. It's guarded very well! None of us has been inside the fenced-in area yet."

Henrik, while casually sipping

his coffee, explained that the three of them were sabotage experts. "We don't like the German Army occupying our country," he said. "So—one week we blow up an important bridge, next week a factory producing war material."

Olaf nodded and smiled: "I can honestly say that the German Army doesn't like us, either. They've a price on our heads of about £10,000 each."

Before breakfast was half-over, it was agreed that Tom could accompany them on that night's mission. "We're going to finish off that airfield—or whatever it is," explained Henrik.

By 2 a.m. they were moving cautiously in the night's sombre shadows towards their objective.

They arrived a few minutes before the train. About 100 yards distant a pair of German sentries paced back and forth, their rifle barrels glinting in the moonlight.

At last the train pulled up, its wagons creaking, the engine hiss-

ing. Great billows of steam rose like ghosts against the dark sky.

"Quick!" said Olaf, and they advanced towards the wagons. "Try each door down the line."

Tom, his face ashen and determined, scurried towards the nearest wagon. For a deadly instant his body was silhouetted against the sky, then he reached his objective. Crouching, he cautiously drew his hand over to the sliding doors. His fingers touched cold metal. He pulled! A frown cross his face. The doors were locked.

Quickly, he moved off to a second wagon . . . and a third. They, too, were locked.

The German sentries were quite near now. His heart pounded heavily. If the train pulled out at this moment he would easily be discovered.

Then Olaf was at his side. "Follow me—down the line. We've found one!"

Minutes later the four of them were crouched inside a pitch-black wagon. With them were two heavy packs containing high-explosives, detonating caps and time-fuses.

Then suddenly Tom froze. Cold fear gripped his heart! A new sound grew in volume. Down the line wagon doors were being opened. Obviously, it was an inspection.

Tom's knuckles whitened around the Sten-gun which Olaf had given him.

The shuffle of footfalls moved up. Doors clanged shut. Harsh, guttural voices rang out. Tom's heart pounded wildly. He saw that his companions, too, were ready to fight it out if detected.

Suddenly there was a jolt. Down the line wagons banged into one another. There was another jolt—and another. The train was moving.

"*Himmel!*" said a startled sen-

try. "We have not finished the inspection!"

"*Ach, Hans,*" came a reply, "there is nothing! It is your nerves. Don't worry!"

As the train rolled on, Tom heaved an enormous sigh of relief. He mopped his sweat-soaked forehead, then peered through the slight opening which the crack in the door offered.

Vast shadowy forms rose into the sky. Tom blinked. They were planes all right. And there was a landing-field, but it wasn't a large one.

Further ahead Tom made out the figures of sentries, of troops waiting to unload the train, of several trucks.

But what were those large, gaunt structures sloping upward? For a moment Tom was puzzled. Then, the impact of what he was seeing hit him like a locomotive!

It wasn't an airport that the Germans were building here. It was a rocket-launching base!

For months the R.A.F. had received reports of such a base. But they had not been able to locate it accurately.

Each launching-pad was carefully camouflaged and impossible to spot from the air. It was as if a blanket of dark secrecy had been tossed over the entire area.

Tom grew angry. He knew that upon the completion of this secret base deadly rockets would be launched—rockets that could do immense damage to England.

Then his anger gave way to a fierce determination. He would gladly give his life, if necessary, to sabotage this base. This mission must succeed!

A moment later the train jerked to a standstill. Quickly the men leapt off and vanished into the shadows.

Tom's assignment was to

secure a small truck. This would provide their means of escape.

Stealthily he moved down the darkened base, towards the shadowed forms of the trucks he had seen from the train.

A nearby sentry turned in Tom's direction. Tom froze dead in his tracks. Had he been spotted? No; the sentry stared on idly a moment longer, and then moved on.

But as he neared the truck he intended to take, the ominous figure of another sentry broke through the shadows. There was only one thing to do. Tom slithered towards him, like a tiger after prey. An instant later he pounced and held his struggling victim in a vice-like grip. The sentry gave a feeble gasp and slumped to the earth. Tom moved on: the truck was within his grasp now.

The other raiders went about their jobs with calm precision. As the minutes ticked away, deft fingers planted high-explosive charges in vital areas. Time-fuses were strung out, were lit, and slowly began sputtering towards their parcels of death and destruction.

It was a slow, painstaking effort. But the result would be rewarding. That is, if they weren't discovered! For then, they, too, might perish in the holocaust that was destined to engulf the entire secret base.

Exactly an hour later, Olaf and Jorgen rejoined one another behind the designated wagon. About one hundred yards distant Tom was crouched in the truck. He had succeeded in crossing the ignition wires, and the truck was now in readiness. All Tom waited for was Olaf's low-pitched, whistling signal.

But Henrik was late!

"Those time-fuses will go off in fifteen minutes," said Olaf

with a frown. "He'd better hurry up!"

The silence was heavy, ominous. Then suddenly it was shattered! A shot rang out, and another! A guttural snarl cried out, "Halt! Halt!"

Olaf and Jorgen whirled about, weapons in readiness. Henrik's figure came into view. He was running for his life, a German sentry on his heels.

Wordlessly, Olaf took aim. The shot which followed brought the German guard toppling over. But the game was up! They had been discovered!

The gunfire had its immediate effect. Light suddenly flooded the base. Commands were shouted out in German. A probing searchlight swept across the area. A burst from a nearby machine-gun rang out. Bullets spurted across the field.

Tom swung into action. He started up the truck's motor. It roared to life. With a fierce grip on the steering-wheel, he accelerated. The truck zoomed along the field, towards the train wagons.

An instant later, Tom found himself swerving to avoid the searchlight's cruel beam. A volley of hot lead screamed past. A jagged crack traced its way along the truck's windscreen.

A hundred yards more and Tom had reached the others. Henrik was behind the wagon now, blasting away at several oncoming sentries. One of his arms hung limp. The wound was already staining his clothes.

Olaf and Jorgen were also putting up a fierce resistance. Between shots Olaf glanced up at Tom wryly. "Looks like we've hit a spot of trouble! We've got about ten minutes before this place blows sky-high."

