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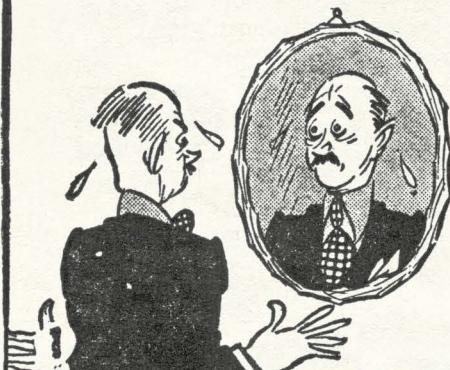


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MASKS OFF-IN MEXICO

By Cole Richards

Ralph Knight, secret agent, "earns" his pay in a Mexican mansion where no one is what he seems, and where disaster waits at every door.



RALPH KNIGHT



CALDERON RUIZ

CHAPTER I. PRIVATE AGENT.

THE American, Ralph Knight, knelt beside his suitcase, only to move as quickly as a thief caught in the act of stealing. He ran noiselessly to the door. After a hurried survey of hotel corridor and patio, he locked the door and ran to the window.

The French windows stood open to the September sunshine. He moved out on the balcony. One bronzed hand lay lightly on the railing. The other pushed back his

coat and rested on a short pistol belted snugly to his side. His sandy head was alert. His muscled body was tensed to action.

For the count of ten, he stood with his gimlet eyes surveying every Mexican within view.

They were all true to type. Peons in sandals, and rags, and big straw sombreros, lolled on the plaza benches. There were the women selling fancywork at the hotel entrance, the ancient beggar with his staff. A soldier gazed at a monument. An Indian woman industriously fanned flies off cookies and shrilled, "Señorita! Pan dulces!"

"Nobody is play-acting there," Knight said to himself. "And nobody trying to spy on me."

He returned to the suitcase and stared at it without touching it. The shirts were doubled; he had left them straight. A clothes brush was out of its holder. A magazine was on top; he had left it on the bot-

It hinted at a great deal and told little:

Señor:

You will remember me as the one who required your services in Puebla. My honor then depended upon your prompt action. Now I fear for the life and, more important, for the honor of my son, Calderon. If you should see him before



ALEK KRESGE



JUSTO RUIZ

tom. The suitcase was locked when he went to breakfast; it was locked when he returned. But some one had gone through its contents, meantime.

"No sneak thief. Everything's here. My visit to Justo Ruiz must mean something to somebody."

He closed the suitcase and emptied his coat pockets on the table. His tourist's card, giving him the right to spend six months in Mexico for pleasure, he returned to his wallet. He had three letters, one from a cabaret dancer in Mexico City concerning the recovery of letters, one from Chihuahua concerning the trapping of a murderer. He tore them to bits and burned them in the washbasin. The third letter was from Justo Ruiz. Knight read it once more before burning it.

you see me, say nothing. He walks alone and confides in no one. Hurry, señor!

Knight burned this letter, too, and washed it down the drain. The last word to go into flame was "Hurry!" It was the word that had sent him on the train only to be stranded fifty miles from San Pedro and the Ruiz house when a railroad dam broke under a hurricane flood. Knight was forced to cool his heels in this hotel until the roads ceased to be torrents, then he could make the fifty-mile journey on horseback.

The enforced wait had given some one a chance to search his suitcase, a search that proved fruitless.

"Wonder if it was that crazy American?" His thoughts raced back over the previous day when an excitable young American on the train had pestered him with per-

sonal questions. Knight remembered him for his unruly hair, his stiff, tense hands. Some things he had asked twice, not listening to the answer. Some obsession blurred his brain and kept him from becoming angered at Knight's extravagant lies. "No," Knight concluded, "he didn't do this. He isn't smart enough to get into a locked suit-

"No, he is not going with me. Did he ask about me?"

"He asked whether you ordered the horses. He knew where you were going."

"Indeed?" He satisfied the peon's curiosity with, "He's trying to sell me a mine. I would as soon ride with a pocketful of mosquitoes as to ride with him. Let's go."



BIG-NOSE



WORRELL

case. And he wouldn't lock it after him."

He was still mulling over the question when the porter came to tell him his horse was ready. He descended to the plaza where stood a peon who would ride with him to bring the mount back from San Pedro. A slight tilt of the peon's head indicated a man leaving the hotel.

"Your friend goes with you, señor?"

Knight looked, and knew who had gone through his case.

He saw a big-boned, big-nosed Mexican in khaki and laced boots. This man, too, had been on the train where Knight's gimlet eyes had seen his wallet. "Big-nose" carried the identification card of a Mexican secret agent.

The agent saw him and hailed him. Pretending not to see, Knight spurred into a hard gallop. The *mozo* rode at his stirrup.

WE may have company on the road," the peon announced, as they picked their way through the flood débris under overhanging trees. "The American with the wild hair took a horse. He goes to see Justo Ruiz. He also asked about you. I told him you came to Mexico for pleasure." He winked broadly. In the San Pedro district, Yankees cannot get permanent passports giving them the right to work. They come in "for pleasure."

Knight's interest quickened at the news that the man who had asked the personal questions was also go-

ing to the house of Justo Ruiz. "I know him," he said. "He has ants in his head."

The peon rode in silence for several miles. He was hard put, good rider though he was, to keep up with Knight. The footing was bad and Knight's urging of his horse more than once brought them to the brink of disaster.



