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FOUR TOUGH GUYS
BY BENNETT FOSTER

MAY 1933



Sidney Risenberg

**"Fortune
or death!
Let's go!"**

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Four Tough Guys

They were ex-leathernecks—and they were going places and doing things

By Bennett Foster

CHAPTER I.

LADY LUCK.

TRYING to change the mind of "Buck" Malloy wasn't the easiest thing in the world, but "Red" Heffernan was trying to do it. He waved two extremely large and freckle-covered hands. "But, look, Buck," he argued. "Four tough guys

an' a Model T can go any place. Ain't that so, fellas?"

Buck Malloy, seated opposite Red at the little marble-topped table, looked bored. Nils Alexson, the "Big Swede," grunted. And Jakey Cohen, the last of the quartet, nodded his head, but not in approbation of Red's argument.

Jake was engaged in the pleasant occupation of throwing dice, right hand

against left, and the right hand had just thrown a seven, hence the nod. Red, however, took the Swede's grunt and Jake's nod as signs that they were with him, and resumed his attack on the unmoved Malloy.

"All this hombre wants for that truck is a hundred an' fifty bucks," he continued. "With that truck we can go places an' do things. All we're doin' here is stagnatin' an' spendin' th' last of our discharge money! Ain't it so, fellas?"

Again a grunt from the Big Swede and a nod from Jake.

"Sec?" questioned Red, looking again at Buck.

"Yeah, I see." Buck Malloy, former gunnery sergeant of marines, half swung his big bulk at the table. "I see we ain't got the hundred an' fifty. You fellows know how much money we got left?"

Jake's right hand threw an eleven, and he grinned, scooped up the dice again and looked at Buck. "No," he said, "how much have we got, Buck?"

Buck pushed a big tanned fist into a pants pocket and brought it out. Unfolding a wad of greenbacks, he counted them with a wet and heavy thumb. "We got just twenty-five bucks," he announced at the end of the computation. "Get that? Twenty-five bucks, an' you talkin' about a hundred an' fifty! You got funny ideas, Red. By the time I get through payin' for Swede's beer, we won't have that."

"Well, we got to do somethin'," Red persisted. "We're so damn close to bein' broke there ain't no difference. We got to do somethin' an' do it quick! You'd think we was a bunch o' rubber boots on a first cruise the way we been actin'. Give Jake twenty bucks an' let him take them educated dice into that big crap game across the street. We'd have our hundred and fifty pronto, wouldn't we, Jake?"

Jake, at the prospect of action, stopped

his cast and grinned at Red. "An' how!" he promised. "I'm a leetle hot, Buck, ain't it? Mebbe Red ain't so foolish after all."

Buck Malloy paused in the act of restoring to his pants pocket the accumulated cash assets of the four. If Jake said he was hot, there might be something to it. Jake had been champion crap shooter of the U. S. S. *Montana*. Buck brought the wad of greenery up to the table top again.

"What d'you say, Swede?" he questioned.

Swede Alexson moved his two hundred and ten pounds of brawn slowly and looked at his questioner. The Big Swede came by his title honestly. Buck, Red, and Jake were all big men, but the Swede made them look like rather small boys.

"Ay say all right, Buck," he answered slowly, just the trace of an accent in his words. "If Jakey iss hot, he iss hot. About the truck, Ay don't know so much. Ay would like to ride one of them things."

Red seized eagerly on the coöperation of the Swede.

"Sure," he said, coming briskly to his feet. "The Swede's willin', an' so is Jake an' me. Let's go, Buck. Like I was sayin', four tough guys an' a Model T can go any place. Let's stake Jake an' get him in that game."

Buck Malloy looked slowly around. Even with the three urging, his was still the deciding word. Should he, or should he not, say it?

It was a pleasant and peaceful scene Buck surveyed as he hesitated. The four, all of them ex-marines and very recently "ex," at that, were seated at a marble-topped table in Nigger Joe's Patio in Juarez.

Nigger Joe does his best for his customers. His restaurant is an open patio hemmed in by adobe walls, with a narrow entrance at the front. On one side is a bar and behind the wall op-

posite the bar is the kitchen. Nigger Joe has potted palm trees scattered about to make shade during the day and to lend a pleasant tropical air.

His waiters are swift-footed natives, and he hires the best orchestra in Chihuahua and the best entertainers in Mexico.

Buck looked at the bar, at the palms, and at a big green-and-red parrot which sat, half asleep, on its perch behind Red. The parrot opened one yellow-rimmed eye and returned Buck's stare. The big brown-haired man felt himself weakening. He made one half-hearted and final objection.

"Suppose," asked Buck Malloy, "that Jakey does run this dough up to important money, an' suppose we do buy this truck yo're ravin' about. Where would we go if we had it?"

Red opened his mouth to answer, but the parrot, widening its eyes, forestalled him. "*Awaaaaaak!*" said the parrot. "Go to hell!"

Buck looked at the parrot sardonically. "You're probably right at that," he told the bird. "Well, here you are. I ain't goin' to stand in your way. Fly at it, Jakey."

BUCK paid their bill to a hovering waiter, gave Jake the remains of the funds, and followed the eager Red out of Nigger Joe's Patio. Outside, away from the shade of awnings and palms, the hot sun of an August afternoon beat down. Red, impatient to put his plan into execution, led the way across the street, pushed through a door past a vainly-objecting Mexican guard, and ushered the quartet into a small and packed room.

There were perhaps twenty men in the room, most of them clustered about a dice table at which stood a perspiring dealer and lookout.

Red pushed his way through to the table, with Jake and the other two at his heels. By dint of persuasive elbows,

Red made room for himself and Jake. Buck stood behind Red, and Swede Alexson simply stood back and looked over the heads of the others. A florid-faced, bald-headed man had the dice, and was shooting. Red watched a moment and then nudged Jakey.

"Put somethin' on the line, Jake."

Jake shook his head. "Not me," he answered. "Wait till I get them dice."

In due time the florid-faced man lost the dice and another shooter took the cubes. He, too, went the way of all flesh in a crap game, and the dice came to Jake.

The Jewish boy took them, looked them over and then tossed them to the dealer, who pushed out another pair with his limber cane.

The fresh dice suited Jake. He cuddled them against his cheek, made a bet, and then bounced the dice from the green felt opposite him. They stopped with a five and a two showing.

Jake grinned, scooped up the dice and passed again. Four times Jake came out, either with a point which he made, or with a natural seven or an eleven. On the fifth throw he pulled down the larger part of the money which had been accumulating, shot again, threw an eight for a point and then lost the dice with a seven. "Five times the next time," he whispered to Red. "I feel it comin' on."

THE afternoon wore on, and fortune was with Jake. At six o'clock he had the dice and had made six straight passes. Jake's coat was off and over the Big Swede's arm, Red was sweating freely, and even the imperturbable Buck Malloy was feeling the tension.

Other players about the table were catching the excitement and were riding with Jake. Dealer and lookout had changed places twice, the dice had been changed, and still the Jewish boy's run continued.

He shot points and made them, came out with naturals, and never a pair of snake-eyes or box-cars showed to mar his play.

The stacks of gold and silver before the payoff man were almost gone and in the pockets of the four the money which had composed those stacks weighed pleasantly. Jake threw a six, rolled an eight, a nine, and then threw six again and the lookout pushed out the last of the money in front of him.

"*Es todo*," he remarked. Then calmly in English: "That's all, gents; bank's broke."

Jake looked at the gamekeeper and then at the dice. The dice seemed to wink at him. Jake carefully measured a stack of five double eagles and pushed them out. "That's a nice ring you got, mister," he commented. "Shoot it against a hundred?"

The gambler looked at the little stack of gold, then at the ring which graced his middle finger. It was a turquoise, set in heavy silver. He pulled off the ornament and tossed it out.

"Shoot," he said. "I won it in a crap game. Let it go the same way."

Jake rattled the dice, flung them out against the bank and waited until they stopped spinning. A six and a one showed. He grinned at the gamekeeper, picked up his stake and the ring, and thrust them into his pocket.

"Thanks," said Jake. "So long."

"So long," replied the gambler. "Come back this evenin', boys; we'll be on deck again."

"But not to us," muttered Buck, pushing out after the Big Swede. "Boys, we're shovin' off. That's too good to last."

Outside the gambling room the four paused. Men were crowding about them, but a scowl from Buck, a growled curse from Red, and a placid frown on the face of the Big Swede, discouraged any attempts that might have been made to approach the big winner. When the

four were clear of the crowd, Buck turned to Red.

"Now what?" he asked. "Yore hunch about Jake was right. We got close to three thousand dollars on us. I'm ridin' with you, Red."

Red mopped his damp forehead. "Now we buy that Ford," he announced. "Ain't I always said that four tough guys an' a Model T could——"

"Don't say it," interrupted Buck. "I heard that till I'm fed up. Let's go buy yore Ford. And say, Jake, why did you put up a hundred against that ring? It ain't worth but half of that."

Jake grinned at their leader. "I know it," he answered, "but I liked its looks. I got to have somethin' for my work, ain't it? I was hot, wasn't I? Quit crabbin' an' let Red get his play-thing. Mebbe he'd take us for a ride."

They bought the Ford. It was a somewhat dilapidated truck with a light body, and both body and seat covered with a canopy top. The saddle-colored gentleman who sold it to them exhibited its points proudly. The motor was in fair condition, and, as Jakey remarked doubtfully, "it didn't rattle too much." Some prior owner had installed an overdrive and a three-speed transmission which added both to pulling capacity and power. There was an auxiliary twenty-gallon gas tank on one running board, as well as two cans, one for oil and one for water, on the board opposite. These the men filled.

Buck, still custodian of most of the funds, parted regretfully with one hundred and fifty good American dollars which form the recognized currency in Juarez. With Red Heffernan as pilot, they then shoved off in search of more places to spend money.

They found such places in bunches. Red, still riding his hunch, announced that they would outfit completely. "What we need," he stated, "is everything: Grub, bed rolls, cookin' outfit, the whole works. We might want to go most any-

wheres. Yuh know I always said that four tough guys an' a——"

Buck's brawny hand clamping down on Red's neck cut short the rest of the sentence. Still imbued with something of Red's spirit, he said nothing when the man with the flaming hair turned in at Rafael Kang's Emporium. The proprietor greeted them in person.

Rafael Kang's features showed the origin of his name. There was an odd mixture of Mexican and Chinese mapped on his countenance. His eyes slanted slightly and his cheek bones were prominent, but these might have been from Indian parentage. The thing that showed the yellow man was his skin. It was almost saffron.

Kang was a big man, almost as tall as the Swede, with massive shoulders and neck, and long, heavily muscled arms. The middle finger of his left hand was gone at the first joint, leaving a stub.

Rafael exhibited and sold to the impatient four a variety of objects. They bought tarpaulins, blankets, cooking utensils, and knives, forks and plates. They purchased several shovels, a pick or two, and, under Red's urging, two iron pans for panning gold.

"We might want to go prospectin'," announced Red when Buck balked at this last purchase.

The Big Swede insisted that a coil of five-eighth-inch rope be included, and it was added to the pile. Jakey wandered among shelves of food and came back laden, while Buck, finally catching the spirit of the occasion, accompanied Kang into a back room from which he emerged bearing four 6.5 Mannlichers and a case of ammunition. When the pile was completed, Red looked it over complacently.

"Now," he announced, "we're all set. We can go huntin', fishin', prospectin', or what have you? If that ain't a lulu of an outfit, I'm Dutch!"

Buck, grinning at his partner's exuberance, paid the bill and Red and

the Swede began to pack the outfit to the waiting Ford. It was then that Rafael caught sight of the turquoise ring which Jake wore proudly on the middle finger of his left hand.

CHAPTER II.

BUCK ENTERTAINS.

THE heavy-set half-breed started slightly when he caught a glimpse of the jewel, but he said nothing for a moment; then, as Jake bent over to take up his share of the load, Kang spoke. "That's pretty ring," he announced. "You like sell?"

"Who me?" Jake straightened. "Not much! That's my lucky piece!"

The half-breed smiled, tight-lipped. "I got plenty luck piece," he announced. "That ring old. You sell, huh?"

"Not by a damn sight!" Jake bent over again and piled groceries on an extended arm. "It ain't for sale, chinky. See?"

"A' right." Rafael shrugged eloquently. "A' right. Don't get mad." Thumbing a sheaf of money that Buck had turned over, Kang turned and walked toward the back of his store.

The partners loaded the truck. They placed the Mannlichers where they could not be seen, rolled their bedding and threw it in, and piled groceries into spare spaces. When they were done the Swede threw a half hitch or two over the pile and announced that he was ready for a drink and a meal.

"Let's eat at Nigger Joe's," Red suggested. "That's where our luck started."

The rest were agreeable, and with Red and Buck in the seat and Jake and the Swede ensconced on bed rolls in the rear, they rattled away from Rafael Kang's and down the street to Nigger Joe's Patio. Buck, listening to the various loose joints of the car, looked back over his shoulder and addressed the men in the rear.

"Pick up all the wire you see," he

said. "From the sounds of this thing we're goin' to need it."

Red halted the loaded truck in front of Nigger Joe's door and scrambled over the side of the car; Buck swung down from the seat, and Jake and the Swede jumped over the rear end. With Buck leading, they went into the open patio.

NIGGER JOE'S was vastly different from the place they had left that afternoon. Where before they had been the only customers, now the little marble-topped tables were almost all in use. Lights glared, and a string orchestra was playing. Red, coming through the door, caught the swinging lilt of the music and scuffed his feet in a dance step.

Buck pushed ahead and presently the four found themselves seated at the very table they had left a few hours earlier. There had been a sign, "Reserved," on the table, but Buck, with a careless sweep of his arm had knocked it to the sand and seated himself, despite the protests of a waiter.

"What you fellows goin' to order?" he asked.

The other three announced their wants, and, when the waiter did not depart promptly but showed an inclination to stay and argue, the Swede started to get up. The beginning of the movement was enough. The waiter took one look at the Swede's bulk and left hurriedly.

He came back from the bar with the ordered drinks, and each member of the quartet lifted his glass. Red, grinning like an ape, said, "Here's how," and four drinks went down four thirsty throats. Red rapped sharply with his glass for another round and Jakey bent over the table.

"Look here, fellahs," announced Jake, "there's some drawin' on this table."

The other three looked and Buck nodded. "Looks like a map," he said. "Somebody's been showin' somebody

else the way to get there. I think that——"

Buck didn't finish telling what he thought. A polite voice, coming over his shoulder, broke into his sentence.

"This is my table, gentlemen," announced the voice. "I reserved it some time ago."

All four of the seated men looked up. Standing behind Buck were four men, three of them dressed in formal evening clothes, the fourth in the dress uniform of an officer of the Mexican army.

For an instant the four at the table gazed at the four standing, then Jakey broke the silence. "Oh, boy!" he said. "Look at the general!"

The man in uniform had no sense of humor. He drew himself up haughtily and stared at Jake. "Colonel Anastacio Hiverno y Sandoval," he announced. "This is my table! Move on!"

"Now, I ask you," commented Jake, "is that nice?" Jake's voice was plaintive.

Buck, unawed by the announcement and the colonel's command, stared with agate-hard eyes at the gentleman. "We're usin' this table," he announced briefly. "Go take a walk!"

Colonel Hiverno y Sandoval could not understand the attitude of the four big men who sat before him. He straightened a little farther, a feat that seemed impossible, and spoke again.

"I am Colonel Hiverno y Sandoval. I have reserved this table, and I——"

"Well," Buck's interrupting voice was hard, "what you want me to do about it? Let down my hair an' cry? I said go take a walk. Now, beat it!"

BUT Hiverno y Sandoval started forward, hand falling toward the holster-covered gun that hung at his left hip. Red moved back his chair to clear for action, and the Big Swede placidly placed a hand under the table and lifted it away as the best means of clearing decks, but one of the black-coated gentlemen behind the

colonel spoke hurriedly and in a low voice, and the hostile officer stopped his advance.

Nigger Joe, hurrying up from the bar, added his voice, and presently Hiverno y Sandoval and his party moved away and were seated at a table close by. From his seat, the colonel, half turning, stared balefully at Buck.

Buck paid no attention to the stare but spoke to his friends. "Now I wonder what he was gettin' so salty about?" he queried. "Must 'a' wanted this table bad."

"Yeah," Red said. "I want another drink, myself. Hi, waiter!"

The group had four more drinks in rapid succession and then settled down to the serious business of eating. They ordered, and the waiter spread a cloth over the mable top of the table. Shortly they were testing the work of Nigger Joe's chef.

It was at the end of the meal that another interruption came. The orchestra struck into a dance number and a girl, her dress white, a white mantilla draping her head, flashed into the square opening at the center of the patio, and began to dance.

Latin audiences are different from their colder Northern counterparts. The dancing girl had barely completed two figures of her performance, before the majority of the patrons were on their feet shouting, "Brava!" and throwing coins, bills, and articles of clothing toward her twinkling feet.

The four partners turning in their chairs, joined in the thunder of applause that came, when, with a final whirl, the girl dropped into an exaggerated curtsey at the end of the dance.

"Some chicken," announced Red to Buck.

Buck nodded violently. The drinks and the meal were having their effect on Buck. He was throwing off some of his reserve.

The orchestra began another dance

number, slower in tempo than the first and the girl, swaying from her hips, began to circle the square, weaving in and out among the tables that stood near its edge. She worked out, farther and farther down the center, white dress swirling, white teeth gleaming as they held a rose. Buck, Red, the Swede, and Jake, watched her approach.

Beside the table where sat Colonel Hiverno y Sandoval and his friends, the girl hesitated, swaying gently to the music. Sandoval said something to her that made her clamp the rose between her teeth and swing swiftly away. Her movement carried her close to the partners.

Buck, snatching his hat from the back of his chair and sweeping the tablecloth from the table, came to his feet.

"I know that dance," he announced hurriedly to his friends. "Learned it in Nicaragua. She ought to have a partner to do it right. Come on, sister!" This last to the dancing girl.

The girl heard the words, smiled and whirled toward the waiting Buck. The orchestra picked up a faster tempo and with Buck dancing with her, the two whirled out toward the open square in the center of the patio.

The crowd caught the spirit of the occasion. They rose *en masse*, their shouts almost drowning out the music.

BUCK weighed one hundred and eighty pounds and was big all over, but for a few moments he gave a demonstration of how graceful a big man can be when he is in perfect physical condition and has cast restraint to the winds.

The dance was "La Cacucha," and the two worked together as though they were a trained team.

Buck's big sombrero went down on the ground and the girl danced on its brim, then, using the tablecloth for a serape, Buck wound her in slowly, pulled back and spun her from him. As

a climax, he dropped the girl across his left arm and bending forward took the rose she held in her teeth, in his own.

Red, the Swede, and Jake were pounding on the table top, and the crowd went mad as the dancer dropped a final curtsey and Buck bowed.

The girl ran toward the door from which she had entered and Buck, grinning a little shamefacedly, came toward the table. His partners were on their feet, and the crowd was pounding and stamping.

"Class to you!" Jake cried as Buck came up. "You sure are a hot number, you are!"

"I made a damn fool out of myself," announced Buck, sitting down and placing on the table the flower he held. "I — Now what the hell!"

His question was caused by Sandoval. The colonel, throwing off restraining hands, was moving toward the center square, his face black with a frown. At the edge of the square he paused and held up his hand for silence.

"Got his table, an' then danced with his girl," surmised Red, watching. "Gosh, but he's mad!"

Gradually the crowd in the patio quieted, and when his voice could be heard, the colonel made an announcement.

"*Señoras y caballeros*," he said, and his voice was a little unsteady. "We have been entertained. *No es verdad?* Now, I, too, will entertain. Watch!"

He moved across the square, drew a white card from his pocket and caught its edge under a scale of bark. In an instant he was back across the square from the palm, his pistol in his hand. He raised the gun and spoke again, his voice harsh.

"Watch!"

The gun in the officer's hand barked sharply, once, twice, again and again and again! With each report the palm quivered and a black hole sprang into being on the white of the card.

"Sure some shootin'!" breathed Red, watching.

Sandoval turned, his gun still out, and looked toward the four partners, a mixture of malignity and triumph on his face. Nigger Joe's Patio was acutely silent.

"We have entertainers in Mexico, also, señores," said Sandoval. "We need no others. The border is open until twelve o'clock."

Still watching Buck intently, he moved toward his table.

Alexson, the Big Swede, was slowly rising to his feet.

CHAPTER III.

A NEW PASSENGER.

ALEXSON shook off Red's detaining hand and he, too, moved toward the center square, easily, almost languorously. He reached it, walked across, and then, stooping a little, he picked up the small potted palm in his two mighty hands.

"Watch!" said the Swede.

His shoulders moved slightly, bulged beneath his shirt and with a crackle of snapping fibers the palm tree broke square in two. The Swede dropped the little tub which held the roots and, with the top of the palm in one massive hand, strode across the square toward Sandoval.

"Buck got a posey," announced the Swede calmly. "Ay think you ought to have posey, too." He held the palm top out toward Sandoval.

Sandoval, who had stood beside his table during the Swede's demonstration, moved an uncertain step back. His companions started to rise, and then a disturbance at the door drew the attention of all in the restaurant.

Five khaki-clad police officers came through the door, each carrying a rifle. At a trot they made toward the table where sat Buck, Red, and Jake. The foremost of the approaching officers

looked intently at Jake and then brought his rifle forward.

"*Arriba!*" he snapped.

The reaction of the partners was instantaneous. Red picked up the marble-topped table as the nearest instrument of destruction at hand. Buck reached behind him and his hand clamped upon the iron bird stand upon which sat the green-and-red parrot. Jakey came to his feet like a steel spring, clipped the nearest policeman on the jaw with a hard left fist and caught the officer's rifle as it dropped from his relaxing hand. The Big Swede, disdaining any implement but his two big hands, reached out massive arms and caught two men by their shoulders, knocked their heads together and reached for another pair.

Buck swung his iron stand and put an ambitious waiter out, the shrieking parrot flying to his shoulder where it dug in with what seemed like steel-tipped claws.

In an instant Nigger Joe's Patio was a bedlam. Women shrieked, men shouted and swore. Swede Alexson dropped his second pair of victims and reached for more, and over the tumult rose Buck Malloy's wārcry: "Gangway for a marine!"

The concert of the partners' action was beautiful. Jake swung his captured rifle by the barrel and guarded a flank; Buck did a like duty on the other side; the Swede formed a point, his great fists doing untold execution; and in the rear, Red Heffernan, backing slowly away, used the marble top of the table he held for a screen.

They made for the door. Just before they reached it Buck, from the corner of his eye, saw a flash of white preceding them. He shouted to his companions: "Make the truck, fellows!"

The Big Swede broke through the crowd at the door, dropping two limp figures behind him, and sprang to the crank of the waiting truck. Jake

dropped the rifle he carried and leaped to the driver's seat. Buck took the back end at a bound, and Red Heffernan, still using the table for a shield, scrambled up beside Buck. Together they crouched behind the table.

The motor of the truck roared into life, throbbed, paused, and then roared again. The car trembled and moved, swaying to one side as the Swede hit the running board. From the door of Nigger Joe's Patio a shot cracked, and the lead smashed against the table top. Careening, rocking from side to side, the truck leaped ahead, whirled on two wheels, rounded a corner and headed south, flashing past the lights of the street.

The parrot on Buck's shoulder dug in its claws and for the first time Buck became aware of the bird and the iron stand he still held in his hand.

"*Awwaaaaak!*" screamed the parrot. "Go to hell! Go to hell!"

Driving south, now turning right and now left again, but always keeping on a southerly line, the Model T, with Jakey in command, presently left the environs of Juarez and swung out into the sandy, yucca-dotted country below the river.

It was not until the lights of the town were twinkling far behind them that Jake slowed down. The truck had been doing its utmost, and for the last five miles Red and Buck had been clinging to what support they could find. Chihuahua does not have many good roads, and the road that Jake had chosen was not one of the best.

For half an hour after slowing, Jake drove on, none of the four wasting breath in much conversation. Things had happened pretty rapidly back in Nigger Joe's Patio and while each was wondering about the causes, they were perfectly satisfied with the results they had obtained.

Buck comforted the parrot somewhat, trying to stroke its ruffled hackles and

back. In retaliation, the bird bit Buck's finger, and Buck swore long and feelingly. When Jake had slowed he had turned on the truck's lights. Now, at the end of half an hour he brought the truck to a halt, turned off the motor and stretched.

"Well," said Jake, breaking the silence, "that's that, ain't it?"

The Big Swede concurred. "It is," he stated.

"Thing that gets me," announced Buck, coming up from the spot where the last lurch had thrown him, "is what set them guys afire so quick. Why was they comin' down on us with that 'Arriba' stuff?"

"They theenk you keel Señor Soman who run thee dice game," a feminine voice announced startlingly. "I hear them say so. Would you please get these table off my foot?"

Buck almost went out of the car, Red jerked his table fortress up, and Jake and Nils turned and half hung themselves over the back of the seat.

BUCK was the first to find his voice, as a very composed young lady dressed in a white dancing costume sat up in the back of the truck and raised two slim hands to arrange a mantilla and her hair.

"For the love o' Mike!" Buck exclaimed. "How did you get here? Who are you? What you doin' in this truck?"

The lady arranging her hair never lost her composure. "Me?" she said brightly. "I am Chiquita. Just before he shooteeng I climb een theese truck. Then theese hombre colorado throw these li'lle *mesa*, what you call table, on me, an' theese other señor step on me an' lie quiet. I theenk it more better to lo so, so I'm come here."

Buck stuttered a moment, Red looked at the table and then at the girl, the Swede gawked and Jake's eyes bulged. Presently Buck spoke. "Well, I'll be jamned!" he said.

Three voices echoed, "Me, too."

"Now we got to take you back." Buck had a grievance in his voice. "Here you go pushin' in on a real nice party, an' now we got to take you home. Most likely we'll get all shot to pieces doin' it, too."

Chiquita shook her head. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed. "You shall not take me back!"

"But we gotta!" Buck scratched his puzzled head. "We can't go cruisin' around with you with us. You said they wanted us for shootin' some gent. That'll mean that likely next time they'll do their shootin' before they do their talkin'. You gotta go back!"

No sooner had he finished his speech than Buck found a weeping girl on his hands. With her arms locked about his neck, her face hidden on his chest, Chiquita poured forth a lament in mingled Spanish and English, interspersed with sobs.

Buck tried to free himself from the clinging arms, tried to get clear of the weeping girl, stammered, begged, swore at his grinning companions, and finally signed a peace treaty.

"Well, come on then," he said ungraciously, scowling at the Big Swede whose face was almost hidden behind a smile. "Come on. We'll take you. I'll do anything to put a stopper on that crying!"

No sooner had Buck succumbed than he was freed, and Chiquita, her face unmarred by tears, looked up at him. It was a roguish, smiling face with dark eyes fringed by long lashes. The nose was piquant, and teeth flashed white beneath curved red lips.

"You are so good," cooed Chiquita, smiling at the amazed Buck. "So good to thee li'lle Chiquita. You are thee Señor Buck, no? Chiquita weel be so good—cook, wash, everytheeng! You weel see. Let us go now!"

The Swede guffawed, and Buck turned a murderous look on the big

man. Not a bit abashed, the Swede began to delve below the bedding and other articles in the truck and presently brought the Mannlichers and the case of ammunition to light. He distributed the rifles and the four took them to the front of the car, where, in the light from the headlights, they made sure that the weapons were clean and in working order.

The guns were practically new, and it took a little work to free them from the cosmoline that coated them. When the rifles were ready, each man helped himself to ammunition, loaded his weapon and put spare shells in convenient pockets. They all felt better when that was done.

"Now," said Buck, summoning a counsel of war, "where we goin' from here?"

"We got a lady to consider," suggested Jake. "Mebbe we better——"

"Do not theenk of Chiquita," interposed that young lady. "I weel go where you go."

"Let's go on south," suggested Red. "We started that way an' we better keep goin'. It might be a good idea to put plenty distance between us an' the cops, Buck."

Buck grunted. "Might as well for the rest of the night, anyhow," he assented. "In the mornin' we can find out where we are an' decide what to do. Is that O. K.?"

The others agreed, and they climbed back into the truck. Red took the wheel, Jake cranked, and presently they were again plowing along the rutted road.

CHAPTER IV.

LA PUERTA DEL INFIERNO.

TWICE drivers were changed, for it was hard work keeping the truck in the ruts and easing it over the bumps.

A faint light began to grow in the east and the road turned sharply away

from that direction. They drove along slowly.

In the growing light mountains began to loom ahead and presently the sun threw its first long beams from behind them, casting a sharp, distorted shadow of the car ahead.

Buck, who was driving, swung off the road, brought the car to a halt and turned off the motor. Red climbed down and stretched himself lazily. Gradually the others joined him beside the truck.

"Time for chow," announced Red. "I could eat a raw dog. Let's get some wood, Jake."

He and Jake went in search of fuel while Buck, Nils and Chiquita unloaded eatables and cooking outfit from the body of the truck. When Jake and Red came back with their arms loaded with mesquite, Buck kindled a fire and began breakfast preparations.

Red, grinning, pulled the little marble-topped table from the back of the truck and set it upright. "Might as well eat in style," he suggested. "I brung a table along."

Jake laughed and began to carry plates, cups and eating utensils to the table. Buck stopped his breakfast preparations and straightened up.

"Bring that water can," he requested. "I want to make some coffee."

Swede took the can from its rack on the running board and carried it to the cook. As he set it down he looked at it doubtfully and then at the country about.

"There ain't a lot o' water there," announced the Swede, "an' Ay don't see any around. We got to get some pretty soon."

"Ought to be some ahead in them hills," commented Red, pointing. "I guess——"

He was interrupted by a little cry from Chiquita who was bending over the table.

"*Mira!*" she called. "Look, Buck!"

BUCK set the filled coffeepot on the fire and strode toward the girl, followed by the other three men. She was standing beside the table, one finger against its marble top, her eyes examining the table intently. As the four came up she straightened, her finger still pointing dramatically.

"Mira!" she cried again. "It ees a map to *La Puerta del Infierno!*"

"A map to the Gates of Hell?" Buck translated automatically. "What——"

"We must go there!" exclaimed the girl. "Wait, I weel tell you!"

As the men gathered about the table, Chiquita looked at each one intently. In turn they looked at her. It seemed to each of the men that the laughing dancer had changed. Her face was intent, bore a look of concentration; her eyes were sober, not filled with laughing lights as they had been. She spoke to all of them, but her eyes she kept on Buck.

"You theenk I am Chiquita, a li'le mestizo dancer girl?" she asked, her voice deep and with an undercurrent of solemnity. "That ees what you theenk, no? I am not! I am Santa de Fierro an' I am not mestizo. I am hidalgo!"

The girl's big black eyes stabbed into Buck's tawny eyes, eyes that held little golden glints that danced and shown as she talked. Buck never blinked, never shifted his gaze. Santa de Fierro knew that she must convince him, must make him believe her, for he was the leader of these four stalwarts who fought and laughed and played. There was a ring to her voice as she continued.

"Las' night you saved my life! You did not know eet, but you did. Eef I had not run weeth you, eef I had not climb een your automovil, thees morn-eeng there would have been a leetle Mejicano dancer girl stab!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "The policemans would have come an' looked an' then gone away. They would say, '*Un otro nina. Es nada.*'"

Red was drinking in the girl's talk. Now he humped his big shoulders. "The hell you say!" he muttered. "Ain't that nice?"

The girl flashed Red a look and turned back to Buck. "You want to know why," she continued, not asking a question but rather making a statement.

"Leesen! There ees in Mejico some bad men, *hombres malos*, an' they do not like that Mejico ees so quiet. There ees no war, no fighting, no chance for men to loot an' rob. They theenk eet ees more better that we have times like when Villa was alive."

"Oh, they do, do they?" Buck asked.

"Si. That ees good for them, no? So that they decide they weel have those times again. One of thees men ees a *coronel*—what you call colonel—een the army. He weeshes to be king, to be dictator, but he have not the money or the men, so he come to Juarez."

The four buddies had stopped all humorous remarks. They were listening seriously now.

"At Juarez," the girl continued, "thees colonel find a Chino—what you call cholo, half-breed—who have guns for sale. Thees Chino he like war times, too, so they plot; they have Junta an' they get more men. Thees Chino know a Yaqui an' the Yaqui know where ees *El Oro del Padre.*"

"The Father's Gold," Jake Cohen interpreted profoundly; and was immediately told by Buck to shut his face and just listen.

"Yes, the Father's Gold," the girl said, her face brightening. "Eef the colonel an' thees Chino know where they can get money, they have a revolution. They turn over Chihuahua an' Sonora, maybe all Mejico. So they find thees Yaqui, an' he agree weeth the colonel an' thees Chino that he weel steal a reeng which have the key to *El Oro del Padre.* And that reeng is the one owned by my father."

CHIQUITA went on to explain that almost back to the period of Cortez, the conqueror, the *El Oro del Padre* had been in the keeping of a Fierro.

"We leev in Yaqui country," Chiquita explained, "an' the Fierros an' the Yaqui are friend. They trust each other. But one day my father look through hees box where he keeps hees valuables an hees reeng is gone. Eet ees a turquoise reeng."

Jake glanced down at his hand and then started; he dropped his hand below the table top. Buck caught the movement but said nothing. Chiquita, who had paused for breath, continued after a moment:

"When my father find hees reeng gone, he is seek, almost loco—crazee. He have no sons, jus' me, an' so I tell heem I weel get the reeng back. So I theenk who has come to see my father an' who has gone away, an' I remember Juan. I theenk he have stole my father's reeng. Then I follow heem. I am not Santa de Fierro then. I take the name my father call me—'Chiquita'—an' I am a li'le dancier. I follow Juan to Juarez an' I dance een Joe's Patio an' I find out thees things I tell you. But I cannot get back that reeng, for Juan has lost it een a gamble."

Once more Jake started to say something, but Buck motioned him to stay quiet. "Let the girl finish her story," Buck commanded.

"There ees not much more," Chiquita told him. "What I tell you I know. Now, thees is what I *guess*. I guess that thees colonel an' these Chino they are desperate. They tell Juan to draw them a map so that they can find theese *Oro del Padre*. Juan draw them these map here."

Chiquita pointed to the table top. "But Juan does not know except to *La Puerta del Infierno*, so he stop the map there. He know I am in Juarez an' he tell thees colonel las' night, when

I dance, these colonel say sometheeng to me that tell me he know. That ees why I run an' climb een your automovil! That ees why I must go to *La Puerta del Infierno*! They weel go there an' eef they find my father there——"

She stopped. Two big tears welled up in her black eyes. No one may know what visions she was seeing, what tortures she was imagining.

Red raised slowly and looked at the other four. Buck took his eyes from Chiquita and looked at Jake.

"I reckon I know that colonel an' the chink," drawled Red slowly. "That Hivero Sandoval guy that wanted this table so bad last night is the colonel, an' I reckon the chink is the feller we bought our supplies from. Correct?"

Buck did not take his eyes from Jakey. He grinned, a slow grin that spread over his tanned face to his tawny eyes.

"Come across, Jake," commanded Buck. "Give the lady her dad's ring."

Jake brought his left hand up to the table and slowly pulled off the ring he had won. On the blue surface of the turquoise crawled what seemed to be a gold matrix that caught the morning sun and flashed.

"Here you are," said Jake.

The girl reached out a hesitant hand, incapable of believing that this was really the ring she sought. Jake put the jewel in her palm.

For an instant Chiquita looked at the ring, then gave a little scream and swayed on her feet. The Big Swede's brawny arm saved her from falling.

"My father's reeng!" said Chiquita faintly.

The Swede, Jake, and Red looked questioningly at Buck. Buck answered the look.

"Sure, we're goin' to take her home," he said. "It'll be a good trip an' there might be some excitement. We——"

"Damn it! Grab that coffeepot! It's boilin' over!"

The prosaic words brought all of them back from the spell that the girl had thrown over them. Jake rescued the coffee, and Buck walked back to the fire and resumed breakfast preparations. They were all a little ashamed of the way they had acted while Chiquita was talking, and they hid their misgivings under a great deal of casual talk.

Only Chiquita herself remained under the spell. She held the ring out before her, looking at it, stroking its deep-blue surface with tender fingers. Until Buck called her for the second time, she disregarded the breakfast that was on the table. At Buck's second call she approached and ate with the four, paying very little attention to the food, and looking off abstractedly toward the mountains.

When they had finished eating, Red made a movement toward the water can, intent upon washing the dishes, but the Swede stopped him. "Save it," cautioned the Swede. "There ain't but a little."

Red set the can down and picked up a handful of sand. "Come on, Jake," he said. "We'll dry-wash these." Jake joined him and they scoured the dishes out with sand.

Jake and Red had finished and were repacking the truck, making room for all five of them to ride, when Chiquita spoke again.

"I have not thank you for theese reeng," she said to Jake, walking toward him. "I do thank you. How much I cannot say——"

"That's all right," mumbled Jake, abashed. "It wasn't nothin'. I just was hot with them dice, ain't it, an'——" He became confused, blushed, and stopped.

Buck took up the words. "Nothin' to thank Jake about," he announced, "nor any of the rest of us, I reckon. We just happened along at the right time. Let it go at that. The thing is, you ain't safe yet. You or the ring either. From what you been tellin' us there's a

couple of gents that are on your trail proper."

Chiquita nodded. "That ees so," she observed thoughtfully.

"Another thing," Buck continued, "we're all of us out here a long ways from anywhere. You better tell us which way to head so we can get started."

The girl looked at Buck steadily. "My father weel pay you——"

"We ain't lookin' for pay," Buck interrupted. "We're all sort of in this boat together an'——"

He was stopped by a tug at his sleeve, Jake stood immediately behind him and Jake was frowning.

"What you talkin' so quick for, Buck?" he demanded in a whisper. "If her ol' man's got plenty o' gelt, let him pay us. Don't be a sap all your life!"

"Well, where do you come in?" demanded Buck harshly. "Who's runnin' this——"

"Ay think we are going to have visitors," interrupted the Swede, pointing toward the east. "Ay see dust."

CHAPTER V.

VISITORS.

ALL five stared in the direction of the Swede's pointing arm. Jake threw his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun and moved a step to one side. "Dust storm," he commented presently. "Looks like one, anyhow."

Chiquita shook her head. "No," she said, "that is *un carro*. It comes fast."

Buck nodded in agreement. "Correct," he said. "Finish loadin', fellows, an' get your rifles. Maybe they ain't friends."

The Swede and Red threw the last of the utensils into the back of the truck and all four secured their weapons. "Let's move down the road a piece," suggested Red. "There's a good place by that brush."

Buck nodded again, and the four stepped out away from the Model T. Chiquita started to follow them, but Buck sent her back.

"Stay at the car," he ordered, and reluctantly the girl obeyed him.

The four reached the brush of which Red had spoken, a straggling mesquite growth that lay to the right of the rutted road.

The mesquite had caught blowing sand and mounted it until a little hill had been formed. The Swede, without orders, moved across the trail and concealed his bulk behind several yucca plants that formed a little clump.

Buck, Jake, and Red deployed along the mound's length, Buck remaining closest to the road. Red and Jake swore feelingly as they wriggled through the prickly growth to reach advantageous positions. The dust cloud that the Swede had seen came on rapidly.

"Comin' fast," commented Jake. "Well, mebbe we'll get a chance to sight in these rifles, ain't it?"

"Mebbe," grunted Red, blowing stray sand from the rear sight of his Mannlicher. "Where you goin' to stop 'em, Buck?"

"'Bout two hundred yards," Buck replied absently, his eyes on the approaching dust. "Just where the road crooks."

The four relapsed into silence. The dust cloud came on, resolved itself into a dust-colored car which drew closer momentarily.

Within a few minutes the men lying beside the road could see that the car was loaded with men, and shortly the distance was lessened to a point where they could see that these arrivals were in uniform and that each carried a rifle. Buck rose from the crouch he had assumed, stepped into the road and held up his hand.

"Halt!" he shouted.

It is doubtful if the car's occupants heard the shout. The commanding fig-

ure with the upraised hand was not to be mistaken, however, and the man who drove the dust-colored car applied his brakes forcibly. The car slithered to a stop, its engine still running. As it stopped, the men in the rear seat threw their legs over the sides and dropped to the ground.

"Halt!" shouted Buck again. "What do you want?"

He was answered by a shot that whined close by his head. Buck grinned grimly and dropped down behind his mesquite-and-sand fortress.

"Take 'em!" he snapped. "Don't kill nobody unless you have to. These guys are cops. They're only doin' their duty."

The first shot had been followed by a fusillade, the bullets spouting up sand from the road or shrieking away across the flat. Jake, at the end of the mesquite clump grunted.

"Don't kill 'em," he said scornfully. "Oi! These lads are only doin' their duty! Ain't that noble?"

His rifle snapped, and a uniformed man close beside the car dropped the rifle he had been aiming, clapped his hand to his shoulder and whirled toward the car. The other officers—there were six of them—immediately sought shelter, one pausing long enough to drag the wounded man behind the car.

"Now see what *you* done!" grunted Red, sighting carefully. "If you'd 'a' waited till Buck gave the word we'd 'a' put four out the first crack."

He squeezed the trigger and an ambitious policeman shrieked wildly, threw his rifle to one side and departed down the road in a hasty scramble. Red had burned him across the buttocks. Buck lowered the gun he had been sighting, and looked around.

"Now, where in hell did the Swede go?" he questioned. The big form of Nils Alexson was missing from behind the yuccas.

"Back to get a drink," snorted Jake,

snapping a shot at an indiscreetly exposed head. "He must 'a' got thirsty." The head at which he had fired, was hastily withdrawn, minus its cap.

"What we goin' to do, Buck?" queried Red, who craved action. "They can't get us, an' we can't get them. Mebbe we better charge 'em."

FROM behind the car a gun cracked, and Jake, who had been peering out from his mesquite ambush, grunted and laid his gun down carefully, then swore with deep feeling.

"Stop one, Jakey?" questioned Red, who had fired as the gun from the car had flashed.

"Yes, damn it!" Jake snapped his answer. "Right through the arm."

Buck looked anxiously in the direction of his comrade. Jake was tying a soiled handkerchief about his left forearm.

"Well," Red offered consolation, "the guy who done it won't no more. I got him just to the right of his neck."

A calm voice spoke somewhere to the right of the car.

"Stand up you fallers!" commanded the voice. "Ay got you covered!"

"Damned if the Swede ain't surrounded 'em," marveled Red. "Hi, Swede!"

The voice had caused consternation behind the dust-colored car. The driver, who alone bore no rifle, waved a white rag from the right of the tonneau and presently stepped into view.

Buck rose from behind the sand heap and walked toward the driver. Red and Jake covered the men who came from behind the car, and the tall figure of Nils Alexson rose from a depression, his rifle held in instant readiness.

"Well, what you got to say?" questioned Buck of the approaching driver. "What's the idea o' cuttin' down on us?"