Tom nodded grimly. "Hop



Lights suddenly flooded the base and bullets spurted across the field

aboard!" he shouted. "We'll try and bash through the gate!"

Seconds later, with bullets raking past, the truck roared downfield, its occupants returning the fire-power. They were still 50 yards from the gate when Tom slammed on the brakes and brought the vehicle around in a screeching, two-wheeled turn.

"Are you crazy?" barked Olaf. "That's our only chance!"

Tom still gripped the wheel savagely. He retorted: "Too well-guarded. They'd pick us off like flies." Even as he spoke a machine-gun from a tower above the gate began to chatter. Fortunately, they were not directly in its range.

Henrik muttered angrily: "Maybe one of us would have got through! This way we'll all be blown to smithereens!"

Tom's eyes shone with a new determination. "Not if I can help it!" he shouted back. "We're headed for that landing field! We'll steal a plane!"

The sheer wildness of the idea

left the others momentarily stunned. "Well," said Olaf finally, above the roar of the truck's motor, "I suppose it's worth a try!" A hail of lead smashed past. Tom jammed his foot down hard on the accelerator.

The seconds ticked past grimly. Five minutes left before the expected blast! Tom gritted his teeth as he brought the truck thundering towards a wire fence. "Hang on!" he yelled. "This is the quickest way!"

The truck tore head-on into the fence. There was the screech of twisted metal. For a deadly instant it looked as if the barrier would hold. Then they were through, thundering towards the gaunt, shadowed structure of an aircraft.

Four minutes left! Two sentries opened fire on them. Tom swerved. The truck swung violently around. Henrik cut loose with a well-aimed burst.

In the distance the dim outlines of advancing troops could

be seen. A truck engine roared to life!

Tom's jaw was set. He chose his plane as only one with flying experience could. He had sighted a fuelling truck nearby. Chances were good that the plane was ready for take-off. They would soon find out, he concluded grimly.

Three minutes left! "*Halten! Halten!*" came the harsh command. A sentry, crouched near the plane, opened fire. Dastly, Olaf picked him off.

But their pursuers were now gaining ground. Troops were closing in, their weapons blazing.

Two minutes! Tom slammed on the brakes. The truck screeched to a violent stop. They leapt out, using the vehicle as partial cover. Bullets crashed around them.

A stinging pain swept through Tom's leg. Ignoring it, he hobbled towards the plane, made his way into the cockpit. "Olaf!" he shouted desperately. "Kick those chocks under the wheels away!"

Henrik kept up a steady stream of fire-power. But the Germans now outnumbered them by ten to one. They would soon be overrun!

One minute left! The air was suddenly filled with the throb

of engines. Tom thanked his lucky stars that there was fuel in the tanks. He didn't wait for the engines to warm up properly. They had to risk a take-off now! Instantly his companions piled inside the plane.

Tom forgot the Germans. He ignored the scathing lead which tore past. He did not feel the wound in his leg. All his thoughts centred on one burning determination. Escape!

Thirty seconds to go! The engines strained as Tom revved them up. Skilfully, he manœuvred the control stick into position. With a slow, lumbering movement the plane began to respond.

Quickly it picked up speed. They were taxi-ing down the field. The Germans looked on, goggle-eyed.

Tom was gambling all on the take-off—and this was it. Gripping the stick, he gently eased it upwards. If the motors, still not properly warm, seized now, they would be lost. A crash would follow.

The engines were being pushed to the limit, and the shriek they emitted drowned out even the sounds of the whistling bullets.

Slowly, doubtfully at first, the plane began to climb. Tom let

go his breath. He knew it would be all right. It had to be!

But suddenly an enormous blast rocked the plane. Tom groaned. He suspected a direct hit. But, no: the plane, though severely shaken, continued to gain altitude.

Olaf grinned: "Those time-bombs are pretty powerful!"

"Wow! Take a look!" shouted Henrik gleefully. Below, a fiery glow ringed its way around the base. Two more shattering explosions rang out.

But already the plane was out of danger. The motors droned on smoothly. And Tom, at the controls, was enormously happy at the outcome of this strange raid. "It'll be a long time before they use that base again," he said aloud.

Before long all of them would be in England. Oh, there were a few other obstacles to overcome. Like enemy fighters or anti-aircraft batteries.

But after what Tom had just experienced, they were nothing. Fighter-pilot Tom Lawson winged his way confidently across the dark skies. The rocket-base was far behind now, just a glowing speck on the horizon. Next stop, England! And Tom concluded that, with his luck, they would get there easily!



IT was on highway 30, motoring across the sagebrush desert of Wyoming, that Jeff Bent suddenly realised he was in the wrong car. It must be. His brother had said he could take his Chevrolet for a drive. This was a Chevy all right, but older than Jack's.

So with a weary shrug of resignation, the kind that comes from a bad patch of misadventures, he sped on, looking for a turn-off from the highway—one which would bring him back down the opposite carriageway.

"Take it easy, Jeff," said his passenger, Chuck Holt, as they turned off the highway several miles later. The car was bouncing on the rough surface. Chuck braced himself.

Jeff, feeling that whereas his college companion was always so right, *he* could never do *anything* right, didn't reply. Instead he

was always *so* right. "Want to go?" he said.

"Well, so long as Jack doesn't want the car back yet."

"It's not his car. We got in the wrong one."

Before Chuck could get over that one, Jeff surged through the entrance of the drive-in cinema. There didn't seem to be a pay box, and he parked among the rows of cars drawn up on a site as big as a cricket field, all in front of something like a massive sight screen on which a film was being projected—in silence.

Chuck didn't keep quiet for long. "Well, let's get back at once, for heaven's sakes," he said. "We'll have the sheriffs of about three hundred counties looking for us."

Jeff straightened an arm through his window, took a small speaker from a post by the car, pulled it inside with affected boredom, and

clipped it to the inside of the rear window.

"Keep quiet and listen to the film," he said, turning a switch.

The speaker crackled. "*Operation Billy the Kid has gone well so far. This mock drive-in has proved an ideal cover-up for briefing personnel. We are ready now for the last phase of the operation—*"

Chuck broke in. "Hey, this has nothing to do with the movie."

"Sssshhhh!"