MALORY

They rode up a gully. The horses seemed to slog through the heavy mud the message of Justo Ruiz: "Hurry. My son's life and honor are in danger." Knight ducked his head to avoid the whip of bushes. He clung tightly with his knees when the horse splashed into deep muck to avoid the stickers of a cactus. He began to wish he had never heard of the honor of Justo Ruiz. He was ducking both a bush and a cactus, when the gully suddenly opened into a Y.

A horseman in the left branch of the Y, called, "Stop!"

"Diablo!" the peon muttered, "I forgot the other cut-off."

Knight looked at Big-nose, the agent. "Yes?" he drawled.

"Where you going?"

"To visit Justo Ruiz in San Pe-

dro." Knight displayed his card. He always spoke softly to Mexican police.

The agent read it with a lack of interest that showed he already knew its contents. "Ruiz is a minning man, but don't tell me you're an engineer, Knight. You don't know one end of a mine from the other. What's doing at the Ruiz place?"



MIGUEL

"Nothing, as far as I know. I'm a guest."

"Come clean, guy. Don't try to hold out on me. I know you're a private agent, expensive enough so people don't call on you unless they need help damn bad. What's Justo Ruiz in flames about?"

"You tell me," Knight suggested.

The agent scowled. "Got a permit to carry that gun?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes." Knight showed the paper.

"O. K. Now, about this house party Justo Ruiz is stagin'. You know Alek Kresge? No? He's a dancer, with a mincin' walk and a sweet way of talkin'—sweet on top and tough underneath."

"Don't know him," Knight answered truthfully.

"Know a goofy drunk named Mallery?"

"No." Knight was busy filling in a mental index.

"Got a close trap, ain't you? I suppose you don't know Calderon Ruiz, either."

"Not personally. Everybody in Mexico has heard of him. Son of Justo Ruiz. Aviation lieutenant.

"Wisdom."

"Not no more. It stands for conquest, for the guys that want to take over Mexico to fill their pockets and satisfy ambitions. Right now, it looks good to a lot of guys that've been kicked off European thrones. Well, buddy, that snake may wriggle plenty this Sixteenth, but he's goin' to stay clamped in the eagle's beak."



COLONEL BRAVO



THE SECRETARY

He's planning a Mexico-to-Vienna flight."

The agent clasped his hands on the broad horn of his saddle. His eyes and mouth tightened grimly, making his big nose stand out prominently. "Now, listen, buddy. Today is September 10th. The Sixteenth is the anniversary of the Grito—the declaration of independence from Spain. It's the day revolts start. But Mexico don't go for that any more." He pulled a small flag from his pocket, striped green, white, and red. The white carried the insignia of an eagle standing on a nopal cactus, a serpent in its beak. "Know what the serpent stands for?"

"I hope the eagle holds him. I'm here for pleasure and I like things quiet. Have a cigarette?"

The agent accepted. Over the lighted match, he surveyed Knight's face. "Yes, you like things quiet," he commented sarcastically. "Not!" He flipped the match into the mud. "O. K., Señor Private Agent. On your way. Be sure you stick to pleasure!"

KNIGHT set the spurs to his horse, quickening his pace in spite of the dangerous road. Now, more than ever, it was necessary to hurry. The trip would consume two full days. He could not arrive before the night of the eleventh. If, as Big-nose had

hinted, Calderon Ruiz had got himself into trouble with some royalist plot, only four days would remain in which to act. Knight remembered that the Mexico-to-Vienna flight of Calderon Ruiz was scheduled to start on the Sixteenth. He spurred harder.

"Your pistol is ready to use, señor?" the peon asked suddenly.

Knight promptly drew it. His eyes searched the bushes and the great trees from which hung heavy curtains of moss. A regiment of bandits could have lain in ambush there. He gathered a tight rein, preparing to shoot and run for it. A twitch of his shoulders indicated that he saw the danger.

A man lay stretched out at full length on a tree limb over the gully! His tight, leather pants and jacket and his face, itself like tanned leather, blended with the tree bark. They saw him only because he moved. He wiggled back along the limb and slid down with the huge trunk between himself and Knight.

"He lay in watch like the jaguar," said the peon. "Shall we take his skin home, señor?"

"We want no trouble, if it can be avoided," Knight answered cautiously.

The peon clicked his tongue in disapproval. They rode on. The horses slogged in heavy mud. Birds whistled in the trees. Knight retained his tight grip on the reins.

The pistol rested on his leg. Then the peon hissed.

The peon's right hand was against his shoulder. He held a stiletto beside his ear in the shadow of his sombrero brim, ready to hurl.

From behind a broad cypress trunk, a masked man sprang out, a hand up to halt them, a knife menacing. Knight did not need the peon's,

"It is the hombre of ants in the head," to recognize him. Above the mask, his unruly hair waved in the breeze. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. His clutch on the knife hilt whitened his knuckles. He was acting in spite of overpowering fear.

"I won't keep you a minute, Mr. Knight," he quavered. "I want to see your papers."



JOSÉ AUGUSTIN

KNIGHT dismounted. He walked up to the holdup man, hands hanging loosely at his sides. When he was close enough to see the mask suck in at the holdup's nostrils, Knight made a quick gesture with his left hand. He stepped back, balancing the holdup's knife on his own brown palm.

"You don't know how to hold a knife, amigo, much less throw it. Where I disarmed you, a Mexican would have killed you. Don't make threats with weapons in Mexico unless you can back them up." He ripped away the mask. "So. My friend of the train, eh? Still curious about me. What are you trying

to learn, amigo? Your name is Worrell. Right?"

"Show me your papers," Worrell insisted, as stubbornly as if he, not Knight, held the gun.

Knight got out his card and, for the second time, let unfriendly eyes read it. Worrell searched him for papers, while Knight held the pistol ready for action and his peon threatened with the stiletto. The search finished, Worrell stepped back.