The driver spoke a species of English. "You giff up?" he suggested.

"Give up what?" Buck couldn't get

the idea. "Any givin' up around here you're doin'." Tell them fellows behind you to put down their guns. They're apt to get shot if they don't. Oh, Chiquita! Come here a minute, will you?"

At the call, Chiquita came. She had remained at the car as Buck had ordered, and now she ran over the sand, reaching Buck's side swiftly.

"Find out what these guys want," requested Buck, eyeing an uneasy member of the Juarez police force who stood behind the driver. "Stand still, you!" He pointed a finger at the uneasy man, and that individual immediately became rigid. Chiquita broke into a stream of rapid Spanish.

The driver of the car, who plainly commanded the expedition, replied, and Chiquita turned to Buck.

"Thees men," she announced, "are sent to arrest you. You have been accused of keeling the Señor Soman an' stealing hees reeng an' monies. Thees man here want to know if you geeve up."

Buck looked wonderingly at the Mexican who stood before him. "If we give up?" he queried. "Say, what kind o' shape does he think he's in? What about *him* givin' up?"

Chiquita spoke again in Spanish and the stolid officer shook his head and answered her. The girl turned again to Buck.

"He say that the Juarez police do not geeve up," she announced. "He say that you are hees prisoner."

Buck lost his temper. "The hell you say!" he snapped, dropping his rifle and jabbing it forward into the officer's stomach. "Now, you march back to that car an' get in, an' pull your freight! Shove off! Get me? I've fooled with you plenty!"

Whether or not the officer understood Buck's command, he obeyed it. His face blanched a little and he turned and motioned to his men. Red and Jake were advancing belligerently. The Big

Swede was coming at a lope, and Buck had not eased the pressure of his gun muzzle. Turning, the officers walked toward their car, the four partners accompanying them.

At the car, the party halted. Red collected discarded rifles and relieved the captives of their ammunition belts. The wounded men climbed in, followed by their unmarked companions. The commander took the wheel and looked at Buck.

Buck answered the look. "There ain't none o' you hurt bad," he announced. "Next time somebody'll get killed if they monkey with us. Now, weigh anchor! Shove off! Tell 'em, Chiquita!"

Chiquita told them. The men in the car heard her out, their faces expressionless. When she had finished the driver freed his clutch, threw his car in gear and with a roar the big car spun, turned, and started down the road.

Buck and his companions watched it.

Half a mile away the car stopped and picked up the man Red had creased, then resumed its progress. Presently it was a speck below a whirling dust cloud. The four men and the girl turned, and collecting the rifles that the officers had discarded, went back to their own automobile. Beside the truck they stopped and Red loaded in the weapons he had acquired.

"Get the water, Red," said Buck, turning toward Jake. "I want to wash off Jakey's arm."

Red moved a few steps, bent over and picked up the water can. He stared at it in amazement. Where the can had stood there was a damp spot on the sand and in the blue side of the can itself was a rip where a rifle slug had torn the tin.

Buck looked at Red, at the can, and then at the other three. "Ain't that nice?" he commented presently. "A hundred miles from town, wanted by the cops, in the middle of a blasted desert, an' no water!"

Red looked at Buck blankly. Jakey swore softly to himself, and on the back of the truck's single seat, where he was tethered by his chain, the big green-and-red parrot shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. The parrot opened his beak, snapped it shut, opened it again, and suddenly screamed.

"*Cajon de sastre!*"

Chiquita laughed, a clear, bell-like peal, and suddenly the grim humor of the situation struck the four men.

"That bird say, 'Hell!'" laughed Chiquita. "I theenk hee's right. No?"

"Able to swear in two languages," commented Buck, grinning at the parrot. "I guess we'll have to name him that."

"No," Chiquita shook her head. "We call heem 'El Diablo,' w'at you call the devil. He ees mascot."

"That's correct," Buck amended his ideas to meet Chiquita's. "Well, no use standin' here. It's gettin' hot, an' we got to go some place. Throw that can in the truck, Red. Pile in an' we'll pull right out. Now, which way do we head, sister?"

Chiquita became suddenly solemn. "You mean that you take me home?" she asked.

"Sure," Buck nodded. "Started to, didn't we? That's what all this palaver's been about, ain't it?"

The girl flashed a glance at Buck, then looked at the somber mountains that lay to the west.

"I live there," she said, pointing toward the hills. "Beyond the Gates of Hell. Eet is far, an' there ees no water on thees trail. Perhaps we had better turn back. Eef you——"

"Turn back an' let the cops take us?" objected Buck. "You don't know this outfit. We got gas an' oil an' water in the radiator. Show us the way, girl. Red says that four good men an' a Model T can go any place. Here's where we find out if he was lyin' or not!"

CHAPTER VI.

SANDSTORM.

THE Swede cranked the truck and climbed into the back end under the canopy top. Jake joined him there, and Red Heffernan eased in beside them. Buck took the wheel and with Chiquita beside him set the truck in motion. The little marble-topped table they left, standing lonely beside the rutted trail.

For a time they followed the road, and then, under Chiquita's direction, left it and branched off toward the south.

It was smoother riding after they left the road, but the driving was more difficult. Buck twisted the truck around yucca and mesquite and rock, leaving behind a tortuous, winding set of double tracks, but ever keeping to the southwest. For a long distance they drove in silence, and then Buck asked a question.

"What you reckon we're goin' to find when we get you home?" he asked the girl. "If that Juan you were talkin' about drew one map, he could draw another. Reckon them fellows will beat us there?"

Chiquita nodded and drew a long breath. "That ees what I am afraid," she replied. "There ees a road that goes almost there, an' eef Juan should show them they weel beat us. Look, Buck." She brought up her hand, upon which the big turquoise shone. "These ees partly a map."

Buck stopped the truck and spoke to Red. "Run this goat a while, Red," he requested. "I want to see what Chiquita's got here."

Obligingly Red climbed over the seat back, dodging the snapping bill of the parrot as he did so, slid down beside Buck, and took the wheel. He started the truck ahead.

Buck looked at the ring the girl displayed. It was not a solid turquoise he saw, but rather a mosaic of the blue

stone, set in gold. The gold setting made thin, wavering lines in the blue and as Buck looked he could see that it was indeed a map. The girl pointed to the stone with a delicate finger.

"Herc," she said, "ees *La Puerta del Infierno*. Beyond that ees my home where ees my father's hacienda. Eef we go through *La Puerta*, we weel see eet. Beyond that ees the mountains, an' here"—pointing again—"ees *El Oro del Padre*."

"An these sons o' guns figger that if they can get to your place they can make your dad tell 'em where the mine is? That's it, huh?" Buck peered down at the stone.

"I theenk so," Chiquita's face was white. "I am afraid so. They want that gold w'ich ees een the mine. Oh hurry, Buck!"

"We're hurryin'," comforted Buck. "Ain't there any chance of some of your father's folks stoppin' 'em if we don't get there?"

"Perhaps at *La Puerta*." Chiquita regained a little color. "The Yaqui keep a guard there, but eef Juan ees weeth thesee men, thesee Sandoval an' the Chino, they weel get through. Then ——" She broke off and Buck's jaw set grimly. He had an idea of what the girl feared.

"This Juan is a big man with the Yaquis, huh?" he observed. "Well, we'll get there! Push her along, Red."

Red grunted. "I am pushin' her," his answer came above the roar of the engine, suddenly put into low gear. "We can't make no time through this sand, though."

The Swede reared his head from the body of the truck. "Jake's arm is botherin' him," he announced. "Ay think he's gettin' pretty hot."

Buck grunted. "Always does go out of his head when he's hurt," he said, low voiced. "Wouldn't that be just the finishin' touch? To have him go loco? How you comin', Jake?"

"Pretty good." Jake did not sit up. "I could use a drink o' water, though."

"So could the rest of us," Buck assured his partner. "We'll get one pretty quick. Hold your head up, kid."

THE truck plowed on. The sun, rising higher and higher, beat down mercilessly on the sand, the drooping scrub and the car. Presently Red stopped and shut off the motor. The radiator hissed and boiled.

"Sounds like a tea kettle," said Red. "We better cool her some if we don't want this motor to stick on us."

Jake's voice came plaintively. "Six is my point," he called.

"Goin' dopey." Buck looked back toward Jake. "He thinks he's shootin' craps. Is there anything for him to drink back there, Swede?"

The Swede pawed over the canned goods. "There's two cans o' tomatoes," he answered, "an' three cans o' pineapple. The rest is corn beef an' beans an' such stuff. Ay give him a can of tomatoes, Buck?"

"Do it," Buck told the Swede. "How you comin', girl? Want a drink?"

"I am a leetle thirsty," Chiquita acknowledged.

"Give her part o' that can, Swede," ordered Buck. "We can maybe make out with the canned stuff ourselves, but this car can't. We're goin' to have to have water for it pretty soon or else do a lot of walkin'. Shove off, Red. Let's get as far as we can."

Red started the engine and the Swede passed to Chiquita an open can half full of pulpy tomatoes.

"Drink it," ordered Buck, forestalling the girl's protest. "Is there any water where we're goin'?"

The girl sipped the pulp and looked at her questioner. "There ees some water een *La Puerta*," she answered, "but I know of none before."

"How far?"

Chiquita looked thoughtfully at the

mountains. "Perhaps feefty miles," she answered.

Buck whistled a long, low note. The motor clattered suddenly and Red stopped.

"Too hot," announced the red-haired man. "We're just about out o' water. Well, we got two gallons of oil. We can go a ways on that." He climbed stiffly over the side of the car and took the oil can from its running board rack.

Raising the hood, Red pulled off the breather cap and dumped oil into the hot motor. The Swede crawled underneath, a pair of pliers in his hand, and presently called for Red to stop.

"It's runnin' out the top petcock," announced the Swede, crawling out and brushing sand from his clothes.

"An' half the oil's gone," said Red, returning the can to its rack. "Do we go on?"

"Might as well," returned Buck. "Let's get as far as we can."

Red started the car again and they toiled ahead, now running in low gear through a stretch of sand, now traveling in high gear over a comparatively hard spot.

The little water in the radiator hissed and boiled, and the motor rattled with at least two loose connecting rods. The occupants of the car nodded, even the Big Swede feeling the effects of a sleepless night and a strenuous day. Only Buck and Red remained grimly alert.

NOW a fresh discomfort was added to the heat. A wind sprang up in the west. A little wind that grew and grew and began to whip sand across the waste. Presently it was sending stinging particles of sand into the car, beating against the unprotected faces of the occupants.

Still Red pushed on. Buck tied handkerchiefs across Chiquita's nose and mouth, and across his own and Jake's. The other two performed like opera-

tions. Dust clouds rose up and smote them and whirled away, and suddenly the motor rattled and knocked as though some smith were beating in its interior. Red stopped the car, shut off the engine, and groaned.

"Con rod's out!"

Buck nodded. "Just as good," he said. "We couldn't see to go no farther, anyhow. This is as good a place to stop as any."

"Think we can make the hills?" questioned Red.

Buck considered the question. "We come about ten miles," he said finally. "That means there's about forty left to go. If this wind dies down by and by, we might make 'em. We can sure as hell try!" Then he laughed grimly. "I thought you said that four tough guys an' a Model T could go any place, Red," he giped.

Red scowled. "They can," he snapped, "if——"

"Yeah, *if!* If the water don't give out an' th' rods don't burn! I can fix them rods!" Red was thoroughly aroused now. "It's the water that's botherin' me. That an' this wind."

Buck straightened in the seat. "We better do somethin' about the wind," he said. "Come on. Let's you an' me fix a wind break an' then flop down an' get some sleep. No use goin' off our heads just because we're in a tight fix."

The two climbed out and unrolled the bed roll. The Swede awakened, and with his help they placed a tarpaulin—one that had covered the bedding—about the car so that it would protect the occupants from the sand and dust.

It was a struggle to handle the canvas in the wind that beat constantly upon them. Finally the task was accomplished and the men made the covering fast with lashings from the Swede's rope. With that done, the three crawled back and lay down, side by side, under the car. Outside the wind raged and tore.

Gradually the entire group dozed. The howl and roar of the wind lulled them. Particles of sand, coming through the cracks in the canvas, sifted down upon them, but they became accustomed to these and to the ceaseless crash of the wind. Presently they slept.

CHAPTER VII.

CANYON BULLETS.

IT was the cessation of the wind that awakened them. Where before had been turmoil, now peace reigned. Buck, the first to crawl out from shelter, was followed by the Swede, Red, and Chiquita. Jake they left in the truck's body, mumbling and talking in his sleep.

To the west the dust clouds still whirled, copper-colored against the lowering sun. Sand was stacked up beside the car where it had dropped in the wind's eddy, and the wheels were buried almost hub deep. Buck rubbed sand from his eyes and surveyed the scene, then turned to the others.

"The storm's over," he announced. "Swede, you take down the tarp. Red, you open two cans o' pineapple an' we'll have a drink. Then I reckon we better figure on how to get out of here."

Red and the Swede obeyed his orders, Buck helping Nils to take down the tarp. Red, in the meantime, opened the pineapple and gave each a sparing drink of the sweet juice. Part of a can they saved for Jake.

Buck was about to throw away the empty can he held, when Red stopped him. "Want me to fix them rods?" questioned Red. "If you do, I'll need that can."

"I don't know what good it would do," returned Buck, dropping the can at his feet. "I think this automobile trip is done. It looks like we'll walk from here out."

The Swede pulled a shovel out of the car and began to move sand from about

the wheels. "Might as well do something," he growled. Chiquita moved away from the group, walking toward a little rise in the flat plain.

"No use shovelin' sand though," countered Buck to the Swede's announcement. "If we walk to the mountains, we're goin' to get plenty of exercise. What do you guys think we'd better do?"

The Swede stopped shoveling to consider the question, and Red stood and stared balefully at the truck. Suddenly Chiquita's voice, raised in a cry, brought all three men from their meditations.

"Sandias!" cried Chiquita. "Sandias!" She ran toward the truck.

"Now what's got into her?" growled Red.

The girl arrived breathless. "Sandias," she panted and stopped. "I have found melons!"

"Well, what's that in our young lives?" began Red. "We can't——"

"Wait, Red," cautioned Buck. "Now what about these melons you found?"

"But where there are sandias there must also be water." Chiquita had recovered her breath. "Come!"

With the Swede still carrying his shovel, the girl took them to the rise. Below the little mound ran a narrow arroyo, a dry crack in the desert. The girl stopped and pointed dramatically.

"Look!" she cried.

There below them, half-covered by sand, a dusty vine crawled—a vine that spread big leaves against the nearer bank of the arroyo. The sight of those few, dirty grayish leaves seemed to instill new life into the group. Red sprang down into the arroyo, the Swede and Buck following him. The big red-haired man caught up a part of the vine and held it out.

"Melons sure as hell!" he exulted. Then, dropping the vine suddenly, the exultation gone from his voice: "But where in hell's the water?"

"Dig," said Chiquita. "Find the

roots of the vines and dig. The water ees underneath."

With Chiquita above them, the three followed up the course of the arroyo. It deepened suddenly, the banks becoming a sheer drop, and there, lying against the bank, was a patch of vines. Red pulled that away and the Swede stuck down his shovel. Chiquita turned and ran to the truck again. She came back carrying a blanket, a loosely woven, cotton affair. The Swede was making the sand fly as he delved. Suddenly he gave a shout. He had struck moist sand.

UNDER the girl's direction the Swede dug on until his shovel scraped against gravel. Scooping out a few spadeful of this, he then cupped the blanket in the hole. All four stood back when this had been accomplished, and watched eagerly.

Gradually, so slowly that it seemed almost to come a drop at a time, a little puddle of moisture began to collect in the blanket-lined depression. When perhaps a cupful had gathered, Buck turned to Red.

"You can go on an' fix them rods," he said laconically. "I reckon we'll take the rest of this trip in the car."

While Buck, Chiquita, and the Swede, brought water from their desert well, cared for Jake, prepared and ate a scanty meal from the canned goods, Red performed a miracle.

Working under high pressure and against the rapidly lowering sun, he drained the oil from the crankcase of the Model T, dropped the pan and pulled two connecting rods.

With the aid of a tin can, a pair of old shears found in the tool kit, and much profanity, he scraped the burned babbitt metal from those rods, replaced the babbitt with pieces of tin, and then put the motor together again.

It was almost dark when he crawled out from under the car for the last

time, reached in and turned the switch, and then cranked the motor. The engine, after an apologetic cough or two, ran fairly well, and as the relined rods wore smooth, took up a steady roar with only a little tap to tell that things were not, perhaps, at their best.

Buck, carrying an opened can of beans, approached Red. He listened to the motor and then offered congratulations.

"Mebbe you was right, Red," commended Buck cautiously. "Mebbe us four guys an' a Model T *can* go any place."

THE truck was reloaded after having been unpacked to remove surplus sand. The patched water can, full again, was put in place on the running board, and then the five having taken a final drink from the well, they moved on.

Red went to sleep in the back of the truck. Jake, his arm wound washed and bandaged, was himself again, and carried on an amiable conversation with Chiquita and El Diablo, the parrot. Jake was trying to teach El Diablo to speak Yiddish, but did not seem to make much headway.

For a time the loaded caravan made good progress. They crossed the arroyo as they had others before it, following down the side until a suitable place presented itself, and then turning in. Having crossed the dry-wash they went on southwest and soon they encountered sand. The truck plowed into the soft bank, spun its wheels, bucked, and stopped.

After some consultation, Jake was given the position of driver, and the other three men piled out. They took tarps from bed rolls, got the wheels on the tarps and then, with the motor roaring, and Red, Buck, the Swede, and even Chiquita pushing, they went on.

It was slow, laborious, tedious work—spread down a tarp, push until the

car was well on it, spread another tarp, and repeat. Finally they crossed the sandy stretch and stopped a moment to rest.

"One good thing," announced Buck, mopping his streaming face, "that wind this afternoon wiped out our tracks. There won't be anybody followin' us."

"Another good thing is that we got four good tough men," commented the Swede, leaning against a wheel. "Ay know now why you always say 'Four tough guys an' a Model T,' Red. It takes four to carry the car."

Red grunted, and the talk lapsed for want of his reply. They climbed aboard and went on again.

The night passed as a sort of nightmare. It was ride over hard ground, push through the sand until pushing was impossible, and then resort to the tarps. Morning dawned and found the mountains almost upon the truck and its occupants.

A FEW miles south of them a canyon opened into the hills, a wide, deep canyon that strangely enough, did not appear to slope up as a canyon should, but rather seemed to slant downward as though boring into the peaks that surrounded it. Chiquita looked at the canyon with troubled eyes. "That ees eet," she announced, pointing. "Down een that canyon ees *La Puerta del Inferno*."

"Reckon we better go on?" questioned Buck. "Do you think that—"

"That ees w'at I do not know," the little furrows in the girl's brow deepened. "Perhaps eet ees all right, perhaps not. Eef we are the first here, we are safe; eef not—quien sabe?" She shrugged her shoulders eloquently.

"Anyhow, there's one sure way of findin' out," commented Buck. "Weigh anchor, Red, an' let's be goin'."

Accordingly Red started the car ahead again.

They left the last of the loose sand be-

hind them and progressed over a curiously level, rocklike floor. They made good time and shortly were approaching the entrance to the canyon. Red looked inquiringly at Buck and that square-jawed individual grinned at him and motioned ahead. Accordingly Red eased down on the throttle and the truck responded.

The rock floor began to slope away and shortly they were at the entrance of the canyon. Red turned a little to the right and the car picked up speed as the slope increased. They entered the wide canyon mouth and went on down.

It seemed that the vegetation decreased as they progressed. Even the sparse desert growth disappeared, and only gray and yellow lichens, plastered against the rock walls that loomed high on either side, showed signs of plant growth. The canyon narrowed, then widened again, the curious smooth rock floor continuing, and then suddenly before the truck loomed *La Puerta del Inferno*.

None of the four men needed to be told that they had reached the gates. From the sides of the narrow gorge that confronted them, loomed two giant pillars of red sandstone, weather worn and smooth. It seemed as though some age-old Titan had wrought the pillars from living rock and thrust them in place to act as gateposts.

On either side was gray, raw rock, marred not even by a splotch of lichen growth, and beyond the red pillars shone a flash of green as though the weary travelers were given a glimpse of some oasis, some resting place through the livid rock gates.

Red stopped the truck. All of the five occupants sat and stared, first at the gates, then at the glimpse of green beyond. On the back of the seat, El Diablo ruffled his feathers and muttered, and then, from some concealed spot in front of the halted truck, a single, flat rifle report spanked against the quiet and

a splotch of leaden color sprang from the rock floor, while the slug that made it whined away in a high-pitched shriek up the canyon.

Behind Buck, on the seat back, the parrot screamed, "Go to hell!"

"Well, we're goin', ain't we?" Buck flung back his answer to the parrot's challenge even as he reached for his rifle. "Looks like we're too late, Chiquita. They beat us to it!"

The Swede climbed down from the back of the truck, rifle in hand. As he reached the ground he grunted: "Landin' party away, Buck." But Buck held up his hand and the Swede stopped.

"Wait," commanded Buck. "There's more to it than that."

As though to prove his words, a ragged volley came from the opening before them. Bullets whistled past, tore through the top of the truck or ricocheted with a screeching whir from the rock floor. Buck motioned the Swede back.

"No use tryin' now," he said, coolly. "Turn around, Red, an' head back. We'll look this over afoot and try tonight. We'd be picked off before we got halfway through."

"But my father!" Chiquita expostulated. "He——"

"You won't do your father no good if you're dead," commented Buck crisply. "You let us do the fightin'; we're used to it. Turn around, Red."

CHAPTER VIII.

TORTURE.

CALMLY, even though the fire from the gates continued, Red turned the truck and with the engine grinding in low gear, headed back up the slope. A final volley urged them on, and as the gates disappeared around the bend behind them, a high-pitched yell arose.

"Go ahead an' yell," Jakey shook his fist toward the sound. "We'll be back

an' mebbe we can give you somethin' to yell about. Ain't it so, Buck?"

"Mebbe." Buck was noncommittal. "Let the Swede an' me off here. Red, an' then go up to the head of the canyon an' make camp. Hide out the best you can. Watch yourself, too. These bozos might try to start somethin'."

Red stopped the truck and Buck and the Swede climbed out. "Now don't forget," cautioned Buck. "Take care o' the car an' the girl, will yuh, Red?"

Red grunted a profane assurance. "An' if you don't show up by sundown, Buck," he promised, "me an' Jake'll be comin' after you."

"We'll show up in an hour," said Buck. "You take this side, Swede, an' I'll take this one. Get high an' see what you can see, an' don't shoot unless you're pushed. Get goin', Red."

Much against his will, Red drove the truck back up the canyon. The grade was steeper than it appeared when coming down, and he growled along in low gear for most of the way.

No attempt was made by the men who had shot from the gates to follow the car. Instead, a baffling quiet reigned.

At the mouth of the canyon. Red pulled over to the side, took the truck up a little entering canyon as far as it would go, and there stopped. Jake and Chiquita stayed with the truck while Red, armed with his own Mannlicher and two of the rifles taken from the Juarez officers, went down to the mouth of the little canyon and stayed there. It was longer than the promised hour, but before noon, Red, Buck, and the Swede slipped into the temporary camp.

Buck seemed pleased. "It's a pipe," he announced, chewing on a mouthful of beans from a can Chiquita had opened. "The Swede an' me got it all figured out. All we got to do to-night is to slide out of here an' start down the canyon. It's smooth all the way an' pretty steep. We can coast right past 'em."

Red shook his head. "We'll have to have lights," he said. "Can't drive straight in the dark, an' our lights will tell 'em we're comin'. They could roll out a rock or two an' dump us."

"I hadn't thought o' that," replied Buck thoughtfully. "Say! Suppose we try it just about sundown or a little later. We might make it then."

"We might," Red admitted. "Say, are you sure none o' them fellers seen you?"

"Ay don't think so," the Swede answered for Buck.

"I know so." Buck was very positive. "I saw the men that were at the gates, about fifteen of 'em, but they didn't see me an' they didn't see the Swede."

"Then we got a chance," said Red. "If we get a good start an' go through there like a bat out o' hell, we might make it. What's below the gates, Chiquita?"

"*El Rancho Perdido*, my father's home. Eef we can get past *La Puerta* we weel be safe."

"Then we'll try it," Buck declared. "I'm goin' down to the big canyon an' stand a watch there. I don't think we'll be bothered but we might as well be sure." Trailing his rifle he walked away.

WHEN Buck was gone, the others busied themselves in various manners. Chiquita rearranged the back end of the truck to suit her feminine ideas, and tried to talk to El Diablo, who sulked on the back of the seat. The bird accepted food from her hands but snapped his wicked beak at her whenever she presumed to come too close.

Jake and the Swede overhauled the firearms and saw that they were in good working order, while Red crawled under the truck with a wrench and applied himself there. After a time Red slid back out, bringing the muffler with him.

"What's the idea o' tearin' down our buggy?" queried Jake looking up from the rifle he was cleaning.

"Plenty of ideas," answered Red mysteriously. "Stick around Jakey, an' you'll learn from poppa."

Jake grunted, and Red began to pay tender attention to the engine.

After an hour or two, the Swede went down to relieve Buck, first having eaten a little, and Buck came back up the camp and refreshed himself from the almost depleted water can. So the afternoon wore on, endlessly it seemed to the waiting party. The sun dipped below the circle of peaks, and long shadows began to grow in the canyon. Still they waited for Buck's orders.

It was almost dark when those orders came. Buck cast a glance at the impatient three, looked toward the mountain-tops, and spoke laconically.

"All right," he said, "let's go."

Red called on Buck and Jake to help him and without starting the engine, they pushed the truck back until it coasted under its own momentum.

Pushing and coasting, they turned it and then slipped almost noiselessly down the canyon to the mouth. Here they stopped to pick up the Swede, and with him sitting beside Jake in the back, they began their attempt to pass the Gates of Hell.

Chiquita was sternly ordered to lie down in the back of the truck and, after some argument, obeyed. Jake had shown her the mechanism of the Mauser that afternoon, and Chiquita's idea was to sit up and share the fate of the others.

It was hard to convince her that she should seek such shelter as the sides of the truck afforded. Finally she obeyed Buck and so, with the truck coasting and gaining speed with every turn of the wheels, with Red, grim and determined, watching ahead, and with Buck, the Swede and Jake watching the canyon sides alertly, their rifles cocked and ready, they began their journey.

They almost made it.

They had passed the turn in the canyon and were bearing down on the gates, looming gigantic in the half light, before they were discovered.

A yell went up ahead of them and a rifle cracked sharply and futilely. Red swore fluently, and Buck, throwing up his rifle, fired an answering shot.

"Give her hell!" he shouted. "Let's go!"

It was too late to stop, in any case. The truck was running perhaps forty miles an hour, coasting with the engine free. Red, suddenly and without warning, let the engine in gear and reached across Buck to give the dash carburetor adjustment a turn or two.

The Swede and Jake, at Buck's yell, began to shoot, firing at flitting figures when they saw them, and otherwise shooting just for noise. As they were almost within the gates, Red kicked over the switch of the engine.

Buck, the Swede, and Jake were firing straight toward the side now and as Red kicked over his switch a new noise was added to the little bedlam that reigned in the narrow gates.

The exhaust manifold was full of unexploded gas. At the first explosion in a cylinder, the gas fired, and so with rifles cracking, with the four men whooping and shouting, El Diablo screeching, and the engine backfiring with pistollike reports and flashes of red flame coming from the muffler connection, they roared past the great sandstone portals.

Some one close by the car shrieked: "*Un canon!*" and dived away into the shadows. Other flitting figures fled as though chased by the devil, and lost themselves in the gloom; and then the truck was past the gates and roaring down a long slope, and Jake and the Swede were shooting back to discourage pursuit.

Red shut off his engine and shouted into Buck's ear. "We made it!"

In an instant he had the car roaring again, bumping and bucking, leaping over irregularities in the canyon floor. It was all that the occupants could do to stay in the car. Red snapped on his lights and they bored a yellow tunnel in the gathering darkness.

Behind them, rifles spat a few futile wisps of orange flame and then were still. Jake and the Swede had long since quit shooting. Chiquita rose from her shelter beside the side board and screamed something, and Red slowed his engine and pushed out his clutch to catch the words.

"To the right," Chiquita's scream carried to the front seat. "Turn to the right!"

Red, obeying the command, swung the truck to the right and the beams of the headlights fell upon a rutted road. Little, smooth depressions, worn in the sandstone canyon floor, threw the car lurching, and then the wheels settled into the ruts and they were running smoothly once more.

"Follow the road," commanded Chiquita, and again Red pulled down his throttle lever.

FOR a few minutes the car rolled along, straight down the canyon.

The darkness which had now captured the canyon bottom made it impossible to see any distance ahead, and suddenly, so suddenly as to almost cause the car to overturn, the ruts swung to the right in a sharp turn.

The car lurched, and the next moment they flashed between two heavy wooden pillars, caught a glimpse of high rock walls on either side, and then came to a grinding stop.

About them loomed rock walls and directly before them, gaping in the headlights' glare, a door pierced one of the walls.

Chiquita had flung herself from the body of the truck and run to the gates they had come through. Now she called,

and Jake and the Swede ran to her assistance. The girl was tugging at a massive gate, trying to swing it shut. With the colossal strength of the Swede applied beside her, the gate creaked sullenly and responded to the effort.

The girl dashed across to the other gate and again, with the Swede and Jake helping, the heavy wooden barrier swung slowly.

When the gates were closed, the girl seized a heavy wooden bar and tried to lift it. The Swede swung the bar up and dropped it into place behind the gates. For the moment they were safe.

Red and Buck, rifles in hand, were beside the gates now, and Chiquita turned to Buck. The girl was panting from her efforts and spoke with difficulty.

"*El Rancho Perdido*," she gasped. "We are safe, Buck."

Buck had found a step and was upon it, peering over the wall, his rifle lying before him. "Safe?" he questioned. "Won't them fellows by *La Puerta* be comin' down on us now? It looks to me——"

"This ees my father's home." Chiquita stepped up beside Buck and peered out into the darkness. "Those men by *La Puerta* are Yaquis, I theenk. They weel not attack by night eef that ees so. We are safe, Buck."

Buck grunted and came down from his step. "Mebbe so," he said. "I'm goin' to keep a lookout though. Jake, take a look over this wall an' if you see anything, yell. Where's your father, Chiquita?"

The girl's hand, on Buck's arm, trembled and her voice held a quaver as she replied:

"I do not know, Buck. There should be lights an' my father should be here. I am afraid, Buck."

"So am I." Buck laid his heavy hand over the girl's slighter one. "We better look around here. Somethin' might 'a' happened. Do you want to come with us?"

"I must." Chiquita had regained some control of herself and her voice. "Come. We weel look."

RED shut off the lights of the truck. The Swede found a flashlight and with Buck in the lead, the flash in his hand, the four entered the door of the house. Jake they left, peering into the darkness over the wall.

They entered a big room, disarranged and in a turmoil. The flashlight showed overturned tables, books thrown about, rugs kicked into heaps and chairs lying on their sides. Plainly, there had been a fight in the room.

The beam of the flashlight fell upon a dark figure in one corner of the room and Buck hastily turned the light away. The instant's glimpse had shown him that the body was that of an Indian, naked save for a breechcloth, and with a gaping wound in his chest. The searching party pushed on.

The next room was in like disarray with the furniture overturned and with two bodies lying on the floor. Buck almost stumbled over one as he entered. The girl caught a glimpse of the prone figures on the floor and suppressed a scream. They went on.

In the third room there was very little sign of combat. There was a table standing in the center of the room and when Buck flashed his light on he muttered an oath and turned the light away hastily. The girl had seen, however, and she flung herself forward toward the table.

"Padre!" she screamed, and then, her voice was a moan. "*Dios! Dios!*"

Buck muttered. "Take her out, Red. The Swede an' me got to look."

Red, swearing under his breath, moved forward, and in the little beam of light from Buck's lamp, tenderly detached the girl from the object on the table to which she clung, and lifting her gently in his arms, carried her away.

Buck and the Swede followed, the flashlight showing the way. When they reached the courtyard where the truck stood, Buck issued another command.

"Stay with her, Red. The Swede an' me'll go back."

Red carried the moaning girl to the truck and deposited her on the bed rolls in the back. The big Irishman was cursing steadily with every breath, the words making a sullen rumble in his throat. Buck and the Swede turned back into the house.

They reached the third room, and what they saw there made them blanch, hardened campaigners though they were.

On the table, the one piece of furniture that the room contained, was the body of an old man. He lay sprawled in an attitude of agony upon the table top, his white beard showing bloodstains in the light, and his eyes staring unseeing up to the dark ceiling.

Strangely enough, the face was peaceful and not contorted, and the lips were curved upward a trifle as though smiling at some inner secret. From the naked chest long strips of skin had been torn and when Buck moved the light, they could see that the skin was entirely gone from the sole of one foot.

"Tortured him, the devils!" swore Buck. "Swede, I swear that if I can get the brutes that done this I won't stop short of—"

He broke off for the Swede was staring silently down at a hand print on the naked leg of the corpse.

The hand print was red, blood red, for it had been made with blood. It was the mark of a left hand, and while all else was clearly delineated, the middle finger did not show beyond the first joint. The Swede stared at it and then spoke slowly, his voice coming in deep even words.

"Kang!" he said. "That's his hand. Buck, Ay will get that man an' when Ay do, Ay will take him apart with my two hands!"

CHAPTER IX.

NIGHT WATCH.

JAKE'S voice came from the door behind them. "I think they're comin', Buck. I seen a light up the canyon," he said, and Buck turned like a flash.

"Get a blanket, Jake," he commanded. "We'll wrap the old man in it an' take him out o' here. I hope they *are* comin'. I want to get my sights on one or two of 'em before I check in."

Jake picked up a rug from the floor and tenderly he and the Swede wrapped in it the body on the table, the Swede in grim silence, Jake cursing.

With Buck lighting the way, the Swede carried the inert body from the torture chamber and out into the courtyard. Little moans came from the truck, and Buck paused in his run across the courtyard to stop a moment and place a big, gentle hand on Chiquita's forehead.

"Don't, girl!" he said awkwardly. "We'll get 'em for you." With those few poor words of comfort, he was gone.

The four men lined the wall beside the gate and stared out into the blackness. Far up the canyon, a feeble point of light winked and flickered. Buck, tearing his mind from the tragedy that engrossed it, examined the light.

"Fire," he announced finally. "Looks like they'd made a camp fire. What do you think, Red?"

"Looks like a camp fire," agreed Red. "I wish——"

What he wished remained untold. Chiquita spoke from beside Buck. "Eet ees a fire at the gates," she said. "I know."

"You go back to the truck, girl, an' lie down," ordered Buck, roughly tender. "We can look out for things."

"I cannot, Buck," Chiquita spoke simply. "The Fierros do not grieve; they avenge."

A grunt came from the Swede, who was seated on the ground, removing his shoes. Buck turned to his giant comrade. "Hey, Swede! Where you goin'?" he demanded.

"Ay go to look at that fire," announced the Swede, rising and moving toward the wall like a big serpent. Before Buck could speak to stop him, the Big Swede had slipped over the wall and was gone into the darkness.

"Swede!" Red's voice was low and fierce. "Come back you fool! You'll get yourself killed!"

Buck shook his head. "No use, Red," he said. "The Swede's as good as an Indian, an' he's plenty mad."

FOR the next half hour there was no attempt at conversation in the walled-in courtyard of the Rancho Perdito. Red, Buck, and Jake hung over the walls listening and Chiquita moved from place to place on soundless feet.

At times Chiquita paused beside the dark bundle that had been her father and at those times, the men, their eyes accustomed to the blackness, could see her on her knees, her hands locked, as she offered up prayers. Again she would appear beside them, the only sign of her arrival being a hand laid on an arm. That half hour was an eternity to the watchers in the courtyard.

At the end of the thirty minutes, a voice spoke out of the darkness, a calm, dispassionate voice, and as they heard it the four in the courtyard breathed sighs of relief.

"Buck?" It was the Swede.

Buck leaned over the wall. "Come in, Swede," he directed. "What'd you find?"

The great bulk of the Swede loomed suddenly beside the wall. He gave a grunt and a heave, and a heavy figure swung up to the top.

Red Heffernan seized upon the body and dragged it down, grunting under the

weight, and the Swede slipped up and over the wall like some giant python.

"It's a camp fire, all right," he announced when he gained the ground. "Ay looked it all over an' listened for a while but Ay couldn't understand what they were saying. Pretty soon one faller started out an' almost run into me so Ay caught him an' brung him along."

Red, bending over the inert man the Swede had brought in, looked sharply up at the Big Sede. "What'd you do to him anyway?" questioned Red. "This guy ain't come to yet."

"Ay maybe choked him a little," acknowledged the Swede. "He was goin' to yell."

"You couldn't 'a' done better," commended Buck. "Now, when this bird comes to life, we can learn what it's all about an' what's been happenin'."

But the breechclouted Indian that Swede had choked was a long time in coming to life. Red stayed close beside the captive and the others resumed their vantage posts on the wall.

Soon a low whistle from Red and a groan from the captive caused them to assemble. The Indian was slowly regaining consciousness. He squirmed, tried to sit up, and was pushed down again by Red's brawny hand. Again he tried to sit up, and this time Red let him rise.

"Now," said Buck, standing, his legs widespread before the captive, "let's find out what this fellow's got to say. Chiquita, I reckon you better talk to him."

Chiquita spoke sharply, and the dazed Indian mumbled a word or two in reply. Again the girl voiced a question, but the Yaqui, aware of his position, refused to answer.

"Won't talk, huh?" said the Swede, interpreting the man's silence. "We can fix that. Le' me get hold of him a minute."

"Wait, Swede!" commanded Chiquita. "Turn on the car light, Rojo." Red

snapped on the lights of the truck and the girl stood in their beam.

"Mira!" she ordered sharply. "I am the last of the Fierros. Speak, I command you!" The great turquoise mosaic flashed on her hand.

At sight of the ring the Yaqui gave a moan and dropped his head toward the pavement of the courtyard.

"He weel tell now," announced the girl, stepping forward. "You may turn off the lights."

RED turned the light switch, and again the yard was plunged into darkness. For a time the only sounds were the soft voice of the girl plying fiercely insistent questions, and the sullen mumble of the Yaqui's answer. Red, Buck, and the Swede were silent, content to let Chiquita do the talking. Jake had resumed his position on the wall. Presently Chiquita straightened and spoke to Buck.

The story she told was clear and clean-cut. It answered the questions in the minds of the men, and they heard her out without interruption.

Briefly, the information she had obtained from the sullen Indian was this: On the previous day an automobile bearing an officer, a large yellow-faced man and Juan Savez, a subchief of the tribe, had arrived at *Le Puerta del Infierno*.

After leaving its occupants, the car, evidently hired for the trip, had left. The Indian did not think it was to return. Under orders from Juan, the five men who guarded the gates had summoned the few men of the tribe who were present, and had spoken to them.

"There are always five men at *La Puerta*," explained Chiquita. "Night and day they watch there. Most of these Yaqui are on a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Lady Guadalupe where they go each year. Lupe Sanchez, who ees chief, ees weeth them."

In his speech, Juan had explained that these men who accompanied him were

friends of the Yaqui, that they had brought presents to prove their friendship, and that they had come to set all the Indians in Mexico free from the bondage of government which now held them. He had promised many things, and, to seal his promise had brought out bottles of mescal which he had given the listening Indians.

Under the spell of his words and the influence of the fiery liquor, the Yaquis at the gates had succumbed. They had let the party through and accompanied them to the Rancho Perdido.

Here Chiquita's father, Bernardo Fierro, had confronted them and ordered the Yaquis to remove the interlopers. A fierce altercation had followed which ended in a blow, struck by one of the Indians who acted as a servant in the house. The mescal had so inflamed the Yaquis that in an instant the blow had been returned. They had swept over the old man and his three servants, and gutted the house.

More liquor had been forthcoming, and the Yaquis had withdrawn, leaving Fierro in the hands of Juan, the army officer, and the big yellow-faced man. More than that, their captive could not tell them, save that Juan had ordered them back to the gates when the liquor had somewhat subsided in their brains, and made them stand guard there.

"I thenk," Chiquita concluded shrewdly, "that thees Yaqui do not know w'at they do. I thenk that they are misled by Juan an' that Sandoval an' that Chino. Sandoval an' the Chino torture my father, but I know he do not tell them of *El Oro del Padre*. Now w'at we do, Buck? Lupe ees far off an' cannot help us, an' these Indios, they are so afraid of w'at they have done that they are loco. They weel keel us an' run eef they can."

"Looks like a tight, Buck," commented Red. "This place is too big for us to look after all of it."

"Yeah, it does, kind of," Buck an-

swered Red abstractedly. "We'll see pretty soon now. It'll be false dawn shortly, an' we can look it over a little."

EVEN as he spoke, Buck's mind was busy. He recognized the desperate predicament they were in, not discounting it in the least, and yet Buck was not impressed by the danger. He knew the caliber of the three men with him, knew how they fought and grinned, and fought again.

The fact that the car that had carried Sandoval and Kang to the gates had turned back was significant to Buck. From it he drew the information that the two renegades were making a last stand. Evidently they counted on discovering the *Oro del Padre* and, using it as a war chest and the Rancho Perdido as a base, terrorize the border as other bandit chieftains had done before them. They would be hard to stop.

"Might take a sneak out o' here," continued Red, breaking into Buck's thoughts. "We got some gas left in the truck. We might make a break for it."

"Me, I do not leave." Chiquita spoke decisively. "I am the last of the Fierros. For long there has been a Fierro guarding *El Oro del Padre*. It has been given to us in trust, an' only when Mejico ees threatened can we geeve up the secret an' the mine. I do not go."

"Me, neither," Buck made his announcement. "I got a date with a dirty skunk named Sandoval an' I'm goin' to keep it. If——"

"Ay stay also." The Swede ranged himself beside Buck. "Ay am goin' to kill a chink."

"Oh, hell!" Red shrugged his shoulders. "We'll all stay. I was 'ust talkin'. Now what, Jakey?"

Jakey had come up from the wall. "There's some fellows slippin' up on us from outside," he announced. "I——"

He stopped suddenly, threw up his rifle and fired. The Yaqui captured by

the Swede had seized the opportunity made by the conversation to make a break for the wall. Jake's shot stopped him just as he gained it. He slumped down in a heap beside a rock rampart.

"I was shootin' for keeps that time," observed Jake, working the bolt of his Mannlicher. "That feller wasn't just doin' his duty, ain't it, Buck?"

Buck had no chance to answer. A sonorous voice came from outside the courtyard, hailing the occupants within.

"You men!"

Buck answered the call. At the sound of the voice he had run with the others to the wall, and now stood, his rifle before him, peering out.

"What d'you want?" yelled Buck.

"We want the ring," the voice came back. "If you give us the ring we will let you go. If not——"

"Go to hell!" Buck's rifle crashed a period to his answer.