"*We rehearse the rodeo wagon race for the last time tomorrow. It must be a perfect kidnap. Nothing must fail.*"

The car door opened, and Jeff looked on to a pair of dusty jeans graced with a well-oiled revolver sitting in a worn holster. It was carried gunfighter style, low and tied down round the thigh with a leather thong.

"Didn't you see the sign saying movie theatre full?" said a voice.

"No, sir," said Chuck. "There was no one around. We just parked."

In the background the speaker crackled on. The stranger stretched a hand inside, and switched it off.

"Come with me."

They followed him between the cars, and into a shack. An inner

RIMROCK

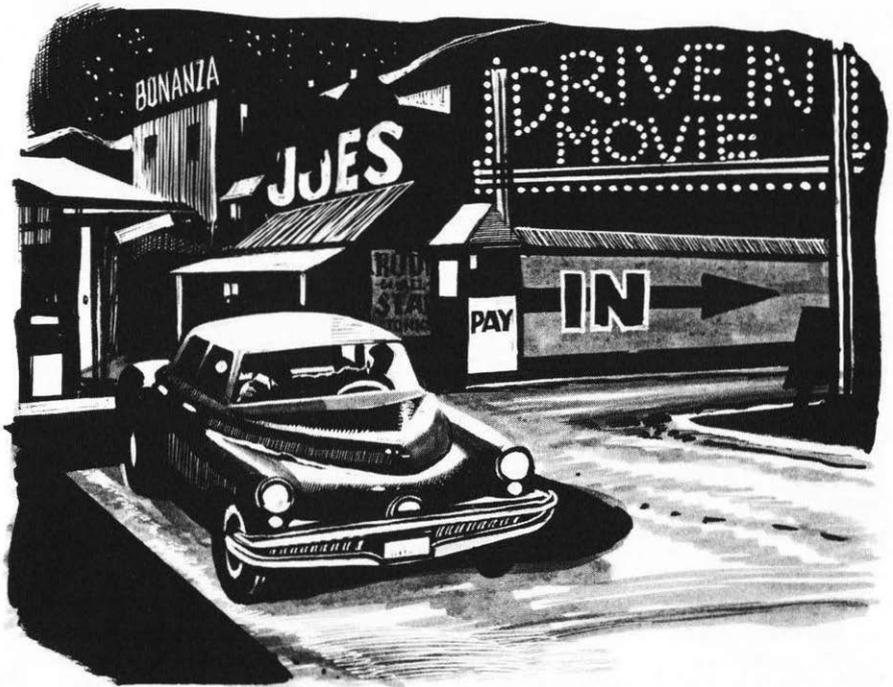
looked hard for the turning which would bring them to the far side of the road they had just left.

Where *is* it, he thought, impatiently. Then he was driving between a huddle of old shacks. It was like some ancient ghost town. He turned a corner, and braked hard, so surprising was the sight ahead.

Rising into the December night were two giant cowboys, thirty feet tall, silhouetted against the stars. Talking to each other, yet silent—as though in mime—their guns were slung low in the old western gunfighter style. They were joined by a third, who just seemed to step out of the night with a flourish of his Stetson.

"A drive-in movie, for heaven's sake," said Chuck. "Out here, of all places."

Jeff looked at his friend; Chuck



door opened. Inside six cowboys lounged against the walls of a neon-lit room, while a seventh, red-haired, sat at a table. It was to him the man reported.

As the red-haired man listened, his eyes grew colder. He turned to Jeff and said, "Well?"

There was silence when the boy finished his explanation. Then—"You have heard too much," the cowboy said. "My men should never have let you drive inside. But now you are a problem. We're going to have some decidin' to do about you."

Before the boys could speak, they were hustled outside to a nearby hut. "There ya go," said their cowboy escort, pushing them inside. The door slammed, and bolts slid home.

"Don't blame me, just don't blame me," said Jeff. "I don't know what this phoney set-up's all about. What a mess!"

"Well, we won't get out of here in a hurry, that's for sure," said a subdued Chuck. "Look at those

bars in the window. Must be the original town jail or something."

They were woken next morning by yodels, whooping yells, and gun shots. "Jumping snakes," said Jeff. "Chuck, over here to the window! I want to stand on your shoulders and see outside."

Under the searing morning sun, three covered wagons were lined up on one side of a wide, open square. A gun sounded. And the wagon horses leaped forward.

Round and round they raced in a hectic circuit, partly hidden in clouds of dust. Suddenly two of the great lurching wagons converged on the other, forcing it off the course—into a maze of deep ruts and boulders. It keeled over with a terrific crash.

Immediately there was the sound of sirens. Two ambulances tore in through the dust, and the four men in the wrecked wagon were lifted inside. The ambulances raced away.

"What you make of that?" said Jeff.

"Well, that must be the rehearsal

One of the wagons was forced into a maze of deep ruts



for the kidnapping they talked about last night during the film," said Chuck. "For heaven's sakes, it *must* be. Hey, and they mentioned a rodeo too."

"Know what I think?" Chuck continued. "I think these greasers are going to shanghai one of the teams in the chuck wagon race at this rodeo, wherever it is. And they're going to rush these kidnapped guys away in phoney ambulances."

"I'll believe anything after tonight," said Jeff.

That night, after a day spent wondering about their predicament, they watched the drive-in cinema show from their window. It showed the covered wagon races at six different rodeos—or so it seemed. Some were in slow motion. And it showed pictures of four men too: all Air Force officers.

"Just don't get it," said Jeff. "Are those men going to be kidnapped? At a rodeo? It gets crazier every minute."

They began to get nearer the truth next morning. The door



The view made them dizzy. Down below the rodeo had just started

opened, the red-haired cowboy entered, and said, "O.K., fellas. You're going to watch a rodeo. Get moving."

They were motioned into the back seat of a car outside. The cowboy sat behind the wheel said, "Don't try anything, fellas," and swung the car out of the encampment.

Presently they passed a sign saying: TWIN BUTTES RODEO, THE GREATEST IN THE WEST—50 MILES ON. Less than an hour later they arrived at the town itself, heralded by the sign: TWIN BUTTES, BEST LI'L OLE TOWN IN THE WORLD.