He sagged. His relaxed face was an open book to his character. Knight read there a shallow man, rather dull-witted, urged by some obsession to acts he was incapable of carrying out successfully.

"How old are you?" Worrell asked.

"Twenty-seven."

"Gee, I should have had more sense. But you look older. Seventeen years ago you were ten. That lets you out."

"Out of what?"

Worrell's face hardened. He ignored the question. "But what are you doing here? You're going to the Ruiz house. Who've you got business with? Malory? Kresge?"

"I have an appointment with Justo Ruiz," Knight answered patiently.

Worrell's manner changed. He became as affable as a beggar. "Excuse me if I bothered you. I'm tryin' to find somebody, see? Don't know how he looks. But I know what he did!" His fists clenched. "I want to ask you a favor. Don't mention this at the Ruiz house. And don't go there with me. You can wait, can't you?"

"I cannot. You'll do the waiting."

He tossed the knife into the bushes, mounted and galloped away.

"He has the ants in his head, no?" the peon chuckled.

Knight thought, "Have those ants

caused Calderon's trouble? What man is Worrell after and what did that man do? Who are Malory and Kresge? What's the big-nosed agent's interest in them? In a layout like this, Big-nose tells me to stick to pleasure! Huh!" he snorted.

The derisive snort frightened the pony into a harder gallop. That pony had dropped from exhaustion, and several others, before Knight at last rode up the drive to the Ruiz house in San Pedro.

An hour later, Worrell rode in. It was late afternoon of the 11th of September.

CHAPTER II.

PLAQUE ON THE WALL.

SAN PEDRO is in a wide valley. From the window of his room, Knight looked over tiled roofs in green masses of foliage. The trees swayed restlessly in the wind. A spatter of rain brightened the red roofs in the dying sunlight. On one side, the town crawled up the mountainside and back through a canyon to the first of the Ruiz mines. On the other side, the flat green stretch of a landing field marked the Campo Militar, the army flying school where Calderon Ruiz was stationed. On a mountain crag between the Campo and the mines, Knight saw the blur that was a group of three ruined stone buildings called the Tres Casas, or three houses. Wise men, whether they respected possible ghosts or the danger of falling walls, left the Tres Casas to the lizards and encroaching tropical growth.

A sudden burst of rain dropped a gray curtain over the Ruiz mines, the Campo, and the Tres Casas.

Knight went to the mirror to adjust his tie. Whistling softly, he

gazed impersonally at himself as he lighted a cigarette and began the careful tying of the bow. Impersonally, because his mind was on Calderon's trouble, the agent's interest, and Worrell, he watched the deft movements of his hands. The fingers were at the bow edges, pulling them tight, when he stopped abruptly.

Brain, fists, and feet were set for action. A thin trail of smoke wreathed from his nostrils, marking his steady breathing. He stared into the mirror, across his own shoulder, to where a man stood in the doorway.

The newcomer, a Mexican, was dressed as a servant. His sudden noiseless entrance laid a hush on the room. His eyes were green as a cat's, and they had a cat's inscrutable expression. His gaze made Knight feel that he had been taken apart and ticketed for future reference.

The cigarette bobbed with the slight motion of the American's lips. "I didn't hear you knock," he drawled.

"The wind, señor, covers many sounds," was the calm reply. "Also it imitates. I thought you said, 'Enter.' Señor Justo Ruiz will see you in half an hour in his sitting room."

As noiselessly as he had come, the man withdrew.

Knight carefully tightened the bow tie. The long ash of the cigarette showered his suit. He brushed himself vigorously, chose a clean handkerchief and snapped off the light. In the semidark, he felt of the loads in his pistol. It fit snugly against his side, under his coat. He fastened one button of the coat; it was easily flipped open.

He crossed the room and opened the door as noiselessly as had the Mexican. His second-floor room opened on a broad, roofed promen-

ade overlooking the patio. A gust of wind sprinkled him with rain. Down the promenade, the cat-eyed servant turned on a light in an old lantern. He moved into the shadow. It was impossible to tell whether he had gone or whether he lingered there, watching.

Keeping close to the wall, away from the splashing rain, Knight went to the third door. He knocked twice and got no answer. The door opened slightly at his knock. He glimpsed a rich sitting room. He rapped again.

"Enter, señor," said the cat-eyed servant at his elbow. "Señor Ruiz will be here soon."

Knight's steady nerves served him well. He did not jump at the unexpected voice. He walked in.

The servant followed to draw the curtains and give Knight a cigarette. He held a lighted match until the tobacco glowed.

"I am not mistaken, you are American, señor?" he said.

"Yes."

"You are tourist, no?"

"Yes. Where is Señor Ruiz?"

"A minute past, he is here. He is not far away. You came into Mexico through Laredo?"

THE shrewd questioning was interrupted by the entrance of a slight, small man, feminine in his mincing walk and his handling of a walking stick. He halted in surprise. He had entered without knocking and evidently expected the room to be unoccupied. His shoes and trousers edges were wet.

"You walked a long way in the rain?" the cat-eyed servant asked.

"You have good eyes, Miguel," the other replied, in a shy voice. He bowed gracefully to Knight. "Pardon my intrusion. I returned to get

COM-1B

a letter I left here. Knowing Justo Ruiz would not be here, I walked in."

Knight caught up the word, "knowing." "Where is he? I have an appointment."

"So he said. He is suddenly called to the mines, not to return until morning. You are the American? I am Alek Kresge."

Knight turned up the card in his mental index, and noted thereon: "This is a man without feeling. A dangerous man."