Three shots echoed Buck's reply. Three, and only three. Chiquita gave a little cry of encouragement.

"They could not make the Yaqui fight at night," she said. "There are but three."

"An' those three are plenty to hold us here till mornin'," snapped Red. "How about you fellers? Did you have any luck?"

"Nary," replied Buck. "I come close, though."

The voice rose again, outside. "You have until morning to think it over. In the morning we will see."

"You're damn right we'll see, an' I'll see your head over my sights!" Buck was thoroughly angry. "I know you, Sandoval!"

A mocking laugh and a shot was all the answer that Buck received.

Waiting there in the courtyard for the dawn to break and show them their position, the four men spent the hours in ceaseless patrol.

None of them could rest, although Buck suggested that they divide the vigil

into watches and stand them two at a time.

Chiquita, from somewhere within the gutted house, produced candles, and four of these she lit and placed about the blanket-swathed figure that had been her father. The little flames guttered with the vagrant breeze, but burned steadily. Their light increased the menace of the dark without, but none of the four had the heart to ask the girl to forgo this last, small service performed for one dear to her.

Now and again, glancing back from their ceaseless watch over the wall, they could see her small figure kneeling with hands clasped, silhouetted against the candlelight.

CHAPTER X.

THE SIEGE.

DAWN came, and with it came action. As the first faint gray showed on the peaks about the little valley that surrounded the Rancho Perdito, Buck thought he saw a movement beyond the wall. He brushed his hand across his tired eyes and staring made sure that he was not mistaken.

During the night, the four men had each chosen such a place as they believed would give them some advantage, and carried to it their own weapons as well as those they had captured. Now Buck, beside the gate, whipped his rifle swiftly to his shoulder and fired as the weapon came level.

A scream answered his shot, and a breechclouted Indian rose to his full height some one hundred yards from the gate, and then pitched forward.

Echoing the dead man's scream, shots flashed from a dozen points about the courtyard and bullets sang a wicked song as they whirred over the wall or glanced whining from its rock.

From an angle of the wall, Jake's rifle cracked steadily, and from the flat roof of the house Red kept up a ceaseless fire. The Swede, ensconced upon a roof

Across the courtyard from Red's position, did not shoot, holding his rifles in reserve. After the first scream there was no other human sound.

Chiquita, when Buck had fired, had run to stand beside him and when he had emptied the Mannlicher, took it from his hands and began to reload. Sometime during the night she had entered the house and changed her clothing. The white dress of the dancer had been replaced by somber black. There were great dark circles under the girl's eyes, and her beautiful face was drawn with sorrow.

Buck, with one rifle empty, caught up a Mauser and waited. Surveying the position of the enemy and the placing of his own forces with a trained eye, Buck could see that the little band of defenders of the Rancho Perdido were in perilous circumstances.

The ranch house lay sprawled about the courtyard they defended, like a great square rock-built U. Across the opening of the U stretched the wall of the courtyard, its heavy wooden gates making an effective barrier against rifle fire or attack.

About the U of the building were clustered corrals, stables, and sheds; beside the sheds were stacks of hay. There was cover for an attacking party to utilize on every side save in front of the rock wall.

Nor was this the worst. On a knoll rising to the right of the ranch house a squat adobe granary stood. From its roof a rifleman might peer down into the open courtyard or on the top of the ranch house and then, lying safe and at ease, pick off the defenders.

The door of the granary stood open and wide, seemingly to beckon invitingly. That open door was almost on line with the courtyard gate, but well uphill from it and perhaps four hundred yards distant. Buck, after one swift look, called to the Swede.

"Don't let nobody near that house on

the hill, Swede," he yelled. "It'll be curtains if you do."

"Ay watch it, Buck," came back the Swede's deep rumble. "You look after your side."

"Check!" replied Buck. "Boy, I wish we was in it."

CHIQUITA handed up the loaded Mannlicher and Buck substituted it for the Mauser. "Is there any water in that shack on the hill, girl?" he inquired after he had made the substitution. "If there is— Wait a minute! Don't get so ambitious."

The Mannlicher enforced the command, and a Yaqui who was trying for a shot at Jake, disappeared behind a boulder.

Chiquita gazed at the granary and slowly nodded. "There ees water," she replied. "There ees a well just below, but eet ees a hundred feet perhaps."

"Too far," grunted Buck, sighting carefully. "We can't afford to get away from water."

"We could take some," Chiquita told him, flinching involuntarily from a shot that whined overhead. "We have a can, an' there are *ollas* een the house. Perhaps—"

"We could, at that—"

Buck squeezed the trigger and grunted disgustedly. The man he had fired at had ducked just before he shot. "I tell you, if we stay here, we ain't goin' to live to regret it. One good shot on that hill would spell by-by for us."

Red called down from his roof. "This place ain't so good," he yelled cheerfully. "There's a son-of-a-gun out there that's tryin' hard for me. He's barked me twice. That shack on the hill looks a blame sight better to me."

From his corner Jake echoed Red's sentiments. "Me, too," he shouted. "How about it, Buck?"

Buck considered. "Come down here, Red," he commanded. "I want to talk to you without tellin' the world about it."

Red, careless of the shots his appearance brought, immediately rose to his full height on the roof, walked to the edge and looked down. Then, with his gun in one hand, he swung over and dropped the twelve feet to the courtyard. He lit safely and walked up to Buck.

"Well?"

"Think we can get up to that joint on the hill?" questioned Buck.

"An' why not?" Red was confident. "Four tough guys an' a Model T can go any place. Ain't I always said so? We'll make a tank out o' the truck an' shove off from here. Lemme have Jakey to help, an' we'll get ready to go."

Buck nodded. "Fly at it," he said. Red turned away and called to Jake.

WITH Jake helping him, Red transformed the truck into a moving fortress. He carried tables from the house, knocked off their legs, and set them about the sides of the truck. The tables were heavy oaken affairs and made good bulwarks. Red protected the engine of the truck with two chests set on the fenders, and announced that for his part he was ready.

While Red had made his preparations, Chiquita had taken a rifle to the angle of the courtyard where Jake had stood. Buck and the Swede had kept up a desultory fire. Now all of them gathered about the truck and Buck decided that they would make their break at once.

"No use waitin'," he said. "Every minute we wait makes it that much worse. You ready?"

They were all ready except Chiquita. The girl cast a long look at her father's body and suddenly broke into sobs. Buck, in some manner, interpreted her wishes.

"We'll take him with us," he announced. "Don't cry, girl."

The Swede, who had come down from his roof, gathered the old man's light body in his arms and tenderly deposited it in the truck. Buck, having made sure

that there was plenty of water in earthen jugs and in the tin water can, now patched and inside the truck, walked to the gates.

"Now Red," he directed, "you turn that car around and head this way. I'm goin' to throw these gates open an' I'll hit the seat as you come by. Don't slow up for me, just keep goin'."

Red nodded his understanding and prepared to carry out the orders, but the Swede made an objection.

"This place ain't so awful bad," said the Swede. "Ay think maybe them fallers will come in when we go out. We better see if we can't make the gates stay open, Buck."

"That's an idea," agreed Buck. "Do you reckon we could make 'em come off their hinges?"

The Swede surveyed the gates. "Ay think so," he observed. "Give me the ax, Jakey."

He took the tool and with a few well directed blows, loosened the pins which held the gates in massive iron hinges, knocking the iron rods almost out.

"Now jump when you open them, Buck," cautioned the big man. "Ay think they fall when the bar comes out an' you pull. All ready, Red."

The Swede climbed to the back of the truck which Red had turned about and which now stood, its engine running, facing the gates. Buck waved his hand.

"Let's go!" he yelled, and heaved up on the wooden bar.

The bar came out of its sockets and Buck jerked back on the right-hand gate. It swung, hung poised, and then crashed to the ground.

Buck leaped across and pulled on the other barrier. It, too, swung, then lurched and fell. The roaring truck struck the prone gates, bounced, and then, under Red's heavy hands dashed through the opening. As it passed him, Buck hit the running board and swung up.

Straight up the hill Red drove the

truck. Rifles flashed from above the table barriers and from the seat where Buck worked his bolt in a frenzy.

The attackers, caught by surprise, were slow to answer the fire. Answer it they did, however, and a bullet crashed through the windshield while others drilled deep into the two-inch table tops on either side, pierced them and passed on into the truck. Only by a miracle were the occupants of that vehicle unhurt.

With the engine wide open, the low gear growling, and rifles spitting defiance, the Model T climbed up the hill, reached the granary and passed through its open door, the low top of the door scraping off the canopy top of the truck and wrecking it.

Inside the granary, the Swede jumped off and, amidst a storm of lead, pulled the doors closed and barred them. He rejoined his companions with a red smear on his shirt where a bullet had grazed his ribs, and a light of anger in his big, blue eyes, that were usually so peaceful and placid.

Buck slapped Red on the back—one hard, congratulatory blow. "By gosh, Red," he said, "you're all right!" Under that praise Red flushed suddenly. It meant something, coming from Buck.

THE granary was a solid block of rock, cemented with adobe, with only two high windows opening into it. On either side of the passageway where the truck stood, were high bins, their sides made from roughly sawed wooden boards. At each end of the passage there was a door.

The light within was dim, and the entrance of the truck had stirred up dust that added to the dimness and set them all coughing.

Buck took the ax and fell to work on the rock wall, knocking out a loophole to fire through, while Red and Jake, rifles in hand, sought the windows.

Bullets strummed a lethal tune on the

rocks that made the walls, for the men outside were firing as though they had all the ammunition in the world.

The Swede, armed with his Mannlicher and a Mauser, and with ammunition for both, climbed through a trap door to the roof, where he lay behind a rock bulwark formed by the upward extension of the walls over the heavy roof beams.

Chiquita went to the truck from which she presently came to Buck, carrying El Diablo.

"Look Buck," said the girl. "See! *El Probrecito!*"

Indeed, the parrot was in a sorry plight. A shot, perhaps the bullet which had smashed through the windshield, had denuded El Diablo's tail of feathers, and the bird, perched on Chiquita's wrist, shifted uneasily and muttered profanely.

"Picked him, didn't they?" said Buck, completing another loophole and peering out through it. "Tough luck, ol'timer. You ain't so pretty as you were but you're still in the ring. Tell 'em about it."

Buck took the bird from Chiquita's wrist and held him up to the loophole. As if understanding his master's words, the parrot craned his neck, cocked an eye at the outer world, and screamed.

"Go to hell! *Awaak!* Go to hell!"

"Just as fast as we can send 'em," promised Buck grimly. "Put him back, Chiquita an' get to where it's safe. A slug might come in through one of these holes an' catch you."

Chiquita took El Diablo back to his perch on the truck seat and moored him there by his chain, then returned to the loophole where Buck stood.

Red fired twice, working his bolt swiftly, and then swore luridly. "Missed, damn it! They're tryin' to get to the house, Buck."

"Let 'em." Buck was watching through the loophole he had made. "If they're all in one place we can watch

'em. Anyway, we can enfilade the house an' if we let 'em collect we can do plenty of damage. Tell the Swede to let 'em get in, then when I give the word we'll raise hell with 'em!"

The Swede called down through the trapdoor. "Ay can see that Sandoval faller, Buck. Shall Ay take him?"

"You lay off of him, Swede," Buck's voice was very cold. "He's my meat, an' I aim to let him know it. Let 'em get to the house an' think they're safe."

Jake's rifle cracked three times and a giant of a man leaped from concealment and in great bounds made for the opened gate of the ranch courtyard. Jake fired again, clipped the rock behind the running man and called up to the Swede. "There goes your chink, Swede."

"Ay see him," responded the Swede laconically.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RUSE.

ONE by one the attackers were collecting in the ranch house and the courtyard. Buck watched them, grimly silent. Shots still came from behind the granary, but they were fewer and fewer in number as the main body of attackers gathered below. Buck, watching the movement and refraining from firing, estimated the number.

"Must be all of twenty of 'em," he said. "Are all those your father's men, Chiquita?"

Chiquita, looking out over his shoulder, shook her head. "No," she answered. "Some of them are Yaquis, but there are men here I have never seen before."

"Sandoval brought his army with him," commented Buck.

Red Heffernan, perched in his grain bin and looking down through the window toward the ranch, swore softly. "What a feller couldn't do to them birds with a bunch o' rifle grenades!" he said. "Buck, the next time we go on a party we bring some o' them things with us."

"We won't need 'em," replied Buck. "I got a plan that beats grenades all to hell if we can work it, but we got to wait till it's pretty near dark so we can surprise 'em some. How much gas we got left in the truck, Red?"

"Ought to have about five gallons," replied Red. "What you goin' to do, Buck? Make a get-away? I tell you we ain't got enough gas to go— Now what the hell!"

The exclamation was caused by a sudden activity in the courtyard. One of the massive gates suddenly was pulled from sight and the men in the granary could see its top as it was erected. The gate moved out across the opening, apparently of its own volition, and then stopped.

"Wonder what they're up to now?" questioned Heffernan. "Do you think they can block that gate? Wonder— Now can you beat that?"

The gate was moving from the opening in the wall of the courtyard, coming toward the granary in short, unequal moves. Buck, watching the phenomena, was completely mystified. Not so Chiquita.

"I know," she said suddenly. "They have found the powder that my father kept. They use the gate for a barricade until they get close to throw eet. Stop them, Buck!"

"That's it!" Buck was firing steadily now. "Take 'em Swede! Don't let 'em come close!"

DESPITE the storm of lead that beat on it from four rifles, the gate came on. It stopped a time or two, and once, when it moved again, a long brown body was left behind it, lying on the slope. Still the gate progressed.

Every one of the defenders was shooting now, even Chiquita taking up a rifle; still that wooden barrier came up the hill, reached a point perhaps fifty feet from the granary, and stopped. A dirty

white rag waved from the courtyard, and miraculously the firing stopped. Buck yelled through his loophole.

"What d'you want?"

In answer, the voice of Coronel Hivero y Sandoval rose from the courtyard.

"We give you one last chance," called Sandoval. "Surrender and give us the ring, or we blow you to pieces. Surrender!"

"Go to hell!" Buck pushed his rifle forward and fired at the door. "We'll never do it."

Sandoval made no answer but a brown arm came from behind the gate and a package bearing a spitting, hissing fuse, whirled out toward the granary and fell against its side.

The gate dropped back and three brown-skinned men ran from its shelter like frightened quail. One stumbled and fell prone as Buck fired. Another staggered but caught his stride again and dashed to the safety of a boulder, while the third, weaving back and forth, made the courtyard wall.

Buck, Red, Swede, and Jake fired furiously but futilely. There was a great crash against the wall of the granary, a sudden shock that threw Chiquita from her feet and caused Buck to stagger.

Dust rose in clouds, obscuring their vision, and a section of wall leaped out and fell, leaving a great, ragged gap through which poured a storm of lead from below. The granary had been dynamited.

The men inside the building called hurriedly to one another and each felt a warm glow arise when the voices of the others answered.

Buck and Red, working furiously, pushed the tables from the truck, planks from the bins, anything they could lay their hands to, into the gap, stopping it up. While they worked, the Swede and Jake kept up a hot fire on the courtyard. When the gap was partially stopped, Buck called Red to him.

"That tore it," he announced. "Now it's our turn. I was goin' to wait till to-night, but we'll pull it now. You wanted a rifle grenade, Red. I'll show you somethin'. Can you fix that truck so that it will coast down against that wall?"

"Sure." Red looked at Buck questioningly. "I can fix that all right, Buck, but what's the idea?"

"We got five gallons of gas in that truck," explained Buck. "If we can run it up against the wall an' explode that gas we'll make 'em think hell's poppin'. We'll be right behind it, see? We'll get Sandoval an' that chink an' some others before we check out. If we stay here, they'll get us. They got another gate an' more powder. They can afford to wait. Pretty soon one of us will stop lead, an' then another. We're just like rats in a trap, but believe me, these rats are goin' to fight back. You fix that truck, Red."

Chiquita had listened as Buck gave his directions. Now she spoke. "I go weeth you," she said quietly.

"You'll get away from here as fast as you can when we make our break," replied Buck. "There's no use of your gettin' killed. You——"

"I go weeth you." Chiquita's voice was very low, and Buck, looking into her eyes, relinquished his argument suddenly and called to the Swede. He knew, did Buck Malloy, that there was no changing the decision the girl had made.

THE Swede came down from his shaken perch, listened to what Buck had to say, and nodded quietly. With Jake to help him he fell to unloading the truck. A vacant corner of the granary was cleared for the body of Chiquita's father, and the supplies in the truck were stacked against the wall. El Diablo was tethered to a post that supported one of the bin walls.

When the truck was empty, the Swede

picked up an old burlap sack, tore it into lengths and fell to making a fuse. He opened a few cartridges, and after having dampened the powder they contained, so that it would burn more slowly, he placed it on the burlap and rolled it tight.

He then stuck the end of his fuse into the auxiliary gas tank on the running board of the truck. Red, in the meantime, had straightened the front wheels and lashed the steering wheel to keep them steady. He straightened, grinned, kissed his hand and smacked the hood of the Model T.

"So long, old girl," said Red. "Ready, Buck!"

"Then come on." Buck pulled his rifle from the loophole and walked to the door. "When I open this, you fellows start that truck downhill. We go right behind it. There's just one thing I want you to remember! Sandoval is mine!"

Red, Jake and the Swede got in front of the truck, ready to push on the radiator and start it on its journey. Buck lit a match, touched it to the fuse the Swede had made, and watched the powder sputter and the burlap grow a thin edge of red. Then, when the fuse was lit he sprang to the door, threw down the wooden bar and flung the doors wide.

"Let's go!" he yelled.

The three before the truck pushed mightily, heaved once again and the car, bearing its lighted fuse, slid out the door and began to roll down the hill. Behind it the four men and Chiquita, rifles in their hands, pushed it on.

The car gained momentum and presently the men and the girl were running to keep up with it. Run as they might, however, the truck outstripped them and rolled on ahead, bearing straight toward the gate in the courtyard wall.

When the car had first made its appearance it had been greeted with a

fusillade of shots. These continued as it progressed, and one leaden messenger found Red. The big redhead stopped suddenly, staggered and almost fell, then, regaining his balance, came on again, a splotch of blood appearing on the blue denim of his shirt. On rolled the truck; on ran the five behind it.

As the truck neared the barrier the firing stopped. The men inside the courtyard evidently could not understand this silent apparition that bore down on them, could not fathom the purpose of the five who ran so grimly behind. Straight toward the open gate rolled the truck and up on the slope, Buck threw up his hand to halt the others.

"It's goin' through," he yelled. "Down—an' give 'em hell!"

Buck dropped to a kneeling position. Jake threw himself prone, his rifle out before him. Red and the Swede stopped and knelt, and Chiquita ran to Buck and stopped beside him. Still they did not fire. They were held by the spectacle of that rolling truck.

Straight through the gates it went, rocking and careening to bring up with a crash against the wall of the courtyard opposite. It rebounded from the wall and men ran toward it, then suddenly the whole clear picture was blotted in a mass of flame and a mighty explosion. The fuse had reached the gasoline tank, ignited the vapor, and the tank had exploded.

CHAPTER XII.

EL ORO DEL PADRE.

A FEW gallons of gasoline can make a mighty blast. The five gallons in the tank seemed to do double duty. The truck was hidden behind the mass of flame, and burning liquid shot into the air and settled down upon the men in the courtyard. Buck had builded better than he knew.

After that first blast, the four men

and the girl on the hill settled down to a steady, deadly fire. Whenever a man showed, a rifle cracked and he went down. Men, those that could, were running from the courtyard and of these the rifles on the slope took their toll. Then, suddenly the Swede was on his feet and running forward, his rifle dropped to the ground.

From the gate had come a man almost as big as the massive Norseman, a man with a yellow face who waved a hand, the middle finger of which was cut off at the first joint. With a roar much as his Viking forbear might have given, the Swede charged Rafael Kang.

Behind Kang a second man made his appearance, a tall, slender figure clothed in the immaculate uniform of an officer in the Mexican army.

With a pistol dangling nonchalantly in his right hand, Hiverno Y Sandoval followed his fellow conspirator out the gates. Buck rose from his crouch, and with his rifle at a trail, walked to meet Sandoval.

There followed a sight which the on-lookers on the hillside can never forget. Jake, Red, and Chiquita stopped shooting and watched.

The meeting of the Swede and Kang was like the meeting of two charging bulls. Each disdained other weapons than their hands. They came together, struck, and locked. After that first mighty shock they stood silent as though carved from stone, each with his arms locked about the other. Only the expression on their faces told of the strain that each was exerting.

Buck walked slowly down the hill toward Sandoval. He did not lift his rifle from the trail, disdaining to use the accuracy of the weapon as compared to that of the pistol in Sandoval's hand. Each step he took was deliberate, and he walked bolt upright.

Sandoval, for his part, was equally unhurried. There was even something almost gallant in the way the colonel

advanced. Suddenly he stopped, threw up his arm and the three on the hillside saw his arm bounce with the recoil of the weapon, even before the crash of its shot came to their ears. Still Buck walked on, a little frozen smile on his lips.

He turned his head once and looked back toward the girl on the slope, but never hesitated in his stride. Again Sandoval fired, and still Buck came on. Then panic overtook the colonel. As fast as he could pull the trigger of his weapon he emptied the pistol. The hammer clicked on a spent cartridge and the colonel threw the weapon at Buck, turned and started to run. Then, and then only did Buck raise his rifle.

"Sandoval!" he called sharply.

The running man stopped and whirled. For an instant he stood absolutely still, and in the instant Buck spoke.

"Here's yours, you murderer!" he growled.

The rifle at his shoulder barked once, sharply, and Sandoval, with a neat hole between his eyes, lurched forward and fell to the ground, his feet drumming a death tattoo on the rocky soil.

As Sandoval fell Buck grounded his rifle and faced toward the spot where the Swede and Kang were locked together. There was a look of fierce triumph on the Swede's face, seen over the shoulder of the man he gripped.

The Swede was killing Kang, killing him with his two hands even as he had promised, slowly crushing the life from the man's bearlike body.

As Buck watched, the Swede's face contorted with a final effort, the muscles in his arms, bare of any covering, knotted convulsively; there came a sharp snap like the crack of a brittle limb broken across a woodsman's knee, and Kang went limp, his face a horrible mask. The Swede had broken his back.

Throwing the body from him, the Swede charged forward, roaring. Buck

whirled to face the courtyard and the men who stood spellbound by the gates. Jake, Red, and Chiquita were on their feet, making a last desperate charge down the hill. From behind them a rifle cracked and then another and another. The charging five turned to face the new menace.

Beside the blasted and deserted granary stood a squat, weird figure—an Indian, partly clad, a rifle across the crook of his arm.

Behind him were others, riflemen these, each with a weapon and that weapon raised. Chiquita gave one thankful cry: "Lupe! He has come!" and staggered into Buck's protecting arms.

IT was three weeks later when four men driving five burros stood on the north bank of the Rio Grande and watched a half dozen stalwart Yaquis ferry back to the south shore the rafts that had brought them across the river.

The Indians reached the green-verdured bank safely, and one, a wrinkled, squat fellow, turned and waved a parting before he followed his fellows.

When the Indians were gone the four men turned, and driving the burros before them, struck into the tangle of brush that covered the river's edge.

Emerging from the river bottom after a half hour's hard and trying work, the four companions, their burros before them, pushed on into the yucca and mesquite dotted desert that was Arizona.

For an hour they pushed ahead silently, then in the near distance a windmill shown and, without command, the lead burro swung toward it. The four animals followed and the men, walking side by side, went after the little, mouse-colored desert beasts. They reached the tank below the windmill and, still in silence, began to make camp.

The burros were unpacked, certain small but very heavy sacks being set carefully to one side. There were three

of these sacks, and in each was ten pounds of gold, almost seventy-five hundred dollars' worth of dust and tiny nuggets.

When the burros were unpacked and had been watered, Jake Cohen and Red Heffernan fell to preparing a meal, breaking the silence with amiable wranglings.

Buck Malloy, carrying a dilapidated green-and-red parrot on his shoulder, stepped to one side and seated himself, watching the camp and his two arguing companions.

Nils Alexson, the Big Swede, gathered up a tin bucket and strode away to the tank. As he climbed it and reached the top his figure loomed gigantic against the sunset.

Buck Malloy, watching the Swede, reached up and stroked the back of El Diablo reflectively. Into his mind flashed a hundred scenes, scenes so recent and so vivid that he shuddered slightly as though to throw off their spell.

He saw again the Big Swede and the half-breed Chinaman, Kang, locked in a death grip; saw Yaquis, the squat, terrible figure of Lupe, their chief, in the lead, meting out swift justice to traitors of their own tribe; saw the solemn funeral procession of Yaquis as Bernardo de Fierro was carried to his last, honored resting spot.

Again Buck shuddered. "The last of the Fierros." The words echoed in his ears and the face of the girl who had spoken them, glowed again in his mind. Santa de Fierro; "Chiquita."

Chiquita had taken Buck to the hidden mine, *El Oro del Padre*, on the day following her father's burial. Accompanied by Lupe only, Chiquita and Buck had left the rancho and gone into the hills, following the trail marked by the gold mosaic on the turquoise ring.

In a barren draw, beside a great, gray boulder, Lupe had stopped, and Buck and the girl had gone on alone. There

was no sign of a trail on the hard rock, but the girl went ahead surely and without hesitation. Beside a massive rock wall she had stopped, turned to Buck and smiled.

"*El Oro del Padre*," Chiquita had said, and then, turning to the rock, had stripped the ring from her finger. She had thrust it into a tiny opening, so small that Buck had not noticed it, and with the turning of the ring the rock wall had ceased to be a wall.

A portion of it moved slowly, turning outward and the entrance of a tunnel had been disclosed. Inside the entrance were piles of sacks and at Chiquita's bidding, Buck had taken three. The girl had wished him to take more, but Buck refused, and so, using the ring as a key again, the girl had closed and locked her treasure chest and then led Buck back to the waiting Lupe.

El Oro del Padre! What cunning had the ancient friars used to discover the mine? What secret, more ancient perhaps than the Aztecs, was hidden behind that blank rock wall? What genius, perhaps a Maya, perhaps a Spanish priest, had wrought the great rock door and the cunning system of weights that worked it? Who had conceived and made the turquoise ring, a map and a key in one?

Buck did not know, would never know. Here was an unsolved and unsolvable mystery.

The two had returned to the rancho after their trip to the mine, and Buck had not spoken of it to his companions. It was Chiquita's secret.

At the ranch they had rested and made certain that Chiquita was safe. The Swede, silently as always, had given the Mauser rifles to Lupe and shown him how to work them. Buck had conceived and designed certain addi-

tional safeguards for the ranch and the valley below the gates, and always they had urged Chiquita to accompany them when they left.

Chiquita had refused to come with the four. The Rancho Perdito and *El Oro del Padre* were her sacred trust. "I am the last of the Fierros, Buck," she had said, "an' I must stay here. There weel be a watch at *La Puerta* again an' there mus' be a Fierro here at *El Rancho Perdito*. I cannot go."

And so Buck had left her; left with his three friends, the pack animals, and the gold, for he was young and adventure beckoned. Chiquita had waved good-bye from the Gates of Hell as the four plodded off with their Indian guides, watched them, a solitary, lonely figure. Deep in his heart Buck knew that she would not long be lonely, that some day, some day soon, he would journey again through the Gates of Hell. He shook his head to dispel the thoughts that were in his mind.

The Swede came back from the tank with the water bucket and joined Jake and Red. Red was laying down the law.

"Now you take us," said Red. "Here we are, four tough guys. All we need is a Model T an' we can go any place. We proved that, didn't we? Now we'll get us a Ford and shove off, ain't it right, Swede?"

"But where do you want to go, Red?" questioned the Swede.

On Buck's shoulder, El Diablo ruffled his weather-beaten plumage and cocked his head to one side.

"*Awaak!*" screeched El Diablo. "Go to hell! Go to hell!"

Buck Malloy stroked the bird's back and grinned faintly.

"You're right, ol'-timer," he said. "To the Gates of Hell, anyhow."





Steve Garvin was innocent, but he knew his Northern snow country and decided to take

A Gamble With Guilt

By Leslie McFarlane

Author of "Man Hunt," etc.

STEVE GARVIN tightened his belt upon an empty stomach. He dug his chin into his parka collar as he trudged down the ice at the river mouth and faced the bitter north wind of Lac Glace.

His young mouth was grim. His face was haggard. He scanned the great reach of snow-covered lake. No game had fallen to his rifle and he was hungry.

Joe Traub, his worthless partner, had deserted him a week ago. That could not be termed a stroke of ill luck, but Joe's departure had been followed by a

crushing misfortune. Steve's cabin was destroyed by fire. Now, without supplies and without dogs, Steve was alone in the wilderness a good three days' journey from Fort MacNabb.

His heart jumped violently. His eyes were glued to a distant point.

Smoke!

The wind had a wide sweep on Lac Glace. Skittering clouds of snowflakes streaked down the great ice plain. But the shifting whorls did not obscure that ghostly column rising from beyond the pines. It drifted lazily to the cold, clear

sky. Smoke, indeed! The smoke of a camp fire.

Steve trembled. He was almost weak with relief as he saw the misty little cloud that meant companionship, food, life. He uttered a hoarse cry of joy. Then he broke into a loping stride as he struck north across the ice.

His mukluks padded silently on the hard-packed snow. As he drew near the point the down-wind brought to his nostrils the sharp, welcome smell of burning wood. But the wind brought something else—a sound that stopped him dead in his tracks.

It was a yell—a fearful, piercing screech of terror.

Steve was frozen with astonishment. The yell was repeated, the cry of a man in mortal fear.

Steve lunged forward, reached the shaggy heap of boulders at the end of the point. That horrible yell echoed in his ears. Then, the inbred caution of the wilderness restraining him, he slowed down, crept around the sheltering boulders. As he did so he heard a harsh, rasping voice.

"I'm goin' to kill you, Joe Traub!"

Joe Traub! Steve blinked in amazement. Joe Traub was his partner, the man who had deserted him a week ago. But he had no time to wonder how Joe Traub came to be here and why Joe Traub was threatened with death, for there came another wailing shriek and then a torrent of babbled pleadings:

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot, Carl! Please, Carl! You can't do that, Carl!"

"I can't, eh?" growled the other. "I can, and I *will*, you thieving skunk! I'm goin' to kill you, Traub, just as sure as I'm standin' here."

As Steve crawled forward and peeped around a huge rock he could hear Traub gibbering in fright. "Carl! No, Carl! Don't! Don't shoot! You've got me all wrong, Carl. Ain't we been friends? Put up your gun. I'll do anything—anything you ask—"

Steve saw Joe Traub, short and stumpy, his mean, flabby face distorted with fear, backing and stumbling among the rocks. He was being stalked relentlessly by a tall, lean man whose pinched face was dirty with a black mask of unshaven beard, a man who gripped a rifle.

Traub's arms were raised; he tripped and fell, scrambled to his feet again, scrambled backward in a desperate and futile attempt to dodge out of reach.

"Let's talk it over, Carl!" gabbled Traub, feverishly. "I've been playin' fair with you, honest! Let's talk it over—"

Neither man saw Steve Garvin.

"Talk it over!" shouted Carl, his face dark with cruelty—the face of a murderer. "Playin' fair with me, are you? Do you call it playin' fair to hide out a hundred bucks o' that dough on me. When we was to split fifty-fifty! Yell, damn you! I'm enjoyin' this. There ain't a soul within a hundred miles to help you, Joe Traub. And when I'm tired of hearin' you screech, I'm goin' to send a bullet through you."

"Don't, Carl!" screamed Traub. "Please! Take *all* the money—every cent of it if you like—"

He bolted suddenly and ran stumbling down the shore toward a heap of boulders a few yards away.

Steve Garvin, hurriedly thrusting shells into the breach of his rifle, was too late to prevent the murder that had taken shape before his eyes. A shot rang violently in the frosty air. Traub uttered a frantic screech of fear that died gurgling in his throat, spun around and pitched on his face in the snow.

STEVE brought up his gun. He drilled a shot over Carl's head just as the bearded man lowered his rifle, sneering.

"Get 'em up!"

For a moment, Carl seemed paralyzed by the shock. Then he whirled around,

crouching. He caught sight of Steve Garvin among the boulders at the end of the point, and his rifle leaped to his shoulder and he fired. Both rifles crashed at the same instant.

The bullet whined viciously past Steve's head. Steve flung himself flat on the hard snow at the base of the rocks. He heard a crashing among the trees on the shore and he knew Carl had reached cover but when he raised his head cautiously and looked through an opening between the boulders there was not a flicker of movement among the trees.

But Steve knew that the man called "Carl" was hiding up there on the slope, watching—waiting to shield murder with murder.

The camp fire flickered. The body of Joe Traub lay where it had fallen. Two pack sacks stood by the fire. There would be food in those packs. Steve Garvin's body was racked with hunger, but he knew that swift, invisible death stood guard over the packs.

He moved away from the boulders. By keeping in the shelter of the point, he told himself, he could reach the wooded shore—

Crack!

Inadvertently he had exposed himself.

A bullet screamed out of the silence and plucked a fragment of fur from his cap. Steve caught sight of a little haze of smoke against the green of the trees and he sent a bullet in reply, then ducked down and ran, keeping to the shelter of the point.

The murderer was going to play the hand out. To the death!

The duel settled down to a grim game of hide and seek. It was a game in which the life of one or the other would be forfeit. The man named Carl would commit murder to shield murder.

It began at the shore, but by mid-afternoon neither man was within sight of the lake. Steve had seen that so long as he remained near the camp he was at

a disadvantage. On the hillside, Carl could command the shore.

So he had gone up onto the slope himself, making a wide detour over snow-covered rocks until he warily made his way into the shadow of the trees on top of the ridge.

The other man saw him once. Steve had just stepped out from behind a tree when the crackle of a twig riveted his attention upon a dark mass of evergreen ahead. He plunged and burrowed into the snow beneath a thicket as shots roared savagely and lead whistled through the twigs above him.

By the time he worked his way to the side of the thicket and came in sight of the clump of evergreen again, Carl had vanished.

Silence closed down on the ridge once more.

IT was cold up there on the mountain. Steve was so hungry that his thoughts reverted constantly to the food down at the camp. But he knew death hung over him like a sword.

He caught sight of Carl among the trees once, flitting from cover to cover. The light was bad. He knew, as he pressed the trigger, that he had missed. They exchanged shots and each took to hiding again.

The encounter had the effect of driving Carl from the top of the slope down into the shadowy recesses of the ravine on the other side. Steve picked up his trail, but he knew the trail would lead to ambush. He did not follow it. Instead, under cover of the bush, he made a great detour and came down at the end of the ravine.

It was very cold. Steve was half-frozen from long periods of waiting in thickets, exhausted by the tension under which he labored. At times he was tempted to hurry the issue, to come out into the open and draw Carl's fire, take a chance on his luck. But it was too dangerous.

At length, taking cover among a heap of rocks, he had heard a rustle and a faint *shuff* as of snow falling from dislodged branches.

The sound came from a dense, dark mass of undergrowth near the top of the ravine.

Steve's nerves jumped. Carl, then, had back-tracked, had somehow circled around to the higher ground. Then he glimpsed a moving form beyond a tree.

He fired.

The moving form vanished as if it had never existed. Steve lay there for a long time, eyeing the tree trunk. He believed he had scored a hit, but investigation would be fatal if he were wrong. So he waited—waited through long, tense minutes.

After a long time he heard a sudden, violent crash among the bushes—*on the other side*. He lunged forward, peering, his rifle covering the spot where a powdery cloud of snow hung in the air and marked the scene of the disturbance.

Then, from behind him, he heard a sharp command:

"You're covered! Get your hands up!"

Steve froze. He was trapped. For one moment he swiftly weighed the chances of fighting it out. His indecision was solved by the bark of a revolver. A bullet whizzed past his head.

He dropped his gun and raised his arms.

There were soft footsteps in the snow. He had not expected even this mercy from Carl. Arms raised high, he turned and faced—not Carl, but a steel-eyed man in the uniform of the Mounted Police.

STEVE'S relief when he saw the officer was tempered by his knowledge of their common danger. "Down!" he shouted, urgently. "Keep down! There's a man over there in the bush! He'll shoot——"

"Yeah?" grunted the MOUNTY, skeptically. He was a shrewd, weather-beaten fellow with a blunt nose and an outthrust chin. His revolver covered Steve steadily. With a quick movement he snatched up Steve's rifle, then gestured toward the slope. "Get going!" he ordered curtly. "Back to your camp."

Steve was dumfounded for a moment. "But you don't understand!" he babbled. "There's another man—his name is Carl—he killed Joe Traub down by the shore——"

"Shut up!" rasped the MOUNTY. "Get going, I said. First you try to shoot me and then expect me to swallow a yarn that it was somebody else. Move!"

The nose of the revolver dug into Steve's ribs. He floundered ahead, confused and angry, protesting and expostulating. He almost wept with dismay as his words fell like hail on the iron surface of the MOUNTY's unbelief.

Stumbling through the snow up the side of the ravine he vainly tried to make the officer understand the truth of the matter, that he had been trailing Joe Traub's murderer and that even now the man Carl was lurking somewhere in the bush near by.

But Sergeant Rouse, who had *seen* Steve fire at him from among the rocks, and who still bore a vivid and unpleasant recollection of the rifle bullet that had come within an ace of blowing out his brains, refused to listen.

"Lay off! Lay off!" he growled. "You can think up a better one by the time you reach camp."

BACK at the camp on the point, where Sergeant Rouse's dogs greeted their master, yelping, and where the sprawling form of Joe Traub was an ugly blot on the white snow, the sergeant curtly ordered Steve to sit down. Then he went methodically through the two pack sacks beside the dead fire.

"What's your name?" he demanded, searching.

"Steve Garvin."

"So! Joe Traub's partner."

"I was."

"That's right. Joe Traub doesn't need a partner any more. Why did you kill him?"

"I didn't kill him," stormed Steve.

"It was the other man—the man he called Carl—fellow with a beard——"

"Yeah?" said Rouse wearily. Then he uttered a grunt of satisfaction as he examined a thick package he had taken from one of the sacks. It was wrapped in deerskin and when he opened it he found money—thick bundles of green bills.

Steve gasped.

"You got the dough, eh?" said Rouse. He glanced at a name sewn into the deerskin, then wrapped up the package again and thrust it into his pocket.

"I never saw it before. That isn't my pack. I tell you," raged Steve, "I came down the lake this morning and I saw this camp fire——"

"You came down the lake this morning? Where's your pack? Your dogs?"

"My dogs went through the ice at Blue Devil Falls. I lost everything but my rifle."

Rouse grinned sardonically.

"Well—let's hear the rest of it."

"I saw this fire, so I came up here and found Joe Traub—and this other man. They were fighting. About money. And this other man killed Traub, and when I took a shot at him he ran away, so I trailed him up onto the ridge—and he's back there in the bush now."

"Joe Traub was your partner," said Rouse. "How did he come to be here? And you coming down the river alone?"

"We had a row. He left me, over a week ago."

"And why were you coming down here at this time of year?"

"I got burnt out."

Sergeant Rouse nodded grimly.

"You have your story down pat, haven't you?" he said. "Now I'll tell you the true yarn."

"I've told you the truth."

"Like hell you have. You and Joe Traub came down here yesterday. And about fifteen miles from here you met Zotique Benoit, the free-trader. You know Zotique always comes this way about this time and that he buys furs for cash and that he always carried a couple of thousand in ready money. You laid for him *and killed him.*"

The sergeant's eyes were fixed steadily and relentlessly on Steve's face. "You killed him and took his money, left him lying on the trail and came here. You were on your way back to your own cabin. You and Joe got into an argument about the dough and you killed him. It happened that I had to make a trip into this country this week and that's how I found Benoit's body so soon. I followed your trail here, found Joe's body and figured you saw me coming up the lake. Then I picked up your trail on the ridge and went up there. You saw me and tried to blow my head off. I heaved a chunk of wood into the brush, caught you off guard and grabbed you. How does that story strike you?"

It struck Steve Garvin that he was hopelessly caught in a net of circumstance. The fact that he had fired at the sergeant, mistaking him for Carl, was damning. It had settled Rouse's conviction that he was Traub's murderer.

Sergeant Rouse was a solid, hard-biten officer of the law and many criminals had passed through his hands in his time. He knew all the tricks and ruses of the fugitive. He listened patiently enough to Steve's frantic protests and explanations, but he believed none of them.

"If your partner left you a week ago,

why didn't he come to Fort MacNabb? He didn't show up there. As for this man, Carl—there is no one of that name in this part of the country that I ever heard. He never existed, that's why. You're out of luck, Garvin. Here is your camp, here is your pack, here is the money you stole, here is the partner you killed. There is the trail you left up on the ridge——”

“It's Carl's pack! Carl made that trail!”

“Where is yours, then?”

The sergeant wanted to be fair. He went up the slope with Steve. The exposed declivity where Steve had made his way to the top of the ridge was in the path of the wind. There were no tracks now. Snow had drifted over them. Tracks beneath the trees on the ridge meant nothing. There was no sign of Carl.

“You see,” said Rouse. “Your story is too thin. The facts are too plain. We'll be getting back to Fort MacNabb.”

“And let that fellow go free!” yelled Steve. He was frantic with a sense of injustice. “He's back there now, I tell you. Hiding in the bush. You're a damned, thick-headed fool——”

He lunged toward Rouse. This was a mistake. He was wild with resentment and perhaps a little out of his head from hunger and exhaustion. The sergeant's lips tightened. Metal gleamed swiftly. He snapped handcuffs on Steve's wrists.

“None of that!” Rouse barked. “You're under arrest. Keep a civil tongue in your head.” He gestured commandingly with the revolver. “Get going.”

THEY went back to the camp. “We'll eat before we go,” said Rouse and went about the business of building a fire. Steve sat on a rock and stared up at the slope. With the touch of steel on his wrists he began

to realize the full extent of his danger. Until then the thing had seemed too improbable, too fantastic for relief. But now he knew.

As Rouse fried bacon and boiled water for the tea Steve talked doggedly:

“I'm telling the truth. My cabin *did* burn down. I *did* lose my dogs.”

“Maybe so. That doesn't prove anything. After your cabin burned down, you and Traub set out together, and when you ran into Benoit you figured it was a good chance to make up your losses.”

“But Traub left me a week ago, I tell you.”

Rouse shrugged. “Tell it to the jury.”

“You mean I'll be tried for murder?”

“D'you expect to be given a medal?”

They ate. Steve was ravenous. He asked Rouse to unlock the handcuffs while he was eating, but the sergeant refused.

“Can't take chances.”

Steve heard one of the dogs growl softly. The animal was lying in the snow, watching the hillside. Its ears were cocked forward.

Steve guessed the meaning of that. Carl was up on the slope. He said so. Rouse laughed.

“And Santa Claus is with him.”