But they didn't enter. Instead 'Big Red'—as the boys had heard him called—drove sharp right up a dirt road, twisting steeply upwards. Near the skyline he stopped, ordered them out, and told them to keep walking.

"Far enough," he said as they neared the ridge. "Through there now." He waved a gun at a cleft through a mass of perched boulders.

"Oh, and you'll need this to signal with to get help."

He handed over the gun.

"It only shoots flares," he said. "Get moving. Right to the far end." For a moment his hand strayed near his low-slung gun.

The boys reached the far end of the fissure, and found themselves on a ledge—on the edge of space. From behind them came a grating sound, then a crash. They looked back to see a great rock blocking the cleft.

"We're rimrocked, for heaven's sake."

They certainly were. Their airy perch lay 500 feet up one of the two great rock faces which gave Twin Buttes its name. The other butte, an even bigger precipice, stared back at them bleakly from 200 yards away.

Down below, sandwiched between the two faces, the streets of the town were filling to bursting with fun-making westerners out to enjoy a touch of the old Wild West. The rodeo had just started.

The boys felt like flies. It looked

miles down to the town, and the view made them dizzy—they were looking directly down on to the bronc busting enclosure. Next to it brahmin bulls were being herded into another enclosure, ready for the contest where cowboys try to stay on them for ten seconds.

Jeff broke their silence. "We're not firing that gun to get help, Chuck. I reckon those hoods hope we'll distract attention while the chuck wagon race is being run—by being rescued."

"Could be," said his friend, slipping the signal gun into a pocket. "But how we're going to make it down?"

The boys felt helpless.

Chuck saw it first. "Remember hearing about the tightrope walker who made this rodeo famous?" he said, staring upwards. "Well, that wire slung from butte to butte must be the one he walked across.

"And he *must* have had an easy way to reach the wire on each butte."

They looked to where the wire, a thick cable, was anchored fifty feet away on their butte. A narrow ledge led across to it, sloping and crumbling.

"Let's try."

They inched across as if walking on eggs. Jeff reached the wire first, and looked back with relief. "We've got it made! There's a staircase of steps carved in the rock down here—it goes to the bottom."

Five minutes later they reached the foot of the butte, right on the edge of town. But their relief didn't last long. A figure stepped out from behind the rocks.

"Into the ambulance, you guys."

"Doggone it, no!" said Jeff dismayed. "They've been watching us."

"Waddya expect, bud?" said one of their previous captors. There were six of them, complete with the two ambulances, waiting just to one side of the steps.

"Into the blood wagon," said another one, pushing Chuck. "You guys are goin' to quit doing us damage."

"Go for it, Jeff," yelled Chuck



Through the darkness loomed a gunfighter thirty feet tall

as he started to fight. "Tell the sheriff." The fracas let Jeff wriggle clear, and he downed one 'cowboy' with a terrific punch. Then he was clear and into the jostling mass of westerners whooping it up in the main street.

Chuck, in the back of the ambulance, next to a greaser thumbing his six-shooter, waited in suspense. The driver was waiting too. Then at some signal he accelerated into town, and screamed to a stop. Through a darkened window, Chuck saw an overturned chuck wagon. Then the ambulance doors were flung open, and two stunned men were carried inside on stretchers. The ambulance, siren full on, roared off through the town, and out on to highway 30.

Jeff's predicament was very different. The sheriff listened to him with disbelief. They combed the town for an hour, but did not see one sight of the 'cowboy' gang. Then they drove to the 'cowboy' encampment. Here, Jeff thought he had been dreaming. The ghost town was there, but no drive-in cinema, or any other sign of life. "You're sure your story is true,"

said the sheriff suspiciously. "Not just a cover-up for car stealing?"

The ambulance containing Chuck had returned to the ghost town about three hours earlier. As Chuck was hustled out, he saw things had changed. The drive-in screen had gone. Men were sweeping out wheel tracks. He was hurried into the shack where they had been first interviewed, but now it was bare, decrepit-looking, stripped of its neon lighting. On the far wall, a well-disguised door swung open to show a passage in the hillside behind. He was taken down this, pushed into a room leading off it, and locked inside. As he sat down he felt the signal gun in his pocket.

"We'd better go. It's getting dark," said the sheriff. They had been inspecting the ramshackle buildings of the ghost town. As they opened the car doors they heard the police radio: "Come in, Sheriff Gunnison. Come in, please. You may be on the trail of four V.I.P. Air Force officers, who have been kidnapped at Twin Buttes rodeo. They are being held for substantial ransom, we believe still in Wyoming. The officers were taking part in the

rodeo as a wagon race team. The wagon was wrecked, and the men abducted by bogus ambulances."

But Jeff wasn't listening any more. "Sheriff," he called. "LOOK!"

Meantime, Chuck had hammered and hammered on his door. When it opened, he pushed his gun into his captor's stomach, told him to step inside. The surprised 'cowboy' did just this, then suddenly grabbed Chuck's gun. "Say, this only shoots flares," he exploded. But it had given the boy time to slip outside and slam the door. In the passage, Chuck cannoned into another two greasers. But he squirmed free, and flung himself through a door. He bolted it, then saw the film projector. It stood on a table, its reels loaded with film. He pressed a switch, A light beam shone out through a slot in the room's wall. Then the door bulged under the weight of four battering shoulders. A hinge gave.

"There!" yelled Jeff again, pointing. Through the darkness loomed a gunfighter thirty feet tall. "It's the film. And the beam's coming from near that cabin." They rushed to the shack. The sheriff found the disguised door, and with gun in hand, called, "O.K. you guys. You're surrounded." He bluffed a quick, neat surrender.

The whole story came out during the television interviews with the boys. The kidnapped officers were all missile experts. That they were all in a covered wagon race team was a godsend to the crooks.

The kidnapers worked from their HQ in the hillside, but the drive-in cinema was only used for briefing hired hands—crooks who acted as cover-up stooges at the rodeo. These "part-time" men didn't know the real HQ was hidden; their only contact with the main gang was the drive-in.

"You certainly had a wild time," said one TV interviewer.

"Wild!" said Jeff. "The Wild West had nothing on this!"