Acknowledging the introduction, he murmured his name as he placed the cigarette in a tray and slipped the coat button open. He had seen a flash of bewilderment in Miguel's cat eyes. Something in Alek's speech caused alarm for Justo Ruiz.

"Miguel," Alek said, "tell Señor Malory I'll meet him in the library in an hour. He's probably there now with his bottle. Where," he asked sweetly, "are you going?"

Miguel turned in the doorway to the next room, the bedroom. "To fix the señor's bed."

Alex snapped his fingers. "He won't be here to use the bed. Take my message to Señor Malory." He waited until Miguel had gone out. "A new servant. Here only a week." He hesitated. "Sorry you didn't get to see Señor Ruiz." He waited for Knight to leave.

An alarm for Justo Ruiz was ringing in Knight's senses.

"Nice bunch of books here," he commented.

"He is queer about them. He does not let any one read them." Sweetly insistent, Alek Kresge added, "Shall we go downstairs?"

From his position by the bookcase, Knight could see into the bedroom. A high clothespress stood between two oaken chests. He strolled across the intervening space and

opened the chests. They were filled with personal linens.

"Really! Señor Ruiz will not like that!" Alek said, shocked at Knight's manners.

Knight had already discovered that the clothespress was locked. He listened at the keyhole. His shoulder crashed against the press. The lock gave. The door swung open.

"I think he'll pardon my bad manners, under the circumstances," Knight drawled. To himself, he muttered, "Katie, bar the door!"

WITHIN the clothespress lay Justo Ruiz. His long body was doubled up. A streak of blood smeared his white hair, and blood had spattered on his trim white goatee. As Knight bent to feel his pulse, he stirred and muttered.

"Dead?" asked Alek.

"Far from it."

"This must have happened after he said he was going to the mines."

Knight did not answer. He did not believe that Alek was mystified. He felt the same alarm for Justo Ruiz that he had felt a few minutes before.

They carried him to the bed. Alek went to have a servant bring bandages and hot water. Justo Ruiz opened his eyes. He stared at Knight without recognizing him. Then his frown cleared.

"I am glad you are here. What happened?"

"Some one hit you. Remember what you were doing?"

"Why, yes. Miguel said you were here. He left. I came into the bedroom. The clothespress was open. I went to close it. Then I fell." He closed his eyes, gathered strength and whispered, "Who would want to hit me? It is doubtless that I wor-

ried about Calderon. I am no longer young."

Knight did not argue. It was not the time to tell the elderly Mexican that his body had been jammed in the press. Ruiz's suggestion that he was suffering from the exhaustion of age was belied by his quick recovery.

When the small cut had been washed and his head was bandaged, he walked to a chair in his sitting room. Authority rang in his voice when he ordered the servants out. They stole away, masking their curiosity. Alek went with them.

"Hand me the cane from behind the books, señor."

Knight obeyed. He brought out a thick mahogany stick carved with a hound's head.

Ruiz laid it over his knees. His long, olive-skinned hands rested firm on it. "Do you know," he asked abruptly, "anything about mental diseases?"

"That hardly comes in my line. I know something of dope."

"It may be dope," Ruiz said thoughtfully, "but I think not. Señor, I was not clear in my mind when you asked how I was hurt. I was struck. I have a vague recollection of some one standing beside me."

"Remember how tall he was? Could it have been Alek?"

"Alek Kresge?" Ruiz chuckled. "You say that because you, like most men, dislike him. Even if he did this, surely he did not do the other."

"Oh, something else has happened?"

"Yes."

Knight looked at his watch. The big-nosed agent had mentioned Alek and a Malory; Worrell had hinted at some connection between the mincing Alek and the goofy drunk.

In five minutes they were due to meet in the library.

"Why do you look at the time?" Ruiz asked.

"I intended to be elsewhere, but it's not important. Tell me what else happened that made you think some one here has a mental disease."

"Later," Ruiz said firmly. "And I shall tell you then about my fears for Calderon. No!"—when Knight moved toward the bell. "I need no guards. I have this." He twisted the hound's head and drew a rapier. "Go, señor."

KLINT NIGHT ran down the stairs. The rain had stopped. Dusk darkened the house. The wind blew in occasional gusts.

Arriving in the lower hall, he heard a series of thuds, as if a man struck the wall with his fist. Several seconds intervened between the thuds. The sound came from the room behind the library.

The library door stood ajar. Electric candles in wall sconces gave a dim light. He had hoped for a room with nooks and curtains, where he could hide to listen. He was disappointed. The books were on stark shelves. Heavy inner doors sheltered the windows. The decorative draperies offered no concealment. A high-backed chair stood in the corner, the back turned to the wall light. Behind that, he might crouch.

He was bent over the chair before he saw that a man sat in it.

Long hair was brushed back from a sallow forehead. His hand, near bottle and glass on a service table, was curved with talonlike yellow fingers. Haunted eyes burned in purple rings.

"Looking for something?" he asked in wry, cynical tones.

"The light switch. I can't see the books," Knight answered glibly.

The other grunted his disbelief. "My name's Malory." He picked up the square bottle of *habenero*, set it down reluctantly. "There isn't another glass. If I ring, it'll bring that damn, sneaking Miguel!"

"Go ahead and drink. I don't need one. I'm Ralph Knight. I came down to see the Grito celebration and Calderon's take-off for Vienna."

"Well! A man enters this house and tells his intentions straight out. Mr. Knight, I drink to you!" Malory drained the glass and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. His third finger carried a fine cameo in black and white. "Good drink, *habenero*." The haunted eyes blazed up. "It'll drown anything, but faces. You hear that, Mr. Knight? You—can't—drown—faces."