Steve wondered if the man called Carl would try to hold them up and get the money. Then he shook his head. No. Carl would leave well enough alone—well enough, that was, for Carl who had lost the stolen money but had seen his crimes shifted to another's shoulders.

He watched the sergeant, munching thoughtfully by the fire.

“More tea, please.”

Rouse took the pannikin and filled it up. The tea was hot and strong. Rouse handed the pannikin to Steve. The moment the pannikin was in Steve's hands he flung the scalding contents right in the sergeant's face and sprang.

Blinded and confused, the sergeant

went back under Steve's weight and they crashed to the rocks in a flurry of snow.

Rouse struggled in silence; his face was contorted with pain; he groped automatically for his gun while the handcuff chain cut cruelly into his throat. Steve was astride him, but Rouse twisted his body violently and heaved as he got the gun out of the holster. There was a frantic uproar from the dogs.

Steve sprawled, but he managed to get both hands on the barrel of the gun as he went over. He clung to it and swung back, twisting the weapon from the sergeant's grasp.

Rouse's hand flew to Steve's throat and closed in a torturing grip. One of the dogs launched himself on Steve's back with a snarl of fury; he smashed out with the gun. It caught Rouse a terrific blow on the temple; the sergeant gasped, his face turned ghastly. Steve struck him again, and the hand relaxed from his throat as Rouse collapsed with a groan.

The dog was tearing at his parka collar. The other dogs were tearing in, barking furiously. He twisted around and beat the brute over the nose with the gun, shook the animal free and staggered to his feet.

The dog yelped with pain and whirled in the air. One of the others raced at him but he fired into the snow at the animal's feet.

The milling dogs scattered. Their leader slunk away, whining, belly in the snow. Steve snatched up the long whip and laid about him, driving the brutes back.

Then he went through the sergeant's pockets. He found a bunch of keys and soon unlocked the handcuffs. Rouse was quite unconscious, but Steve snapped one cuff about the sergeant's wrist and the other about a stanchion of the sled.

He sprang up and went over to the pack sacks on the hand sled. He found the deerskin package that held the stolen

money and thrust it into his pocket with the sergeant's revolver. Then he flung the other pack over his shoulder, snatched up his rifle and the dog whip and strode down to the ice. The dogs cowered among the rocks, snarling, their teeth bared. They eyed him with hatred, and some of them came out, following him. He lashed at them with the whip and sent them scuttling.

Steve headed up the ice along the shore. One of the dogs raced after him and then the others burst into a chorus of frenzied yelping and coursed in pursuit.

He trudged on. The lead dog was close behind before he wheeled suddenly and blazed two shots from the revolver. The dogs howled and turned tail.

Steve went on.

"This," he muttered, "settles my hash with the sergeant."

HE kept close to the rocky beach and in a little while the contour of the shore line altered. The slope became steeper and then became a ragged bluff, finally a long, sheer cliff. Great heaps of ice-covered boulders lay at the foot of the cliff and he skirted his way around them.

He came, at length, to a place where the cliff line receded to form a bay, and when he had gone around a huge jumble of rocks he halted, sized up the place and swiftly crept into a sheltered place under a ledge.

Between two of the rocks there was a crevice through which he could watch the shore line and cover his back trail. There he crouched, with his rifle across his knees.

Carl couldn't come down the steep face of the cliff. That was impossible. And Steve judged that Carl would not follow the top of the cliff in search of a trail down to the ice farther north. The snow was heavy up there, progress would be slow and Carl would realize

that he could not outpace a man traveling on the ice.

Carl would come down the slope at the south end of the cliffs and follow Steve's trail—if Carl came at all. That was the gamble.

The light was fading as dusk came on. There was a great crimson glow in the west, red as blood above the darkly purple hills and diminishing to pink as it melted into the steel blue of the sky. The lake was a white desert, silent, unbroken. Shadows formed pools at the base of the cliff to the south.

Then, after a long while, one of these shadows detached itself from another. It flitted briefly, vanished.

Steve's muscles tensed. His eyes narrowed.

Carl was following the ice at the base of the cliff. He was making his way from rock to rock, taking advantage of every bit of natural cover. Once in a while he looked back.

Steve could hear the pad of the man's mukluks now. He peered through the crevice and saw Carl speeding doggedly toward the rampart of boulders, rifle in hand.

Steve waited, crouched there under the ledge, until Carl came abreast of him. Carl was looking down at the tracks in the snow as Steve covered him. It was not Steve's intention to kill the man, but he was taking no chances. He aimed at the legs just as Carl realized that the trail had turned, and looked up.

Steve pressed the trigger.

But there was no crashing shot. The mechanism had jammed. Snow that was on the weapon when it lay beside the camp fire had melted and congealed again to ice.

Steve tugged savagely at the trigger, but Carl had seen him.

"Up! Quick!" yelled the bearded man, springing to one side and flinging his rifle to his shoulder.

There was nothing else for it. Steve dropped the gun. He knew why Carl did

not kill him on sight. He got to his feet as Carl advanced toward him, his evil, bearded face tense.

"The money, damn you!" The voice was hoarse. "Give it to me!"

"I haven't any money," returned Steve, sullenly.

There was no chance of getting possession of the rifle. Carl stood back well out of reach.

"You have! Give it to me. Quick! You took it from the pack. I saw you. Quick, or I'll kill you——"

"You won't kill me." Steve scowled. "You know damned well that cop thinks I killed Traub and the trader. If you shoot me you'll give yourself away."

Carl's face was wolfish.

"Give me that money!" he rasped, advancing a step. "Give it over, or I'll take my chances on that cop!"

Steve thrust his hand into his pocket.

"Take it, damn you!" he raged. Carl's rifle swayed slightly as Steve yanked out the sergeant's revolver. He fired, lunging to one side.

The rifle crashed, but the shot was high over Steve's head. For Carl went back as if some one had thrust him violently in the chest. Steve sprang in from the side and grabbed the barrel. Carl clung to the weapon, his knees sagged, his eyes shut in pain. He coughed, hung on, mechanically struggled to work the ejector and pump another shell into the chamber. The two men swayed on the icy rocks.

The bearded man suddenly groaned. His legs buckled, he let go the rifle, clutched at his side and crumpled to a quivering heap in the snow.

A little later, as he strode southward down the ice, Steve heard a frenzied yelping of dogs. From around a buttress of rock surged Rouse's team, dragging the sled. And Rouse, a fuming incarnation of righteous wrath, was on the sled yelling to his dogs.

A handcuff dangled from one wrist; he had freed himself by hacking away

the stanchion with his axe, and unarmed though he was, Sergeant Rouse had taken the trail of his fugitive.

As the dogs raced up the sergeant sprang from the sled. Warily, he strode toward Steve.

"Thought better of it, eh?" he said.

Steve gestured toward the rampart of rocks ahead.

"You'll find your man up there."

AN hour later, the man named Carl groaned in his sleeping bag beside the fire. "He'll have to face a jury," Sergeant Rouse said. "But I must say you're lucky, Garvin. You took an awful chance."

"It was my only chance," Steve said. "You wouldn't believe me."

"Do you blame me, man? I went by what I saw." The sergeant knitted his brows. "But what would have happened if Carl hadn't seen you knock me out and take the money? You would have been in a bad spot in that case. You'd have been caught eventually. What price your defense then?"

Steve shrugged.

"I knew Carl was watching us. The lead dog told me, for one thing. And it was natural that he would want to know what you were going to do. If you took me away, he was safe."

"But, man, he might have drawn a bead on you from the shore and killed you. Then he could have taken the money and vamosed. You deliberately put yourself in the way of a bullet that probably would have killed you."

Steve shook his head.

"I figured he wouldn't do that. If he killed me, then you would know there *was* a Carl. If he simply held me up, took the money and let me go he was in the same position as before—only richer. I would be caught sooner or later, as you say. I would still be the scapegoat for those murders. You would think I had hidden the money somewhere. I had to gamble on what he would do."

The sergeant rubbed his head.

"It was worth a crack on the skull at that," he said.

TROPIC LURE

By ROBERT PORTER

YOU can sail your Western Ocean an' right welcome, lad, say I;
 You can shiver when the bleak nor'wester blows;
 You can stand upon the lookout with the ice a-driftin' by,
 While you swaller fog an' freeze your bloomin' toes.

Oh, it's not for me to scoff at ale, an' pubs is very nice,
 And the fish an' chips is somethin' really fine;
 But I likes t' splice my wire when my hands ain't cold as ice,
 And I ain't all soakin' wet with freezin' brine.

So I give away my oilskins an' my sea-boots I did sell
 To a feller what is sailin' for the 'Pool.
 And I'm off for Iloilo where the days are hot as hell
 And the nights are kind of peacefullike and cool.

You can have your Western Ocean an' your fish an' chips an' ale,
 And don't forget the sprays of cold green sea.
 And some time when you're standin' in the drivin' wind an' hail
 You can think of warmth, an' tropic night—an' me.



Ozar and the Black Skull

By Valentine Wood

Author of the "Kroom" Stories, "Ozar and the Jade Altar," etc.

***The turquoise-hilted knives of the Aztec warriors
threatened the life of the bronzed American***

CHAPTER I.

THE TOWER OF DEATH.

THE very air breathed peril. Ozar the Aztec knew that the leering high priest intended to murder him before he left his sinister chamber in the Temple of Gold. It was evident in the way the black-robed Aztec priests were maneuvering into the corners behind him.

Under those vestments, Ozar knew that bony fingers clutched the turquoise-hilted grips of *itzli* knives—knives that would flash in the light of the flickering oil lamp on the stone pedestal in the center of the room; blades that could hack him to pieces in the flicker of an eyelid.

"I will repeat, Lord Ozar," said Tarx, the high priest. A forked tongue—sign of his holy rank—slavered over Tarx's

lips as he moved closer to the white nan. "I command thee to leave the ity of Karnux, forever; for if thou eekest to obtain the king's greenstone racelet from the Tower of Death, thou halt be sacrificed on the altar of Yaxob, hy patron god. *Otske!* Tarx has poken."

The white man's ice-blue eyes never vavered. He could feel, rather than

clipping tensely through slitted lips. "The orders of the sun god are to be obeyed even above thine, Tarx."

The high priest seemed to swell himself beneath the scarlet robes of his humming-bird-skin mantle. Breath whistled over his notched, jade-inlaid teeth. And then the blue plumes of his helmet bobbed slightly, as Tarx gave the death signal to his priests.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE IN THE ADVENTURES OF OZAR THE AZTEC

LARRY STARLING was captured as an infant by a lost tribe of Aztecs. The barbarians killed his parents, who had wandered into an inaccessible part of mountainous Mexico with an American scientific expedition. They had been slaughtered to appease the wrath of Yaxob the Rain God, who had withheld his favors until the fertile fields that were once so green and lush were now withered and brown.

Just as the child was placed on the sacrificial block, thunder pealed and lightning flashed. Rain—merciful, life-saving rain—poured from the skies in torrents.

And Montezirka, aged king of the Aztecs, shouted to the high priest in charge of the sacrifice: "Spare him, O Tarx! It is written in the walls of the Golden Temple that a ruler shall come to Karnux—a fair god with skin like furbished silver, named Ozar the Aztec. Who knows but this babe is Ozar?"

As the bloodthirsty Tarx scowled, the monarch continued: "He shall not be killed until twenty summers have passed—for then, if he be indeed Ozar the Aztec, he can prove his divinity by meeting the mightiest warrior in Karnux in the fabled Doom Duel. If victorious in that, stripling though he be, this ivory-skinned babe is indeed Ozar, sky king of the Aztecs!"

And Ozar, after twenty summers had passed, proved victorious in the fabled Doom Duel. But he had yet to fulfill the Five Sacred Commands of Mexlitl the Sun God and redeem an afflicted people from the sinister influence of Tarx, the pagan high priest who ruled supreme now that the aged monarch was dead.

He was victorious in fulfilling the Sacred Command of the Plumed Serpent and again in recovering the lost knife of the great god Mexlitl from the sunken Temple of the Jade Altar, and still again in the adventure of the Death Drums. This is the fifth episode of Ozar's struggle against the wiles of Tarx, the vicious pagan high priest.

see, the priests closing about him, beady Aztec eyes glittering murderously. They awaited but a nod of Tarx's silver-helmeted head, or the droop of a lid over his blind eye that lay in its socket like a frosted marble, to charge him.

"Mexlitl the Sun God has instructed me to enter the Tower of Death and obtain the greenstone bracelet which belongs on the arm of Esta, queen of Karnux," said the white man, the words

One instant, Ozar's sleek bronzed form had been standing before the high priest, hands resting lightly on the girde of ocelot fur, which was his only raiment.

But when the stone knives of the black-robed priests sliced the air, Ozar was not there.

Like the blurry leap of a panther, Ozar the Aztec sprang forward. In one lightning-swift movement he stripped the red *tilmali* mantle from

Tarx's shoulders, exposing a priest whose blue-veined hands were clutched over the haft of his sword.

Pivoting in the same motion, Ozar ducked away from stabbing blades and hurled the humming-bird mantle over the guttering lamp on its pedestal. The room was plunged in darkness in a burst of oily smoke and a stench of scorched feathers.

A squall of rage from Tarx was interrupted by a scream of agony as a stone-edged sword hacked the spot where Ozar had been a split second before, only to cleave open the shoulder of a darting priest.

A photograph of the room burned in Ozar's vision. Like a breath in the night, the white man slipped through the crowd of raging priests, to worm himself behind the heavy featherwork tapestries which curtained the walls.

For a moment he lay back against the limestone walls of the chamber, recovering his breath. The air was thick with shouts. Knife blades clanked raspily against each other, and blundering priests hewed blindly at passing bodies.

Heavy forms thumped the floor with leaden thuds.

And then the weird notes of Tarx's signal whistle twittered, and the slaughter ceased.

Ozar squirmed into the open again, his leather-sandaled feet making no sound on the stones. Sliding along the wall like a phantom, the white man darted through a curtained opening, and paused to let his eyes become accustomed to the gloom outside the chamber which Tarx had planned as the place of his murder.

Red tongues of flames stabbed the darkness in the room; Tarx had jerked his smoldering mantle off the pedestal. The blaze had not been completely smothered by the mantle of humming birds' skins. Flames darted through the smudge of dense smoke.

IT was a scene of death and gore which met Tarx's baffled gaze. Two priests lay dead on the floor, stabbed by their brothers. Crimson splashed the lamp pedestal and the hatchet faces of the Indians. But no trace of the white man with the ocelet-fur girdle was to be seen.

Outside, Ozar was speeding down the dimly lighted corridor which led from the Temple of Gold to the streets of Karnux, that hidden Aztec city which had lain in a crater of the Navajada Mountains of northern Mexico for four hundred years, since Cortes returned to Spain with the word that he had destroyed the Aztec empire forever.

Ozar was faced with the fourth, and perhaps the most difficult, of the Five Sacred Commands—to recover the greenstone bracelet from the Tower of Death; a bracelet which symbolized the power of the Montezirkas, who had ruled Karnux for a thousand vanished years. That bracelet belonged on the shapely left wrist of Queen Esta; but it was up to Ozar the Aztec to obtain it for her.

Thus it was that Tarx had lured Ozar into his council chamber, and had delivered his ultimatum, this morning. He had confronted the white youth with the alternative of leaving the city forever, or accepting death at the altar of the rain god. But it had really been but a treacherous pretext to get Ozar into a place where he could be slaughtered by Tarx's black-robed priests of the Chalmecan order, and no one knew it better than Ozar.

The white man was laughing as he made his way out of the Golden Temple, into the warm Mexican sunshine. But it was a bitter laugh. He knew that peril stalked at his side as he made his way toward the great white pinnacle which was the Tower of Death.

He peered across the city to where the Tower loomed, ghostly, sinister, a thick, white spike that shrouded the su-

perstition and horror of a pagan people. Inside that forbidding white edifice, the bones of hundreds of Aztecan nobles, down to the great Montezirka himself, rotted and moldered.

And somewhere inside that grim, sky-piercing sepulcher, was hidden the fabled greenstone bracelet—symbol of the power and affluence of the Aztecan royalty.

Ozar shuddered, and turned his eyes away. It was a legend in Karnux that no mortal being could enter the Tower of Death and return alive.

CHAPTER II.

MYSTIC SYMBOLS.

STANDING in the shadow of the limestone rampart which girdled the base of the Tower of Death, stood the figure of a girl, her eyes sweeping the long, red-paved street up which Ozar the Aztec was approaching.

"My Lord Ozar is coming, Larxatun," murmured the Queen of Karnux, her sparkling black eyes glowing as she watched the white man approaching. "*Huwa!* I feared that he would never return from his visit with the evil Tarx in the Temple of Gold."

The sleek-bodied slave at Queen Esta's side nodded. His eyes—the piercing black orbs of the typical Aztec—glowed also with a love for Ozar. Both loved the white man, but with a different emotion.

The thrill which coursed through the heart of the beautiful queen was the love of a woman for a man. The devotion of Larxatun was that of a dog for its master, or the gratitude men hold for those who have saved them from countless dangers.

Ozar had rescued the Indian Larxatun from the fattening cages under the Golden Temple, where he had been hurled by Tarx; but he little dreamed that he was making a friend and helper

who had already saved his life on numerous occasions. The love of Ozar for his dusky slave was little short of the devotion Larxatun held for his white deliverer.

Even in the dense shadow which the Mexican sun threw at the base of the Tower of Death, Esta was a vision of dazzling beauty. Her shapely face was framed in clusters of raven curls, which were bound under a gem-encrusted crown of yellow gold. Her red lips were parted slightly, to reveal even, white teeth which were strikingly different from the jade-inlaid, yellow-stained teeth of the average Aztec woman.

The Queen wore a bodice of finely beaten gold plates, which fitted the curves of her supple young body as closely as the scales fit the side of a shimmering goldfish. A skirt of royal green featherwork fell to her knees, to reveal copper-skinned legs garnished with jade anklets, and shod with slippers of gold and precious stones.

Such was Esta, Queen of Karnux; for she was the granddaughter of the mighty Montezirka, whose corpse lay inside the holy walls of the Temple of Death.

LARXATUN had once been a slave in the court of Tarx, the high priest. One luckless day he had upset a bowl of *octli* liquor, and the priest had hurled him into a dungeon to await sacrifice. But Ozar the Aztec had rescued Larxatun from his fate; and the queen had made the Indian a freeman.

Ozar's eyes lighted as he climbed the stairs which formed the pyramidal base of the milk-white Tower of Death. He was panting from the exertion of his recent struggle as he joined Esta and the slave in the shadow of the masonry wall.

"I shall enter the Tower of Death immediately," Ozar said, after he had finished telling of Tarx's scheme to mur-

der him in the council chamber. "Tarx knows that if I recover the greenstone bracelet for thee, my queen, it will further prove my right to the title of Ozar the Aztec. He will spare no effort to slay me; for I have already fulfilled three of the sun god's Five Sacred Commands."

Queen Esta shuddered. Her glance swept the glittering city, to come to rest on the dazzling white spire of the Temple of Gold.

"I fear to have thee remain within the threat of Tarx's might, but still more do I fear to have thee enter the Tower of the Dead, Lord Ozar," the queen said, turning to look up at the forbidding heights of the sepulcher temple beside her. "Thou knowest well, my lord, the curse of my grandsire, Montezirka, the king. It is death to all who enter this holy temple."

Ozar smiled, and placed his hands on the queen's shoulders. Well, indeed, did Ozar the Aztec know of the curse of Montezirka. What Aztec didn't? The length and breadth of the Navajada rim, Indians knew the Tower of Death was the abode of ghosts, not of living, mortal men.

In fact, the Tower of Death had been located in a remote corner of the city. The natives feared to so much as touch foot on the terraced pyramid of its base. During certain phases of the moon, they dared not even look at it after sundown.

Even before he died, King Montezirka had warned his people that he would place a curse to protect his tomb—a curse which would mean death to any who might try to break into the sepulcher to glut themselves on the treasures which had been entombed there for Montezirka to spend in the next world.

It had long been a secret desire of Tarx, the high priest, to fleece the Tower of Death of its riches. Yet even the great holy man of Karnux feared

to enter the tomb. He had sent his mightiest warriors on the quest, but they had fled in terror upon reaching the portals of the death tower.

"Thou must return to thy palace, O Queen," said Ozar tenderly. "Do not fear, beloved—I shall return. *Huwa!* Am I not Ozar the Aztec? Did I not win the Doom Duel, when all thought I was lost? Did not the Plumed Serpent sanction me, and did not I conquer the secret of the Jade Altar and destroy the holy Calendar Stone of Huitzil', atop the Blue Temple? Surely, my queen, if I can conquer the living, I can be victorious over the dead"

Tears filled the girl queen's eyes as she saw Ozar step back. She had seen Larry Starling overcome the countless obstacles which Mexlitl the Sun God and the evil Tarx had thrust in his path; but who could conquer the ghosts? What man could overcome the death curse of Montezirka?

"Larxatun will protect thee, my queen," Ozar assured her, as he backed under the corbel-arched doorway that pierced the circular walls surrounding the base of the Tower of Death. But he was not at ease as he took a last glimpse of the queen and his faithful slave, and entered the tower from which no man was supposed to return alive!

OZAR, like Esta, knew the dead were far more dangerous than the living. He knew he was more than a match for any warrior in Karnux; for his sling shot had beaten death by a hairbreadth when it came to fighting men armed with swords or arrows. But a ghost—Ozar shuddered.

He parted a heavy curtain of feather-work tapestry. As it closed behind him, Ozar felt a shiver course through his body. Those curtains shut off his last glimpse of sunshine. Would he live to see the sun again?

He was in a dimly lighted corridor. There were no lamps or windows; but

the light fell down through ingenious well shafts that reflected the glare of sunshine against the white sides of the tower outside.

The whole place breathed death and age and gloom. The air was fetid with the smell of mummies. The walls were damp and clammy. His footsteps started eerie echoes.

For the space of two hundred feet, Ozar the Aztec made his way through the ghostly hallway, while his pupils accustomed themselves to the light. The walls were bare of decoration; it was, indeed, like a tomb.

Another passage barred by a curtain met his advance. With trembling fingers the white man lifted it aside, his flesh creeping with the damp feel of the moldy tapestry. The curtain rustled together behind him, and Ozar felt cold wind fanning his sweat-greased skin.

He turned about, and gasped aloud. On a pedestal of polished jasper before him was mounted a great slab of solid gold. Above it, a pencil of sunlight shafted downward from some window high above, to make the tablet blaze like living fire before his eyes.

As his gaze recoiled from the brilliant light, the white man saw that the golden slab was carved with Aztec hieroglyphics. And as he cringed back before the white light, the white man made out the words of a primitive verse, graven by a hand long dead. And as he read, the color drained from Ozar's face, when he realized what he was gazing upon.

It was the curse of Montezirka:

Beware the portals of the dead;
The arms of bone, the fleshless head.
Beware the doors that enter tombs,
Where plunging flood guards secret rooms.

What could it signify? What message was hidden in that mysterious verse?

It spelled death for the unwary. Could he solve its sinister riddle? Did the se-

cret of the Tower of Death and the hidden greenstone bracelet lay wrapped in those four lines? Would this mystic verse, properly interpreted, lead him to the fulfillment of the Fourth Sacred Command of Mexliltl?

A sudden clatter of footsteps resounded in Ozar's ears, before he could think further regarding the hidden meaning of the mystic verse. The American sprang back from the curtains as they parted, and the forms of Queen Esta and Larxatun fell at his feet.

"Forgive, Lord Ozar!" begged the queen piteously. "We entered the forbidden doorway behind thee. We—I—I couldn't have thee face death alone. Now——"

"Now we are trapped, master!" babbled Larxatun, groveling at Ozar's feet. "The high priest Tarx and his warriors are entering the Tower of Death! They pursue us, even now!"

Ozar's jaw tightened. Leaping past the panting queen and his disobedient slave, the white man peered through the curtain. Larxatun was right.

Charging down the long corridor came Tarx and six of his murderous henchmen! Ozar and the queen were trapped.

CHAPTER III.

PORTALS OF THE DEAD.

FOR a single paralyzed instant, Ozar the Aztec stood peering through the thick curtain which shut from view the golden tablet recording the mystic curse of the Aztec king.

Tarx and his warriors had paused, to let their eyes become adjusted to the gloom. Apparently they had pursued the queen and her slave to the very edge of the first curtain; and it would be but a few seconds before they would resume their grim hunt. Ozar knew that it would mean speedy death for the three of them, whenever Tarx overtook them in the weird halls of the death temple.

It meant much to Tarx to prevent

Ozar from obtaining the greenstone bracelet which symbolized the regal power of the Aztecs. The warriors, seeing Ozar enter the dreaded tower, and be followed by the queen and her slave, had overcome their morbid fear at last. Could not they enter where a woman did not fear to tread?

"We must hide!" whispered Ozar tensely, his blue eyes darting about the narrow chamber in search of a shelter from the prying gaze of Tarx's warriors. "Tarx would not spare us for an instant—nay, he would delight to slay the three of us."

Esta cringed back to one side of the jasper pedestal, hands clasped over her breast. Ozar shuddered as he saw her beside the golden tablet, the shaft of sunlight making a halo of her gen-studded crown and glittering from her gilded bodice. Why had Larxatun permitted the queen to follow him into a hall from which no man might return alive? Still, Ozar could not blame them. They had only been reluctant to see him face death alone!

But it was too late to think about that now. Taking one final glance through the thick curtains, Ozar saw the blue-feathered warriors advancing cautiously, with drawn swords and murderous eyes alert to probe the tiniest niche and shadow.

At their head came Tarx, his scrawny body wrapped in the mantle of scarlet humming-bird skins, his crooked mouth exposing the filed rows of jade-inlaid teeth, parted to reveal the cleft dart of his tongue. The priest's head was incased in his holy helmet, fashioned like an animal's head, with wide-spread jaws framing his evil face.

THE Aztec warriors were stern and terrible figures. They were giants of men, their heads helmeted similar to the priest's, with military plumes of blue *quetzal* feathers floating down their backs.

Their bodies were armored with quilted corslets, and girdles sagged with knives, the blades of which were made of the hard volcanic glass known as obsidian. Mosaic-designed shields were thonged to their huge arms, and flat Aztec swords swung from brawny fists.

"Quick—into this passage!" whispered the American, leading the panting queen and the sober-faced slave into the black maw of an opening in the chamber wall behind the jasper pedestal. What lay back in those shadows?

The curse of Montezirka had warned them against the "portals of the dead." Was this one of them?

For an instant, Queen Esta and the Indian slave hesitated before following Ozar into the murk; but the scrape of heavy sandals on the corridor outside, and the snarling tones of Tarx's venomous throat spurred them on.

No matter what the curse of a long-dead king, it could be no more dangerous than the threat of those murder-thirsty warriors who were seeking them out like a ferret chases a rat.

With his arm clasped about Esta's waist, Ozar the Aztec felt his way along a dark corridor leading into the Tower of Death, with Larxatun close behind. The white man's finger tips slid along damp stones; his feet padded on a thick layer of dust that was moldy.

Ahead, another shaft of light filtered through a mantle of cobwebs to illuminate the corridor with a nebulous glow. The walls were lined with corbel-arched doorways; the Tower of Death seemed to be literally honey-combed with passages and chambers.

Reaching the end of the passage, Ozar peered into the nearest of the gloomy compartments. From the reflected light, he could see that the room was entirely empty. Some day it would be occupied by the coffins of some of King Montezirka's nobles; but now it was bare of even a fiber mat on the floor.

"Quick—hide in here, my queen!" commanded Ozar, sliding an arm about the waist of the trembling girl. "Make no sound; for Larxatun and I are going to return down the passage, and watch the movements of Tarx and his warriors. Perhaps they will be terrified by the mystic tablet, and leave the temple."

Esta nodded in mute agreement. A moment later, she saw Larry Starling slip down the hall with the Indian slave at his side, leaving her in the safety of the chamber. Soon Ozar and Larxatun were lost in the darkness, and she heard no sound.

THE minutes fled to the pounding of her heart. The Tower of Death was silent as the tomb it was. Somewhere, she knew, Tarx and his warriors were slipping through the darkness on noiseless feet. Somewhere, also, Ozar the Aztec and his faithful slave were stalking then, risking their lives to protect her.

Slithering footsteps caught her straining eardrums, minutes later. Creeping to the door of her hiding place, Esta looked out into the ghostly corridor, her heart throbbing against her ribs. Who was it?

The girl flattened her body against the thick wall and peeped forth. Was Ozar returning? If so, he would do it with the stealthy quiet of a cat. Or might it be Larxatun?

And then the queen's eyes registered the glitter of light against the obsidian-edged length of a sword. An instant later she caught the glimmer of a silver helmet, and the flowing plume of a warrior's blue decorations.

A gasp of fear escaped Esta's lips, and she shrank back into her hiding place. The padding of sandals stopped.

"Who is there?" The raspy whisper of the warrior's voice chilled her soul. Panting with terror, the queen cringed deeper into the shadows.

There was a soul-freezing snarl. An instant later the huge form of the warrior towered in the doorway, eyes glittering in the darkness, his feather-hung shield thrust out defensively as the sword lanced out before him.

Only for a second did the warrior stand there. Then his catlike gaze filtered through the shadows, and fastened upon the cringing form of the Queen of Karnux.

Esta screamed with horror as she saw the warrior spring forward, arm swinging backward as he brought the great sword up for a cleaving blow. Then the girl side-stepped from the warrior's attack, and the sword stroke burned the air near her face.

A cry of rage escaped the warrior's lips. She felt his great bulk hurl itself in her way. A powerful arm snatched forward, seizing her.

Clubbing the warrior's arms with her bejeweled fists, Queen Esta twisted from the Aztec's grasp, taking advantage of the heavy shield which hampered the warrior's movements. Strong fingers tore at her hair, jerked out a raven wisp as she fought loose from the warrior's clutches and ran screaming from the room.

Esta sped through the corridor, the thunder of the warrior's footsteps in her ears. A flight of stairs climbed the gloom to one side, and she fled up the steep casement like a deer.

There was more light, now. The walls were frescoed, and there was gold-work and feathered tapestry, gorgeous furnishings, in striking contrast to the bare walls of the lower story.

The warrior was gaining on her, screeching like a horned devil. She flung a terrified glance behind her, to see the Aztec stretching forth a hand to seize her banner hair.

She ducked to one side, felt the warrior charge past her. The force of his rush carried the huge Aztec against a glittering pedestal with a heavy crash.

The warrior fell back, momentarily dazed, crimson gushing from his hawkish nose.

Seizing her opportunity, the Queen of Karnux seized a long-cold stone censer from a niche beside her, and hurled the heavy jar upon the forehead of the reeling Indian. With a grunt of pain, the warrior sank to the floor, stunned by the blow. The censer broke in a flutter of stone bits and a cloud of damp ashes.

There was no time to waste. Frantically, the queen fled the length of the hallway, and darted through a curtained doorway which seemed to invite safety.

AN instant later, she backed, screaming, from the curtained entrance. Inside that chamber, connected with the outside world by narrow loopholes, a cloud of hornets droned and buzzed! She had broken into the "Portals of the Dead"—the first of Montezirka's curses!

Pulling her raven locks about her face and shoulders, to prevent being stung by the few hornets that followed, the queen sped down the corridor, leaped over the stirring body of the dazed warrior, and headed for the stairs. Somewhere on the lower floor, she knew, was Ozar the Aztec. And Ozar would protect her.

But even as the queen paused in her headlong flight at the head of the stairway leading down into the dark recesses of the Tower of Death, she flung herself back in horror. For climbing out of the inky pit of the stairway came the hideous-gigantic figure of Tarx!

The girl pressed back against the frescoed wall, her heart slamming. For an instant the high priest regarded her, his one eye glittering like a serpent's. And then the queen turned to flee from a terror far worse than the vicious hornets which hummed about the curtained Portal of the Dead which she had disturbed.

But she was not quick enough. Dart-

ing forward like a springing jaguar, the red-robed priest seized Esta in an iron-muscled grip. She opened her mouth to scream, but spikelike fingers throttled the cry, as heavy nails sank into the soft flesh of her throat.

Into the priest's mind had sprung an idea. If he could hold Esta as a hostage, he could force Ozar the Aztec to brave the dangers of the Tower of Death, loot the tomb of Montezirka of its treasures, and restore the fabled greenstone bracelet to Tarx—in return for the life of the girl he loved!

The queen felt the high priest's foul breath panting hotly against her face as Tarx's strangling clutch tightened, and she sank unconscious in his grasp without the slightest sound.

CHAPTER IV.

ARMS OF BONE.

THE screams of a woman's voice electrified Ozar and Larxatun as they crept down a dark passage, following a pair of blue-feathered warriors who were creeping along, inspecting door by door of the Tower of Death.

Ozar hoped only to get those two warriors separated; then he and the slave could make short work of them. They did not know that Tarx and the remaining Aztecs had gone down another corridor in the direction of Esta's hiding place.

As the frantic scream wafted through the ghostly passages of the musty tower, however, the two men looked at each other in horror.

Tarx, the pagan high priest, or one of his men had found the queen!

With hearts pounding frantically, Ozar and the Indian quit stalking the two men ahead of them, and ran headlong down the corridor toward the room where they had left Esta. No more cries did they hear; but their instinct guided them through the maze of passages to

the place where they had left the queen, as they supposed, in perfect safety.

The strength seemed to ebb from Ozar's muscles as he came to the chamber where they had hidden the girl. No trace of Esta or her captor did he find; only the echoes of that scream, resounding in his ears.

"The queen is gone!" groaned the white man, as Larxatun darted into the cubicle, searching the corners. "Come—we must search for her!"

Frantically, the two searched through the chambers and halls of the lower story of the temple. Thus it was that they were totally surprised when they met Tarx coming down a staircase above them.

Tarx saw the two men at the same instant that they whirled and discovered the priest. For a moment the three stood as if paralyzed; and then Ozar's lean brown hands shot for the sling thong which was wrapped about his forehead.

Tarx had seen the white youth slay, at long range, with that deadly sling. He knew how accurate was Ozar's aim, with those smooth round pebbles which he carried in a leathern pouch at his girdle. And the high priest had no intentions of giving the white man even a tiny chance to get that sling whirling about his head.

Diving headlong from the high stairs, the priest's body hurtled through the air to crash against the white man, before Ozar could spring back. The two went to the floor, the breath knocked from their lungs.

Tarx, his fall broken by the body of the white man, was the first to recover. Wriggling away from his tangled robe, the high priest jerked a mosaic-hafted knife from his girdle and sprang forward, snarling deep in his throat. He had just choked Queen Esta into unconsciousness.

Why not finish the job by slaying his enemy, Ozar the Aztec?

FOILED in his attempt to bring the sling shot into play, Ozar was far from helpless, dazed though he was. He leaped back from under Tarx's blow, and staggered to his feet as Larxatun went into action, charging like a bull. The priest danced away from the slave's rush, his knife flashing nastily in the inky gloom. Unarmed, the slave was at a disadvantage.

Shaking his head to drive off the cobwebs which clung to his brain, Ozar the Aztec dived under a hard-driven thrust and snapped out powerful fists. Then Larxatun entered the fray once more, knuckles crashing against the jade-studded ornaments which Tarx wore on his bony chest. Another instant, and the three were grappling.

Tarx's filed teeth snapped close by Ozar's ear. The priest's muscles seemed to be of iron, his skin as slippery as a greased eel's.

The stone knife clanked to the floor as Larxatun's grasp wrenched it from Tarx's fingers. Then the priest slithered from the grip of his adversaries and reeled back.

Outmatched two to one, Tarx was desperate. His bony, blue-veined hands fluttered to the yellow-stained whistle which dangled on a maguey-fiber cord about his skinny neck. As Ozar closed in again, he heard the priest play a weird series of notes on the whistle. It was Tarx's signal to his warriors!

A red fog enveloped Ozar's brain as he crashed into that leering, one-eyed priest. The whistle signal was nipped in mid-note as a knuckle-studded fist smashed Tarx's face.

The blow rocked the Aztec, but he danced away from the white man's rush, and parried with a rib-smashing punch to Ozar's heart, which staggered the white man. It was the first time he had tasted the full strength of the vicious priest in hand-to-hand conflict; and the pain of the blow drove him berserk with fury.

Larxatun was boring in from one side, but a terrific blow of an upthrust elbow caught Larxatun's unprotected throat, and he dropped, momentarily out of the fray.

The priest cringed before Ozar's attack. But Tarx's whistle signal was too late to save him from the raging white man. A left-arm jab spun the evil priest about. A straight punch grazed Tarx's silver helmet and barked his cheek. And then a hard right into the priest's jaw button doubled Tarx up like a sack, and Ozar stood panting over the Aztec's unconscious form.

But there was not a moment to rest. Already, Ozar could hear the clatter of arms as Tarx's blue-feathered warriors were speeding to his rescue.

The sight of the high priest's bone whistle, dangling under Tarx's pain-contorted face, shoved an idea into Ozar's brain. Stooping, he jerked the whistle from its cord.

DOWN at the far end of the corridor, three warriors were racing to their master's aid. With one foot, Ozar rolled the unconscious form of the high priest under the shadow of the stone stairs.

"Come—Larxatun! Up these stairs!" Ozar hissed in the ear of the Aztec, who was struggling to his feet. "Here come Tarx's warriors!"

Three steps at a time, the two men leaped up the stairway. Pausing at the top of the stairs, Ozar put the whistle to his lips. As he blew, the weird notes of Tarx's signal knifed the air. Almost instantly, an answering shout came from the warriors on the story below. They believed their master was signaling them upstairs.

Three corridors branched from the head of the stairs; yet on none of them could Ozar catch a glimpse of the missing queen. Little did he realize that at that instant, Esta was lying unconscious, behind the shadow of a huge

stone image a dozen paces beyond, where Tarx had secreted her.

"Back, Larxatun—we must lure the warriors away from Tarx's body, lest they find him!" whispered Ozar, pushing the slave back into the left-hand corridor.

A single doorway greeted them; they were in a boxed hallway. But as Ozar moved forward to go into the doorway, he fell back, sweat breaking out on his forehead. At the same instant, a groan of terror escaped Larxatun's lips.

Dangling across the entrance of the doorway, hung a pair of bony arms—the skeleton of dead hands, dead wrists, dead forearms and elbows—bones which hung there, as if to clutch at the first person who dared cross beneath them!

But the fugitives had no time to look farther. The warriors were already climbing the stairs, plumes bannering, swords ready.

In a trice, Ozar the Aztec recalled the warning of the mystic golden tablet—"Beware the arms of bone——" Could these be the arms included in the ingenious protective system which Montezirka had thrown about the temple which guarded his tomb? Ozar had no doubt about it.

The warriors had reached the top of the stairs now. They were peering about, undecided which of the three radial hallways to take.

Again Ozar put the bone whistle of the high priest to his lips, and again the halls echoed to the thin notes of the signal whistle which Tarx used to control his henchmen.

The corner in which Ozar and Larxatun stood was pitch-dark. The warriors heard the tones of Tarx's signal issuing from the left-hand corridor; it could mean but one thing. Tarx was in danger, somewhere down that corridor.

And then the Aztecs saw the doorway, with its dangling arms of white bone; and they dashed toward it, swords ready, shields pushed before them.

There was a clatter of bones as the two warriors brushed them aside to enter the only outlet which they saw, in their search for Tarx.

Even Ozar, hiding back in the shadows, was unprepared for the incredible spectacle which next occurred. If he lived ten thousand lifetimes, he never expected to see again such amazing evidence of Montezirka's ingenuity.

For the dangling arms of bone were attached to a balanced top piece of heavy stone, immediately above the door. The slightest touch, and the great block would come plunging downward—such was the skill of the Aztec engineers!

There was a swish of air, as the huge stone dropped. A crash that shook the temple walls flung a blast of air against the cringing white man and his wide-eyed slave, and the two Aztec giants who had been warriors in Tarx's ranks lay under the stone, flattened messes of gory pulp!

Only their outflung arms and legs protruded beneath the rock slab, which had needed only a touch on the "arms of bone" to dislodge from its balanced position.

CHAPTER V.

BOXES OF THE DEAD.

BACK under the staircase, Tarx shuddered himself awake, and pulled himself to a sitting position. For a moment, he could not tell where he was, for a rain of red sparks beat against his single eye like exploding fireworks; but as his parchment-skinned palms began to grope about, the roaring stopped in his brain, and he knew he was beneath the stairway he had just descended.

The high priest was surprised to find that he was not mortally wounded. Then he reasoned it out: Either Ozar and his slave had been forced to flee at the approach of Tarx's warriors, before they could finish their job of slaying him; or else they had feared to kill him until he

had revealed the hiding place of the queen.

At thought of the beautiful Esta, whom the priest intended to hold as a hostage over the wrath of Ozar, Tarx smiled evilly. To his diabolical brain, the life of Queen Esta meant but one thing—his own chance to ascend the throne of the Aztecs.

For many years, while Esta was a child, Tarx had ruled the city of Karnux with an iron hand. Now that she was mature, and wore the regal crown of the Montezirkas, Tarx still held sway over the Aztecs of the Valley of the Navajadas, for his cruel grip was not easily wrested away.

That was one reason why Tarx had risked his own life by entering this abode of spooks—to prevent Ozar from restoring to the queen the greenstone bracelet which, in Aztec legends, was supposed to endow the queen with powers second to none.

But with Esta out of the way, the high priest knew that he could command full authority over the Aztecs. He also knew that so long as he held Esta prisoner in this moldy, ghost-filled Tower of Death, Ozar the Aztec would not kill him. He could use her as a hostage, to protect himself against the white man who had sworn to hurl Tarx from power.

The high priest groaned, and picked himself shakily to his feet. His ribs and jaw ached from the rocklike impact of Ozar's fists. His ears hummed, and he felt dizzy, so that he had to support himself against the stone wall; but his poisonous brain was clear as a crystal, and his thoughts were functioning perfectly.

GATHERING his scarlet robes about him, Tarx adjusted the silver helmet which he wore over his long, coarse hair. He sucked in a gasp as his groping fingers reached for his whistle, only to find it gone.

A quick survey of the floor where he and Ozar had struggled convinced Tarx that the whistle was really gone. Without it, he could not summon the ghoul-ish warriors whom he knew to be skulking about the gloomy caverns and corridors of the temple.

Suddenly an ear-blasting crash of sound dazed him, and the whole tower shook as if from a terrific explosion. Echoes of the crash pounded angrily down the corridors and back again, resounding against doorways that had been closed for years, coasting down stairways that had not known the tread of sandals for centuries.

The sound brought Tarx to full possession of his senses. That it had come from upstairs, he had no doubt; and he also knew what the sound meant. Balanced stones were a common trick of the Aztecs; they were fiendish traps to destroy the trespasser.

Chuckling low in his throat, like an animal who wolfs down the meat of his freshly slain kill, Tarx scuttled up the stairway. Possibly it was Ozar who had met his death at the ingenious trap which the long-dead Montezirka had devised to slay possible thieves inside his tomb. On the other hand, it might have been one of his own warriors; in that case, the sound would bring Ozar and the slave Larxatun to the spot. They might discover the corner where Tarx had dragged the unconscious body of Queen Esta!