THE FLAMING FRONTIER



1. In April, 1836, after the Battle of the Alamo, in which a large army of Mexicans overwhelmed the small Texas garrison, the Mexican President, Santa Anna, led his troops across the state of Texas by forced marches. He was determined to defeat the entire Texas army.



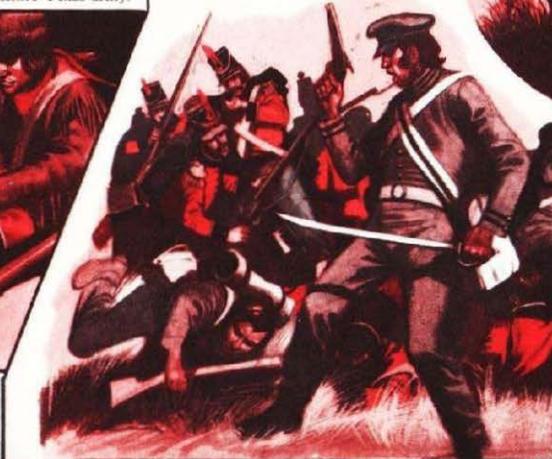
4. At the junction of the San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou, Sam Houston at last decided to call a halt. When President Santa Anna and the tired Mexican army were resting, Sam gave the order to advance on the enemy camp.

THE BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO



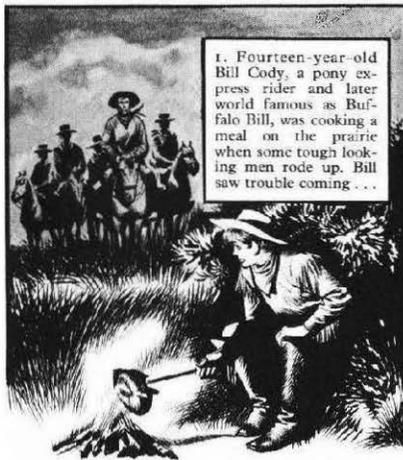
2. Santa Anna offered the Texans no quarter and the Texas people fled, praying that their army would save them from the invading Mexicans.

3. General Sam Houston, Commander of the Texas army, refused to stand and fight the Mexicans. He knew that Santa Anna was too strong for him and that, if he were defeated, it would be the end of Texas. He wanted to catch the Mexicans when they were tired and far from supplies. He marched on, drawing them ever deeper into the unknown wilderness.



5. General Sam Houston led the charge with the cry: "Remember the Alamo." Seven hundred Texans remembered it and completely defeated an enemy who outnumbered them several times. Over six hundred Mexicans died, many surrendered, others fled. The following day, Santa Anna was caught, but later Houston set him free. Sam was satisfied—the Alamo was avenged and Texas was victorious and free.

THE FLAMING FRONTIER



1. Fourteen-year-old Bill Cody, a pony express rider and later world famous as Buffalo Bill, was cooking a meal on the prairie when some tough looking men rode up. Bill saw trouble coming . . .



2. One of the men said that his horse was lame. They were on the run from the law and he wanted Bill's horse. He told the boy to get the animal or it would be the worse for him. Against such odds, the boy didn't have a chance. He could only obey the man's order.

3. As they drew near his horse, Billy saw his chance. The four inauspicious outlaws were a long pistol-shot away. He dropped the hen and one of the men stooped to pick it up.



4. Like a flash, Bill drew his gun and slammed the barrel over the stooping man's head. Startled, the other fellow drew his gun, but he was too late. Bill shot the outlaw down and ran for his horse.



5. Taking the hobbles off his horse, he leapt into the saddle and rode for his life. The outlaws gave chase but Bill got away. Did these thieves ever know that the boy they tried to rob became the greatest scout in the history of the West?

THE HORSE THIEVES

The Listening Trees



CLOUDS of dust and the deep clowling of cattle as they pushed their way through the sage and underbush, the pounding of hooves on the dry sandy soil, the hoarse shouts of Ed Dunkin riding behind, these made up life at the moment.

Barney Franklin had been looking forward all the term to riding herd with his father this summer when they took the bunch of steers to Williams Lake to be sold. But what a disappointment, for his father was laid up with a sprained back and had sent Dunkin instead. Barney had never liked Dunkin, had never trusted him, though his father said the man was all right and knew this Chilcotin part of British Columbia better than most.

One good thing, Johnny, the Indian boy was riding with them, and he and Barney had been friends from the start.

But Barney had been uneasy. "I guess it's okay, Dad, but—"

"Well, what is it? I thought you'd be delighted?"

"It's just—well, I don't like Dunkin."

"Nonsense, boy, you're too fanciful. Anyway you've got to go with him and that's that. Now listen. The buyer will make out a cheque for the fifty steers and you will go to the bank and cash it. I'll give you a letter to the manager. Put the cash in this little bag and hang it round your neck, and *don't part with it till you get home, understand?*"

That had been the day before yesterday. Barney looked back at Dunkin, riding heavily in his saddle like he always did, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, shouting curses and orders alternately at the boys and the cattle. Dunkin under Dad's eyes was one man, but Dunkin on his own was quite another, Barney thought.

He was yelling now at Johnny. "Get a move on there, you Injun! Look out for that stray, you want to lose him for us?"

It made Barney hot the way

Dunkin talked to the boy. Now he called out angrily, "You lay off Johnny, Dunkin! He's Indian but he's as good a man as you are, maybe better, as far as I can see."

Dunkin looked sideways at him and sneered, "A half-fledged young nipper like you can't see very far. You'll keep a civil tongue in your head, kid, or your pa'll hear of it."

Barney looked across at Johnny now, on the far flank of the herd, riding easily with a straw in his mouth; he said he couldn't get used to white man's saddles so all he had was a saddle-blanket. He wore only pants and his coppery back shone like satin in the sun; his lithe body swung to the movement of the horse, so that it looked as if he were another part of it.

They should make Williams Lake in the morning with luck, and Barney hoped that the sale could be fixed up that day so that they could go home the day after.

At cattle-sale time Williams Lake was a bewildering and noisy place:

dust and the bellowing of cattle, drovers and ranchers, Indians and Chinamen, horses tied up and horses loose. All this was before the age of cars, so everyone came in on horseback.