He peered at Knight. "What you listening to? Those thuds on the wall? It's Kresge at knife practice. Pleasant things, knives. Silent. Certain. No clews for your secret-service men."

"Who's he?" Knight asked, as if the answer meant little.

Malory smiled faintly. "Alek Kresge dances. But don't underestimate him. Men have, to their sorrow." He leaned forward and stared keenly at the American. "Alek Kresge," he drawled, "is an Austrian." The tone and look probed like a scalpel.

Knight assumed a blank expression. Malory clutched the bottle and the light fell full on his cameo. The black figure on it was the Austrian double eagle. He had spoken as if the nationality of Alek Kresge were a password. What would Austrians have to do with the house of Justo Ruiz, with Big-nose, and Worrell?

The bottle clinked on the glass. Malory drained the drink and

sighed. "What do you know about this house?"

"It belongs to Justo Ruiz, who owns half the mines in Mexico, speaking broadly."

"It was built by the discoverer of the mines, back in the days of the viceroys. He threw money around. Built churches and plastered them with gold. Built the loveliest garden in Mexico around this house. Wanted to pave it with silver. King wouldn't stand for it. Too much like royalty." His cynical voice fell to a dry whisper, "you can't keep royalty out of Mexico."

KNIGHT sat down and tamped tobacco in his pipe. Outwardly, he was relaxed; inwardly, he had come to attention. When men speak of royalty in Mexico, they speak of the ill-fated Maximilian. Maximilian was an Austrian archduke. Alek Kresge was an Austrian. Malory's cameo bore the Austrian double eagle. Many an Austrian was among those whom the agent had said were kicked from their thrones.

"Royalty will never come to Mexico," Knight remarked.

"Perhaps not," Malory replied dryly. "Empress Carlotta used to come here. She loved the garden. All she saw there were the magnolias and the roses, the pepper trees, the jasmine. She missed a green plant in a far corner."

"What plant was that?"

"Marihuana. Mexicans fed it to her. She was insane when she left Mexico to try to save the empire, but only the Mexicans knew that. No one knows the nights she spent walking in the garden, with the wind howling and the sky black, and poor Carlotta trying to think with what was left of her mind."

Knight strolled toward the door.

He did not want to interrupt any consultation Alek planned with this goofy drunk.

"She still walks there," Malory persisted. "She's been seen lately. The Mexicans executed Maximilian and drove out the French, but they can't rid this garden of the girl they sent to a living death."

"The evil men do lives after them," Knight quoted. He spoke automatically. His mind was on Austrian royalists.

"The evil men do lives with them," Malory cried harshly. The bottle rattled on the glass. "You—can't—drown—faces."

His haunted eyes raced over the library, as if he searched for another subject of discussion. It struck Knight that Malory was talking to detain him.

Was Justo Ruiz safe? Kresge's knife practice had stopped some minutes before. He had an appointment with Malory. Why, then, did Malory cling to the American's companionship?

Suddenly another knife hit the wall. It struck with a dread finality.

Some one began to whistle in the patio.

"With your permission," Malory said. He hurried from the room.

Knight turned slowly, frowning. Small sounds had a way of annoying him until he discovered their origin. He had heard a sound that had no place in this room, a *plink, plink* as of water dripping. Now that the wind was down and the room was emptied of Malory's voice, the small noise became loud and insistent.

He located it at the wall on the other side of which the knives had thudded. The wall lights did not reach there. Knight crossed the room and struck a match.

"Katie, bar the door!" he muttered.

On the wall hung a wax plaque of Maximilian and his two generals awaiting execution. The heart of Maximilian was bleeding. The blood was not painted; it was real. Bright-red drops welled from the heart of the Austrian, trickled to the plaque frame and dripped, *plink, plink, plink*, on the tiled floor.

CHAPTER III.

A DEATH AND A LETTER.

A WIDE corridor separated the library from the living room. Into this corridor opened the wide staircase. A tall lamp stood at the stair foot. By its light, Knight saw that Justo Ruiz stood on the lower step, the naked rapier in his hand. The blade was clean. He stood sidewise, so that it was impossible to tell whether he had been descending or ascending when Knight burst from the library. The room behind the library also opened on the corridor and was the last room on that side to do so, because of the patio. Knight pointed at it. "Anybody come out of there?"

"Not this way. But that room also opens on the patio. What happened? I thought I heard some one cry out."

"Stand here," Knight directed. "Be on guard."

He walked briskly into the patio. Potted plants, tables, and chairs had been moved inside during the storm. A fountain played from frogs' mouths into a small basin. The patio offered no chance of concealment. He strode through the open door into the room, found the switch and flooded the room with light.

The mark of Calderon Ruiz was

on the room. A long table was stacked with books and magazines on aviation. Shelves carried airplane models. Between these models, the walls were covered by ancient and modern rifles, rapiers, and stilettoes in ornamental patterns.

A low cabinet, three feet high, barred the doors that had once opened into the library. It held a collection of matched dueling pistols. On top of it was the room's one grisly exhibit.

A man knelt there. His arms hung loosely at his sides. His back was to the room and his ear pressed the barred door. A stiletto, driven in with superhuman force, nailed the dead man's neck to the door. The point had gone on through to pierce Maximilian's plaque. If Justo Ruiz spoke the truth, the patio had given exit to the murderer.

Knight called Justo Ruiz. "Isn't this Miguel?"

"Yes. But who would want to kill him? He has been here only a week."

Knight restrained the comment that Miguel, with his sly questions and cat eyes, could learn more in a week than it is good for a man to know. He set down a mental note that Miguel was killed while listening to Knight's conversation with Malory; also that Miguel had known that Kresge and Malory had had an appointment in the library.