Tarx passed like some wraith of hell over the top of the stairway. As he slipped into the right-hand of the three corridors, the evil high priest caught a flashing glimpse of the white youth, Ozar, and his swarthy Indian companion, standing over the great stone which had crushed two of his blue-feathered warriors to a pulp. Ozar did not see the red-robed priest as Tarx vanished into the gloom.

A moment later, Tarx was stooping over a gold-and-green form that was the

body of Queen Esta. The girl was stirring, about to regain consciousness.

Lifting the girl in his bony arms, the high priest of Karnux slipped silently down the corridor. A huge doorway of triangular shape loomed before him; censers with the ashes of long-dead storax incense stood on either side of the portal.

No sound disturbed the stillness as Tarx padded his way through the great doorway, clutching the unconscious figure of the queen against his bony chest.

The sight which met Tarx's gaze brought a gasp of superstitious admiration to the high priest's lips. At last he was in the presence of the riches and splendor he had so longed to see!

He was in the central room of the Tower of Death; he could tell that, because the walls were circular, and sloped upward for a great distance, with light filtering dimly through slits of windows.

IN the center of the circular room, towered a terraced pyramid with a flat top, which was connected to the ceiling of the main chamber with a snow-white alabaster sanctuary. The circular walls were adorned with skull racks and the spears and swords of long-dead Aztec warriors.

Never, except in the Temple of Gold, had Tarx seen such dazzling evidence of the wealth and power of the Aztecs who had flourished for a thousand vanished years in this hidden city of northern Mexico.

The walls behind the skull racks had recessed panels with picture writings, denoting the forgotten valor and ancient deeds of the dead Aztec kings who lay buried inside this pyramidal tomb.

Smooth stucco glistened between the panels; a row of doors at the base of the pyramid were supported by round columns topped by square capitals carved with Plumed Serpents and the many minor Aztec godlings.

Then Tarx's eyes swept over the tomb itself. The outside of the pyramid was decorated with blue paintings in a claret-colored background, and included all the designs common to the Aztecs—gods, fruit, flowers, knots, and geometric figures—a place of splendor for the dead kings of Karnux to rest their bones!

Tarx's single eye narrowed as he walked across the red-and-gray-checked floor, toward the base of the pyramid. For the first time, he noticed that the terraced pyramid was honeycombed with small doors. And then he realized the meaning of those entrances.

They were the coffin drawers where the bodies of hundreds of lesser nobles were entombed! Inside the pyramid, the bones of the great Montezirka himself rested, surrounded by the treasures Tarx had so long coveted; but the shell of the pyramid itself was filled with the bodies of long-since departed Aztec nobles and lesser kings and princes, stowed in coffins like drawers in a cabinet!

A sudden idea seized Tarx's evil brain. Esta was a queen; why should she not be buried with her ancestors? What mattered it if she still lived? If he placed her in one of those countless coffin compartments, who would know which drawer held her body? Indeed, the boxes of the dead all looked alike—how could he, himself, know where he had hidden the queen?

Fitting action to thought, Tarx laid the body of the insensible girl upon the floor, and hurried to the base of the great tomb. Climbing several terraces, the evil priest pried open one of the stone doors, and peered within.

In the stone drawer lay the mummified remains of some Aztec noble, dead for many forgotten centuries. The corpse was surrounded by jadeite images, and slate-blue pottery loaded with crystal and gilt and bells and dried fruits. Gold gleamed dully among the shroud wrappings; the mummy's lips

and ears were set with polished jade plugs. A prince, no doubt, of an earlier era.

Tarx's blind eye seemed to glow like a luminous marble in its socket, as he hurried back to the floor level, and returned with the body of the queen. There was plenty of room inside the coffin drawer for Esta; and he did not doubt that she would quickly suffocate, inside the compartment.

With deft movements, Tarx placed the golden-clad body of the Queen of Karnux inside the mummy box of a long-dead noble. Beads of sweat burst out on the priest's brow as he slid the door shut.

With a fiendish chuckle, Tarx returned to the base of the pyramid. As he glanced back up the wall of tombs, even he himself could not detect which of the hundreds of boxes contained the body of the living queen.

CHAPTER VI.

TARX TRIUMPHS.

OSAR THE AZTEC wiped the sweat from his face, and stepped warily around the gruesome bodies which lay, crushed flat, beneath the great stone slab which had been tipped off balance when the pairs of bone arms had been touched. Larxatun's face was now of ashen hue.

The white youth knew he owed his life to his interpretation of the mystic curse of Montezirka, as carved in Aztec hieroglyphics on the golden tablet: "Beware the arms of bone." What if he had slid through first?

How long would he be able to solve the riddle of the curse of Montezirka? The tablet had mentioned "portals of the dead," a "fleshless head," and a "plunging flood," that would destroy the person who opened the "doors that enter tombs."

"You see what might have happened to us, Larxatun?" commented Ozar, in a

hushed voice. "Truly, the great god Mexliti must be sparing us."

Aztec legend stated that the fabulous greenstone bracelet was among the treasures which surrounded the body of Montezirka in his costly tomb. The job that Mexliti the Sun God required of Ozar the Aztec was the finding of the greenstone bracelet, and placing it where it belonged—on the wrist of the ruler of Karnux, Queen Esta.

Queen Esta! Like a dash of ice water against his brain, there flooded upon Ozar's recollection his very reason for being on the second floor of this ill-fated, unlucky Tower of Death. In the excitement of eluding Tarx's warriors, he had forgotten his original mission.

Where was the queen? That question alone burned in Ozar's mind. Once the queen was found and safely restored outside of this ghastly house of horror, he would have plenty of time to find the greenstone bracelet. What mattered it if he were to overcome the various curses of Montezirka and find the greenstone bracelet of the Aztec monarch—what good would that do, if Queen Esta were forever lost?

"Come, Larxatun!" ordered Ozar. Gritting his teeth in bitter determination, the white man stepped over the death stone and entered the doorway which the mystic "arms of bone" had protected through the years.

As he did so, the white man stopped, jaw gaping with surprise. He was in the magnificent sepulcher room of the Tower of Death, surrounded by the glamour of departed kings! Even Larxatun, used to working amid the splendor of Queen Esta's royal apartments, could not stifle a gasp of admiration.

ABOVE him soared the stuccoed whiteness of the interior of the tower, with shafts of sunshine streaming through from slitted windows like tinsel ribbons. Occupying the floor

space of the great circular edifice was the gorgeous pyramid of tombs which Tarx had just marveled at.

Larxatun shuddered as his gaze flitted the *tzompantlis*, or racks, from which were suspended the skulls of sacrificial victims slain during the lifetime of Montezirka. Gruesome place!

A sudden sound interrupted Ozar's awe-stricken inspection of the gorgeous tomb. And the next instant the white youth's muscles tensed, and he saw the form of Tarx walking around the base of the pyramid, his back toward them.

In a trice, Ozar knew what had happened. The high priest had recovered from Ozar's blow, and he had climbed the stairs to enter this sepulcher room by a different entrance. Possibly Queen Esta was here!

Larxatun stiffened, and attempted to crowd past. Motioning the slave back, Ozar the Aztec slipped across the polished floor on noiseless feet, like a gray shadow in the ghostly room.

He could hear the rasp of the high priest's breathing, as Tarx made his way around the base of the pyramid in search of an opening to Montezirka's treasure house and tomb. The priest's back was still toward Ozar.

The pliable thongs of Ozar's sling were twined about the American's wrist, and a pebble from his pouch had been inserted in the sling, as he slipped silently across the spacious floor.

Some sixth sense seemed to warn Tarx of danger. The high priest whirled, his forked tongue darting behind filed teeth as he did so. Then the priest's single eye snapped as his hand darted through the folds of his scarlet mantle, and drew the obsidian-edged sword from his girdle.

Spang! Even as the priest darted forward with the blade upraised, the pellet of stone shot from Ozar's sling. An instant later the sword clattered to the floor, and Tarx was clutching a hole in his wrist which was oozing crimson.

The priest leaped backward, drawing a knife with his uninjured hand.

W'hu! Ozar's leathern sling shot lashed out like a whip, and the thongs cut welts in Tarx's face. Even as the leather unwound itself from the priest's head, the American had leaped through Tarx's defense and his hands wrapped iron grips on the wrist which clutched the deadly knife.

The two crashed heavily, rolled on the floor, and heaved to their feet in a grapple.

Bam! The white man's fist shot outward in a stiff jab, and knocked the breath from the struggling priest's lungs. Tarx went down with a moan of agony, and at the same instant he felt Ozar jerk the knife from his grasp.

Footsteps clattered close at hand, and Ozar spun about to see Larxatun headed for the prostrate priest. The white man sprang forward, and flung out a restraining hand.

"Back, Larxatun—and guard the doors!" snarled Ozar. "I have a score to settle with this viper, Tarx. Guard the doors, lest the blue-feathered warriors surprise us!"

The priest was struggling to his feet as Larxatun nodded mutely, and turned away.

A snarl of hate wrenched from Ozar's lips as he pounced upon the red-robed priest as a tiger springs upon its prey. The gleaming knife lifted, its point of razor-sharp *itzli* poised inches above the priest's scrawny throat.

MANY times had Ozar longed for this opportunity; but he was destined not to plunge the knife through Tarx's jugular vein. For even as the blade paused at the top of its arc, words grated from the high priest's working throat.

"Kill me—and Esta dies!" croaked Tarx, squirming under Ozar's weight as the white man forced him floorward and clamped his knees about the priest's

body. "Dost thou wish thy loved one to die, Lord Ozar? *Otskc!*"

The words had the effect Tarx had anticipated. Ozar's knuckles whitened on the blue-and-gold handle of the knife, but he did not plunge the weapon down in the death stroke. If he killed Tarx, he realized his last clew to Esta's fate would be gone.

Tarx leered as he saw Ozar pause. Though helpless under the American's weight, the Aztec priest knew he held the upper hand. In the back of his cunning brain, Tarx was confident that his hostage—the Queen of Karnux—was dead, by now. How could she live, sealed in a tight coffin box among the bones of an ancient corpse?

Ozar's grip relaxed. His hot breath fanned the priest's hideous face as he got to his feet, jerking the scarlet-robed holy man with him. A bitter sneer twisted Tarx's lips.

"Speak—viper!" snarled the white man, prodding the tip of the *itzli* blade against the priest's chest. "Where is Esta? Speak—or I shall slice out thy foul heart—"

Tarx's fanglike teeth gleamed dully. His single eye burned like a snake's into Ozar's blue orbs.

"I placed her—in one of the boxes of the dead, Lord Ozar," hissed the crafty priest. "Which one? *Otskc!* I know not! Find her thyself!"

The American paled. His darting glance took in the tiers of coffin boxes, row on row, all alike, all containing the bones of long-dead Indian nobles. Which one contained Esta?

And then, to Ozar's acute ears, came the muffled sound of a girlish scream, followed by a thumping of doubled fists against the door of a stone box.

OZAR waited for no more. Doubling his fist, he shot forth a blow from the shoulder that sent Tarx spinning like a scarecrow across the floor, where he measured his length

on the stones, and then sat up, his mouth bleeding, and a sputter of filed teeth dripping from his lips.

"Quick, Larxatun!" shouted the white man. "We must find the tomb in which this vile wretch has hidden our queen!"

In a single bound, Ozar was on the first terrace of death boxes. Seconds later, Larxatun had scurried across the floor of the circular room, and was climbing the terrace behind him.

Ozar's keen hearing had located Esta's cry as coming from the third row of coffin niches. Ozar had not been trained to favor deaf ears by Claxitl, his foster father. His hearing was the hearing of a deer, of a cougar. His twenty years in the wilds of the Navajadas served him in good stead now, whetting his faculties and developing his senses.

But there was no time to lose. The cries had already ceased—they were probably the last breaths Esta could draw before she would be smothered.

From box to box the two men ran, bending their ears against the carved stones, listening with bated breath. No sound met their eardrums; the place was silent as the death one would expect to find in this grim tower of the Aztecs.

It was Ozar's keen sight which came to his aid. Not one Aztec in all the Valley of the Navajadas would have detected the slight smear of sweat on the rim of one box door—a smear where Tarx had struggled to close the heavy coffin.

Panting with desperation, Ozar the Aztec heaved on the heavy, sliding drawer. Larxatun joined him, and sweat burst like water on their necks, trickled down their arms. The drawer had jammed in its stone grooves!

Muscles swelled and strained under brawny skins, as Ozar and Larxatun took fresh grips on the stone edge, and wrenched anew. Veins stood out like cords on neck and arms and thighs.

Then, with a grating of stone against

stone, the drawer slid free. A musty odor smote Ozar's nostrils. Dust—the dust of dry bones—clouded his eyes. And then his fingers were under the arms of Queen Esta, and he was lifting the girl from her living entombment.

COLD fear clutched at Ozar's heart as he saw how limp and lifeless Esta appeared to be. And then he caught a slight flicker of lashes, and as he pillowed her head on his arm, her chest heaved, and she breathed deeply. A minute more, Ozar knew, and she would have been dead.

"Ozar—my lord—my lord," breathed the queen, as her arms lifted to pull the white man's head close to her cheek. "Ozar—"

Larxatun's dusky face left the man and woman by his side, and then the wide grin faded from his face. The thrill of relief which had coursed through the Indian slave's body gave way to a tense jerk of alarm.

While Ozar held the girl's quivering body in his arms, Larxatun shot a sweeping glance about the floor of the Tower of Death.

Tarx was gone!

During the few seconds they had been searching frantically for the tomb of their queen, Tarx had scrambled to his feet and made his escape!

And even as Larxatun made the discovery, he heard a weird whistle echo and réecho through the lonely corridor. With his lips, Tarx was making the signal which would bring his blue-feathered warriors to his side—the death signal he usually gave with his bone whistle.

Tarx had trapped his victims at last!

"Ozar, my master! Esta, Queen of Karnux! Tarx has escaped!" Babbling the words, the slave Larxatun tore the lovers apart from their clinging embrace, to point toward the spot where the priest had fallen.

Ozar's face blanched as the full im-

port of Tarx's escape reached his brain. Then he cried out, as he saw Larxatun leap forward, vault down the terraced tomb, and land on the polished floor of the circular room.

"I shall slay Tarx, and save thee! I shall save thee, O Master Ozar!" shouted the faithful slave, and then, with a wave, the huge Aztec sped across the floor and vanished in the direction he had heard Tarx's signal.

CHAPTER VII. THE BLACK SKULL.

ESTA and Ozar exchanged horror-filled glances. They knew there was no escape from this sepulcher room; not when Tarx was free, and four of his blue-feathered warriors were alert to do his bidding. Even now, they could hear the shouts of the Aztecs as they sped to their master's side.

"I fear Larxatun is lost, seeking to save us, my queen!" groaned Ozar, helping the pagan empress to her feet. "The warriors will slay him, even as he reaches Tarx. But come—we must hide in the tomb of Montezirka!"

Queen Esta's face blanched, and her eyes became dark pools of fear. Who dared enter the tomb of the king? None but a god could cross the portals of the dead—and return! Ozar was a god, but she—was she not a mortal?

But before she could protest, Ozar had her in his arms and was striding down the stepped tiers of coffin boxes. Tomb dust cascaded from her bodice of golden scales, and the girl shuddered at the memory of her terrifying ordeal.

Ozar understood, now, why Tarx had been making a circuit of the death pyramid. The doorways which were skirted by the round columns of stone were in reality dummy entrances; they presented walls of porous volcanic stone. Possibly one of the panels was a sliding door; but Ozar had no clew to which one, nor time to investigate.

Again Ozar found himself referring to the mystic verse which he had seen on the slab of gold. Queen Esta had, almost at the cost of her life, discovered the meaning of the ominous "portals of the dead"—for behind them was the room whose walls were plastered with hornets' nests, insects alert to sting to death any possible intruder.

The mystery of the "arms of bone" had been solved in an all-too-gruesome manner for Ozar the Aztec; but there still remained two warnings, of which the weird verse had spoken—the "fleshless head" and the "plunging flood." Could either of them hold the secret to the hidden entrance of Montezirka's treasure house and sepulcher?

A hoarse squall of triumph rang through the echoing expanse of the Tower of Death. Ozar and Esta whirled about from their inspection of the sealed doors of the pyramid of tombs, to see the appalling spectacle of four blue-feathered warriors charging through the great triangular-shaped door of the sepulcher room. Behind them came Tarx, his face aglow with fiendish triumph!

What, then, had happened to Larxatun? Doubtlessly, thought Ozar, he was lying out there, his skull split open by one of those wooden swords.

Hearts in their mouths, Ozar and the Queen of Karnux ducked around a corner of the pyramid, to escape the hail of arrows which the warriors might launch at them at any second.

Ozar thumbed a pebble from his girdle pouch, and loaded the sling shot; but he knew it would be well-nigh impossible to slay one of the blue-feathered warriors with the sling. They wore heavy armor and silver helmets; the best he could hope for would be to cripple them. There would be slight chance of drilling their foreheads with a pebble; for they were alert to this danger, and would keep their faces shielded behind mosaic-studded shields.

For an instant, they were safe, protected from the oncoming warriors by the corner of the pyramid. But it would be but a few seconds until they would be surrounded; then their unarmored bodies would be sure targets for poisoned arrows.

Ozar and the queen realized that they could expect no mercy from Tarx or his henchmen. Their lives meant nothing to the high priest of Karnux; they would meet death in this sinister Tower of Death, and the citizens of the great Aztec city would never dream that their beloved queen and the man they believed to be the long-heralded fair god of the Aztecs, had perished at the hands of Tarx and his men.

The yells of triumph grew louder, as the warriors separated and began approaching the corners of the pyramid warily, alert for a whizzing stone from the American's sling.

WITH the fierce screams of Tarx in his ears, Ozar's keen eyes caught sight of a dark blob against one of the heavy stone panels about the base of the pyramid of tombs. As he drew the clinging Esta closer to the panel, a cry of surprise broke from his lips.

It was a doorknob—fashioned from a human skull, which had been lacquered a jet-black! Fragments of turquoise—thought by the Aztecs to be chipped from the sky itself by Mexlitl the Sun God—were studded in the dome of the skull. The eyes were pyrites encircled with shell rings of a delicate pink shade; the nose was inlaid with plates of jade.

But most peculiar of all—the jaws were agape in a wide, horrid yawn!

With a cry of joy, Queen Esta moved a copper-skinned hand forward, to slide back the bar which would open the door, admitting them to the tomb of her grandfather. Even the halls of the dead would be better than those murder-thirsty warriors who were creeping ever

closer, each bent on being the one to slay the white man and the woman he loved!

But even as she reached for the knob that was made of a yawning black skull, Ozar the Aztec knocked her hand aside. What had the mystic tablet said? Had it not warned them of a "fleshless head"? Here it was—the black skull!

And then Ozar made a fresh discovery. Even with his flesh wincing before the expected thud of barbed-tipped arrows, he bent closer to examine the open-jawed skull. Then it was that he discovered that the skull was mounted *above* the true doorknob, and was not an actual part of it.

The only way to move the sliding bar was to reach for the doorknob *inside* the skull's open, grinning jaws!

For an instant, he considered thrusting his hand inside the tooth-studded mouth, and opening the door. And then the warning of the golden tablets stayed his muscles. It had said for him to beware!

Zing! An arrow whizzed past Ozar's shoulder from an archer who had secreted himself just out of sight around the corner of the pyramid. Gasping with horror, the American youth moved over to protect the body of the Aztec girl.

Looking about in desperation, Ozar saw a wooden figure of Quetzal, the Plumed Serpent, near by. In a trice, he had seized the statue in a viselike grip.

The wood, brittle and dry, broke in his hands. Equipped with a sturdy bar, Ozar inserted its end through the black skull's gaping jaws, and slid aside the doorknob. The panel slid with it, revealing the black recesses of the tomb of Montezirka!

Another arrow droned past Ozar's head and splintered on the stone column beside them. Panting, the white man shoved the queen through the narrow opening into the tomb. But at the same instant, something happened that snapped his interest away even from the

threat of the warriors who were aiming their arrows in his direction, from three different angles.

For as he jerked the wooden bar from the skull's yawning mouth, the jaw snapped shut from hidden springs, splintering the bar as he pulled it away! Had it been his wrist, his hand would have been cleaved from his arm!

A sharp click, as he wrenched on the wooden bar, and the jaws opened once more, ready to catch a fresh victim!

An instant later, a shower of arrows pounded against the doorway, as Ozar the Aztec squirmed inside the tomb.

CHAPTER VIII.

INSIDE THE TOMB.

A SECOND volley of obsidian-tipped arrows splintered their reed shafts against the casing of the tomb door as Ozar stepped back. He was safe for the moment, but he realized that it would be impossible to shut the door against the savages outside. If he exposed so much as a hand, it would be bristling like a pincushion with arrows, before he could withdraw it.

Cold sweat beaded the white man's forehead as he joined the Queen of Karnux, back in the gloom of a long sealed tomb. He realized how narrow his escape had been, and even now the peril of their situation. Tarx had them cornered without hope of escape!

Esta's body was quivering as Ozar gathered her in his arms, his blue eyes probing the gloom.

If the sepulcher room of the Tower of Death had been gorgeously appointed, Ozar had seen but little yet. The floor beneath his feet was paved with solid gold plates, ingeniously fitted together with copper rivets. The walls were hung with rich tapestries representing the highest in Aztec art, and portrayed the various deities and the noble deeds of King Montezirka.

A thrill coursed through Ozar's body

as he noted one huge tapestry which depicted his own coming to the city of Karnux. The primitive artist had embroidered the scarlet-robed form of the high priest Tarx, holding aloft a white babe over the convex altar block atop the Temple of Gold.

In his royal palanquin near by, was the aged Montezirka, seated beside the infant girl who was to become the Queen of Karnux. The sky over the temple was pouring the Aztec symbols of rain; Yaxoh the Rain God was smiling from the heavens, his cloud-wreathed head radiating thunderbolts.

It was the scene where life had been spared Larry Starling, and the scene where death had removed Montezirka to the sun temple of the Aztecs. And on the king's lips was the awesome prophecy, shown in picture writing that had thrilled a pagan people on that storm-lashed night so long ago—that the white babe captured by the cruel Tarx was Ozar the Aztec, long-heralded fair god of Aztec legend.

The bodies of two white people, a man and a woman, lay beside the altar of sacrifice; and a turmoil of strange emotions surged in Ozar's breast as he looked upon the savage painting. He knew little of his past; the only father he could remember was Claxitl the Arrow-maker, who had raised him from infancy in his mountain grotto far out across the Valley of the Navajadas.

Cr-rash! A heavy jar on the door diverted the white youth's attention back to the danger which confronted him and the girl who was pressed fearfully against his body. The warriors of Tarx were pounding the door with their wooden swords, so as to open it wider!

IN a trice, Ozar the Aztec was alert as a steel spring. His inspection of the resplendent tomb had been arrested by the weird painting in which he was the central figure; but as he continued his glance about the sepulcher,

he saw that another, and small pyramid had been built inside the larger one, and it, like the first, was topped by a milk-white alabaster tomb.

Inside this smaller pyramid, Ozar knew, reposed the remains of Montezirka, grandfather of Queen Esta. There was but one door entering the pyramid; and but one door entering the sanctuary, which was covered with paintings of the king himself. Crude though the painting was, Ozar could see in the stern and regal features of the Aztec chief a resemblance to the maiden who was now in his arms.

"I fear that we have reached the end, my queen," whispered Ozar, his mouth pressed against the girl's ear. "If we are not slain, we can be imprisoned here until we starve. Thou shalt hide thyself among the statues on the tomb, away from possible arrows. I will guard the doorway with my sling. Hasten—at any moment they may attack."

Obedying Ozar's order, the Queen of Karnux slipped from his embrace, and Ozar saw her scurry for the pyramid. Not until he saw her safely hidden behind a huge idol of Mexlitl the Sun God, did he turn his attention to the dangers awaiting him.

Crash! Crash! Succeeding blows of heavy swords jarred the sliding stone panel loose in its groove, and the doorway opened to expose a three-foot slot. For a fraction of a second, the form of a huge warrior loomed on one side of the opening, his *itzli*-edged sword swinging from a brawny arm. The instant of carelessness cost the Aztec his life.

Whirrrr! The sharp whine of the American's sling cut the air, then ceased suddenly as Ozar released the pebble. There was a sharp smack of stone against the warrior's neck.

The wooden sword dropped from the Indian's grasp as he lifted his fingers to claw at a hole which gushed crimson from his unprotected throat.

The Indian toppled, half twisted on

buckling legs, and slumped dead on the very threshold of the tomb. The blue crest of plumes settled down to smear in the growing pool of crimson which bubbled from the warrior's wound.

The death of one of their number inflamed the blue-feathered warriors outside. Arrows whined through the opening, to shatter their obsidian barbs on the gem-incrusted pyramid tomb of the dead king. The Tower of Death resounded with vengeful yells. But the warriors could not place themselves in a position to see Ozar, without exposing themselves to a deadly hail of pebbles.

But the crafty Tarx, witnessing the opening of the door and the death of his warrior from a safe distance, was quick to see the only way of overcoming the white prisoner they had trapped.

"Cease, O warriors!" commanded the high priest, his voice sibilant as a viper's hiss. "Dost thou not realize that Ozar is unarmed, save for his sling? Thou shouldst rush the open door in a group. One, perhaps, will fall. But the white devil cannot reload his sling before thou shalt seize him, and cleave him to dog meat with thy weapons."

The savage warriors looked at each other. They glanced at the quivering form of their late companion, and shook their heads.

"But if he hides? It is dark within the tomb for fighting," one of them objected.

Tarx smirked. "I shall return to the Temple of Gold, and bring a torch," the high priest said. "*Huva!* Ozar the Aztec shall never leave the Tower of Death alive!"

So saying, the priest departed in a rustle of humming-bird-skin robes. But his words had left their effect on the warriors. They thought nothing of possible death from Ozar's sling; for it was the belief of every Aztec fighter that he who died in battle should reap perpetual reward in the heaven of Huitzil' the War God.

For twenty soul-harrowing minutes, the trio held council, before they made up their minds. Then, with war cries retching from their lips, the three Aztecs hurled themselves through the doorway over the stiffening corpse of their brother warrior.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTURED.

A BITTER smile twisted Ozar's lips as he sent a pebble humming like a bullet toward the jam of warriors. The stone hit the edge of a wicker shield and bounced into space with a sharp whine.

With whoops of triumph, the three warriors charged at the white man in the gloom, their shields raised and swords leveled. But Ozar did not flee into the shadows.

Instead, he was loading his sling, with swift, sure movements that were too quick for the eye to follow. The sling whirled and lashed, and one of the warriors tumbled in his mad charge, with a pebble piercing his brain.

The falling body tripped his two companions, and they sprawled on the copper-riveted floor at Ozar's feet. In an instant the white man had flung aside his sling—useless for hand-to-hand fighting—and was grappling with the nearest of the warriors.

From her hiding place behind the idol on the tomb pyramid which contained the body of her grandfather Montezirka, Queen Esta of Karnux witnessed the furious battle.

Her eyes recoiled as she expected to see the white man hacked and chopped to bits by the armored soldiers of Tarx; but she was due for a surprise.

Moving like a jaguar, Ozar caught the neck of his opponent in the jack-knife bend of one elbow. His legs pinned the Aztec's arms to his body, and the grim headlock was popping the fighter's eyes from their sockets.

The second warrior struggled to his feet and raised the great wooden sword for a blow that would have beheaded the American youth, but Ozar was ready.

Twisting deftly, he brought the broad shoulder of his struggling opponent under the descending sword. There was a sickening smash of sharp blade against quilted armor, and he felt his assailant wince as the sword cut through bone and flesh.

Ozar dropped the wounded warrior and plunged forward before the swordsman could jerk his weapon back for a second blow. The white man's brown-locked head caught the Aztec in the pit of his stomach, and the two went to the gold-tiled floor in a struggling whirl of flailing knuckles and squirming legs.

Then it was that the red-clad form of Tarx the high priest, appeared at the crimson-stained threshold of the tomb, bearing in his hands the flaming torch he had left the Death Tower to obtain.

Under its ruddy glare, the high priest saw Ozar and his mightiest warrior locked in a death struggle, there on the gold-slatted floor. At their feet lay another blue-plumed warrior, motionless. Another was struggling to lift himself, his shoulder deeply cut by his own partner's sword thrust.

But Tarx had no eyes for the furious struggle which was being enacted back in the dancing shadows. He felt that his warrior was more than a match for the bronze-skinned American. Was not Ozar naked save for the girdle of ocelot fur? The Aztec had the advantage of weight and weapons and armor. Ozar did not have so much as a knife!

It was for Queen Esta that Tarx's single eye roved over the resplendent, bestatued sepulcher pyramid. He had had the girl in his clutches once since this amazing adventure began, and he did not intend to lose her if he recovered her again.

And it did not take the cruel priest a

second to discover the golden-clothed body of the pagan empress, crouched behind an idol of Mexliti, halfway up the tomb pyramid.

A fiendish chuckle grated through Tarx's scrawny throat, at the sight. It was a soul-chilling laugh, like that of a hyena as it wolfs down the meat of its freshly slain kill. At last, Tarx had the wealth and power of the Montezirkas in his grasp!

LEANING his torch against one edge of the pyramidal wall, the high priest lifted his body up to the first terrace of the tomb. Like a lurking shadow, the figure of Tarx climbed to the second tier of tombs and on to the third, and then, crouched like some witch out of a forgotten fairy tale, the Aztec slipped forward toward the spot where Queen Esta, back turned to his approach, was hiding behind the idol of Mexliti.

With twiglike fingers fluttering ahead of him, the priest slowed down as he drew close to the figure of the girl, her attention glued to the form of her lover, fighting a duel to the death.

The faint scrape of golden-soled sandals against the dust which had accumulated for twenty years in the sepulcher room, snapped the attention of the empress of the Aztecs, and she turned, her teeth exposed under half-parted lips.

A scream of terror rose in the girl's throat as she saw the leering, one-eyed priest upon her, but the sound never passed her lips. With a rustle of crimson robes, Tarx's arms shot forward, one sweat-greased palm clamping over the queen's mouth at the same instant his other wrapped like a snake about her body, pinning her arms against her sides.

Resistance was useless, against the iron muscles of the high priest. While Ozar the Aztec fainted right and left, behind and ahead of him, with hard-flung fists, he little dreamed that half-

way up the terraced sepulcher, his mortal enemy was slinking toward the doorway with the body of the Queen of Karnux wrapped inside the flowing robes of his feathered mantle.

Silent as a ghost, the high priest gained the floor level and slipped outside the door with its grim knob of a black skull. Struggling like a crippled bird in his arms, was the body of Queen Esta, hidden under the folds of his humming-bird *tilmatti*.

Not until he had gained the outer corridor, away from the bedlam of noise in the death room, did Tarx pause.

Queen Esta had ceased her struggles; terror had robbed her of consciousness, and she was limp and flexible in Tarx's grasp as he lowered her to the floor.

Tarx's jade-inlaid teeth were exposed in a snarl of triumph as he drew a mosaic-incrusted knife from his girdle. Long years he had longed for the moment when he could stab the ruler of Karnux, and himself ascend to the throne of the Montezirkas.

At last his moment of triumph had come, and he was safely away from the wrath of Ozar. Tarx would not have dared slay the girl there inside the tomb where escape would have been impossible. But now——

The blade of *itzli* flint glistened as the high priest lifted it above the heart of the insensible queen. But the death stroke never dropped.

FROM the shadows of a corner at Tarx's elbow, a half-naked form of an Indian appeared, like a black ghost. And even as Tarx's arm darted downward in its arc that was to plunge the blade into the queen's bosom, a pair of steel-fingered hands seized the high priest's wrist.

A second later a heavy body crashed against Tarx's back, and the Aztec went down without a moan, dazed by his unseen attacker.

And as Queen Esta's eyelids flickered

open, it was to gaze into the troubled black eyes of Larxatun.

"Art thou uninjured, my queen?" asked the slave anxiously. "Luckily, when I left thee and thy master, I had time to hide myself ere the warriors caught me. I saw the evil Tarx leave, to get the torch; but he eluded me in a maze of passages. *Huva!* I knew I would find him again. My queen——"

"Quick—Larxatun—thy lord Ozar——" Esta gasped for breath as the Indian squatted beside her, too overcome with joy at the deliverance of his mistress to speak more. "Inside the tomb! He is——"

A hard look galvanized Larxatun's features. He nodded, and with a quick glimpse at the stunned form of Tarx, he leaped to his feet and hurried to the triangle-shaped door of the tomb.

He was thankful that he had had time to hide himself behind the drapes of the corridor walls, when he had first seen the advancing Aztecs; else he would have been slain in cold blood, and his opportunity of rescuing the Queen of Karnux would have been denied him.

But a gasp of horror leaped from the slave's lips as he charged into the sepulcher room and headed toward the door of the tomb pyramid.

Pouring from the interior of the tomb tumbled volumes of thick, black smoke, through which laced darting tongues of flame.

Ozar the Aztec was trapped inside a stone pyramid that was soon to become a raging furnace, as the tinder-dry hangings ignited!

CHAPTER X.

FIRE.

A BLAST of heat-laden air, accompanied by a swirl of foul-smelling black smoke, interrupted the death struggle which was being staged inside the tomb of Montezirka.

Fight forgotten, the Aztec warrior and Ozar turned their eyes toward the spot where Tarx, the high priest, had leaned his fire torch against the wall.

What had happened became instantly apparent. The entire interior of the tomb of the Aztec monarch was heavy with featherwork hangings. When Tarx had left his blazing torch against the wall, cobwebs had transmitted the flames to the nearest hangings.

Like oil-soaked lint, the tapestries had burst into flame. Even now, escape through the tiny door of the tomb was cut off. Soon the entire ceiling and walls of the pyramid would be a seething mass of flames!

But it was not for himself that Ozar gasped aloud in terror. Instead, his thoughts sped to Queen Esta, whom he believed to be hiding behind the huge idol of Mexlitl, halfway up the pyramid.

Disregarding the panting Aztec warrior with whom he had been fighting, Ozar turned, and with the lithe grace of an acrobat, leaped to the level of the first terrace of the tomb. Agile as a jungle monkey, the white man pulled himself up the terraced heights, to come at last to the spot where he had seen Queen Esta hide herself.

But the queen was gone!

"Esta! My queen! Where art thou?" Ozar's frantic cry was lost under the roaring of the flames inside the tomb, as the American leaped forward, hands groping in the shadows behind the idol for the form of his vanished lover.

And then, in the crimson glare of the flames which were making the pyramid walls a vault of fire, Ozar the Aztec read the story of Esta's capture in the ruffled dust that had accumulated along the terrace.

He saw the marks of Tarx's golden-soled sandals, the trail of his long red robes scraping the dust behind him; where he had hooked his long-nailed fingers over the edge to draw himself

up, and the marks where the queen had struggled.

And then Ozar's attention was arrested by a ringing shout which reached his eardrums even above the roaring of the flames. It was the voice of Larxatun, booming forth through the fire-barred door of the tomb!

"Ozar! Master! Behind thee!"

Spinning about as his slave's warning reached his ears, Ozar the Aztec braced himself as he saw the form of an Aztec warrior leaping upon him. The two went down in a squirming mass.

While Ozar, dazed by the discovery of Esta's absence, was searching behind the idol, his opponent had scaled the terraced pyramid to destroy him before the fire roasted both of them alive!

Helpless to assist, Larxatun witnessed the death battle which was being waged near the top of the tomb pyramid. He could see that his master had but a very slim chance against the heavier, armored warrior.

And then a red curtain of flame drove Larxatun back from the doorway, and covered from his eyes the sight of his master waging a fight from which escape seemed impossible.

THE fierce heat of the mounting flames, already eating the tapestries above their heads, separated the two fighters. Shielding his eyes with bare arms, the Aztec squared off, Ozar retreating before him, glancing about him for a weapon.

Suddenly, in the white-hot glare of the flames, Ozar perceived something which had escaped his observation before. Only a few feet above him was the snow-white sanctuary which topped the pyramid, in the center of which was a heavy door!

With a cry on his lips, the American leaped monkeylike to the next highest terrace, even as the warrior rushed him, bent on killing his foe before the flames consumed them.

Summoning his last ounce of strength, Ozar the Aztec climbed higher and higher, through the heat of the flames which seemed to cook his flesh. Cinders, dropping from the roof above, threatened time and again to ignite his flowing brown hair.

Blisters were rising on his neck, as he climbed on. If he could gain that sanctuary door, perhaps he would be safe from the onslaught of that berserk Aztec, and at the same time escape the fury of the flames.

Smoke wrapped singeing coils about the form of Ozar as he pulled himself to the top of the pyramid and staggered forward toward the sanctuary door. At the same instant, the leering face of his foe appeared at the edge of the topmost terrace, his hands pulling his body upward.

Seizing the stone knob of the sanctuary door, Ozar jerked with all his strength. But the door seemed sealed.

Murder lust gleamed on the hawkish face of the Aztec as he rushed forward, knife glittering in a heavy fist. Ozar sagged to his knees, tugging at the long-shut door.

And then, as Ozar jerked the door partly open, he felt a tremendous force as if of a thousand steel springs, shove the door wide. And from the inner recesses of the sanctuary plunged a flood of water that caught the Aztec and brushed him, like a chip, into space!

The tomb shook with the force of the water, and then Ozar the Aztec realized the reason why the Tower of Death had been built like a circular reservoir. The upper half of the great edifice was a water tank connected with this white tomb sanctuarily—providing the "plunging flood" mentioned in the tablet of gold!

Montezirka's supreme protection against invasion of his resting place!

The cool breath of the water surged past him, as he lay behind the door, heaving in gulps of fresh air. Below him,

a scene of indescribable destruction was unfolding before his eyes.

The fire was out, extinguished in a hissing, sizzling rush of sound like an explosion. Froth-flecked water was replacing the stench of black smoke, and somewhere down there in the swirling maelstrom which swept about the terraced pyramid were the bodies of Ozar's last two foes, the first victims of the great King Montezirka's ingenuity.

MANY minutes later, Ozar became aware of the fact that the flow of water had ceased. Struggling to his feet, the white man stepped forth on the puddled stones, and glanced within the tomb.

The roof of the sanctuary connected with a tube of masonry, doubtlessly tapping the immense water tank which formed the top of the Tower of Death. Immediately under the water tube, in the center of the sanctuary, reposed a great stone coffin, topped by a slab of pure gold.

The coffin of King Montezirka, mightiest ruler of the Aztecs, a cousin of the illustrious Montezumas! King Montezirka, who twenty years before had saved the life of a white babe from the sacrifice block of Tarx, the high priest! And now that white boy was standing in mute reverence at his rescuer's tomb!

Then Ozar noticed that the golden slab which topped the coffin was a mate to the warning slab at the entrance of the Tower of Death. Letters were carved on the slab of gold which had rested on the dead king's bier for twenty years:

The curse that foils a dead king's foes
Shall bless the one whom Yaxob knows;
A secret great for long has lain
Within the hidden curse's brain.

...

Aztec poetry as old as time itself!
An American youth, translating with the fluency of a native Aztec, a mystic verse which contained a "secret great"!

"Ozar! My lord!"

The silvery voice of Queen Esta snapped the American from his thoughts, and he spun about and leaped outside the sanctuary chamber, a glad cry springing to his lips.

There at the base of the pyramid, standing knee-deep in the water which was swirling out of the open tomb door to spread out on the main floor of the Tower of Death, stood Esta, Queen of Karnux!

At her side, grinning joyously as he saw the form of his master emerged unscathed from the depths of the sanctuary far above them, stood Larxatun, the slave who had saved his master's loved one from the death stroke of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs!

"Esta! Larxatun! Let us thank the great Sun God Mexlitl that we are safe!" shouted Ozar, as he leaped from terrace to terrace, slipping on the wet stones, scrambling forward recklessly in his eagerness to hold his queen again in his embrace.

"Ozar! I feared so for thee—the flames——" Sobbing like a child, Esta swayed forward into Ozar's arms as the white man splashed his way to where the queen stood beside her faithful slave.

"And I have the viper Tarx awaiting thee, to solve his fate!" boasted Larxatun, pressing forward to meet Ozar. "He——"

"Ya-ah!"

A high-pitched scream of hate startled the trio inside the tomb, and Esta recoiled in Ozar's arms as they saw the leering face of Tarx regarding them through the door of the tomb!

"Thou hast escaped my warriors—thou hast escaped the plunging flood of Montezirka, and the fire which threatened to consume thee!" shrilled the high priest, his forked tongue darting. "But why? So that I, Tarx, might have my revenge! *Otske!* I shall lock thee inside this tomb—to rot with the bones of countless Aztecs! Thou, Queen

Esta, shall die in the arms of thy lover! Thou, Larxatun, pig of a slave, shall witness thy lord and master, Ozar, in the throes of starvation! *Otske!*"

A snarl that was half rage and half terror burst from Ozar's lips as he and Larxatun leaped forward, wading through the water as they saw the priest leap back to shut the door upon them.

A thousand times worse than fire would be the slow death which would result from being entombed alive inside this grim, fire-seared, and water-drenched pyramid of Montezirka!

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREENSTONE BRACELET.

BUT the evil high priest of Karnux never accomplished his fiendish purpose. Even as his long, bony fingers reached through the yawning jaws of the black skull to grip the door-knob, a scream of agony resounded within the Tower of Death.

Queen Esta shrank back against the protecting form of Larxatun, as they saw Ozar the Aztec wade forward to where Tarx lay squirming in the water, his red robes bannered in a sodden mass about him.

The jaws of the black skull had claimed a victim at last! They had closed upon the fingers of the high priest, as securely as if a steel-fanged trap had ensnared the wicked Aztec!

With a last scream of pain and horror, the high priest of the sun god writhed, and then slumped unconscious, his body sagging from arms that were held by the teeth of that grinning Black Skull.

"If he does not lose his fingers, he will at least have some scars to remind him of the curse of Montezirka," murmured Ozar, as Esta and Larxatun joined him, to look down upon the fainted man. "The Black Skull will hold him from the water, and prevent his drowning, and after this water sub-

sides, I shall send one of his warriors into the Tower of Death to release him."

It was Larxatun who next spoke—to remind Ozar of the reason for their whole amazing adventure, the quest which had led them into the perils of the Tower of Death.

"But—thou hast not fulfilled the Fourth Command of Mexlitl the Sun God!" exclaimed the slave. "The greenstone bracelet—it will be impossible to find in this gigantic place——"

The white man smiled into the upturned face of Esta. Cold dread clutched at the girl's heart, for she knew that Ozar's destiny would lead him to a sacrificial altar unless he fulfilled the Five Sacred Commands of the sun god.