The only inn was full up so the two boys decided to bed down in the straw in the shed where they had stabled their four horses. The boys wandered about the town inspecting everything and enjoying themselves. The next morning the cattle were sold, the cheque cashed and the money handed over to Barney as representing his father.

Dunkin sidled over to Barney as he came out of the bank.

"Better turn that cash over to me to look after, youngster. Too many toughs around town right now, they'll lift it off you as easy as winking."

But Barney had had his orders and he wasn't turning the money over to Dunkin or anybody else.

"Guess it's as safe with me as with you," he said coldly and turned away, aware that Dunkin was scowling after him.

Late in the afternoon as Barney was idly making his way through the crowd he saw a man he knew standing on the steps of the inn. It was Bert Stainer, a long-time friend of his father's and now in the Mounted Police.

Stainer gave a grin of welcome as he saw Barney and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Well, well! If it isn't little old Barney Franklin! But little no more, by gum. What are you doing here, riding herd, eh? Where's your dad? . . . Gosh, I'm sorry to hear that."

They talked awhile, until Barney saw that the policeman's gaze was fixed on someone across the street. Barney saw Dunkin walking with another man in close confab.

"That's our man, Dunkin," Barney said. "You know him?"

"No, but I know the man he's with all right. Your man is not very choosy about his company, I'd say. That other's Busty Ricardo, a no-count cuss who's fallen foul of the police too often. You

steer clear of him, Barney, give him a wide berth—" but just then the constable was interrupted and had to hurry away.

Barney strolled on through the crowds and made his way to the shed, he was tired and wanted to get to sleep. He found that Johnny was still out somewhere, so he bedded down in the straw and was soon asleep.

He woke suddenly to a whisper in his ear and a tug at his arm.

"Barney, wake! It's Johnny!"

"What's wrong? What's the matter?" Barney asked, only half awake.

"Those two, Dunkin and another man. They sat at a window in eating-place, they had bottles and they drank and I hear what they say. *They not friends to you, Barney!* They say—we'll take the money off him on the trail tomorrow, it'll be easy. We'll send the Indian on ahead. Then we make tracks for Vancouver with lots of money."

Barney grew hot with anger. So Dunkin was all set to steal his father's money, was he? It didn't surprise him too much.

"The skunk," he muttered, "what do we do about it?"

"Best thing we start home quick—*now*," the Indian advised urgently, "that give us good start."

Barney felt for the other boy's hand in the darkness.

"You're right, Johnny. How about food? We must hurry."

Hastily they arranged that one should saddle up while the other went out to rustle some food that they could take along. It was long past midnight and Barney, after peering cautiously up and down the street saw a light burning in a Chinese cook-house. Here he persuaded the Chinaman to sell him a loaf, a hunk of bacon and some cheese. Not much but it would have to do till they reached home.

The Indian boy was waiting for him with the horses just inside the stable. They walked the horses out very quietly and took a roundabout way to the trail that led westward out of town. Then they galloped fast through the night.

The stars were fading out and the sky behind them was streaked with light when Barney slowed up to a walk.

"We're all right now," he said, "we've got about four hours start of them and they wouldn't make our pace anyway. Let's eat."

But the Indian was not so confident.

"They'd make the pace if they wanted to. We won't stop here, plenty water at Armstrong Creek. Not safe yet, come on, Barney."

He put his horse to a gallop and Barney had to follow. The sun was well up by the time they reached the creek and dismounted, letting

"Better turn that cash over to me to look after, youngster," said Dunkin





the horses drink and crop the wild hay. But even then Johnny dissuaded Barney from making a fire to cook bacon.

"Look, Barney, they could track us easy by a fire. We just eat bread now and drink, that's enough. Come night-time we reach the old cabin by the bridge. Then we cook bacon. Then we know pretty well if they coming or not. But now we hurry, yes?"

Once again Barney had to admit that the Indian boy was right, so they called up the horses.

The trail was lonely. They had met one outfit since dawn headed for Williams Lake, and only one rider since that. A bull moose crossed the trail ahead of them and they reined in, ready to run if he noticed them; bull moose were dangerous at this time of year. They rode on at a steady pace through the heat of the day and the sun was sinking when they came to the deserted cabin where the trail forked west and north.

Barney slid off his horse with a sigh of relief, he would have given anything for a bath, a good meal, and a dozen nights of sleep. But Johnny was made of tougher stuff, also he was still uneasy. He wanted to take the north trail

"You put your ear to the handle—see, now what do you hear?"



rightaway and reach home a round-about way. But Barney would have none of that. He was sure Dunkin and his pal would have given up the chase by now.

"The horses are tired, Johnny, and we both need food even if it's only bacon. I'll make a fire in that rusty old stove and we'll eat."

When the fire was glowing hot they laid sticks across it and fried the bacon, laid it on slices of bread and wolfed it down hungrily.

Now they must go down to the creek to drink. Outside they stood to listen, but the only sound they heard was the distant howl of a lone coyote.

The night was warm and the boys were well used to sleeping in the open. Barney flung himself down on the bunch-grass and sleepily watched the Indian take out his hunting knife and go up to a group of trees nearby. What was Johnny up to now, he wondered, but he was too sleepy to call out and ask.

He saw Johnny drive the knife straight into the tree, then stand there with his ear against the knife handle. Barney's curiosity dispelled sleep and he called out to ask what he was doing. But the other was too intent to answer at once. Then he turned and beckoned to Barney.

"Come here quick, Barney!"

With a sigh Barney heaved himself up and went over.

"You put your ear to the handle—see—now what do you hear?"

At first Barney heard only faint vibrations, but these became clearer as he listened—cloppety-clop-cloppety-clop—

"Why," he exclaimed, "it sounds like horses galloping!"

"That's just what it is! The trees hear everything, the trees tell us. *Barney, they're after us!* We must get away quick, take the north trail and hide out."

"Are you sure?" Barney stood away from the tree and listened intently, but he could hear nothing but the munching of the horses.

The Indian was listening again, his ear to the knife handle.

"Louder now," he said, "nearer, coming this way. Two-three mile off. That give us time—come on—" and he was off after the horses.