"Where did you hire him?"

"He came well recommended from one of Calderon's officers."

"And how did Alek Kresge and Malory come here?"

"Alek's grandfather was an officer under Maximilian. He was quartered in this house. Alek met Calderon in Vera Cruz and asked permission to come. The house has sentimental associations for him. He

brought Malory with him. They are staying on until the Grito."

"I see. And Alek uses this room for knife practice?"

"Sometimes. We have another visitor, an American writer named Worrell. From New Jersey, I believe. Alek is teaching him knife throwing."

"Writer, eh? Have you seen anything he's written?"

"No," Ruiz admitted. "I have been too worried over Calderon and over the other strange thing, to give him much thought. But, señor, we waste time! A man has been killed. We want to know who did it!"

"We want to know why it was done," Knight corrected. "Stay here, please. I'll have the police called."

KNIGHT crossed the patio to the kitchen. A sharp-faced Indian girl looked up from an illustrated weekly. Not far off, an ungainly woman fanned the blaze in a charcoal brazier.

"Where did Señor Malory go?" Knight asked. "Señor Kresge was here whistling, wasn't he? Where are they?"

The girl spilled out copious Spanish, which finally brought out the fact that the two men had gone up the rear stairs just before Knight entered the patio from the corridor.

"Which one was in the gun room?"

The ungainly woman interrupted the girl's shrill, wordy patter with a curt, "Both were there. They brought out the gringo, sick again." The gringo?—Worrell!

"Sick?" Knight asked.

She tapped her head significantly. "You will think he is drunk, that gringo, but no. It is not liquor." She refused to say more.

Knight telephoned the police and

returned to stand guard with Justo Ruiz.

"They will be here soon."

Ruiz did not answer. He was listening to some far-off sound. He turned anxious eyes on Knight.

"Do you hear anything?"

"I heard nothing but the wind."

Ruiz appeared to be weighted by some nameless dread. "Calderon wants to fly to Vienna on the Sixteenth," he began abruptly. "He has been preparing for months. Suddenly he began to act strangely, as if he carried some terrible secret. He worried. A man cannot do that and fly. He began to work late at night on something secret. Lines grew in his face. His mind has not been on the flight. To-day, when he should be here, overseeing the flight preparations, he is in the capitol."

Ruiz's eyes fell on Miguel and he roused himself. "Now we have this other trouble, apart from Calderon. I was struck down. Miguel is stabbed. And before that—" He interrupted himself. "You say you know nothing of mental diseases?"

"Nothing. What else happened?"

"I found some bricks loose in a wall in the garden. It is a thick wall, several feet through, surrounding a sunken garden. I tore some of the bricks out, intending to lecture the men on their carelessness. When I had taken out a dozen bricks, I saw something that made me dig farther."

"And you uncovered—"

"The body of a man, stabbed in the heart. He was unknown here. The police found out nothing. I had him buried."

"Then you were struck down and Miguel was killed."

Ruiz clasped his hands on the

rapier hilt. "There is but one solution. We have among us a homicidal maniac. Heaven have mercy on us!"

"Yes," Knight grunted. He thought, "First Calderon gets in a mysterious jam; then a couple of strangers get killed. Royalist fever is in the air. Among the guests: Malory is a drunkard, Worrell is obsessed, Alek Kresge's an oddity. Homicidal maniac? I wonder."

Ruiz, at the window, gazed into the gathering dark. "You have heard of Carlotta, dosed into madness with *marihuana*? She sometimes returns to walk in the garden. You call that superstition, no?"

"I've seen too much in Mexico to call anything superstition."

"She walked in the garden last night. The peons are whispering about it. Evil will befall the house. They say she walked the night before I found the man in the wall."

"The evil won't touch you," Knight said. "Probably these are just Indians, dead in Indian quarrels."

"Carlotta," Ruiz answered solemnly, "does not walk for peons, unless their deaths bring trouble to the owner." He shrugged off the morbid suggestion. "We must find this murderer."

Knight looked at his watch. "The police are a long time coming."

"You say the women saw Worrell come out of this room just after the killing, and he was sick? Go see what he has to say."

Justo Ruiz clapped his hands. Several peons had made a silent, curious group in the patio for some time. They thought something was wrong, but dared not investigate.

Two men ran in, answering the summons. When they saw Miguel, they pretended to lose all interest.

KNIGHT started upstairs, but halted. The library door stood ajar. He distinctly remembered closing it.

The dim glow of a wall candle touched the even ranks of books on the far wall. He could see the blotch of darkness where hung the bloody plaque of Maximilian.

Then a shadow rose on the books, flitted across them and disappeared.

Knight stole to the door. He could see the high-backed chair, now empty, and the dull gleam of Malory's *habenero* bottle. In the opposite corner stood a small writing desk. A man was bent over the wastebasket beside it. He carefully put a paper in it.

Abruptly he sprang to his feet and wheeled, in a swift, graceful movement. Alek Kresge stared at the door. He seemed to be gazing directly into Knight's eyes. In mincing tiptoe, he advanced toward the hallway.

At each step, Knight retreated. Just before Alek got to the hall, Knight slid back under the stairs. Alek cast one cautious look down the patio. He stole to the front door and slipped out into the gathering night.

Barely had he gone, when a man rushed from the living room into the library. He was direct in his movements, yet somehow clumsy. He lifted his feet high, as if he expected to cover the wide corridor in a step. When, by a series of high steps, he got across, he fumbled to find the exact location of the doorway. Then he reeled across the room to the wastebasket.

"Evening, Worrell," Knight said, entering behind him.