"Fear not, my queen!" responded Ozar, reading the terror in Esta's gaze. "For in the sanctuary where rest the bones of thy grandfather, the mighty Montezirka, I found the secret of the greenstone bracelet's hiding place."

"Then—then the bracelet lies within the tomb of—of my grandsire?" whispered the girl, shuddering as she glanced at the sanctuary above them.

Ozar shook his head. "No, my queen. The secret of the greenstone bracelet and the Fourth Command of the sun god lies—in *this black skull!*"

"The Black Skull? But——"

"In the sanctuary of thy grandfather Montezirka, is a golden slab which tells of a

'—curse that foils a dead king's foes
Shall bless the one whom Yaxob knows——'

And am I not the child of Yaxob the Rain God? Did not Yaxob bring the rain that spared my life, the night I was to be sacrificed by Tarx? The verse also tells me that

'—a secret dark for long has lain
Within the hidden curse's brain.'

"And now, my queen—I have but one more command to fulfill, and I shall

wear the crown of Ozar! One more of the Five Sacred Commands, and my destiny shall have been completed, my queen!"

Esta's face was furrowed with perplexity, as she saw the white man step forward to examine the Black Skull, while its tooth-studded jaws clamped in their grip the scrawny hands of Tarx, high priest of the Aztecs.

"But—the greenstone bracelet! I do not understand, my lord!" repeated the queen, in bewilderment. "Surely——"

Standing over the unconscious body of the wicked high priest of Karnux, Larry Starling touched the top of the Black Skull. With strong, flexible fingers, he lifted the top of the skull as if it had been the lid of a bowl!

"See, my queen?" said Ozar the Aztec, as Esta stooped forward to peer into the cavity exposed by lifting the top of the skull. "The secret which has lain within the hidden curse's brain! Thus do I fulfill the Fourth Command of Mexliti!"

And then the white man reached within the cavity of the Black Skull, and drew forth a glittering bracelet of price-

less greenstone, most precious of jewels in the sight of the ancient Aztecs who inhabited the Valley of the Navajadas.

"And now let us be gone from this abode of ghosts," said Ozar. "We will leave the bones of Montezirka to rest in peace forever. And we, Larxatum, must rest well likewise—for the quest for the Crown of Ozar will not be an easy one!"

Not until they were again outside the gloomy and forbidding temple did the three pause, while Ozar slipped the sparkling bracelet upon the burnished-copper arm of the pagan queen.

Larxatum bowed his head as one would do reverence to the coronation of a mighty monarch—for the greenstone bracelet which King Montezirka had hidden within the Black Skull was the emblem of the power and affluence of the Aztecs.

Don't miss "Ozar's Crown of Victory," to be published in the next issue of **Top-Notch**—the June number, on the newsstands May 19th.

"Ozar's Crown of Victory" will be the concluding episode of the "Ozar the Aztec" series.

THIRTEEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO

MEXICO is still a land of mysteries. There are wild mountains, canyons, and deserts which hold many secrets man has yet to solve. A short time ago, astounding revelations were made by the famous Brazilian archæologist, Doctor Maximus Neumayer, who has been visiting sites of monuments erected in Mexico by peoples of ancient races. To one stone monument he assigns the age of thirteen thousand years. The site, he declared, was the home of a prehistoric race swallowed up by volcanic eruptions.

The stone shaft is called the monument of Cuicuilco, and it is near the town of Tlalpan. The strangest thing about the Cuicuilco monument, outside of its great age, is that its architecture closely resembles the famous Tower of Babylon in ancient Assyria. Symbols or markings, if there ever were any, have been wiped out by the hand of time, but the shape of the stone shaft is remarkably like many of those found in the old world.

This gives rise again to the possibility that there many once have been a continent or a series of islands stretching across the Pacific Ocean and linking Asia with North and South America. Perhaps, in the dim past, races of men allied to the Assyrians and Egyptians made the tremendous journey across this linking continent into the heart of Mexico and there set up their mighty temples to the sun.



\$1,000 Ransom

Lazy Lucas looked harmless—but the Cattlemen's Association pitted him against the terror of the Black River Valley

By Galen C. Colin

Author of "Smoke Talk In San Miguel," etc.

A "Lazy Lucas" Story

THE blond-haired "Lazy" Lucas was the third Cattlemen's Association man to ride down into Black River Valley. Tom Gaines had been the first. He was planted in Gunsite burying grounds—with his boots on.

That was as far as he reached be-

fore he cashed in his chips from a half dozen slugs of lead in his lanky body. He had breath enough only to whisper a name before he died. And "Big Tim" Duncan, a member of the Association, had caught it.

"Black Dorgan—Serenio." Just that, and nothing more.

But it told plenty. Black Dorgan was the king-pin of the most ruthless and bloodthirsty outfit that had ever infested the range. And they headquartered at Sereno, the wicked little town in Black River Valley.

As a matter of course, old Barry Hildreth, secretary of the association, had sent another man after Black Dorgan. That man had been Lon Skelley—one of the best on the C. A. rolls.

Skelley had been gone three weeks, when the little package reached Barry Hildreth's desk.

It contained a polished silver shield, with the initials, "L. S." scratched on the back. And with it was a lock of brick-red hair. The shield was Skelley's—and so was the hair.

The crumpled sheet of paper that wrapped these two articles spoke volumes in a few words:

Yu know this badge an yu know this hair. If the hombre thet wore both of em is wuth a thousand dollars send it down. If he aint Im dumpin him in Black River. DORGAN.

And it was then that Barry Hildreth sent a boy to bring Lazy Lucas to his office. The youngster found the blond C. A. man dozing in his chair, leaning back against the sunny side of his little cabin in the outskirts of Pyrite.

The boy delivered his message in breathless haste. Lazy Lucas listened, barely opening his eyes. When the youngster had finished, he grunted resignedly and arose yawningly.

"Tell ol' Barry I'll be along d'rectly," he drawled. "Reckon it means a job of work—an' I'd better change my boots an' stow away a mouthful of grub."

UP in Barry Hildreth's office, Lazy Lucas slumped in the stout chair, his heels on Hildreth's desk. He listened to the old secretary's story, apparently paying no attention to what Hildreth was saying.

His square, almost handsome face showed not the slightest sign of excitement. His low-lidded eyes were closed to the narrowest slits. And his broad chest rose and fell slowly and evenly as if he were almost asleep.

But Barry Hildreth knew his man. He knew that beneath that slothful exterior there lurked the speed and sinews of a catamount; that those indolent hands could draw six-gun or cast a rope with the speed of lightning.

And he knew that the brain that guided those muscles was like a piece of well-oiled machinery in speed and accuracy. That cold courage was a natural to Lazy Lucas as his pose of amazing indolence.

When Barry Hildreth finished, he laid the silver shield and the lock of red hair on the desk before him. Lazy Lucas dragged his spurred heels slowly from the desk. He coiled his slightly more than six feet of body with a grunt.

His eyes, still lazy-lidded and sleepy looking, dropped to the two small objects. An almost imperceptible tightening of the muscles of his jaws was the only visible sign that he understood. His fingers played with the shield for a moment.

"An' yuh're sendin' me with the thousand dollars, huh? I might have knowed it was too good to be true. A full week of jest catchin' up on my restin—an' then this happens."

Barry Hildreth shook his head. "The association ain't got a thousand dollars to pay in tribute to Black Dorgan—or any of his thievin' kind. Lon knew he was runnin' into plenty danger when he rode down into Black River Valley. But it's our duty to do all we can to get him out of there safe an' sound."

A faint smile dimpled Lazy's bronzed cheeks. "Thet's what I was hopin' yuh'd say, boss. Lon wouldn't expect to be bought out—but he'll be lookin' for help. Reckon I'll take a sashay down thet way. It's a right long ride,

an' I don't relish that part of it none. But duty's duty." He sighed deeply.

Barry Hildreth smiled grimly. He knew that beneath that pose, Lazy Lucas was as eager as a leashed bloodhound to get onto the trail. And he knew, too, that if any one in the world could turn the trick of freeing Lon Skelley, Lazy Lucas was the man.

THREE full days' ride brought Lazy Lucas to the head of Black River Valley. He did not push his coal-black horse, Tar Heels, for he needed the time to lay out a plan of action.

He rode indolently, most of the time with one long leg swung around the saddle horn and his wide shoulders hunched forward. But his keen blue eyes, from beneath the low lids, kept constant watch of every movement on the trail or in the brush.

If he was being spied upon during this three days' ride, he failed to catch sight of the spy. The only human being he had seen was the line rider at the shack halfway between Pyrite and Sereno, where he had stopped for a dipper of water.

From all appearances, Lazy Lucas did not have a care in the world, as he paused on the crest of the ridge that looked down upon the head of Black River Valley.

If his carriage had been indolent before, it was doubly so now. His shoulders hunched still more, and his square chin rested on his chest.

His broad, gray Stetson was swept back upon his head, revealing his thatch of crisp blond hair. His blue eyes were almost hidden by the heavy, lazy lids that dropped over them.

But through the narrow slits, he scanned the black, forbidding valley closely. His gaze followed the course of the winding, black river as it threaded between great rocks and mighty trees.

His eyes rested for a long five min-

utes upon the little town that clung like a drab fungus growth to the steep south wall of the valley three miles below.

From where he sat his horse, Sereno looked to be what its name indicated—serene and peaceful. But Lazy Lucas knew differently. He knew that the half hundred dobe and log buildings sheltered twice that many men who were the scum of three States.

It was the boast of Sereno, delivered upon every possible occasion by Black Dorgan, that no law except that of the six-gun and knife was recognized in Black River Valley. And the fate of Tom Gaines and of Lon Skelley seemed to prove its truth.

Lazy Lucas gathered up his reins and swung his long leg down from where it draped around the saddle horn. A fitting smile played across his face. There was action ahead—action and danger. And these were the things that made life worth living for Lazy Lucas.

He touched the coal-black horse lightly with his rowels. "Let's get go-in', Tar Heels. Black Dorgan'll be lookin' for us—an' we can't disappoint him."

LAZY LUCAS was conscious of the eyes that watched him from the narrow, dingy windows of the shacks that made up the little town of Sereno, just as they watched every stranger who came down the twisting trail along the bank of the deep, black river.

And his own eyes darted from side to side beneath the sleepy lids. But he did not lift himself from the indolent, slothful pose. His head bobbed to the slow movements of his horse. His hands, holding the reins loosely, rested on his saddle horn.

He passed the first scattered shacks that clung precariously to the abrupt, rocky slope of the valley wall. He came abreast of the first of a crooked line

of squat buildings that almost crowded the trail into the river.

Halfway down the rutted path that served as Sereno's only street, he saw a crudely lettered sign jutting out from the most pretentious of the structures:

Black River Bar and Hotel
B. Dorgan, Prop.
Cash on the Bar! Head

Lazy Lucas pulled his black to a stop at the cedar-pole hitchrack before this building. With lazy eyes he scanned it. It was the only two-story structure in the straggling little town.

The lower floor was occupied by the bar and gambling tables. The blond C. A. man could see a dozen or more men inside, drinking or playing stud poker. He could sense from their exaggerated attempts at ease that they knew of a stranger's arrival.

The upper floor was marked by three narrow windows, with drab curtains drawn. Here would be the rooms that Black Dorgan let out—for cash in advance.

Lazy Lucas swung indolently from his saddle and tossed the reins over the hitchrack. He ducked under the cedar-pole crossbar and sloughed across the narrow slab porch.

He stepped through the door and shuffled toward the bar. Glittering eyes darted appraising glances in his direction, but he did not appear to notice them.

He placed his elbows on the scarred oak bar, and his body slumped lazily. His low-lidded eyes turned slowly to the greasy-aproned, stubble-bearded drink slinger.

"Rassle me a bottle of sarsapariller, barkeep," he drawled. "I'll tote it to a table. I'm right tuckered out. Need to ketch up on my settin' down."

The bartender eyed the blond stranger incredulously. "Sarsapariller? Yuh mean yuh—"

"Want sarsapariller," Lazy Lucas

finished the sentence for him. "Don't like beer—an' never drink hard liquor in the summertime."

A twisted sneering grin split the bartender's flabby face. He fumbled beneath the bar and hauled out a dusty bottle. As he sat it before the blond stranger, he leered across the scarred oak.

"Don't have much call fer sarsapariller in Sereno. This here's a *man's* town. Stranger here, ain't yuh?"

A lazy grin was the only answer. The C. A. man picked up the bottle and turned toward a table against the north wall. He caught a glimpse of a furtive face at the little window at the back of the room, but it ducked out of sight before he could fix its features in his mind.

He shuffled slowly to the table and slumped down into the chair. As he poured the brown liquid into a glass and lifted it to his lips, he allowed his gaze to roam about the room.

It was just like any one of a dozen other barrooms he had seen—the bar across the whole length of the south wall, a half dozen tables for those who cared to gamble, chairs for those who only wanted to loaf, and an inch of sawdust over the whole floor.

Near the back door a stairway went up to the rooms above. But all except two or three steps were cut off from view by a closed door.

Now Lazy's eyes strayed back to the little window where he had seen the peering face. A wall of black rock seemed to be almost against the building. Not more than three feet could separate dobie and rock.

But through the window, a narrow slash like a crack in the wall was plainly visible. Scarcely wide enough for two men to walk abreast, it angled upward and into the wall. A beaten path on the floor of this slash marked it as an often-used trail.

Lazy Lucas felt an overwhelming de-

sire to see where that trail led. Perhaps into a cavern—or maybe up to a ledge that overlooked the little town. But wherever it was, that was where Black Dorgan would be holding Lon Skelley.

He uncoiled his long body, and yawned widely. Then he slouched toward the bank window. A darted side glance caught the nod of the bartender's head, and the answering nod from a slab-sided, stubble-bearded man at the far end of the bar.

And as he approached the window, the ruffian stepped in front of him. Lazy's indolent gaze took in the man from head to foot. The man's right hand hovered over the butt of his low-thighed six-gun.

"I wouldn't go wanderin' around if I was yuh, stranger." The voice was low, but it grated harshly on Lazy's ear.

"Me, I usually go where I take a notion," Lazy Lucas drawled indolently. "except when there's some right good reason to change my mind. An' this time I don't savvy no reason—"

"This here's the reason!" rasped the slab-sided ruffian. A clawlike hand snatched the long-barreled six-gun from its holster, and jammed the muzzle into the blond man's middle.

A SLOW smile split Lazy's face. He let his lazy-lidded eyes drop to the weapon. Then he raised them slowly to the twisted face of the gunman. "Thet's a reason I always listen to," he said softly.

He turned on his heel and slouched back to his table. Once more he slumped in his chair—and once more his square chin rested upon his chest.

He had found what he wanted to know—perhaps more certainly than if he had been allowed to look around through the window. His guess had been right. The slash in the rock wall led to a cavern or a shack that Black Dorgan guarded jealously.

But that almost certain knowledge would do him little good. Not a chance in the world to follow the trail to its end. An attempt would mean a bullet before he was well started.

For a full half hour Lazy Lucas sat motionless. But behind the sleepy mask of his face, a lightning brain was at work. And the train of thought would have been most interesting to Black Dorgan, could he have read it.

It was not likely. Lazy Lucas reasoned, that the outlaw king knew him for a C. A. man. Many strangers came to Sereno—and of all of them, Lazy Lucas appeared the least like a man hunter.

The blond man determined to play the waiting game. He'd let Black Dorgan make the first move. His own actions would be judged by just what this move was.

Nor did he have long to wait. The sound of the opening of the door from the stairs brought Lazy Lucas from his indolent pose for only a second. Then his eyes dropped again. For the newcomer who stepped out into the bar-room was only a pasty-faced boy.

But the lazy-lidded blue eyes followed the slight form of the youngster as he shuffled across the room and exchanged a word with the bartender. Lazy Lucas caught the fat-faced man's almost imperceptible nod in his direction.

The boy turned. And now Lazy Lucas got a good look at the thin, colorless face. For a second his muscles tensed. Then a half smile flicked across his face. Something was due to happen—and soon. For that face was the same one he had seen peering through the rear window.

The youngster slouched toward Lazy's table. The blond C. A. man studied him as he approached. The boy's face was not evil—but rather frightened and desperate. It was as if he was doing something that he hated terribly to do.

He reached the table and slumped down in the chair opposite Lazy Lucas. For a moment he did not speak—just studied the expressionless, low-lidded face across the table.

Then he leaned far across the table, and his voice was almost a whisper. "Are—are yuh a C. A. man? An' have yuh come to see Black Dorgan?"

A wry smile spread across Lazy's face. He shook his head slowly. "If I was, yuh wouldn't expect me to say so, would yuh?" he drawled.

"No, I reckon not," answered the boy listlessly. "But Black Dorgan thinks yuh are—an' he's wantin' to see yuh."

"I been here most all day," answered Lazy Lucas softly. "I ain't none hard to see."

"Yeah. But Dorgan wants to see yuh—alone. He done sent me to tell yuh he's waitin' for yuh upstairs."

"Upstairs, huh?" Then he leaned toward the slim boy. His voice was softer and lower than ever. "Yuh're workin' for Dorgan—but yuh ain't like him. How come, son? Has he got yuh scared?"

The boy's eyes went wide, and his face blanched to a still paler shade. He shook his head swiftly. "I'm workin' for Dorgan because I want to. I been here at Sereno ever since he k— Ever since my dad died."

"All right. All right. We'll say no more about it. Jest amble back an' tell Black Dorgan thet if he wants to see me, I'll be settin' at this table."

The slim boy turned, and his gaze went back and up along the wall of the stairway. His hand gestured toward it. Lazy's glance followed. Then it held on the muzzle of a six-gun that was thrust through a loophole in the wall.

For a tense second he studied it. Then his eyes returned to the boy. A twisted smile came to Lazy's face.

"I was wrong, son. I'll be goin' to visit Black Dorgan upstairs."

The boy drew a long, quivering breath. "I—i thought yuh would." Then his voice became a mere whisper: "Don't start nothin'. Yuh'll think Black Dorgan is alone—but there'll be others watchin' yuh. Dorgan ain't got no more conscience than a snake."

"Thank yuh, son. I'll remember thet.— An' when the time comes, I'll pay yuh back."

He uncoiled his long body, and yawned widely as he stretched his arms above his head. Then he slouched toward the stair door.

THE passageway into which the door opened was gloomy, and a musty odor came down its narrow, twisting length. Lazy Lucas halted on the lower step until his eyes could adjust themselves to the semi-darkness.

Then a low, harsh voice reached his ears from above. "Up the stairs, hombre—an' keep yore hands clear o' yore holsters."

Slowly Lazy Lucas mounted the rickety stairs. He had not caught a glimpse of the speaker, nor did he see him as he climbed. But he heeded the order carefully.

The stairs ended in a narrow, gloomy hall with two closed doors on each side. Lazy Lucas hesitated. Behind one of these doors would be Black Dorgan. Which one, he could not tell.

But the question was answered almost immediately. The second door on the right swung open noiselessly. There was still no sign of a human being. The whole thing looked to Lazy Lucas like a carefully planned and rehearsed series of mysteries, rigged up to unsettle the nerves of a stranger.

He shuffled to the opened door and looked inside. His expression did not change at sight of the black-bearded, thick-bodied man who sat behind a huge slab table. Lazy's gaze swept to all corners of the room.

The only furnishings were the table and three or four homemade chairs. Not a curtain—not a bunk—not even another door in the room. Only a single window, and it looked out squarely upon the street below.

Then his lazy-lidded gaze went back to the man who glared silently at him. "Yuh're Black Dorgan—an' yuh was wantin' to see me?" There was a question in the lazy, drawling voice.

"Come in!" Black Dorgan's voice matched his body—rough, harsh, and booming.

LAZY LUCAS slouched toward the burly ruffian. He stood before the table, looking down questioningly at Black Dorgan.

"Yuh're a C. A. man—an' yuh're bringin' a thousand dollars to buy thet red-headed friend of yores."

Lazy Lucas shook his head. "I ain't had a thousand dollars onto me for a right long spell. Yuh're barkin' up the wrong tree."

Black Dorgan's hairy fists pounded on the table in front of him. His beady little eyes fairly glittered. "Don't lie to me, blast yore hide! I knowed yuh was comin' hours before yuh got here. I know who yuh are, too." A twisted, gloating grin split his bearded face. "Yuh're Lazy Lucas, ol' Barry Hildreth's prize hombre."

Lazy Lucas drew a sharp breath. This was something he had not bargained for. He hadn't even dreamed that any one away down here at Sereno would recognize him. It was a mighty tough spot he was in now. His hands stole toward his holsters. Then he remembered the warning of the slim boy downstairs.

He shrugged his shoulders listlessly. "Suppose yuh're right, to avoid argument. But when it comes to bringin' a thousand dollars to Sereno, thet's somethin' different. A waddy'd have to be plumb crazy to do thet."

The big man leaped to his feet. With catlike speed, in spite of his bulk, he circled the table. His right hand grasped the butt of his six-gun, as his left searched Lazy's pockets.

The blond man stood grinning softly as Black Dorgan's hand fumbled in his pockets. "If yuh find thet thousand, I'll split with yuh," he drawled.

The burly man drew back. His face was like a thundercloud, and his lips writhed in deadly anger.

"Blast yore hide! Where have yuh hid it?"

Lazy Lucas shook his head. "Yuh wouldn't expect me to tell yuh, always providin' there *was* any thousand dollars. Yuh ain't givin' me credit for right good sense. Now if I was figgerin' on swappin' the money for Lon Skelley, likely I'd insist on doin' it considerable distance from Sereno."

Black Dorgan stood before Lazy Lucas, his shoulders hunched and his hands crooked for the butts of his guns. For a full minute Lazy Lucas was sure the big man was going to draw. And his own lightning hands were ready to beat Black Dorgan at his own game.

Then the big ruffian straightened his shoulders. A leering grin spread across his bearded face. "So yuh hid it somewhere along the trail, huh? Yuh didn't trust me, huh? Well, I ain't trustin' yuh, neither. I'm givin' yuh a few days to think it over. Mebbe yuh'll change yore mind."

Black Dorgan lifted his hand. A section of the wall on the side toward the rock barrier swung open. It revealed a gloomy, rock-walled passage. Lazy's eyes could penetrate it for only a few yards.

Two men stepped out of the gloom, and looked toward Dorgan for instructions. The big man gestured toward Lazy Lucas.

"Take his guns, hombres. He won't be needin' 'em where he's goin' to spend the next few days. Hang 'em up on

the wall behind my desk. I want 'em where they'll remind me of a slick C. A. man who didn't get away with his tricks."

As Dorgan's two ruffians disarmed Lazy Lucas, the burly man stepped up to him and prodded him in the ribs with the muzzle of his six-gun.

"Get goin', hombre!"

Lazy Lucas turned and slouched toward the gloomy opening. With Black Dorgan at his heels, he stepped out of the room and onto a slab floor that resounded as if there was only empty space below it.

Six feet of this—then his feet found a rough-hewn rock floor. The sides of the narrow passage were rock, too. The only light came from a narrow crack far above.

"Keep right on goin', hombre!" rasped Black Dorgan.

For what Lazy Lucas judged to be a hundred yards, the passage twisted and turned. Then he stopped as a wall of solid rock faced him. Dorgan stepped to his side and pushed on an outthrust knob of rock.

The wall swung easily, revealing a well-lighted room beyond. Lazy Lucas edged into it, his lazy-lidded eyes sweeping to every corner. He barely repressed a gasp as he caught sight of a form chained by shackles to the opposite wall.

A hoarse chuckle came from Black Dorgan's lips. "I'm bringin' yuh some company, Skelley. Hombre by the name o' Lazy Lucas."

"Hello, Lon." Lazy Lucas spoke evenly, as if he had casually run onto the other on the range.

And Lon Skelley took his cue from the indolent appearing blond C. A. man. "Hiyuh, Lazy. Long time I ain't seen yuh. Welcome to my shack."

Then Black Dorgan prodded Lazy Lucas again, and gestured toward a single window that let in the light. "Look here, hombre. I want to show yuh what

yuh'd be up against, even if I wasn't goin' to shackle yuh alongside yore partner."

Lazy Lucas strolled to the window and looked out. Almost straight down, a good hundred feet were the drab roofs of the buildings along Sereno's single street and at the left the twisting crack that he had seen from below angled down.

And this crack was the only visible means of descent. The passage which had brought him here evidently threaded through the rock wall itself. This little slab shack on the narrow ledge was as impregnable as the strongest fort.

Lazy Lucas turned and faced Black Dorgan. He forced a lazy smile to his face. "Right tight little hide-out yuh got here, Dorgan. Can't imagine what yuh need o' shackles. Don't look like a waddy could get out, no matter how hard he tried."

Black Dorgan chuckled hoarsely. "More than one's tried to slide down the rock—an' got themselves kilt in the fall. An' yuh waddies are worth more alive than dead."

Now he prodded Lazy Lucas to the wall, ten feet from Lon Skelley. In a scant minute a pair of leg shackles securely fastened the blond C. A. man. Then Black Dorgan drew back, leering.

"I'll be up to see yuh every day or two. When yuh've decided yuh've had enough, mebbe yuh'll talk business."

He turned, twisted a wooden button on the wall, swung it back, and disappeared into the passage that had brought Lazy Lucas to this shack on the face of the sheer cliff.

Lazy Lucas squatted, his back to the wall, and turned his gaze to Lon Skelley. "Looks like we're in the same boat, Lon. An' the worst of it is thet there ain't no thousand for me to dicker with."

"I wasn't lookin' to be bought out, Lucas. Black Dorgan outsmarted me—an' I had it comin'."

A wry smile spread across the blond man's face. "Looks like he outsmarted me. too."

LAZY LUCAS looked down at the iron shackles on his ankles. They were heavy and strong—fastened with a stout lock. And a thick chain tethered them to the slab wall. Their length allowed him only two or three feet to move about in..

Not a chance to pick the lock, or to loose the chain from the wall. Looks like he was stuck until Black Dorgan was ready to turn him loose. And when that happened, an even worse fate than imprisonment would be waiting. Lazy Lucas knew that for a certainty.

Now he turned his gaze to the little room. It was almost entirely free of furnishings. Only a small table, made from a wide slab nailed to the head of an empty barrel—two or three rickety chairs—a little monkey stove in one corner.

"Looks pretty tough for us, Lon," drawled Lazy Lucas. "Shore hope they feed well in this here hotel. Thet'd help a lot."

"No kick on the feedin'," answered Lon Skelley. "The skinny kid thet brings the grub sneaks in more than he's supposed to bring. Twice he's fetched me tobacco an' papers, too."

"The young hombre with the white face an' the scared eyes, huh?" Lazy Lucas squatted against the wall, his low-lidded eyes closed.

He had not been mistaken in the slim youngster. There was no love lost between the boy and Black Dorgan—only deadly fear of Dorgan's wrath kept the youngster in Sereno.

There might be a chance of enlisting the boy's help—if only he could be persuaded that he could escape Black Dorgan's wrath, along with the two C. A. men. Worth a try, anyway.

The long afternoon dragged. Darkness was falling over Sereno when the

white-faced boy opened the door that led to the down trail. He carried a galvanized pail, and set it down in front of the prisoners.

"Black Dorgan said yuh'd both have to get along on the same grub thet the red-headed hombre has been gettin'. But I put in three-four sour-dough biscuits while the cook wasn't lookin'."

"Good boy," grinned Lazy Lucas. "I feel like I ain't tasted grub for a week."

AS the two C. A. men ate the coarse food, Lazy Lucas eyed the youngster through lazy-lidded eyes. There was a streak of courage in the slim body—Lazy Lucas knew that. But it would take confidence as well as courage.

"Yuh don't like it none too well in Sereno, son?" questioned the blond man carelessly.

The boy's eyes opened wide. "Why—why, what makes yuh think thet?"

"Black Dorgan kilt yore father. Yuh almost told me thet, down in the bar-room. An' it ain't natural yuh'd feel none too good toward him. Yuh'd like to get out, wouldn't yuh?"

A look of hope swept across the youngster's face for a second—then it faded. His lower lip trembled. "Yuh—yuh don't know Black Dorgan. He'd plug me like he would a polecat. There ain't a chance in the world."

A slow grin spread across Lazy's face. "Yuh never can tell, son. If yuh'll jest listen close—an' do what I say—mebbe yuh'll be on yore way long before mornin'."

The boy shook his head, but Lazy Lucas could see that the confidently-spoken words had aroused a spark of hope. He continued evenly.

"When yuh go back down to the bar-room, slip the word to Black Dorgan thet I'm honin' to see him. Then make it to the livery barn. See thet three horses are saddled an' waitin'—my black, an' one for you, an' for Lon

Skelley. Then stand by until somethin' happens. When it does, race for the livery stable."

The white-faced boy nodded slowly. "He couldn't figger I was trickin' him if I do that, could he?"

"Nope, son. Yuh'd jest be tellin' him the truth."

The boy picked up the pail, turned to the door and disappeared in the darkness of the slash in the rock wall. And then Lon Skelley turned wondering eyes to Lazy Lucas.

"What yuh got in mind, Lucas?"

Lazy Lucas grinned. "It's bad luck to prophesy what's goin' to happen, feller. But I can promise yuh that we ain't goin' to spend a lot o' time in this here shack."

The blond C. A. man squatted against the wall, the very picture of indolence. His hands rested listlessly on his knees, and his eyes were almost closed.

He barely looked up, twenty minutes later, when the trail door opened and Black Dorgan stepped in. A gloating grin twisted the black-bearded man's face. He swaggered over and stood before Lazy Lucas.

"So yuh decided to talk, huh? I figgered yuh'd get enough, pronto."

Lazy Lucas looked up slowly. "I've tried the chains—an' they're plenty strong. Can't pick the locks. Don't know what I'd do, even if I was free. Nothin' else to do but talk."

"Now yuh're actin' sensible," grunted Dorgan. "Jest tell me where yuh hid that thousand dollars. I'll get it—an' then I'll be back to open them locks."

"It's a right long ways to the thousand dollars," said Lazy Lucas softly. "Yuh'd have a hard time findin' it, unless I'd draw yuh a map. Unlock these here shackles, an' I'll see what I can do."

Black Dorgan shook his head, and a leering grin spread across his face. "I ain't turnin' yuh loose until I get my hands onto the money. Yuh can make

yore map jest as well with them chains on."

He turned to the table, made from the wide slab and the barrel. He scratched a match and lighted the wick of the oil lamp that sat upon it. Again he faced Lazy Lucas. He drew a stub of a pencil from his pocket and tossed it to the prisoner.

"The rock floor is smooth. Make yore map there."

Lazy Lucas drew a long breath, as he picked up the pencil. He shook his head slowly. "I'll do the best I can. Squat down here so's I can explain it to yuh."

He leaned over and began to trace a twisting line on the rock floor. Slowly and carefully he drew a rough map of the trail leading out of Sereno.

Black Dorgan watched with growing interest. He leaned low to watch. Then Lazy Lucas paused. He looked up at Dorgan, puzzled.

"Now where would yuh say that lightnin'-blasted pine should be located, Dorgan? I can't jest remember——"

Black Dorgan sucked in his breath eagerly. He squatted on his heels before Lazy Lucas, and his thick finger went out toward the crude map.

"Right here, jest a little more than three——"

But the rest of the sentence did not leave his lips. For Lazy Lucas's sinewy right hand shot out. It grasped the burly ruffian's ankle. He jerked with all his might.

Startled, unbalanced by the swift movement, Black Dorgan toppled backward, a rasping curse bubbling from his lips. But Lazy Lucas acted with baffling speed. He had spent an hour in planning every movement.

WITH both hands on Black Dorgan's ankle, he dragged the big man toward him. Dorgan was clawing at his holsters, but he could not drag the guns from the

leather. And now he lay on his back, his feet tangled in Lazy's chains.

With the smooth action of a cat-amount, Lazy Lucas shot his long body out to the full length of his shackles. His hard right fist drew back—then smacked solidly on Black Dorgan's jaw.

The ruffian's eyes went glassy. Once more the blond C. A. man struck. This time Black Dorgan was out—and would remain that way for some time.

Lon Skelley watched breathlessly, as Lazy Lucas snatched Black Dorgan's six-guns from their holsters. His eyes opened wide, as the blond C. A. man turned one of them toward the lock on his leg shackle.

Crack! The stout lock shattered at the impact of the heavy slug. Another bullet—and the other lock ceased to function. Lazy Lucas shook the chains from his ankles, and leaped to his feet.

He stooped over Lon Skelley. Two more bullets shattered the redhead's shackles. Lon Skelley staggered to his feet.

"Fast work, Lucas! But what now?"

"They'll be comin' up the trail in a minute! No time to waste! Rip the slab off the barrel. Then break up the monkey stove an' heave the pieces into the barrel. Set it right in front of the door."

As Lon Skelley hastened, wondering, to obey the astonishing orders, Lazy Lucas streaked to the opposite wall. He twisted the wooden button. A sigh of relief came from his throat, as the door into the tunnel swung open.

Now he raced back to the trail door, picking up the lighted lamp from the floor. Lon Skelley had already carried out Lazy's orders.

For a scant ten seconds, the blond C. A. man listened. The shots had aroused the men in the barroom. He could hear shouts down at the foot of the trail.

Now he twisted the burner and wick from the lamp. He spilled a great

splotch of oil on the wall of the shack. The rest he emptied into the barrel.

The he stooped and touched the lighted wick to the wall. The flame leaped high. He straightened and tossed the burning wick into the barrel. It blazed up hotly.

He took a half step backward. One booted foot shot out. The barrel toppled from the door and into the sharply sloping trail. As it hurtled down, it gathered speed, and the flames crackled and roared. But there was no time to waste in watching it. He raced back into the room. Already the fire was eating into the slab wall.

He swooped and lifted Black Dorgan easily to his shoulder. With Lon Skelley at his heels, he darted into the pitch-dark tunnel.

Hardly had they gone a dozen feet when they heard the crash as the barrel, weighted with the broken stove, thundered into the back of the barroom. Frightened shouts followed the crash.

FEELING his way, but making fast time, Lazy Lucas threaded the dark tunnel. He came to the wall of Black Dorgan's room. His fumbling fingers found another wooden button, like the one in the shack above.

The two C. A. men and the unconscious ruffian burst out into the upper floor of the Black River Bar. Below them they could hear shouts and the crackle of flames.

"The building's afire, Lucas! We'll be burned like rats in a trap!" said Lon Skelley hoarsely.

Lazy Lucas did not answer. Instead, he sped to the window that looked down upon the street. Then his gaze swept to the right. Lighted by the growing blaze, he made out the roof of the adjoining building, eight feet below.

The edge of the roof jutted out two feet beyond the wall of the Black River Bar. Not a big target to hit, but they'd have to chance it.

"Swing out, Lon! Drop onto that roof next door! Get set to catch this carrion when I let it down!"

In a scant three minutes the two C. A. men and their unconscious prisoner were on the flat roof. Like an uneven floor, the roofs stretched for a full hundred yards up the twisting street.

"Lucky these here waddies built their shacks so close together," muttered Lazy Lucas.

THE milling crowd down in front of the Black River Bar had eyes only for the blaze of the tinder-dry building—a blaze that was growing in intensity with every passing second.

They did not see the two shadowy forms speeding over the roofs in the direction of the livery barn at the end of the street. There was no one watching, when they dropped to the ground and hurried across the half hundred feet to the bulky stable.

No one, that is, except the slim, white-faced boy who stood at the heads of three saddled horses. Lazy Lucas was breathing heavily from the unconscious burden he carried, and he heaved it across one of the saddles with a sigh of relief.

Then he swung up behind Black Dorgan's body. The other two were in their

saddles, as Lazy Lucas neckreined the horse around the big barn and angled for the trail that led up the length of Black River Valley.

From the crest of a steep ridge a full mile away, he shot a look back over his shoulder. A slow grin spread across his face. For the great blaze against the sky told him that the fire was eating its way along the tight row of slab buildings. It was too late to save anything.

"Reckon Sereno won't worry us no more, Lon," he drawled. "They won't be nothin' left of it in three-four hours. Black Dorgan ought to be glad he's out of it, when he wakes up. But likely he won't. He don't impress me as bein' a very grateful cuss."

"But Barry Hildreth'll be glad to see him, Lucas," answered Lon Skelley. "An' me, I'm plumb grateful to the coldest nerve an' the best brains in the cow country."

Lazy Lucas grinned in half embarrassment. "It wasn't brains on my part, Lon—it was jest greed an' lack of brains in Black Dorgan's head. He figgered he was too smart for any outfit of lawmen. But he's headed along the trail that all killers foller sooner or later."

Watch for another "Lazy Lucas" story in an early issue of Top-Notch.



PISA'S LEANING TOWER NOT TO COLLAPSE

AN architectural commission recently appointed to investigate the condition of the leaning tower of Pisa and figure out some means of stopping the gradual tilting, ten millimeters in ten years, has made its report, and the work of stopping the tower from collapsing will soon be done. The commission stated that the tower could tilt thirty centimeters before collapsing, unless an earthquake or landslide took place.

An injection of cement into the subsoil of clay and sand under the tower on the leaning side will be made, and its further tilting will be stopped.

The construction of the tower was begun in 1174 and completed in 1350.

The campanile is 179 feet and leans more than 16 feet out of the perpendicular.



Sea-wolf Gold

***With a strange yellow flag flying at the forepeak,
Joe Carley sailed in quest of pirate treasure***

By Chart Pitt

Author of "The White Dragon," etc.

CHAPTER I.

KILLERS OF THE CORAL.

A SHOT rang out among the mangroves. A wailing cry lifted itself beneath the stars, and its echoes went drifting down across the South Sea night. Joe Carley leaped to his feet and caught up the loaded rifle that lay beside the fires.

Zuva was a wild and godless isle of the coral seas, and the law of the land

was the law of the whetted blade. Men fought for treasure, and men died along the wave-washed beaches—and no one asked a question.

But a barking gun was an alien sound in Zuva. To-night there was something afoot besides the old feud of the rival gangsters and the exploits of the wild-cat dealers who traded in pearls and whisky and picked dead men's pockets beneath the stars.

Joe glanced down the lagoon where

the riding lights of the *California* rocked back and forth in the rolling tide.

It was time he was getting back to the boat. He had a date with Woo Ling, the Mongol adventurer, and the old tongman had been as close-mouthed as usual about his affairs. He had told him to come ashore an hour before moonrise, and to come alone—and he would be well paid for his trouble.

He turned his head and listened. The Chinaman was on the square, which was more than you could say of many a white man in the South Seas. Since coming down there among the islands, Joe Carley had played a lone hand in the pearl game, and few and far between were the men he had trusted. Here and there was a friend he could depend upon. Black, brown and yellow they were, but they were men to the last inch.

Far down the beach was the sound of running feet. Joe stood there beneath the stars and waited, while the crunching footsteps drew closer across the coral.

A form lurched out of the shadows, and Woo Ling reeled into the firelight. The Chinaman pitched forward, and fell in a crumpled heap at the trader's feet.

He reached a clawing hand toward his friend, and the burning driftwood splashed its crimson glow across his stricken face.

Joe knelt beside him. The dying Mongol fumbled at the breast of his bloodstained jacket, and pulling out a piece of paper he thrust it into the trader's hand.

A whisper seemed to flutter his passing breath—and was gone. It was only a phrase—but that phrase was "*Pelican* gold."

Woo Ling slumped lower upon the coral. Joe growled an oath as he bent above him.

The Mongol lifted his head at the

word. He drew something from under his coat, and shoved it into the trader's lap. Once more his yellow lips parted, and that ghostly whisper fluttered among his breath.

"You promise to take flag along—and be brother to the Big Tong."

Joe nodded his head in answer to the old man's request.

WOO LING, the Chinaman, died. His numbed lips had failed to reveal the identity of his murderer—things like that meant nothing in that land of the Greater Tong to which old Woo was going.

His words had been of brotherhood, and of gold that would reward the faithful. Joe Carley sat there in the deepening shadows and stared at a bloodstained treasure map that still held the ragged scar of a murderer's bullet.

The trader unrolled the bundle of silk, and held it to the light of the dying fire. It was the flag of some heathen tong, a flaming yellow dragon upon a blood-red sea.

Joe folded the silken flag and tied it about his waist. To him it was something more than the emblem of a tong. It was a token of the faith that had bound him to Woo Ling, the Chinaman, whose skin was saffron-yellow but whose soul was white and clean.

That ragged and bloodstained scrap of paper he had taken from the fingers of the dying Woo Ling was a passport to Eldorado, where diamonds glittered in the caves of the sea rovers, and every rainbow had its gold pot at the end.

The trader smiled to himself. It was strange how a treasure map could get into your blood the way it did.

It was something you couldn't measure by the yard stick of the dollar. He might make a fortune in the pearl trade, but it never would give him the thrill he got out of that scrap of paper that told about the *Pelican* gold.

THE pirate ship *Pelican* wrote a red and shameful page in the history of the South Seas, and in her day much treasure had passed across her bloody decks.

Sailormen and island traders cursed her and her cutthroat crew—and sent a petition to the English king, asking for a man-of-war to protect them against that ruthless freebooter. Still the ill-famed *Pelican* sailed upon her swashbuckling way, and laughed at the oaken dreadnaughts that followed in her wake.

She gathered her toll from scuttled ship and looted settlements, and the South Seas smiled upon her godless test, and offered her a thousand lagoons to hide in.

Then one night the whim of that outlaw ocean changed. The lurking typhoon came rolling down across the deep, and even the mighty *Pelican* turned tail and fled before it.

Somewhere in the black of that storm-accursed night, a hidden reef lay waiting. The coral teeth gnashed at the ship's planking, and the waves chased each other across her submerging decks.

That much was history, as history in the South Seas goes. The *Pelican* came no more to ravage the tropic isles, but legend and folklore carried her name in many a rambling tale.

Stories came and went about the pearl camps, vague and fantastic tales of the *Pelican* gold. It haunted the dreams of treasure-mad men, and added its glint of romance to lives that were wild and reckless, and beyond the line of the law.

Joe turned his head and listened, and a groping hand was reaching for his gun. Some sound had caught his ear, a sound that did not belong to the tropic night.

A shadow emerged from the deeper gloom of the mangrove hedge, and inch by inch it crept across the coral.

Joe sat there motionless beside his dying fire, and his fingers toyed with a bullet-scarred treasure map that was red with a tongsman's blood.

The shadow crept nearer in the night. But the trader's face was turned toward the sea, where the *California* was riding among the wind rips—and his eyes were focused a thousand miles away.

There was a step upon the coral, but the ears of Joe were tuned to a far sound. The voice of the gold was calling, and the road to Eldorado lay waiting for him to come.

CHAPTER II.

WOLVES OF THE SEA.

IT was night in the South Seas, and once more the call of romance and adventure was on the wind. The burning glare of the day had slackened, but the blood of man still seethed with poison fires, and the Coral Coast was following the star of its lawless desires.

Out on the black lagoon the steam schooner *Cormorant* lay at anchor, a vague and shapeless blotch at the rim of the shore shadows.