They trotted quietly away from the cabin up to the north trail, making for a thick growth of fir on the slope of a hill half a mile off.

"Johnny, how did you know that trick with the trees?"

"Old Indian trick. Trees hear through their roots—everything. But you got to pick a tree not too old, not too young, and you got to drive knife right in through the bark. Now let's ride right on, eh?"

"No," Barney said stubbornly, "we're tired and so are the horses. I'm not going to ride a horse to death not even to save my own life. They'll find the stove hot and think we've gone on home."

They hobbled the horses and Barney dropped to the ground, but the Indian boy sat up, watching.

It seemed a short night to Barney when the Indian woke him and he saw the first streaks of dawn.

"They came, Barney, Dunkin and that other one. They're there now in the cabin. Better we slip off right now, eh?"

"Johnny, two of those horses are ours. I'm going to creep down and get 'em. Then we'll travel quick."

"That's plumb crazy! They hear you, you won't have one chance. They got guns, you got money. Leave those horses be and come on!"

But Barney was already running down the hill and, of course, the Indian boy had to follow.

All might have gone well had not the third horse, a stranger, seen them and whinnied. The boys froze in their tracks and, to their horror, heard voices in the cabin. That whinny had wakened the men. The boys dropped flat, hoping to stay hidden.

Dunkin came out of the cabin and looked around, then the other man followed him. They saw the horses with their heads raised and ears pointed towards the boys. Now the shouts of the men told the



As the boys leapt through the trees a shot winged past Barney's ear

boys that they had both been seen.

"Come on, we must run for it—" but as the boys leapt to their feet a shot winged past Barney's ear.

"Separate—zig-zag—" the Indian cried to Barney, and the two ran farther apart, criss-crossing to confuse their pursuers.

They heard shouting behind them, but they were so intent on escape that it didn't strike them to wonder where all the shouting came from until Barney looked back and straightened up to stand still and stare.

"Johnny, look! It's Bert Stainer—the police!"

Gasping, the boys stood to watch the happenings down by the cabin. They saw Stainer and another policeman dismounted from their horses palavering with Dunkin and Ricardo. They saw that the talk didn't last long, for the two policemen were relieving the other

men of their guns and their knives.

"Come on, Johnny, let's get back there and see what's up, it's all safe now."

Stainer looked graver than Barney had ever seen him.

"You had a pretty narrow shave, you two," he told them. "We got here just in the nick, it seems. These two are wanted for a hold-up in Williams Lake the night before last and we're taking them in now. Where are your horses? . . . Oh, I see, very wise. Two of these others are Franklin horses, you say? Well, you'll have to lend us one. Tell your dad, Barney, that I'll bring him back myself as soon as possible. And now get back home as quick as you can. Goodbye, kids, and good luck to you."

Barney and Johnny heaved long sighs of relief as they led the remaining horse up the hill to join the others. Now they could sleep in peace and take their own time.



HUNTER'S LANCE

VIC CURRAN, snake-hunter, sipped tequila and stared broodingly at the wood-burning riverboat mooring against the landing pier. His rangy form stirred in a wicker chair under an awning of palm leaves as he fished in the pocket of his bush-jacket for a cheroot. The tin was empty and, scowling, he tossed it on to the dirty floor.

He hoped fervently that the boat was bringing him some mail. There were snakes in plenty in the forest lining the banks of the Essequibo, deep in the heart of Guiana—but he had no commissions. And if the zoos and laboratories specialising in snake-bite serums did not come through with a few orders, he would soon find himself out of business.

He squinted into bright sunlight as three passengers left the riverboat. One, he saw, was a young lad in brand-new safari kit. The youngster walked with quick determined steps, directly towards him.

"Mr. Curran?" he asked.

"That's me," Curran admitted, idly watching the other two passengers who waited at the pier.

"I'm Jimmy Dexter, Mr. Curran, and I've come because I've been told you know the interior. I need a guide to help me find my brother. His plane crashed into a hillside below Taripan. I can pay you—"

Curran looked at him in astonishment. Jimmy Dexter was no more than seventeen, he judged, fair-haired and freckle-faced. His body was spindly and he wore spectacles . . . and Curran wondered how he knew about the plane crash and how he had got there so fast.

"I'll take the job," he said bluntly, "but I don't advise you to go along. Jungle-trekking's no picnic."

Jimmy's jaw jutted. His voice was firm, decisive.

"I'm going with you!" he said with determination.

Curran kept silent, looking past him to the other two passengers from the riverboat. They were moving towards him now. One was a big man with a face devoid of any expression; the second was small, with eyes that seemed to cut like a razor. Both wore lightweight tropical suits and both had a bulge under the armpit.

They reached the shade of the awning and separated, standing one on each side of young Jimmy Dexter. The small man spoke sharply.

"I'm Morse. My friend answers to Woodroffe. Whatever the kid's told you, don't believe a word of it! We want to hire a guide, and we'll double whatever he's offered. Okay?"

"Don't trust them, Mr. Curran,"

Jimmy murmured.

Vic Curran looked from Morse to Woodroffe, and back to Morse. He clicked his teeth.

"You're looking for a crashed plane too?" he suggested. "Mind telling me why?"

"Never mind why!" Morse snapped. "You want to save a man's life, don't you? After all, he might be injured and needing help. Time for your boy scout act!" His thin lips parted in a smile that suggested he was not interested in what happened to the crashed pilot.

Curran was intrigued. He glanced at Jimmy and reckoned he was in trouble. These two were hard-cases, right enough. If he hadn't needed the money so badly, he would not have touched the job.

He finished his tequila and set the glass down carefully.

"All right," he said, "I'll take the three of you."

At first light the next morning, he paddled them upriver in a dug-out canoe and hired pack-mules at a native village. He cut trail, with Jimmy just behind him, and Morse and Woodroffe following.

He swung a machete with practised ease, hacking a way through dense green vegetation. Tangled vines tripped him; an oven-heat baked him; and mosquitoes stung

him. He moved mechanically through the South American jungle, towards the foothills below Taripan.

Then he heard a wild scream of terror behind him and jerked round.