Worrell stood up, stuffing a paper in his pocket. He rocked drunkenly. "Hi!" he chortled. "You get

here? I came in yesterday. It wasn't far, at all."

"Yesterday? You came in this afternoon, about an hour after I did. I thought it was a long ride. You say it was short. How wide does the corridor look to you, Worrell?"

He slid his hand confidentially under Worrell's arm. In walking to the door, he hoped to get the paper that Alek Kresge had left and that Worrell had stuffed in his pocket.

Worrell wrenched free. He stumbled backward, recovering his footing just in time to save himself a fall. His good humor turned to ragging fury. "Are you calling me a liar?" he snarled.

"No, old man, of course not. Come here."

Worrell snarled deep in his throat. He ran out in high, clumsy steps that indicated his lost sense of space. But he could move rapidly. By the time Knight got to the corridor, Worrell was out of sight.

KNIGHT reentered the library and stood gazing into the empty wastebasket. Questions piled in upon him. Why was the big-nosed agent interested in his visit? What was Worrell's obsession and whom did he seek? Who was Malory, with his faces? Who committed the two murders and why? Who struck down Ruiz? What was the note that Alek placed and Worrell took? What was Calderon's trouble? If Calderon had learned of a royalist plot, why didn't he expose it?

"Still looking for something?" asked Malory, from the doorway.

"No. I've had a shock," Knight replied. He ran his hand through his sandy hair and fumbled at his tie.

Haunted eyes burned in Malory's

sallow face. "Strange things go on in this house, my friend. Stay here long enough and you'll be as mad as Carlotta was. The house is cursed. Better leave. Have a drink?"

"I need it. A man was stabbed on the other side of that wall not fifteen minutes ago. I found him."

"Stabbed! Who?" His pretense of surprise was perfect.

"A servant—Miguel. I'm told it's the second such death within a week."

"Yes. It's the second." Malory gripped his neck. The news appeared to stun him. He made a show of getting a grip on himself. He was an excellent actor. Knight found himself believing that Malory was shocked.

"Drink," Malory suggested, filling a glass. "You can drown anything, but faces. Carlotta will walk to-night. Things are bad in this house, plenty bad."

"How so? A peon is stabbed, but another peon did it, don't you think?"

Malory listened to some outside sound. "Do you hear anything besides the wind?" He was tense, as Justo Ruiz had been, waiting anxiously for some expected sound.

Knight thought he heard the throb of an airplane motor. He opened the window. But in the garden there was only wind and creeping dark, and the ghost of the mad Carlotta.

When Knight turned from the window, Malory was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

ROYALISTS.

THE night was advanced when the police finally came. Two guards were stationed at front and rear of the house. The inspector was an army captain.

"I make the report to my superior, Colonel Bravo," he said.

His beady eyes fixed on Knight at once. He had a thin, narrow mouth, and the manner of a weasel. He was servile to Justo Ruiz. In marked contrast was his ignoring of Alek Kresge. He questioned the dancer without looking at him, and frequently turned his back.

"Miguel was stabbed," Alek said, as the captain bent over the body.

"I have eyes," the captain replied. To Knight, he said, "You found him, I believe?" When the American had told how he found the body, the captain fixed his glance on him as a weasel fixes his teeth in a rat's throat. "You admit you were alone. Why did you bother to look at the other side of the wall, if you did not know the blood would be dripping there? This room contains plane models. Come, now, what were you doing in here, my American friend? What did Miguel catch you doing?"

Before Knight could answer, the captain said in a changed tone, "Never mind. We'll come to it later."

Knight glanced back. Alek was behind him. A signal had passed between Alek and the captain.

The captain got out pad and pencil. After questioning Justo Ruiz, he questioned each servant and Alek and Malory. Although he deliberately ignored Alek, he watched him from the corner of his eye. By gestures and nods, Alek Kresge directed the questions.

As cleverly as a lawyer, the captain brought out testimony to prove that Miguel had been killed by a wandering lunatic. One imaginative girl, under proper questioning, remembered seeing a strange man go out the kitchen door. The captain's final decision, disposing of any

further inquiry in the matter, was that Miguel had died at unknown hands.

The captain searched Miguel's few effects, and announced that he had no family connections. It was arranged for Miguel to be buried in a plot provided by Justo Ruiz.

"All of which," thought Knight, "stops any further investigation into the antecedents of Miguel. And we learn that sweet little Alek has the police under his thumb."

Aloud, he said, "You didn't question Worrell."

The captain stared at his pad and from under the visor of his cap, watched Alek's hands. The delicate hand moved. "Forget it," the motion said.

"He's drunk," Alek asserted. "I tried to waken him."

"Still, he should be looked at," Knight insisted. "We should try to rouse him."

At Alek's approving signal, the captain went to look at Worrell, with the others trooping after him. He found the gringo sleeping soundly. His intoxication had left him in a coma from which he could not be roused. The captain satisfied himself that there was no blood on Worrell's clothes. He repeated that the death came at unknown hands, and ordered burial first thing in the morning.

So he departed. Miguel was taken away and the house slowly fell into silence. Alek Kresge retired first. Malory and Justo Ruiz went later, each listening intently for some sound from out of doors.

Knight remained in his room until the house was quiet and the lights had been turned off. He smoked half a package of cigarettes while he considered the matter of Worrell's clothes.

When Worrell went into the li-

brary for the note that Alek had placed in the wastebasket, he wore riding breeches and a travel-stained coat. When the police went to his room, the riding clothes were nowhere to be seen. A blue suit was thrown over the chair as if he had taken it off.

"Why?" Knight asked himself. "Was there blood on the breeches?"