Like an unclean thing she wallowed in the humping ground swells, and rattled at her anchor chain.

Down in the after cabin, Morg O'Brule, admiral of the Blackbird Fleet, sat brooding over his bottle, and dreaming of days that had been red with something besides wine.

The slaver's muscles tightened at the thought. Those had been the happy days, when he carried a black flag handy in his color locker, and wrote his own law with a dripping blade.

Evil days had come to Morg O'Brule. The cruisers of the king had chased the black flags off the ocean, and he had been forced to find a place for himself in the slave trade, running blacks in for the Java plantations.

There was money in running slaves, but it was no job for a self-respecting pirate. The decks of the *Cormorant* reeked with the smell of the blacks, and there wasn't enough soap in the South Seas to wash away the fumes.

Morg O'Brule chuckled to himself, as he toyed with his brimming glass. To-night the wheel of time had rolled backward, and once more he had a man-size piece of work to do. He had a red-hot tip on the *Pelican* gold—and there was nothing but a slant-eyed Chinaman standing in the way.

An hour ago he had sent "Alcatraz John" ashore to look over the ground and locate the chink. In these days a fellow had to watch his step a bit, or he would be bumping his nose against a gunboat—and then it would be a hempen rope for him.

Alcatraz was one of the best trackers in the South Seas, and it wouldn't take him long to get the lay of things ashore. As soon as he came back with his report, a picked landing party would be sent out after the Chinaman, and before another day grew red in the east, they would be on their way to Eldorado.

Morg O'Brule toyed with his empty glass, and his black eyes were staring out of the open port.

Over on shore a bonfire waved its red arms in the blowing trades, and a love-mad diver was singing his serenade beneath the stars.

A rifle shot rang out in the night. Morg O'Brule jumped at the sound. Something was going on ashore, and perhaps old Alcatraz and the Portugee were mixed up in it.

The slaver held his breath and listened. There was no sound, except the lapping of the water along the *Cormorant's* sides, and the far-away hum of the wind-blown jungle.

He hoped that old Alcatraz hadn't got mixed up in any shooting affair just at present. Dead men didn't mean anything in his wild and woolly life, but

he didn't want to make too much noise about it just now. As soon as he got that treasure map safely in his fist, Zuva and the rest of the world could go to hell for all he cared.

Something splashed in the lagoon. Morg O'Brule listened carefully.

Something rattled at the anchor chain, and there was a murmur of voices up forward. Heavy feet tramped across the deck, and clawing fingers clutched at the knob. The door swung open, and "Portugee Joe" staggered into the room.

"We tried to get the Chinaman—all by ourselves," the sailor blurted. "But the gun must have slipped just as I pulled the trigger—and he got away on us. Alcatraz is still trailing him over there on shore."

MORG O'BRULE leaped for the door. He lifted his voice in a bull-like roar—and once more the ancient challenge of the sea devil went mounting its call down a black lagoon.

"All hands at the rifle racks."

The darkened decks of the slave boat rang to the tramp of running feet, as the killers of the *Cormorant* rushed aft to answer that old familiar battle call of the South Seas.

Gun barrels banged together in the dark, and snarling oaths told that the wolves of the sea were thirsty for blood.

The *Cormorant* rolled in the ground swells, and her greasy decks tilted like a writhing snake. The odor of the slave trade still clung to her ancient planking, but along her oaken sides there was many a scar of battle which the covering paint could not conceal. It was the boast of the king's gunboats that they had driven the black flag from the ocean, but tucked away in a dark cranny of the *Cormorant's* fore peak was a crossbone flag that had seen service with the buccaneers.

Now the old cry had gone mouthing down the night. Once more the sea rovers were swarming for the attack, and the gory years had come back to the earth with a bang.

A davit clanked and the boat splashed down into the black waters of the lagoon. The next minute the crew of the *Cormorant* swarmed over the side.

"It's treasure you are going after to-night, lads," Morg O'Brule passed the word to his killers. "And we'll blow old Zuva off the map while we are about it."

CHAPTER III.

THE GOLDEN DRAGON.

THE island of Zuva lay in the hush of the midnight, waiting for the coming of the moon. A vague light had filtered up across the heavens. The surface of the lagoon had caught the glint of the sky flare, and the lifting ground swells writhed and twisted beneath the stars.

On the lower lagoon a beached boat lay waiting, and the lapping water splashed and scuttled about her keel. A stone's throw away, a dead man sprawled in the sand, with his staring eyes turned toward the stars.

In the warm darkness beside him sat his friend Joe Carley, the free-trading adventurer of the South Seas who always was willing to try anything once, and asked nothing of fate, except a fighting chance.

A treasure map was in his fingers, and wealth was calling to him across the miles. He toyed with the scrap of paper and dreamed his golden dreams, while up across the coral a shadowy form drew nearer amid the gloom.

Joe Carley reached out a hand in the dark, but it was not for the loaded rifle that lay on the coral beside him.

His questing fingers found the hand of his friend, and rested there in a seal of brotherhood. Woo Ling, the Chinaman, had died as he had lived, a tongs-

man who shot a game that was square and clean in that land of the treacherous.

Something stirred in the veins of the trader. Woo Ling was dead, but he was still a brother, and his share of the treasure would be sent across the sea, to those who waited for him among the poppy gardens of Old Cathay.

Joe sprang to his feet. Somebody was pulling off a raid, and by the sound of that song, Zuva was in for a bloody hour.

A gun spouted its red flame beside the mangroves. A bullet tore its way through the trader's coat, grazing his shoulder as it went.

He fired at the flash. A body thudded into the coral—and another man of the South Seas had gone to the port of missing men.

JOE CARLEY stood there listening to the tumult that was sweeping toward him. His fingers tightened upon the rifle. That gang down there were hunting blood to-night—and he would give them all the blood they wanted.

One moment the trader's veins were thrilling with the hope of battle, then he shook his head sadly.

"Not to-night," he muttered. "We have got other work to do just now."

Lifting the body of his friend, he carried it down to the boat. The raiders swept nearer in the night.

Joe turned for one last shot before he shoved off from the beach.

A roar of rage came from behind him. The outlaws had spotted the boat out there on the moon-gilded lagoon.

A ragged volley flashed among the shadows. The bullets screamed their death song about his ears as he tore his way through the ground swells, headed for the schooner.

A cry went up from the *California*, and the voice of "Sacramento Charley" was bellowing orders to the crew.

The machine gun broke out with its chattering songs, spraying the beaches of Zuva with a leaden death. As usual, Sacramento Charley had been on the job, ready to cover the retreat of his trouble-hunting captain.

The *California* lifted her hook and circled in toward the shore to pick up the captain. The boat was hooked on to the falls and hoisted clear of the water. Joe came catting it up the lines, and leaped to the deck.

"Turn her loose and head her out to sea," he ordered. "We are off for Borneo—and the *Pelican* gold."

The crew of the *California* leaped into life. It was a magic word their captain had spoken, and a bag of dreams had been spilled in the dark.

MORNING dawned upon the South Seas, where the trading schooner *California* plowed her trail into the westing.

The trades were blowing strong and free, and the ocean rolled her heaving swells before it. A streak of coal smoke was streaking across the sky, and the engine was pounding its steady beat. The sails were spread to the piping winds, and the voice of the gold was calling for them to come.

In the first graying light of the dawn Joe Carley and his mate were out on deck, looking back against the sky, trying to pick up the boat that was trailing them.

The sharp eyes of Sacramento Charley picked them up almost dead astern.

"There she is now," he pointed across the water. "And by the looks of all that sail she is carrying, it must be the *Cormorant*."

"It's the *Cormorant*, all right," the captain agreed as he studied her with the glass. "That old slave runner has got a sniff of treasure in his nose, and he'll follow us to hell to get a chance to horn in on the pickings."

The red sun lifted her face above the

ocean's rim. The glory of another day had come to the tropic isles, but a solemn hour it was aboard the *California*.

The body of Woo Ling the Chinaman lay at the rail, awaiting its plunge into the sea. A flag was bunched at the masthead, and a Kanaka sailor stood with his hand upon the halyard, waiting for a signal from his captain.

Joe spoke the word. The flag was broken loose at the peak. The burial hatch was tilted, and another adventurer of the South Seas had found sepulcher within the vaults of Mother Ocean.

A sharp word broke upon the lips of the mate, and he pointed upward, where a golden dragon flag was floating upon the wind.

"Where did you get that thing?" he stammered.

"It's the flag of old Woo's tong, and he made me promise I'd take it along," the captain said, as he watched the strange emblem flapping in the trade wind. "It is the last thing we ever will get a chance to do for the old Mongol—and somehow I feel better with that yellow dragon up there at the masthead."

CHAPTER IV.

INTO THE JUNGLE.

IN the crimson glow of a tropic sunset, the schooner *California* came slanting down the trades, and the land of gold lay just ahead.

Joe Carley and the mate stood in the bows of the boat, with glasses in their hands. Behind them the Kanaka sailors crowded each other in their eagerness. It was their Eldorado, too, that waited over there among the pathless and half-explored jungles of the great island wilderness.

The captain pointed over the rail, where the beach bluffs of Borneo stood out against the darkening sunset.

"Looks like that ought to be the mouth of the Kava River, over there where you see the break in the hills."

"It's a river, all right," the mate agreed. "I can see the shimmer of water back among the mangroves, and by the lay of the land back in the interior—shouldn't wonder if it was a pretty good-sized stream."

"If it proves to be the Kava, we'll be sitting pretty," the captain studied the coast with his glass. "We are hitting her at just the right time. The shadows are getting deep along the shore, and we can slip in under cover without the *Cormorant* seeing us—and Morg O'Brule will have to feel his way inside, and limp along through the dark."

"If this map of ours isn't on the bum, we ought to make it through to the island where the pirates buried their gold, then all we got to do is to stand off the gang from the *Cormorant*."

A cannon boomed behind them, and the beach bluffs of Borneo flung back the challenge in rumbling undertones.

Joe Carley wheeled at the sound. It was the *Cormorant* using her gun.

The slaver fired again, and the flash of the gun was visible in the dusk.

"Shall we give them an answering shot?" The mate nudged his skipper.

"I should say *not!*" Joe laughed. "That old slave runner has lost sight of us against the black jungle, and he's just trying to egg us into doing some shooting, so he can locate us again."

Hopeful words the trader passed out to his mate, but he wasn't so sure about things as he pretended.

Morg O'Brule had gained a lot on them last night, and as they drew nearer the island, the wind had slackened off and lifted, while the slave ship out there was getting the full benefit of the trades.

The hell cats of the *Cormorant* were just one jump behind them, and they seemed to be getting all the lucky breaks in the game. The few miles that separated them didn't mean much. Morg would be storming down upon them before they had time to stick a spade into the treasure isle.

THE *California* poked her nose among the shadows, and felt her way in toward the mouth of the river.

The sky flare dimmed to a dark and bloody hue behind the black fangs of the interior mountains. The jungle gloom spread farther out across the water, and the stars took their accustomed places in the bowl of the tropic night.

A canoe glided out from the mangroves and went scudding down the coast. Joe Carley swore as he saw it. That fellow had gone to spread the alarm. Before morning came the war drums would be beating, and every brown man in the region would be whetting his blade, and on the lookout for the strange boat that had headed up the Kava.

"It looks like they was gettin' ready to give us a welcome?" Sacramento Charley ventured. "And with the *Cormorant* following behind us, I guess we will have all the excitement we want this time."

"A treasure hunt without a fight is no treasure hunt at all," the captain told him. "Them two things always seem to go together, and I guess fate intended it to be that way."

Once more the gun on the slaver boomed its threat behind them. They had been forced to slow down the engine in the treacherous currents at the mouth of the river, and Morg O'Brule and his killers were gaining on them every minute.

The *California* nosed her way around the bend in the stream, and the jungle closed upon them like a trap.

It was black night among the mangroves, and not even the glint of a star could penetrate that lost world of the Borneos.

Like a vaulted ceiling, the vine roof arched itself above the stream, shutting them away from the heavens, shutting them away from the very world itself.

A murmur of alarm came from the Kanaka seamen, and Joe could not find the heart to reprimand them. They were men of the atolls, where coral beaches lay under the wash of the flaming stars, and life itself was tuned to a lilting strain.

Here in the black and brooding jungles of Borneo a man was buried alive. Even the captain himself could not shake off the morbid impressions that were crowding upon him.

The breath of the swamps was a stench in his nostrils. It was the odor of death that hung above the winding river—the acrid fumes of funguslike growths that had sprung up in the steaming heat of the tropic day, and now were rotting themselves to nothing in the moist ooze of the jungle night.

Frightened monkeys chattered at them from the vine tangles overhead. Startled birds screamed their protests as they winged their way to some deeper recess of the swamp.

Fruit bats flitted about the running lights, and wisps of swamp fog snaked, their way across the dim-lighted decks. Lumbering crocodiles splashed along the muddy banks, and snapped their jaws at the new monster that was invading the rivers of Borneo.

Sacramento Charley came and leaned out of the wheelhouse window. He was on his way to Eldorado, but no longer did he speak of the waiting gold.

His light-hearted and reckless life had been overshadowed by the gloom of the jungle. Those death-breeding swamps had lain there through the ages, growing more foul with each passing year. Now the unclean monster was laughing at the puny efforts of man, and filling his brain with poison thoughts that crawled forever inward.

The mate stood there and stared into the darkness ahead, where the black tides of the Kava swept ever out of the night. He growled a curse as he turned away, and the bog waters of Borneo

hissed their snake song along the oaken sides of the *California* as they plunged on toward the sea.

Something boomed in the outer dark, and the rumbling echoes came rolling up the river.

"What's that?" Sacramento turned a startled face toward the captain.

"Sounds like Morg was doing a little more practicing with that gun of his."

"The crazy fool! He'll be stirring up every man in Borneo, and they——"

The words died upon the mate's lips, and he reached a clutching hand to the captain's shoulder.

Far away across the night-bound jungles came the thud of signal drums, where the natives of the back lands were spreading the alarm among the tribes.

CHAPTER V.

SIGNAL FIRES IN THE NIGHT.

THE *Cormorant* was feeling her way in through the shadows, following the *California* into the land of the great adventure.

Morg O'Brule smiled to himself as he nosed in closer to the land. Carley and his traders were nowhere to be seen, but Morg had a hunch he knew where to find them.

Up ahead, the line of white coral showed dimly under the stars, and in the middle of the beach there was a wide, black gap that looked like the mouth of a river.

If the *California* had gone upstream, all he had to do was to follow along behind and pounce down upon them when they were busy digging treasure.

The slaver grinned at the blinking stars. It was a streak of luck when he got that tip about the *Pelican* gold—and his luck was going to hold out to the end.

There were running feet upon the teakwood deck, and Frenchy de Loup poked his head in at the wheelhouse door.

"What the hell do you make of that?" he blurted as he pointed down the coast. "Somebody has gone and built a signal fire up there on the headland."

Morg O'Brule broke into a mirthless laugh as he reached for the bell pull, and rang down the engine.

The *Cormorant* swung her nose around toward the fire, and the captain himself lined the heavy bow gun into position.

There was a spurt of flame in the darkness, and the echoes of the shot went mouthing its call down the black night.

The slaver chuckled to himself as he turned back toward the wheelhouse. It had been a bull's-eye that time, and there was nothing left of the signal fire, except a swarm of red embers that went twisting their way down the slanting trades.

"That's what I call shooting," Morg O'Brule boasted. "It's the first shot that counts."

"Yes—but you didn't shoot quick enough that time," Frenchy groaned. "They saw his signal back in the hills."

Morg O'Brule turned his eyes inland where the higher country lifted its sloping terrace above the coastal jungles, and a fringe of mountain stood black and grim against the stars.

Over there among the inky crags, other signal fires had sprung into life. Like red eyes they winked out of the darkness, and each flaming pyre was a call to the savage tribes of the hinterland who had no fear of gods or men, and carved out their own destinies with a blade of poisoned stone.

The slaver ripped out a string of oaths as he grabbed for the bell pull. It was full speed ahead for the *Cormorant*—and let the devil pay for the ride.

"Here, you, Frenchy, take the wheel, and don't run her into a mud bank," the skipper cautioned as he turned things over to the mate. "I'll look after the crew."

THE next minute Morg O'Brule's bull-like voice was roaring its orders in the night. "Everybody on deck—and make it on the run. Break out the sandbags and throw up a barricade along both rails.

Swearing and sweating men rushed to do his bidding. Heavy feet tramped their stampede across the teakwood planking, and a bloodthirsty pirate cursed them as they worked.

"Here, you lubbers that belong to the gun screws—rustle up that ammunition from the hold—and get it stowed away in the bulletproofs."

The thrill of battle was in Morg O'Brule's blood. It was treasure he was after in the pitch-black night of Borneo, but the scent of battle was strong in his nostrils. The spirits of the dead buccaneers had returned to earth again, to once more tramp the bloody decks beneath the stars.

Rushing to the galley, he poked his head in at the door and bawled out his orders to the cook.

"Break out them tar pots, you, and get them to boiling. There's nothing like a shower of burning pitch to take the fight out of them heathens if they try to come over the rail."

With the clamor of battle aboard her decks, the *Cormorant* swung into the mouth of the river, and went hammering her way into the stupefying gloom of the coastal jungles.

The tides of the Kava writhed down to meet them in the dark, and passion-strained voices cursed and railed amid the confusion.

Up on the higher slopes of the island a string of signal fires blinked their red eyes in the blowing trades. Far away on some lonely peak a drum boomed its warning note in the night.

It came again. Then fainter still from some distant glade another drum took up the call, till the black miles of the Borneo back lands were athrob with the sinister tattoo.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FANGS OF THE JUNGLE.

A WEIRD silence had settled about the trading schooner *California* as she pounded her way up that treacherous and outlaw river of Borneo.

The Kanaka sailors had huddled into their quarters. It was a singing crew from the coral isles—happy and thoughtless children of the South Seas who wished well of all men—but lads who would follow their captain into the jaws of hell if he spoke the word.

To-night they sat in brooding silence. The land of songs was far, far away—and the gloom of the jungle was deep about them.

Sacramento Charley came to relieve the captain at the wheel. He paused outside the window, and turned for one backward glance upstream.

A startled exclamation was on his lips as he pointed upward, where a star showed through the broken roof of the treetops.

"That fellow up there sure looks good to me," he chuckled as he came inside. "We must be getting above the beach jungles, and the country'll be more open from here on."

"That means we're getting above the fever belt," Joe Carley said as he sniffed out of the open window. "And the air is getting better already."

"It can stand to get a whole lot better, without hurting it any," the mate said with a trace of feeling. "If hell smells any worse than this—I don't want any of it in mine."

A moment later they rounded a bend in the river, and the rolling benches of the hinterland stretched out its gloomy panorama beneath the stars.

A worn-out moon was in the sky, and it was a weird and ghostly light that filtered down upon those nameless glades of the Borneo back lands. Mist wraiths rose from the winding river,

and dragged their ragged shapes among the ironwood and the pine.

Here and there jungle-matted valleys lay steeped in the gloom of their poison bogs, each with its film of fever haze hanging like a threat above its vine-matted roof.

A chatter of voices came from up forward. Once more the stars were back into their accustomed places in the sky, and the hearts of the singing islanders were gathering hope.

Along the sweep of the higher hills, the coals of abandoned signal fires blinked their red eyes in the fanning trades, and here and there a hidden drummer beat his slow and measured warning in the night.

A shock seemed to run through the teakwood planking, and the *California* keeled around and headed for the bank.

There was a cry of alarm from the mate as he heaved on the wheel and tried to swing her back upon her course.

The next minute Joe Carley was there beside him, yanking at the wheel with one hand, and trying to ring down a signal for full speed astern.

"It's a sand bar," he shouted. "The river is falling, and if we don't get loose we are stuck here till the next rain."

Before the man below could get the signals, and throw his engine over for the reverse, the *California* had hogged her way across the bar, and was riding in open water.

THE trader gave the jingle for full speed ahead, and once more they were bucking the current of the Kava, bound on the great adventure.

"So far—so good," the captain muttered as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "That was a close shave for the *California* that time."

"How are we going to get back?" Sacramento Charley blinked at him. "If the river is falling, that sand bar is go-

ing to be getting worse every minute. We're caught in a trap."

"We'll think about getting back, after we get the treasure aboard—and not before," Joe called over his shoulder as he went up forward, to have a social mug with the Kanakas, and cheer them up a bit while he was resting up for his next trick at the wheel.

The bed of the stream had widened, and there was a strip of star-sprinkled sky visible overhead. The broadening river had lost the sweep of its current. The black waters lay there like a dead lagoon, and the crocodiles splashed along the muddy and vine-tangled banks.

Joe had his visit with the faithful Kanakas, and headed for the deck to take his trick at the wheel. "Lavaka Jim," the diver, followed his master to the top of the companionway.

There was no caste law aboard the *California*. Adventurers all, they were. No man touched his cap in salute to Joe Carley, the trader. Motions like that might do for men who wore gold-braided uniforms, and depended upon the laws of king and court to hold them secure in their tight-laced berths.

But Joe Carley had no need for ritualistic flub-dub to tell the world that he was the skipper of the adventure ship *California*. He had a master's ticket that was good for the seven seas, and two iron-hard fists to back up that scrap of official paper that was hanging over the wheelhouse window.

He turned and laid a friendly had upon Lavaka's shoulder.

"You boys better try an' grab off a little sleep while you got a chance," he advised. "If anything turns up, I'll call you."

Joe looked over toward the wheelhouse, and he was doing some hard thinking.

He was trying to frame something cheerful to say to Sacramento Charley, and jolly him up a bit.

He shook his head in despair. The last cheerful thought had spilled out of the bowl of life, and only the gloomy dregs remained.

There was a reckless and devil-may-care spirit that wandered abroad among the coral isles, and the men who sailed those sunny seas became the apostles of the laughing heart.

But there was something about this jungle gloom that got into a man's blood, and you couldn't chase it away.

It was a depressing something that seemed to creep up out of the great tropic wasteland, something that pressed upon you from every side, and fenced you in like a prisoner in his cell.

He felt the rustle of a paper in his pocket. It was the bullet-torn map that still bore the crimson blood seal upon its ragged page. Somewhere ahead the treasure of the sea wolves was waiting. But farther away it seemed to-night, than it had when he crouched beside that dying fire on the coral beach of Zuva, and dreamed of the great adventure that had dawned at last.

A BALL of light came floating out of a black bayou, and followed the wind drift down the sluggish stream. A cry of alarm came from Lavaka, as he staggered back against the companionway.

"It's nothing but a bog light—a will-o'-the-wisp—and it comes from all this stagnant water and rotting fungus we have been smelling all night," the trader told the excited native.

"It's a Voodoo lantern," the diver gasped. "My grandfather he see a Voodoo lantern once when he was a little boy—and the next day the devil men came down from the Blood Islands and killed most all the village, and cooked them in a big fire—all the same as roast pig."

Joe laughed at the diver's yarn, and the brooding jungle gulped the sound as it left his lips.

"That thing over there don't mean anything at all," he scoffed. "I've seen thousands of them down in the bogs of Sumatra—and nobody ever came and made roast pig out of me."

"Maybee Voodoo lantern don't make any curse on white man," Lavaka said stubbornly. "But it makes bad medicine for island boys."

The Kanaka slipped back into the shelter of the fo'c's'le, to spread the evil tidings to his brown-skinned mates.

The trader swore to himself as he watched the uncanny light go drifting off down the stream, and flutter its way around a bend of the shore line, and out of sight.

Joe had lied like a gentleman when he spun that yarn about the bog lights he had met up with over in Sumatra.

He had heard many a wild and gruesome tale about the dreaded Voodoo lanterns of the inland jungles. But a bog light he never had seen, and he had put the whole thing down as a mess of beach combers' superstition.

Now a real, live, honest-to-goodness bog light had come crawling out from the stinking water of a jungle bayou—and perhaps after all it was as Lavaka said. Maybe the Voodoo lanterns *were* bad medicine.

A cry came from the mate, and the next mintue the *California* was trying to hog her way through another mud bar.

The trader went tearing down the deck and leaped into the wheelhouse.

"Full speed astern—before she sticks fast in the gumbo!" he called to Charley.

The mate was yanking at the bell pull, and a moment later they were backing down the stream.

"Now if I can only manage to hit her in the same place I'll be all right," the captain said as he took the wheel.

He rang to the engine room, and gave them the jingle for full speed ahead.

"What you tryin' to do?" Sacramento

spluttered. "Has this damn jungle got on your brain? Tryin' to wreck us?"

"The old *California* never laid down on the job yet—and she ain't going to do it to-night," the trader said as he drove the schooner's nose full tilt into the mud bar.

"Just feel her squirm!" Joe laughed as he steadied the wheel. "I struck her right kerplunk in the same spot you did—and that's pretty good navigating considering how dark it is."

"What's the big idea?" Sacramento wanted to know.

"We're going on a treasure hunt, ain't we?" the captain asked in an injured voice. "A hot bunch of treasure hunters we'd be, if we let a little mud bank stop us."

The *California* squirmed and twisted. Inch by inch she dragged her belly through the mud, and with a plunge went floundering into deep water—still headed upstream.

"Go turn in and shoot yourself a wink o' sleep," he passed out the order as the mate staggered up the deck. "We'll make her through by morning—and I'll call you when we get there."

SACRAMENTO CHARLEY slipped into the companionway, and a moment later a babble of voices were going it again in the crew's quarters.

Charley was a big brother to the Kanakas, and Lavaka and his mates were feeding him up on the latest news about the Voodoo lantern.

The *California* rounded a bend in the river, and once more Joe felt the mud beneath his keel.

Backing off downstream, he made a run for the obstruction, and plowed his way into the clogging mass.

The old schooner squirmed and wiggled like a hog in a puddle, and inch by inch she forced her way into the mud flat.

Then like a hog she lay down for a

rest. The tides of the Kava gurgled about her oaken sides, and went twisting away in the darkness behind her.

Joe smiled to himself as he reached for the bell pull, and gave the signal to back off. One or two more jolts like that would take all the fight out of that old mud bar of Borneo.

The bells tinkled in the dark depths of the old trade ship. There was a jar as the engines were thrown over for the reverse.

The flying screw slashed at the muddy water, but the boat refused to move. The *California* was caught like a rat in a trap. The jungle had won in the end.

Something splashed along the muddy bank. The sound came again, and for the third time. Far up the Kava was an answering splash—three measured strokes in the water.

It was a signal. The men of Borneo had their spies posted on the Kava tonight and they were relaying the message from post to post, spreading the word that the *California* was stranded and helpless upon the mud bar.

CHAPTER VII.

WHERE THE GOLD WAITED.

WHEN the *California* piled up on a mud bar in Kava River, the Kanakas came tumbling up out of the fo'c's'le, to meet whatever fate might have in store for them.

Silent and steady headed in the hour of victory, these open-hearted sons of the coral isles refused to be stampeded in the hour of defeat.

They feared and hated the evil spirits that lurked in the jungle gloom, but it was a fighting fear.

Sacramento Charley availed himself of the white man's privilege of hawling somebody out when things went wrong.

"Now look what in hell you went and done—planted us here in this rotten-smelling jungle, and we'll all be dead

with the fever before the river rises enough to float us off."

"If we can't get the old hooker off, then it ought to be a safe bet that nobody's going to come along and steal her while we're gone."

"While we're gone?" Sacramento gasped. "What fool thing are you figuring on doing now?"

"You might as well turn the lads to work, and stock up the longboat with three days' rations and a thousand rounds of ammunition. We're going up the Kava at daybreak."

Angry voices sounded behind them, and the bull-like roar of Morg O'Brule drifted around the bend.

"We better pass out the rifles, hadn't we?" the mate said as he started buckling on his cartridge belt. "It's the *Cormorant*—and they'll be piling on top of us in a minute more. Them guys don't waste time."

"Wait a minute!" Joe held up his hand for silence. "The *Cormorant* draws two feet more water than we do—and it sounds like Morg was having some trouble with that mud bar back there around the bend."

For a moment the night rang to the profane wrath of the buccaneers. Then their voices died out, and there was no sound, except the swish of the trade winds blowing the high-headed palms.

Neither fear nor respect had they for anything that walked the earth.

But the jungle fastness had put its seal of silence upon their tongues. Swashbuckling buccaneers, they had come storming up the Kava and the bog land of Borneo had drawn them to her unclean breast, and when the hour was ripe, the bog land would use them in her godless plans.

The *California* was caught like a rat in the mud of a tropic river, but no man spoke of defeat. Lithe-limbed islanders scurried about the deck, getting things ready for one last, desperate dash for the gold.

GRAY dawn crept in across the jungles, and a wan and ghostly glow settled upon the sluggish river. Parrots fluttered among the branches overhead, and fruit pigeons winged their way across the brightening sky. Gibbons screamed their challenge as they swung from treetop to treetop above the Kava's yellow flood.

"The hour had come to pick the boat crew for the treasure hunt, and there was only one way it could be done. A blind man could have made the selection with his eyes shut and never made a mistake. There was only one kind of man aboard the *California*, and that was the *best*. Every island of the South Seas had been combed and sifted to get that crew, and even Joe Carley himself would never have thought of making a choice between them.

The trader came out on deck with a bag of marbles in his hand. As he passed down the line each man thrust his hand into the sack, and made the draw.

"Black marbles go up the river—and white marbles stand by the ship," the captain stated the rules of the raffle as he passed on down the line.

Here and there a lucky islander drew a coveted black marble, and walked over and took his place beside the longboat that was waiting to carry them to where the gold of the sea wolves was waiting.

A warning hiss came from the mate as he pointed over the rail.

A boat had shot out from the shadows, and was swinging upstream abreast of the *California*.

"It's Morg O'Brule," the captain passed the word. "Keep down under cover—and when he starts shooting, give it to him with everything you have."

The islanders sprang to their battle positions, and waited with their fingers on ready triggers.

The buccaneers swung abreast, and a score of paddles were tearing at the

muddy water. The next minute they darted around the bend of the river, and were out of sight."

"Now see what you went and done!" Sacramento swore at his captain. "There I was with the prettiest sort of a bead on old Morg, and you let him get away without giving me a chance to try out this new rifle of mine."

"Don't go to work and spoil a pleasant day by grumbling over little things like that," Joe told him.

"Little things, hell!" the mate snorted. "You have let them pirates get the jump on you—and they will beat us to the treasure."

"A lot of good it'll do 'em!" Joe laughed. "They're trying to trail the *California*, and they went and passed right by us, and never saw a thing of us."

"I'll never get a chance like that again," Sacramento mourned as he fondled his rifle. "There I was with a real live pirate ready for the bag—and you went and let him get away."

"You're getting altogether too blood-thirsty with that new gun of yours," the captain said as he locked up the river. "Old Morg has got his faults, but right now he's working for me, and I never allow anybody to interfere with my hired men."

"What you talkin' about? If that old sea wolf ever woke up some mornin' and discovered that he had done somebody a good turn, he'd drop dead of a broken heart."

"That's the joke of it. Morg don't know he is working for me—and we ain't going to wise him up. But judging by the looks of them signal fires they had out last night—and the way them drums have been beating—well, it might be just as well if Morg goes ahead, and sort of breaks trail for us."

"Shall I get the boat over the side? Everything's loaded and ready."

"Lower away," the captain ordered.

"We'll be following right on their heels, and while they're going on up the river looking for the *California*, we'll be digging up the treasure, and ready to beat it back to sea."

"I guess you're forgetting that the *California* is stuck in the mud, ain't you?"

"Don't try to cross your bridges till you get to the river," the trader advised. "Anyway, the glass is going down, and if we get a good stiff shower back in the hills, the Kava will come up with a bang—and we'll be on our way to the coral isles."

"There goes that damn war drum again," the mate growled. "Wonder what them black devils are trying to do—start a little war or something?"

"That didn't sound like a signal drum to me," Joe squinted up at the sky. "If my ears ain't fooling me, that was a clap of thunder back in the hills. We may be getting that shower of rain I was talking about."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EYES OF THE JUNGLE.

THE crew of the *California* stood at the rail, and beneath them the longboat lay waiting in the black wash of the Kava. The hour had come at last. Some of them were to go upon the great adventure, and some of them were to remain behind to guard the ship. There was no bickering among the men of the atolls, no grumbling because they were denied a place in the treasure hunt.

It was picked men who would go with Joe Carley upon that last dash for the *Pelican* gold, and those who went would be no better than those who would wait behind. They had taken their chances in the raffle of adventure, and knew how to lose like gentlemen.

Black marbles went, and white balls remained behind—and that was all there was to it. The lucky sailors picked out

their rifles from the gun rack, and took their places in the boat.

The lines were cast off. The paddles bit into the muddy water, and they went sweeping away into the jungle shadows.

Once more the river was growing narrow, and the mangroves crowded their matted hedges out over the boggy banks.

Joe Carley looked over his shoulder as they rounded the bend. It didn't seem right to go off on a treasure hunt and leave the old *California* behind. They had seen turbulent days together, but now their paths had parted on the road to the gold.

The islanders bent above their flashing blades, and swept deeper into the shadows. The trader started at the jungle wall that hedged them in, and instinctively he reached for his rifle.

Nothing was visible in that vague half light that hung above the river. But he knew that hostile eyes were watching them from the vine-tangled banks, and measuring them with savage cunning.

Flowering trailers hung in festoons from the palms, and the air was clogged with the perfume of a hundred nameless flowers of that tropic wasteland.

It was like the incense of a Chinese temple, something that was more than a smell. It set your blood to leaping, but there was a druglike something that crept into the human brain.

Joe Carley shivered at the thoughts that kept crowding upon him. He had come to that lost land of the Borneos, and the jungle had put its brand upon him.

There was something there in the covering dark that he had known before. It was like the strange, wild legends which Woo Ling the Mongol used to tell when the winds were crying among the palms, and the coals of the camp fire were smoldering low.

Those tales of the lost Cathay were too deep for his brain to grasp, but

there was something within the very soul of him that understood, as though in some dark day of a forgotten past, he, too, had been a tongsman and knew the magic word that bound the yellow clans together.

So it was to-day in the dark depths of the Borneo jungle. There was something that the eyes could not see, and things that the ears could not hear—but he had known it before.

JOE turned and looked behind him. Somewhere beyond the mangrove swamps was the open sea, with the blue bow of the horizon fringed with its coral isles—but a million miles away, it seemed, to-day.

Up in the higher palms the trade winds were blowing, but down there in the dark and steaming ground levels the warm winds crawled along the surface of the fetid river, and the stupefying breath of the waste land put its haze over the world.

Not only had the jungle twisted his brain with its unclean magic, till the coast seemed millions of miles away—it had done something to the soul that was within him. The old-time codes and creeds were but a lingering memory that belonged to days that were dead and gone.

Joe growled an oath as he picked up a paddle, and threw his full strength into the stroke. The islanders were flashing their paddles like so many pieces of machinery, and Joe dropped into the stroke. Slaves they were, of the jungle, to-day, and Mother Jungle was shaping their lives to fit her mighty and evil plans.

Once more the growl of something sounded in the distance. In the back of his brain Joe knew it was thunder over among the nameless mountains of Borneo.

The trader paddled on and did not lift his head. What did a thunderstorm mean to Mother Jungle anyway? From

her stronghold among the mangrove and the palm, she had seen a million storms come down across the earth. So it would be to the end of time—if there really was an end to time.

A gasp came from Sacramento Charley, and Joe lifted his head. He rubbed his eyes and looked about him. What was the mate making all that fuss about anyway?

Then the haze seemed to slip from his brain, and his clawing hand was reaching for his rifle.

Sacramento Charley was pointing upstream, where the Kava had once more widened into a real river, and there at the bend was a crescent-shaped island. It lifted its higher ground above the roof of the swamps, and three pine trees stood like watching sentinels on the sun-bright headland.

It was the land they sought, and the gold was within reach of their hands.

CHAPTER IX.

DEAD MAN'S GOLD.

WHEN Joe Carley saw the three sentinel pines standing on the uplifted point of Eldorado Island, it was like a glimpse of the homeland flag flapping in the breeze of some alien port.

They landed in a little cove in the lee of the island, and the trader was the first man ashore. He took his place in the line as they dragged the boat up over the muddy bank, and hid it among the passion vines that grew beside the water.

As he climbed up the steep bluff that led to the top of the island, he felt that each inch of elevation was lifting him out of some loathsome pit, and bringing him back into a life of orderly things.

He stood at last on the headlands, and turned for one backward look at the place from whence he had come.

The jungle spread its dark and mys-

terious miles beneath him, but far away it seemed. Beyond its vine-matted roof he could catch the glimmer of a sun-washed sea—and the old trails of romance were waiting for him to come.

The cooling trade winds blew in from the ocean. He heard the soothing murmur of the pines behind him—pines that stood their guard above the dead man's gold.

Joe pulled the treasure map from his pocket, and motioned for the mate.

Somehow he couldn't make this place tally with the markings on the paper—or tally with the way he had pictured it in his dreams.

"Well, what's the big trouble now?" Sacramento wanted to know.

"This island is shaped just like the one we are hunting for, and there's a creek coming in from the mountains abreast of it like the chart shows. But it's a bigger place than I thought it was going to be, and there's a lot of things around here that the pirate hasn't got marked down."

"It's the place, all right," the mate said as he squinted at the paper. "But that thing was probably drawn from memory, and you can see that he didn't try to work it up to scale."

"I guess you're right," the captain admitted. "It's been a good many years since the pirates camped here—and things grow fast down here under the sun."

Bearings were taken on the given landmarks, and the two officers went into a prolonged conference. One thing was certain. The fellow who made that sketch might have been a red-letter pirate in his day, but as a map maker he was a frost.

The Kanakas stood around with shovels in their hands, waiting for the order to start digging. The two white men measured off the lines, and tried to figure out the location of the treasure.

The sun inched its way down the western sky. It had slipped down be-

hind the inland mountain ranges of Borneo before a spot for the operations was decided upon.

Joe turned to the crew.

"Bring up wood for a fire, and get the supper going. We might as well eat before we do anything else. Once we start digging, we'll never stop till we turn up the treasure."

NIGHT settled like a swift-moving shadow over the jungles of Borneo. Once more the fruit bats were skimming above the mangrove and the palm. Wisps of fever fog curled up from the stagnant bogs, and went drifting their aimless courses through the dark.

On the higher ground of Eldorado Island the trade winds were blowing—life-giving breezes that held the salt tang of the sea.

On the highest hump of the island a fire of ironwood was burning. The glow of the flames spread out in a widening circle, and flickered upon the faces of the islanders from the *California*, who stood clutching their spades and waiting for a word from their captain.

Joe Carley lifted his hand for attention. For a moment he stood with his head twisted. Then, slowly, he pointed inland where the Kava snaked her lonely course into the never-never land of Borneo.

From far away across the miles came the dismal beat of the war drums.

"Damn them black devils!" Sacramento growled. "Don't they have nothin' to do but sit up nights—and hammer on them tom-toms?"

Joe gave the word to the islanders, and the dirt began to fly from a dozen spades.

Over to westward the flutter of heat lightning showed behind the hills, and the far-away rumble of thunder crawled in across the night.

The trade wind scurried through the

swaying pines. The fire flared and fluttered among the crackling logs of ironwood.

The storm drew nearer in the night. Masses of black clouds lifted themselves behind the ragged mountain spires. The fluttering heat lightning changed to zig-zagging streaks of fire that slashed their way through the inky heavens, or twisted a golden ruffle along the edges of the billowing clouds.

An hour passed. The fire burned itself to a mass of coals that threw its bloody reflections over the spade-torn surface of Eldorado Island.

Joe ordered the islanders to knock off for a short rest. Fresh logs were brought and heaped upon the embers, and the fanning trades whipped them into a mass of flame.

Once more the word was passed out to the Kanakas. The digging spades took up their monotonous clank as they burrowed into the stony soil of Eldorado Island.

Midnight came. Sacramento Charley had boiled a pot of black coffee over the coals of the bonfire. He passed out steaming cups to the islanders. A heap of sea biscuits was dumped upon the wet sod of the treasure isle. The hungry men from the atolls leaned upon their spades and ate.

The far rumble of thunder had changed with the passing hours. No longer did human ears need to strain to catch its distant growl. The guns of the gods were booming now in individual concussions, and the sleeping jungles flung back the echoes in a series of weird and lonely sounds.

A Kanaka boatman finished his sea biscuit, and, lifting his head, he broke into song. It was "The March of the Atoll Islanders." Others joined him, and a moment later even Joe was humming the haunting tune, and the black night rang to that march of the coral and the palm.

The singing crew of the *California*

returned to their work. The black hours crawled away. Wider and ever wider grew the circle of fresh-turned sod, where the spades were questing in the night.

CHAPTER X.

PIECES OF EIGHT.

A SPADE clanked against something that gave forth its hollow sound, and a startled Kanaka mouthed his cry of gold in the night.

The men of the atolls crowded about the lucky treasure hunter. A babble of excited voices lifted itself to the black skies.

The fire had died to a heap of glaring coals, but no man thought to replenish it. For once the crew of the *California* had forgotten the discipline in which Joe Carley had so patiently trained them.

Men trampled upon each other, as they clawed at the earth with their naked hands. They cursed and they shouted as they tore away the covering clods.

The lightning sprayed its blinding glare over them as they worked. The jungle crouched lower among the shadows, an empire of poison bog lands that had watched and waited on the rim of the treasure isle.

Thunders crashed in the black sky overhead, and a few scattered drops of rain glittered in the lightning's glow. The storm god was out on rampage to-night, but no man paid heed to his wrath.

A triumphant cry rose over the babble as the Kanakas swarmed up out of the diggings, dragging a brass-sheathed treasure chest behind them.

It was the gold of the old sea wolves, gold that men had fought and died for—and even at the moment, the killers of the *Cormorant* were combing the jungles of Borneo, trying to rob them of their prize.

"Bring a crowbar," Joe ordered.

Lavaka, the diver, came running up

with the heavy iron bar, and handed it to the mate.

The storm broke in its full fury about them. The fire was but a heap of coals that glowed among the ground shadows, but the lightning's glare was like a mighty lamp over the jungle.

The thunder rolled and crashed among the wind-torn clouds. The storm god had massed his artillery for the grand assault, and every gun was belching its hell in the night.

Sacramento Charley stood with the uplifted crowbar poised above the treasure chest, while ringed about him were the dark-faced men of the atolls.

The heavy iron bar came crashing down. The corroded brass padlock tore loose from the hasp.

Joe Carley lifted the lid of the strong box, and the next minute the men of the *California* were scooping up the yellow disks, and excited voices called to one another amid the crashing thunder.

The storm god was spilling his vials of wrath upon the earth, but no man recoiled from his fury. The cry of gold was on human lips to-night, and the treasure of the sea wolves glowed yellow in the lightning's glare.

Sacramento Charley approached the captain.

"Now you got your treasure—what you going to do with it?"

"It'll be coming daylight pretty soon. We'll stow it away in the boat, and be heading back for the ship."