Jimmy Dexter stood with his back pressed against the bole of a tree. His face was white and his eyes staring, hypnotised by sight of a snake reared ready to strike. Seven feet of sudden death, diamond-patterned, with a flat triangular head. Curran saw the tongue flicker in and out as the fer-de-lance lunged.

Morse and Woodroffe backed noisily away; they weren't going to do anything to help.

"Don't move, Jimmy," Curran rapped out, grabbing his revolver.

His gun swept up in one swift co-ordinated movement. He aimed and squeezed out a single shot. The viper's head exploded into pulp but its body continued to lash furiously.

Curran didn't like killing snakes, but this had been necessary. He lowered his gun and stepped back along the path and gripped Jimmy's arm.

"It's dead," he said quietly. "It can't hurt you now."

Jimmy Dexter was still shaking. "Don't take any notice of me," he muttered. "It's just that I've got a thing about snakes. I can't stand 'em."

"Lot of people like you," Curran said shaking his head. Fear of snakes was something he just didn't understand.

"When the kid's got his nerve back, maybe we can get on," Morse sneered.

Curran looked at him steadily.

"I didn't notice you exactly rushing forward . . ."

Hour after hour, Vic Curran forced a way through thick jungle, with his machete flailing. Sweat dripped from his body and his arm ached. Then, high in the steel-grey sky above the green canopy, he glimpsed the soaring peak of the mountain called Taripan.

His gaze moved slowly down the forest-clad slope to where metal glinted in the sun. He raised his hand, pointing.

"That must be—"

He broke off, startled. Morse had

thrown one arm round Jimmy Dexter, holding him, and he pointed a gun at the youngster's head.

Curran checked an urge to hurl himself at the small man.

"Now you're showing sense, Curran! Just do what I tell you—or the kid gets hurt. Understand? He's a hostage for your good behaviour."

"What's this all about?" Curran asked, irritated.

"Never you mind! Just obey orders and maybe you'll get out of it alive! Take his gun, Woody."

A giant paw enveloped Curran's revolver and took it from him. Morse stared coldly at him. Curran froze. He didn't doubt that Morse would kill Jimmy—and he knew that his own life was in danger too.

Whatever was aboard the crashed plane was important. Play along with them, Curran told himself. Play along and wait for a chance.

"Okay," he said. "What do I do?"

Morse smiled confidently. With Jimmy completely at his mercy he obviously felt in control of the situation. "Go find the plane—and the pilot," he ordered. "Woody, go with him—you know what to do."

Curran glanced at Jimmy.

"Not to worry, lad—I'll be right back."

"I'll be all right, Vic . . ." Jimmy stammered.

Curran strode forward, swinging his machete to carve a path through the jungle. Woodroffe breathed down his neck and jabbed the muzzle of a gun into his back. He couldn't take a swing at the big man—not yet.

The forest closed about them, gloomy, echoing with the harsh cries of parrots, the cough of a jaguar. He worked his way up the hillside and, as he broke clear of the undergrowth, heard a shout.

"Help me . . . here . . ."

Curran saw that the pilot had managed to crawl some way from his wrecked aircraft. He lay on the ground, his flying suit shredded to ribbons and one leg twisted under him. Curran ran forward, seeing the pilot's pain-creased face, a bulging leather brief-case half-hidden beneath him. He whipped out his water bottle and knelt beside the injured man.

"Here, drink this," he said, tilting

the bottle. "Just take it slowly now."

The pilot drank greedily, hands clutching at the water bottle. Curran waited for him to catch his breath. He badly wanted to know what this was all about. So this was Jimmy's brother . . . a pale-faced man with a pencil moustache. There didn't seem much family resemblance.

From behind, Woodroffe spoke.

"All right, Curran! Stand aside!"

Curran lowered the pilot and rose, turning angrily.

"What the heck—?"

Woodroffe held a big revolver pointing at the pilot, his finger taut on the trigger.

"Get out of the way, Curran," he snarled.

Vic Curran did not move. He shielded the pilot with his own body, sensing that the big man would shoot to kill the moment he moved.

It was the brief-case, he thought, and kicked the case towards Wood-

Woodroffe backed away; he could not see the snake behind him







The snake shot out of the case, and its venom tooth sank into Morse's hand; he screamed and dropped his gun

back to join Curran, covering them both with his gun.

"Keep still, the pair of you. That way you'll live another few minutes. I just want to check what's inside. . ."

Curran gripped Jimmy's arm, holding him tightly.

"And where do you fit into this?" he asked casually, watching Morse from the corner of his eye.

Jimmy smiled wanly.

"My brother works at one of Britain's new atomic power stations. He's a top boffin and knows all sorts of secrets—secrets worth a lot in hard cash. Some important papers disappeared and my brother got the blame—but it was really his assistant who stole them. That's who the pilot is, my brother's assistant."

Curran waited, tensed up, sweating as Morse's nimble fingers wres-

tled with the buckles of the leather brief-case.

"Morse and Woodroffe are working for a foreign country," Jimmy Dexter continued. "Their plan went wrong when the plane crashed, or the papers would have been in their hands a long time ago. Not that it matters now," he finished dismally.

Morse had the buckles slackened right off, but his gaze never left Curran and Jimmy. His gun menaced them as he flipped back the leather flap of the case.

Curran knew they had minutes left to live if . . .

And then the fer-de-lance he had put in the case shot out, blurring with its speed. Its venom tooth sank deep into Morse's hand and he screamed and dropped his gun.

The snake vanished into the

undergrowth as Morse fell to the ground, writhing.

Curran took a deep breath and expelled it slowly.

"It's all right now, Jimmy," he said. "You can relax. I've got Woodroffe tied up and the traitor won't be going anywhere with a broken leg. There's nothing I can do for Morse. . ."

Jimmy Dexter picked up the brief case and looked inside. "The papers? My brother's papers?"

"Safe," Curran assured him.

Jimmy's eyes shone.

"Then he's cleared! We've done it. Mr. Curran, I'll do anything to repay you—"

"You can help me right now," Vic Curran said. "I want to catch that fer-de-lance again. It's a very valuable snake. Now if you'll just give me a hand—"

He stopped—for Jimmy Dexter had fainted.