"And the old *California* is stuck in the mud," the mate said with a shudder. "And we'll have to sit there in that man-killing jungle, and wait for the rainy season to set in."

"We got neighbors just around the bend," Joe said as he stared off down the river where the waters of the Kava were aglitter with the lightning. "There's no danger of anybody getting lonesome as long as Morg O'Brule is in the neighborhood."

THE storm rolled its fury across the night, and the guns of the thunder grew faint and far in the distance. Gray dawn crept into the east. A blood-red sun rolled up over the rim of the world, and another day had come to the land of the mangrove and the palm.

The last of the gold had been freighted down to the beach, and the Kanaka sailors were waiting on their paddles.

Joe Carley and the mate paused on the rim of the headland. It was like saying good-by to an old friend, to leave those crooning pines, and go back into that gloom-glutted jungle of Borneo.

Sacramento Charley's jaw sagged open, and he lifted his hand for a signal.

From up the river came the throb of drums, and they were drawing nearer.

A rifle shot rang out, and a ragged volley sputtered its challenge upstream.

"It's Morg O'Brule and his killers—they're coming back looking for us," Sacramento gasped. "I'll have to warn the boys to keep under cover—and perhaps they'll pass by without seeing us."

Sacramento Charley leaned over the bank and called down to the men on the beach.

The Kanakas sprang into action. Trailing vines were pulled down to cover the boat, and the footprints in the mud were carefully concealed. Then the brown-skinned sailors of the *California* ducked in among the ferns, and the jungle foliage swallowed them from view.

Joe leaned over the bank and scanned the beach below him to make sure that everything was in shape. The place seemed empty of human occupation, but the captain knew that behind the vines, the men of the atolls were watching, and loaded rifles were ready for battle.

The trader stared off across the tangles jungles, where the bog mists twisted

among the palm fronds, and the fruit pigeons fluttered their endless dance above the great wasteland.

The sound of guns came riding down the wind, but they brought no thrill to the blood of Joe Carley. Once more the ominous spirit of the jungle was upon him, something that numbed his very soul and filled his brain with unlovely forbodings.

There was a fresh burst of gunfire behind the mangroves, and the boat from the *Cormorant* came into view around the bend.

With flashing blades the boat swept down the river, and the rifles belched their red glare against the dark, green wall of the jungle.

Joe stared at the turbulent scene. Morg O'Brule was on the retreat, and the killers of the *Cormorant* were firing behind them as they fled.

The roll of drums drew nearer. A swarm of war canoes darted around the bend, and a thousand savage voices lifted their roar of wrath beneath the palms.

The boat from the *Cormorant* shot down the stream. Behind them thundered the armada of the wild, and the red sun glinted like blood upon the flying arrows.

Joe stood beneath the pines of Eldorado, and watched the battle beneath him.

It was men of his own race who were fleeing down the Kava to-day, and it was black-faced heathens who were swarming the river behind them. His sympathies should have been with Morg O'Brule, lawless pirate though he was.

Joe leaned eagerly forward, and the heart within him gloated when he saw that the brown men were gaining upon their victims.

Somehow it seemed that this was a part of a life he had known before. In those half-submerged years of some far time, he had heard the war drums beating along the rivers of never-never. The

trader's blood leaped upward as the submerged memories crowded up out of the past. He, too, had swung a paddle in a war canoe, and gloated when the brown men swarmed down to the kill.

The battle swept its turbulent course down the Kava, and out of sight around the bend. Something snapped in the trader's brain, and a flood of alarming thoughts poured in upon him. Those heathens of the jungle were out for blood to-day, and the *California* lay helpless upon her mud bar.

Turning he ran toward the beach, and his heavy voice was calling its orders.

"Launch the boat—we got to get out of here in a hurry. The boys are down there on the schooner—and that bunch of wild devils will be right on top of them."

THE men of the atolls sprang into life at the world. It was brothers of theirs down on the imperiled *California*. Those laughing lads of the coral had followed Joe Carley far from their sunlit isles, and they must not be abandoned in this black hour when the hordes of Borneo were swarming to the kill.

The boat was dragged out from the concealing vines, and the lithe-limbed islanders leaped to their places.

With flashing paddles they swung out from the island of Eldorado, and went tearing their way down the black tides of the Kava.

The shadow of the matted mangroves was like a twilight over the river, but for once the gloom of the jungle was powerless to subdue the soul of man.

Lavaka, the diver, lifted his challenging cry, and the next minute a score of vibrant voices were blended in a battle song.

Wild and defiant it rose amid the gloom—a barbaric saga of the bygone days, when war ran its red tides among the coral isles, and the tribes of the atolls were heroes to a man.

Monkeys scolded at them from the swinging vines. Parrots screamed their protest in the dark, damp masses that arched above the river. Wild boars sprang from their mud wallows, and fled squealing into the swamps.

Faster the paddles flashed, and the quickening current of the Kava hurled them onward through the gloom.

In the bottom of the boat the treasure of the sea wolves lay unnoticed. Bare-tooted islanders squatted upon the yellow disks and dreamed no dreams of the magic gold.

The drums were beating on the Kava to-day, and it was the wine of war that stirred the blood of men.

A cannon boomed its challenge in the distance, and the rumbling echoes came rolling up the Kava's inky flow.

"Morg has made it through to the ship." The mate turned a strained face toward the captain. "Now if our boys can only hold out till we get there—we may have a fighting chance."

"A chance to fight, you mean," Joe corrected. "There's enough of those brown devils on the Kava to-day to whip a fleet."

The current of the river quickened beneath them, and the slashing paddles sent the boat plunging around bends and sweeping down straight stretches of open water.

Every minute the clamor of battle was drawing closer. The long tom aboard the slave ship was frantically booming above the din.

Sacramento Charley cursed above his paddle.

"Wonder what that fool thinks he is doing, using a cannon on a swarm o' natives. A good sawed-off shotgun is the thing to use on them. He'd oughter know that."

"He's trying to sling a scare into them, I guess," the captain told him. "That long tom makes a lot of noise, and if he's lucky enough to hit one of their boats and sink it, they're going

to have a whole lot of respect for slave ships after this."

"You can take it from me, them brown devils ain't going to let nobody scare them. That wasn't a mob that came down the Kava this morning. It was an army—and somebody has been training them chocolate doughboys in military maneuvers."

They rounded the last bend, and there was the old *California*, just as they had left her. A shout of welcome went up from the islanders, standing there behind their line of sandbags with rifles waiting in their hands.

They pulled in alongside the schooner. The treasure of the sea rovers was hoisted over the side and dumped upon the deck. The wind dipped down across the river, and a red dragon flag flapped its lazy folds in the air.

Down the stream the sound of battle was growing louder. The cannon was blazing away like mad, and the rattle of rifle shots was all but drowned by the cry of savage voices.

"We can't stay here and see old Morg and his outfit murdered in cold blood." Sacramento began spearing around for a chance to get into the fight. "Of course the old devil needs killin', all right, but white men have got to hang together in the jungle."

"Yes, I suppose it's the right thing to do," Joe said as he pushed off from the schooner, and gave the signal to the paddlers. "We'll go down and help him beat off the natives—and then we'll have to fight the old son of a gun ourselves."

They swept around the jutting mangroves, and a straight stretch of the river lay before them—and the stranded *Cormorant* hanging there on her mud bar at the far end.

Joe gave the signal to draw in to the bank. An islander caught hold of a trailing vine and held them against the pull of the current.

"Now we want to get this thing

straight," the captain turned to his men. "Morg is a goner—nothing this side of hell can save him. But it's like Charley says—we got to hang together, and go with him."

The men of the atolls nodded their heads.

"If there's any of you boys who want to go back to the ship, and take your chances behind the sandbags, I'll put you ashore now."

Lavaka lifted his head and there was pride in his voice.

"Island boys never turn back. When captain goes, we go."

A roar went up from the war canoes, as they hurled themselves toward the doomed *Cormorant*. Only a feeble fire answered them from the slave ship.

"It's the last assault," Joe said as he lifted his rifle. "Most of Morg's men are down—and nothing can stop the brown devils now."

A swishing roar came bellowing through the jungle, and a breath of cold air swept down beneath the arching palms.

"A tornado," the mate shouted. "Everybody hold fast to the vines."

"Water coming," a Kanaka boatman bobbed. "Death water—coming down from mountains."

"He means a cloud-burst in the hills—and a flood." The captain caught the idea. "Make the painter fast—and then climb into the mangroves."

Like clambering monkeys the men of the atolls scampered into the higher branches. Sacramento Charley knotted another painter into the ring bolt, and the captain gave him a hand in hoisting the bow high above river level.

A moment later a wail of frothing, tumbling water came piling around the bend.

A cry of alarm came from the war canoes, as they saw the writhing flood rushing down upon them.

The guns on the *Cormorant* went dead, and no longer did the war drums

of Borneo beat their battle marches in the jungle.

The flood passed with a deafening roar. The natives were making frantic efforts to run their canoes into a protecting bayou.

The last boat failed to get under cover. The rushing torrent caught it amidship and sent it rolling like a log down the Kava's boiling flood.

The *Cormorant* lurched and keeled in the pounding water. Then lifting herself from the clinging mud, she went swaying in her aimless drift around the bend.

"There's another good battle all shot to hell," Sacramento Charley grumbled as he slid down and lowered the boat into the quieting water. "If Morg O'Brule ever needed a piece of good luck it was right now—and the old slave killer got it."

A hail came from upstream. The *California* poked her nose around the bend, and headed toward them.

A Kanaka sailor was at the wheel, and the bos'n stood by the anchor, ready to knock out the pin when they got abreast of the boat.

"Keep her going," Joe called to them. "We got to get across that lower mud bar before the river goes down. As soon as you get into deep water, drop the hook—and we'll come aboard."

The *California* swung down across the bar, and the big mud hook went splashing down into the black water. With close-hauled anchor chain she turned her nose to the current. As the boat approached the schooner, Joe called to the men aboard:

"Start your fires, and get up a head of steam as quick as you can—we got to make it through to the coast before it gets dark."

As if in answer to his words, a roll of drums came from the jungle. The war canoes nosed their way out of the bayou—and headed straight for the *California*.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOE OF THE WOLF.

WHEN the cloud-burst brought its flood water tearing down Kava River, it found Morg O'Boule at the end of his rope.

The old pirate was still fighting, but that didn't mean anything. He had been fighting ever since he crawled out of the cradle, and he would go down to his grave with his boots full of blood.

Morg O'Brule was burning up his powder with a reckless bravado that was worthy of the old days when pirates were the cream of the earth. He poured his lead into the charging natives, but there was not even the glimmer of hope in his heart.

He was caught in the web of the jungle. The black clans of Borneo were swarming for the kill, and his hour had come. The old pirate didn't believe in anything, but he knew there was such a thing as luck. Fate had stacked the cards on him to-day, and given him a handful of deuces, but he would play them as though they were aces, and die like the buccaneers of old.

Half of his men were dead, and every minute was taking its toll from his thinning ranks. He heard the cry of alarm from the war canoes, and saw the foaming fresher sweeping around the bend, but his battle-dazed brain failed to realize what it meant. He braced his sagging body against the sandbags, and kept on pumping lead.

The foaming flood water struck the old *Cormorant* and lifted her from her mud bar. Something in the motion of the lurching deck seemed to clear Morg's brain.

He had fired up his boilers, and broken out the steam hose ready to turn the scalding water upon the swarming savages in one last desperate attempt to repel the attack.

When the *Cormorant* lifted herself off the mud bar, Morg O'Brule was on

the after-deck, a blood-spattered and forlorn pirate making his last stand among his stricken crew.

Before the old schooner had dragged herself off the bar, the slaver was running for the wheelhouse.

Desperately, he yanked at the bell pulls, ringing for full speed astern.

The cold engines turned slowly under the low head of steam—but the flooded Kava swept them around the bend.

The *Cormorant's* nose was brought around and pointed downstream, and like a beaten wolf, she plunged away through the gloom.

In the brick-red glow of the tropic sunset, the old slave ship came plowing her way out of Kava River, and headed straight out to sea.

Morg O'Brule shuddered as he looked behind him where the jungles of Borneo lay like a black gloom against the bloody sunset.

Frenchy de Loup was dying in his bunk, with a poison arrow buried in his lungs. Full half of his crew had sailed on their voyage to eternity.

Night thickened its shadows over the sea, and the *Cormorant* dipped and lifted to the running swells.

There was a splash alongside. Morg O'Brule muttered a curse at the sound. That was the last of Frenchy de Loup.

Morg O'Brule looked back astern where the headlands of Borneo bulked black against the stars, and his lips were parted in a wolfish grin.

Somewhere back there in the jungles was the *California*—and the brown devils of Borneo would settle the score with Joe Carley.

THE war canoes were sweeping down toward the *California*. "Every man at his gun, and don't fire till I give the word," the captain passed the order to the crew.

The islanders sprang to their positions behind the sandbag barricades.

The brown paddlers lifted their voices in a defiant shout, and the echoes went trailing down the lonely waterway.

A strained hush settled along the decks of the *California*, while overhead the dragon flag of Woo Ling the Mongol flapped its folds in the sultry air.

Down in the stokehold, furnace doors banged, and frantic shovels sounded their dismal clank. The lascars were trying to get up steam, but Joe knew that they were too late.

The leading canoe swung abreast of the schooner. It swung around with its bow to the current, and then steady moving paddles held it in position just off the port rail.

Other boats dropped into position beside it, till the Kava was bridged from bank to bank.

A tribesman in the head canoe lifted himself from among his fellows, and stood with his face toward the schooner.

The native lifted a bundle of cloth from the canoe, and the passing wind shook out its gaudy folds.

"It's a flag," the mate blurted. "I told you somebody had been training them devils."

"I'll say it's a flag," Joe laughed as he swung the rope ladder over the side. "That's the yellow dragon that was going to bring us luck—just like old Woo Ling said it was."

"But how in the devil did it get down here in Borneo?" Sacramento Charley wanted to know.

"That's easy. The Chinese had a string of settlements down here in the fifteenth century—and that tong of the yellow dragon must be as strong as ever back among the hill tribes."

"What you going to do—invite them aboard?"

"You guessed it," Joe said as he took his place at the head of the ladder, and reached a hand to a brown man who was coming over the side. "We'll give a feast to the whole blamed tong—and we'll open up the back lands of Borneo, and get a trading concession worth a king's ransom."

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 2^d, 1912, of Top-Notch, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1933.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared George C. Smith, Jr., who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of the Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Top-Notch, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 2^d, 1912, embodied in Section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, Ronald Oliphant, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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GEORGE C. SMITH, Jr., Vice President,
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 31st day of March, 1933. De Witt C. Van Valkenburgh, Notary Public No. 32, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1934.)



How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

THE WEDDING PRESENT

By Frederick Gallagher

THE loose gravel on the broad highway to Fort Wynne scuttled from the swift wheels of the blue sedan in a continual rattle against the under sides of the wings. Jim Belton thought the car had never behaved better, and some of the exhilaration of the speed found its way into his enthusiastic consciousness for he sang a little song to himself.

And why shouldn't he sing? He had just left Alliance, where he had completed a successful deal in purchasing Ole Losevar's lumber mill. And not only that! To-morrow, in Fort Wynne he was to be married!

It was early morning, and Jim had a long trip ahead, but he realized by the behavior of his engine that he would reach Fort Wynne around seven in the evening, giving him ample time to complete the few details necessary for to-morrow.

The road was practically empty, for it was early. Between Heisler and

Grannan, one car passed him going in the opposite direction, and he overtook none.

About one in the afternoon he passed through Colmer. Colmer is the kind of town in which one obeys the speed laws. It was the largest town between Alliance and Fort Wynne. Jim passed through and on to the highway again with a feeling of relief. He shot up the hill near Baker's Ranch at forty-five then opened out on the level to fifty-five.

Traffic was beginning to get thicker, but when he approached Elmwood he appeared to have the road to himself, and this made it easier for him to see as he approached a certain crossroads that a figure stood by the side of the road signaling for him to stop.

As Jim drew nearer, he saw that the figure was that of a man. Jim stopped. The man came over.

"What's the trouble, buddy?" Jim shouted through the open window. He could now see that the fellow was

dressed in a blue suit that appeared much worn. He was about five feet ten, and looked tired. His hair which once had been jet-black was now streaked with gray, but Jim thought his eyes were the brightest blue he had ever seen.

The man spoke clearly. "I'm on my way to Fort Wynne, I've walked all the way from Brentville and would appreciate it indeed if you could give me a lift at least part of the way."

Jim threw open the door. "Sure, buddy, jump in. I'm going to Fort Wynne myself," he said.

A clear ingenuous smile broke over the man's face as he slipped in beside Jim.

As the car started with a roar he muttered his thanks, and a few minutes passed before the man turned to Jim and said: "You've been decent with me mister, and perhaps some day I'll be able to return the favor, and if I am ever given the opportunity you can bet your life I'll do it."

"Oh, that's all right," Jim said. "I'd give any one a lift that needed it. Where do you want to be put off at in Fort Wynne?"

"Well," the man said, "perhaps when you hear it, you'll put me off here, but I'm going back to the pen. My name is Sam Dillon, and I'm a pickpocket serving time in the pen at Fort Wynne, but my daughter, who is now twelve, took sick two weeks ago, and Governor Wilson gave me parole to go home and see her. I'm due back to-morrow morning at ten. He gave me some money for train fare but this all went for medicine for the kid, so I'm walking. I've just one dollar left, but if I can get back to Fort Wynne to-night, I'll stay at Bessett's Rooming House till to-morrow. I can get a room there for fifty cents, and it will be one night less in prison."

Jim took his eyes off the road for a second and looked at Sam. That the man was telling the truth there wasn't the slightest doubt. He felt a pang of

pity for him. Here he was himself, happy and contented while this man beside him was going to the penitentiary, and his daughter sick—the whole business, no doubt, brought on by present conditions.

During the conversation Jim had been traveling slowly, as he wanted to hear Sam's story. Now he opened up. Forty-five, fifty, fifty-five, sixty. Yes, he intended to get home in reasonable time.

Jim slowed down and looked back. *Put-put-put-put-put!* A speed cop was following. As he came closer Jim could hear the roar of his machine. Presently he came abreast of the car and held out his hand. Jim stopped.

The cop climbed off his cycle, parked it at the side of the road, took out his notebook, looked the car over, wrote something down, walked around the car to the side where Sam was seated.

"Your name? You were exceeding the speed limit."

After writing down the name he dropped the notebook in his pocket, and leaning across Sam with his head and shoulders through the window he commenced to lecture Jim on the evils of speeding.

"You guys are a menace to safety. You're just about the fifteenth I've caught to-day. You don't seem to realize that it is a criminal offense to speed. Appear at Colmer to-morrow at noon to answer the charge. Drive on."

"But listen, officer," protested Jim. "Hang it man, I'm to be married to-morrow in Fort Wynne at eleven! Can't you——"

"You should have thought of that before, young man," broke in the cop, as he went toward his motor cycle.

THE remainder of the journey was uneventful. Jim was downcast, and Sam realizing his position, said nothing. Once Jim said: "The cop said it was a criminal offense Sam. Guess he meant it."

"Yes," Sam said.

When they arrived at Bessett's Sam got out. "Mister Belton, I wonder would you mind giving me your address in town," he asked. "You know, I certainly appreciate that lift, and I'm sorry for what happened."

"Oh, that's all right, Sam," Jim cut in. "I stay at the Pyramid. Room four."

Sam thanked him, and disappeared into Bessett's.

By the time Jim reached his hotel and changed his clothes it was getting along toward eight o'clock. The Hotel Pyramid is old-fashioned and very quiet, but as Jim sat down to dinner he seemed depressed and a little sullen. The situation he found himself in was the cause. He was compelled to accept the unpalatable fact that there was no getting away from it.

Halfway through the meal a waiter approached.

"There's a boy outside to see you, Mister Belton. He has something to give you, but won't give it to any one but yourself."

Jim went outside where a boy with a huge grin on his face stood with a large envelope in his hand.

"I'm Mister Belton," said Jim.

The boy handed him the envelope. "I was to give this to no one but yourself, sir. The man said to deliver it to Mr. Belton."

Jim thanked him, placed the envelope in his pocket, gave the boy a quarter and returned to finish his meal.

Ten minutes later in his room Jim sat down and drew from his pocket the envelope the boy had given him.

Tearing off the top, he drew forth the contents which consisted of a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. A note was inserted in the string which tied the parcel.

Jim read the note once, but hurriedly, and now, with something like a twinkle in his eyes, he read it again.

These were the words he read:

DEAR MISTER BELTON: I am just again thanking you for your kindness to me to-day. I heard you tell the cop you were to be married to-morrow. I am sorry I am unable to give you something suitable as a present, but you will probably appreciate the contents of the small parcel attached.

Yours sincerely,

SAM DILLON.

Jim rapidly tore off the string and paper and gasped a little as he held in his hands the contents of the parcel.

It was the traffic cop's notebook!

HEADLINES

By H. P. Behnke

THE chill warning of the coming winter was in the evening breeze that swept through the little city park. Its breath, dank with the smell of the near-by river, tugged gently at the tattered rim of Martin Whitney's old hat, as he shivered on one of the iron benches in the park. He drew his shabby coat closer around his trembling body, and huddled up on the bench so as to offer a smaller target for the biting wind.

Broke, tired and hungry, he sat on the hard, metal bench and wished he had never left the little town that had been his home up to eight months ago.

Then, inspired by stories of success and fame in the "big town," he had left home to make his mark in the city. But jobs were scarce, and his small supply of money dwindled until he was forced to pawn all his possessions, except the rather ragged clothes he now wore, in order to keep alive.

All his high hopes and ambitions were crushed to bits, and his promises to the townspeople that they would hear of him in the headlines came back to mock him as he shivered in the park.

"It's beginning to look more like the breadlines, rather than headlines," Martin muttered to himself.

He kicked against the newspaper under the bench, brushing it to one side.

The sight of something gleaming protruding from under it caused him to bend down for a closer look, for daylight was fading rapidly.

He started slightly as he pushed the paper away and saw a nickel-plated revolver come into view. Then he seized it, with the ideas of a hot dinner bought with the money it would bring in the pawnshop.

But when he looked at the chambers and saw that one of the six shells in it was exploded, he changed his mind. Visions of what the gun had been used for flashed through his mind. Probably it had been used in some robbery by one of the riffraff that haunted the park. A murder might have been committed with it. And if he pawned the gun, it might be traced to him, resulting in a prison sentence—or even worse.

He braced himself to hurl it away, hesitated a moment, a long moment, then thrust it in the back pocket of his trousers. He arose from the park bench, stretched his cramped and aching limbs, and walked out of the park and down the street.

THE street was near a factory district, and well flanked on both sides with restaurants and lunch rooms. As Martin walked by them, he gazed longingly in. His hands opened and closed nervously, as he thought of tempting foods, and his mouth watered as he saw steaming meat and potatoes pushed onto the tables.

He was hungry, had been for almost three—or was it four?—days; he had

forgotten how many. The last thing he had eaten was a paper-thin sandwich purchased with his last five-cent piece. His wasn't just ordinary hunger, but the desperate, cruel hunger of starvation.

Martin groaned feebly to himself and shambled on. Anywhere to get out of sight and smell of those foods.

He paused a moment at a street crossing, and a headline in a newspaper caught his eye:

BANDITS TERRORIZE STORE-KEEPERS!

He laughed bitterly, almost crazily to himself, as a thought struck him.

"That's about the only way I'll ever get in the headlines," he muttered brokenly to himself as he crossed the street.

His hunger was getting the better of his qualms about pawning the pistol. As if by a magnet, he was drawn toward the pawnshop where he had left the most of his possessions.

Reaching the little, dingy shop, he started to go in, changed his mind abruptly and walked rapidly down the street again. He was still afraid to take a chance on the revolver and its mystery of the exploded shell.

Close by the pawnshop was another brilliantly lighted restaurant, in which the supper crowd was already congregating. Martin passed slowly by it and peered inside at the bright marble-topped tables being covered with food. Hot, steaming food!

He pressed his face against the window and his eyes devoured the scene within. He licked his lips hungrily and almost grew wild at the sight of so many eatables, so near and yet so far.

Wrenching himself away with a superhuman effort, Martin walked back to the pawnshop, passed it slowly, then came back again. Pausing at the doorway, he stopped and looked into the somewhat dim interior.

Two men were in the place, with their

backs toward the door. The shopkeeper behind the counter was just taking some money out of the till.

Martin suddenly made up his mind. Better to go to jail than to suffer these gnawing, wrenching pangs of starvation. He took the gun from his pocket and walked into the shop with it in his hands.

At the sound of his footsteps, the two men turned around as if in a dream. Martin saw them suddenly drag guns from underneath their coats. They evidently thought he was trying to hold up the place!

Martin tried to say something—to shriek out that he had only come to pawn the revolver he held in his hands. But his parched tongue refused to work. There was a thunderous crash in the little shop as one of the men fired and Martin instinctively pulled the trigger of the gun he held.

To his horror, he saw one of the pair grasp at his shoulder, stagger in a circle and plunge headlong to the floor.

The other fired and edged toward the rear door of the place.

It was all like a horrible nightmare! Again the gun crashed and Martin felt something searing hot smash his left shoulder. It spun him around in a staggering circle. He swayed drunkenly on his feet, then sagged slowly to the floor, while his finger unconsciously worked the trigger of the gun.

In a sort of red mist, he saw the other drop his revolver, clutch wildly at his stomach and drop slowly down as his knees buckled beneath him. There was a look of surprise and terrible pain on his face.

Martin tried to crawl to the door and get away, for already people were coming in answer to the shots and the shrieks of help from the terrified shopkeeper. And off in the distance sounded the harsh, strident whine of a police siren!

He had to get away! They'd never

believe he had only come to pawn the gun. He managed to crawl a few feet, but the effort was too much for his shattered shoulder. His body was wrenched by pain which seemed too terrific to bear. He held out for a few seconds, then passed into oblivion.

IT seemed years before he regained consciousness again. He came to, to find himself in a clean, white bed, with the strong smell of medicine in his nostrils. And sitting beside him was a police captain.

"Well, this is the end for me. No use even trying to explain about that gun." Martin thought wearily to himself, as he saw the brass buttons and blue uniform.

Next was the electric chair!

"How do you feel, son?" asked the captain, as he noticed that the other was awake.

"All right," muttered Martin, almost laughing aloud as a thought struck him. Funny, asking a man how he felt, when in a short time he would probably be electrocuted.

"You did a good job all right," the other went on. "Pinked both of 'em. One in the shoulder and the other in the stomach. He'll kick off, the doc says."

Martin turned away. Then it *would* be the electric chair! And here the captain was complimenting him on his shooting, when he only wished that the bullet which had entered his shoulder had gone a little lower. Just about three inches. Then the State would have been saved the trouble of sending him to the "chair."

"Yep, you did a good job, all right. And with a policeman's gun, too. A copper lost it in the park when he was shooting at a holdup guy. But he tripped and knocked himself out on a park bench, before he could get him."

"So that was how the gun got under the bench," thought Martin to himself.

And he explained the mystery of the exploded shell.

"And say, son. I forgot to tell you. There's a little reward of a thousand dollars from the Merchants' Association waiting for——"

"Yeah. For those fellows that shot me," thought Martin bitterly.

"—waiting for you!" finished the captain.

"What!" screamed Martin, after the sudden announcement sank in. The shock of it made him sit upright in bed!

"Sure!" said the other. "Five thousand smackers reward for you! Those were the two guys who have been holding up the little stores around the city! 'Terrorizing the shopkeepers,' as the news hounds put it. The one guy confessed! And listen, son. This is going to put you in the headlines! Big headlines."

"Headlines!" Martin echoed.

And then the police captain wondered why Martin laughed hysterically and fainted dead away!

CARTRIDGES

By Hal Field Leslie

BLACK hatred was in Lassiter's eyes as he watched Costigan prepare to leave the cabin. For when the grim specter of starvation stalks through the white wilderness, certain kinds of men are apt to forget the debts of friendship.

It was so with Lassiter now. There was in him no memory of the fact that he owed his life to Bill Costigan. Instead, Lassiter's mind was filled only with thoughts of self-preservation.

Costigan, with snowshoes thonged upon his feet and with his rifle in the crook of his arm, was bound for another day of desperate hunting through the snows. They needed meat, these two, if they were ever to see the thaws of another spring unlock the valley river.

A marauding wolf pack had drifted down from the northern barrens and swept the district clean of such small game as might have fallen to trap or snare. However, a lone bull moose—whose mighty antlers and sturdy hoofs were enough to compel the respect of the killer pack—had chosen to winter along the timbered benches. Costigan had read the sign, three weeks ago; but daily the cunning of that wily old forest

monarch had forestalled the best efforts of the hunters to bag him.

Up until ten days ago Lassiter had taken turns at stalking the moose—up until the day he had wasted all but three of Costigan's precious cartridges, in a vain attempt to knock down a stray ptarmigan from the tip of a giant spruce. Wasting bullets on a pound of meat, when more than a thousand pounds was lurking among the thickets!

Since that day, Costigan alone had carried the rifle.

The rifle belonged to Costigan. Lassiter had lost his own weapon, and all his outfit, on that stinging fall morning just before the freeze-up, when his canoe had met disaster on a rock in the river rapids that raced past Costigan's wilderness cabin.

Costigan, hearing Lassiter's desperate cries, had risked his own life to drag Lassiter from the river's deadly grip. And Costigan, with barely enough grub on hand to see himself through the winter, had willingly taken Lassiter in, to share that food and share his camp and blankets.

However, it was not of this kindly deed that Lassiter was thinking, as Costigan opened the cabin door and dragged

his webs out into the gray skeins of storm. Lassiter, on his stool beside the roaring fireplace, was cursing himself because he hadn't sped a bullet into Costigan when the fellow had reprimanded him for that waste of ammunition. With Costigan out of the way, Lassiter knew he could manage safely to winter out on the grub that was left.

If he could only get his hands on that rifle again! But that seemed impossible of accomplishment; for since the day Costigan had taken the weapon wholly into his own possession, he had guarded it jealously. He even slept with it beside him—almost as if he suspected the growth of that black hatred in Lassiter's heart.

Without the sure advantage of the rifle in his hands, Lassiter dared make no move against Costigan. Though Costigan was a smaller man, there was in him a fiber of courage that Lassiter lacked; and unless the first stealthy blow should bring him down, the tables might be quickly turned. Lassiter dared not take the chance.

However, as Lassiter sat glowering beside the fire on this day of storm, there occurred to him a plan that was simplicity itself. Surely there was food enough to see one man down the long white trail to the settlements. Why not take it, bend his back under it, and away? Take the food, take the ax and all the matches; take Costigan's blankets and hit the trail on Costigan's spare snowshoes! There was salvation! Let Costigan look out for himself—with the rifle and the three remaining cartridges. There could be no safer, surer way to kill a man!

Fired with sudden energy, his bearded lip twisted in a wolfish grin as he pictured Costigan's return to the cold, bare cabin, Lassiter set feverishly about his preparations for departure.

Within fifteen minutes his pack was ready, the snowshoes standing by the door. Every scrap of food was bundled

in Costigan's four-point blankets, together with the few marten pelts which Costigan had taken before the wolves arrived. But there was yet something else of Costigan's that Lassiter meant to take away.

Costigan had a small quantity of gold dust, which he kept in a tiny vial on a shelf behind some empty coffee tins. Perhaps forty dollars' worth of gold—but men have fought and died for less of the yellow substance. Lassiter strode across the floor, thrust a grasping hand behind the coffee tins. His fingers failed to encounter the vial. With an impatient sweep of his arm he sent the tins clattering away. But the treasure he sought was not in its accustomed place. Costigan must have hidden it away.

Lassiter began his search for the gold with systematic destructiveness. And the more the dust eluded him, the more determined he became to possess it. At the end of an hour the cabin's interior was a wreck, and Lassiter was standing in the middle of it, baffled and filled with an unreasoning anger.

He reluctantly concluded that Costigan must be carrying the gold upon his person.

It was at this moment that Costigan pushed open the door and came in with a gust of snow-laden wind. One searching glance and he read the sign correctly. His wind-tanned countenance grew hard as rock.

LASSITER stood rigid. The look on his face was the expression of a man who has come suddenly face to face with death. Costigan's silence was more terrible than any words could have been. When he did speak, finally, his voice was flat and cold—as cold and gritty as the snow that was slithering across the cabin floor.

"You're a rat, Lassiter—and if the storm hadn't driven me back, you'd have got away with it, too. I ought to kill

you, Lassiter. But I'm no murderer. I'm going to give you a chance. Shut the door!"

Lassiter obeyed. Costigan freed his feet from the webs and gestured toward the table with the rifle barrel. "Sit down!"

When Lassiter was seated, Costigan racked two of the remaining three cartridges from the rifle. He stood them upright on the table, side by side. Then he levered out the third cartridge. Holding it upon his palm, he looked long and steadily at Lassiter. Lassiter remained very still; for the rifle, though empty now, could be an effective bludgeon in Costigan's hands.

"Lassiter, I've suspected you for days," said Costigan coldly. "But I didn't think you'd pull out and leave me to starve—not without the rifle. I figured you'd jump me, Lassiter—and maybe have luck enough to come out on top. But the rifle wouldn't have done you much good on the trail, I can tell you that."

Question leaped in Lassiter's eyes. Costigan answered it by cradling the rifle in the crook of his arm, and pulling the bullet from the cartridge in his hand. From the uncapped brass cylinder he poured into his palm a small cascade of yellow dust.

"My gold, Lassiter. I figured you'd want it, so I hid it in two of the cartridges. One good one for the moose is all I need. But *you'd* need more than one good cartridge, Lassiter—with wolves roaming the woods."

The pupils of Lassiter's eyes dilated suddenly. Lassiter had forgotten the possibility of encountering the gray devils on the trail.

"You don't deserve it, Lassiter, but I'm giving you a chance—a gambler's chance. Those two cartridges on the table—one of them is filled with my dust, the other with good powder. Take your choice, Lassiter. And if you pick the good one—well, the rifle's yours.

I'm gambling my life with you, Lassiter."

Lassiter's eyes began to gleam. "You mean——"

"You can shoot me, Lassiter," said Costigan softly. "But if you pick the wrong one, I'll do the shooting. I'll kill you, Lassiter."

For a moment Lassiter stared at Costigan as if he believed the man gone suddenly mad. But there was nothing but sanity in the eyes of Costigan; that, and a faintly mocking expression which taunted Lassiter wordlessly.

Lassiter's gaze riveted on the twin cylinders of brass. He leaned forward, as if a closer look might tell him which bullet had been disturbed. But Costigan froze him with a sharp command.

"No closer, Lassiter! Make your choice from there."

With an abrupt move Lassiter braced himself away from the table with both hands. He looked at Costigan and laughed—nervously. "You're joking, man," he managed to say.

"I'm not joking, Lassiter. Either you'll gamble with me, or else you'll take half the grub, one blanket, half the matches and my knife, and then hit the trail!"

Silence fell, and the wind tore at the eaves of the cabin. Costigan spilled the yellow dust back into the cartridge case, replaced the bullet carefully atop it. Then he stood grim and still, waiting, watching the changing expressions on Lassiter's countenance as he stared at the two inscrutable cylinders of brass and weighed his chances, one against the other.

On Lassiter's face, where in turn were mirrored hope and hatred and an awful fear, great beads of sweat were standing. Lassiter's nerve broke suddenly.

"I can't do it, Costigan!" he cried. "I can't do it!"

"Very well," said Costigan with grim finality. "You'll trail."

THERE was a twist of contempt on Costigan's lips as he watched the storm take Lassiter with his allotted share of the grub and equipment. And when the man had disappeared among the up-wind thickets, Costigan closed the door and returned to the table. Mechanically he picked up the two cartridges and slipped them into the magazine of the rifle. He tossed the weapon on his bunk, quickened the fire, and set about the brewing of a pot of tea.

There was no water in the cabin. Costigan went to the door for a bucket of snow to melt. And as he opened it, his eye caught a blur of dark movement against the storm-swept evergreens on the far river bank. He looked intently that way, and saw that it was the big moose he had these many days been hunting.

The creature was working restively down-wind. Costigan realized that Lassiter's passing must have routed it from some thicket. Costigan drew back into the cabin; and with hands that never fumbled in his hurry, he seized his rifle and levered a cartridge into the chamber.

The moose was a dim target through the veils of the storm. But Costigan was a cool and steady shot; hard upon

the shattering report of the rifle, the big bull went down threshing in the snow.

As Costigan started toward his quarry, he heard a sound that brought him short. Riding faintly down the wind, it was the blood-chilling chorus of a wolf pack on the hunt. At first he thought the gray devils were on the track of the moose. But the diminishing volume of that weird hunt cry told him they were trailing other game. Easier game!

As Costigan turned again toward the moose—he was shuddering a little despite the justice of the fate that would be Lassiter's—he saw that the big bull had regained its feet. Swiftly Costigan levered home the second cartridge. And deliberately he took his aim and squeezed the trigger.

That second shot, so carefully placed in the mighty neck, brought the big bull down to stay.

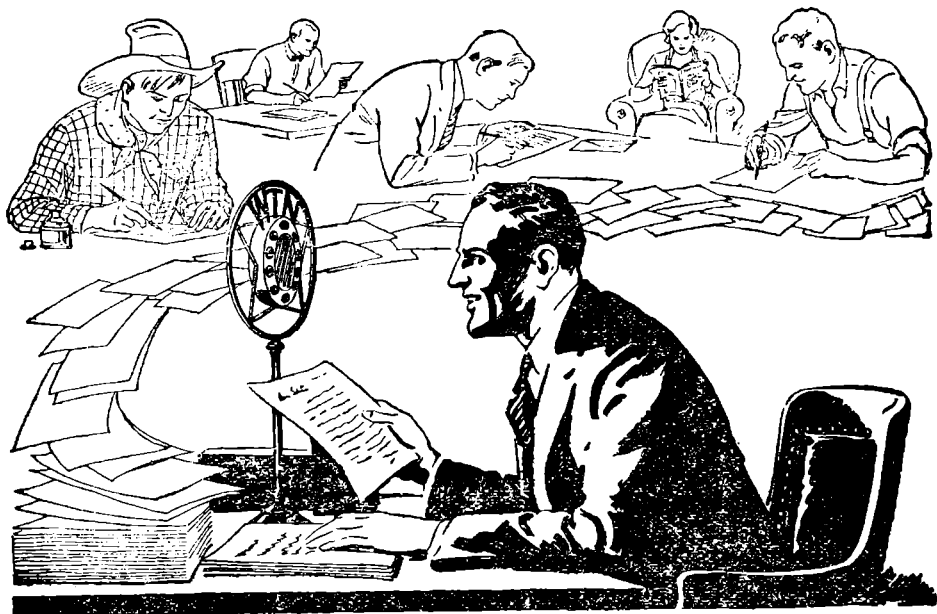
That second shot, yes—for *both* those cartridges which Costigan had placed upon the table had been good ones!

Lassiter—had he not been betrayed by the cowardice which Costigan had known was in him, and on which Costigan had staked so dangerously his own life—had needed only to put forth a hand to win the gamble.



EARTH ENERGY

A NEW invention of a former president of the Academy of Science is said to be able to tap some of the electric forces playing about the earth. The invention has already been shown as a working model, and the energy it gave forth easily operated a sewing-machine motor. Scientists claim that it may turn out to be the greatest, most far-reaching and most revolutionary discovery of all ages. It may mean that man will be able to grasp the elemental forces of the earth at first-hand and apply them directly to his own uses. It may mean the obtaining of power by such a simple and inexpensive device that power will be as plentiful and cheap as the air we breathe. It may mean the elimination of fuel for steam purposes, perhaps even for heat. And, lastly, it may signify that man is standing on the threshold of the most wonderful era the world has ever seen.



At The Top-Notch Mike

STATION WTN—New York! This is the station, ladies and gentlemen, located on the fifth floor of Street & Smith's building, the home of good fiction, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York.

This station wishes to make a special announcement about the leading feature in the June issue of Top-Notch. This tale is the opening novelette of a series called "The Diamond Spearhead," and was written by Ben Conlon, author of "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef," and other Top-Notch stories.

"The Diamond Spearhead" will continue for several issues, but each episode will be a complete novelette. The yarn concerns the experiences of Bruce Harley, a young private detective in whose heart the spirit of adventure was always alive. He ran into a case which seemed just routine business at first, but which, once he was well into it, he found to present all the adventure, risk

and romance that any young man could wish.

This unusual series will take the reader from New York to Rio de Janeiro, and then up the mighty Amazon River to a village of Baralhao Indians, a backward tribe known to but few white men.

Probably the Upper Amazon country is the most primitive section remaining in this old world of ours. There, when the jungle closes after one like a curtain, one leaves the white man's world and the white man's standards and enters upon a life as primitive, as untouched by modern invention and custom, as the world was several centuries ago.

If you have not forgotten your geography, you will recall that the Amazon is almost four thousand miles in length, and that even several of its *tributaries*—imagine it!—are over two thousand miles long.

It is in this remote jungle country that the author of "The Diamond Spearhead" sets many of his scenes, although the action of the opening story takes place in New York City and the episode is called "Murder in the East Seventies."

Your announcer feels that you will enjoy this series quite as much as you did "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef," concerning which this station is still receiving many letters.

So don't fail to watch for that June issue of Top-Notch, on the news stands Friday, May 19th.

And speaking of series stories, the final dramatic episode of "Ozar the Aztec" will also be run in the June number of Top-Notch. Seldom, indeed, have we had stories which had more appeal for Top-Notch readers than these unusual experiences in the Lost City of the Aztecs, and in "Ozar's Crown of Victory," the final episode, the adventures of the bronzed young American come to an end. The final novelette is one of the best of the series.

In the near future, this station expects and hopes to be able to announce the titles of new stories by Valentine Wood, who, with the "Ozar" stories,

has added to the reputation he won with "Kroom, Son of the Sea."

A complete novel about as different from the tropical yarns mentioned above as one story could be from another is "The Man From Skagway," by James B. Hendryx, author of "Constable McI'ce—Rookie," and "Justice and the Law," and other stories of the great white Northland.

The June issue will also contain a number of other good, authentic action stories by favorite Top-Notch authors. And of course the popular Short Short Story Corner will be continued.

Letters from Top-Notch fans continue to pile up, and now I'm going to read as many of them as my time on the air will allow.

The first letter is from George L. Maas of Jamaica, Long Island, who compliments Top-Notch on its Short Short Story Corner as follows:

DEAR EDITOR: I can truthfully say that your Short Short Story Corner alone is worth the ten cents which I pay for your magazine every month. So far as I know, you have the only magazine running enough of these little gems in every issue. You give us at least three, and sometimes four or more. Tastes may differ, but I am all for short short

**HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH!
READERS' BALLOT**

Best story in this issue

Next best.....

Best "short short" story.....

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors?
.....

Remarks and suggestions

Name and address.....