He stepped out on the promenade. He could hear the water tinkling in the patio. The wind had given way to dead calm.

Worrell's door opened at the touch. Knight stole to the bed. Worrell slept profoundly. Knight quietly crossed to a chest of drawers. In searching the room, the police captain had glanced in the upper drawer and hurriedly closed it. As Knight opened it, a blinding light flashed on him.

"Well," Alek said sweetly, from behind the light, "you continue to search for things, don't you?"

"There are some things about Worrell I don't understand." Knight moved closer and prepared to attack.

"Perhaps I can explain them," Alek suggested. "Have a cigarette?" He held out the case.

Knight reached out. His wrist was gripped. Kresge's hand clapped his, and he felt a piercing pain, a pain of a deeply driven needle. "I must go back to my room," he thought. Then his mind went blank.

K NIGHT stirred and wondered what he had eaten to upset his stomach. When he lifted his head, the nausea increased. His feet were heavy. He felt waddled and uncomfortable, and he knew he must have lain down with his clothes on. He tried to put one foot on the floor, but it struck a wall. He tried to

get out the other side, and found a wall there, too. He could touch it with either arm.

Knight struggled to think. His brain would not wake up. He stretched his arms above his head to pump some air into his lungs. His hands struck brick.

The shock broke into his dulled brain. He was incased in a brick wall.

He lay back, panting and suddenly drenched in cold sweat. At first, he thought it must be some horrible dream from which he would soon waken. He could not recall how he got there. The last thing he could remember was calling the police.

He pushed feebly against the bricks. His arms were numb and slow to respond. He lay back, limp and exhausted, after a few seconds of effort. The air was growing stale. He wanted to sleep, but something inside forced him to renew his feeble efforts at the bricks. After a seeming eternity, a brick fell out. Others followed. The cool night air washed his hot face. He wriggled out of the hole and rolled to the ground. He was in the garden. He had been entombed in the brick garden wall.

Nausea overcame him. He felt better at once, after being sick.

"Why, I'm doped!"

He vaguely remembered starting for Worrell's room, but he could not recall how he had received the drug. He stumbled on leaden feet to the house, and walked up and down to rid himself of the drug before trying to enter. After an hour of pacing, he tried to get in.

All the lower windows had iron bars on the outside. The front door was locked. He wandered to the rear and tried two doors without success. The third opened. After-

ward, he learned that five men slept on the floor of that room, each on a mat with a serape over him and a knife at hand. A kindly fate guided Knight's leaden feet through the maze without rousing the men—men who would knife first and ask later.

He wandered through many rooms before he stumbled out into the patio. Somehow, he got to his own room, but sleep had deserted him. He felt capable of walking to the border and back. Removing his shoes, he tramped the tile floor in his stocking feet. Little by little, his brain cleared until he could reason.

"I remembered starting for Worrell's room," he muttered. "Logic says I met Alek or Malory on the way. Probably Malory, with his bottle, and I took a drink to get rid of him." To his dying day, Knight will believe that that was how he got the dope.

With the clearing of his brain, came clarity of sight. He gazed upon a jumble of his clothes and personal belongings on the bed. His tourist card and wallet were there. Alek had taken them from his pocket and left them. The money was untouched. In searching the clothes, Alek was after something more than the paltry sum Knight carried.

"Good thing I burned my letters." Then he remembered why he was going to Worrell's room. It was to get a note Worrell had taken from the wastebasket after Alek put it in. "I'm betting that note is a key to something." He snapped his fingers. "No, damn it! I wasn't going there after the note, in particular. It was something about blood on his clothes." He groaned. "Katie, bar the door! What a shape to be in!"

THEN he became aware of a sound that was new and yet familiar. He must have been listening to it for some time before his ears quickened to it. It was a rhythmic ringing of steel on steel. Swords, that was it. The resonant clash of good steel.

He stepped out on the balcony. A line of light showed between the French doors of the room next to his. He worked along the balcony until he could peer in through the crack where the doors were not quite closed.

He could see only a narrow section of the room. At spaced intervals, Alek and Malory came into view. Each carried a sword. They came smartly into sight, in a march step. Within two feet of each other, they came to a military halt. The swords, held arm high, crossed and clashed.

"Very neat. But why do it in the middle of the night? And whom do they intend to cheer?" He dully remembered some one saying, "The serpent will wriggle in the eagle's beak on the Sixteenth," and some one else saying, "You can't keep royalty out of Mexico," but he was hazy about who had made the remarks.

Suddenly the light went out. He turned to go back. Something struck his shoulder. Hands gripped his arms. They were still numb and easily held. A muscular shoulder pressed his shoulder.

"Who are you?" the captor demanded in a whisper.

"Knight, an American. Who're you?"

"Calderon Ruiz. What're you doing out here."

"Mustn't talk," Knight warned. "Come on."

He slid into his room. The man who followed him carefully closed the French doors and barred them.

He was a man in his early twenties, with intelligent eyes lined by wind and distance. He had an aviator's direct stare, a soldier's carriage, slender waist and broad shoulders. He appeared to be tired, but too intent upon some inner battle to know his own weariness. This was the man who wanted to fly the ocean and had been caught in some mysterious trouble.

"Why were you on the balcony, señor? Did you hear the plane?"

"Did you come in a plane at night, after that rain?"

"I had to get here. How is my father?"

The reference reminded Knight of Justo Ruiz's intent listening. Yes, and Malory had been listening too. Both of them had expected the aviator's arrival.

Knight should not have talked, with his brain hitting on two cylinders. But he was desperately trying to remember things and to rid himself of the dope. "I remember!" he blurted. "I came here for the Grito and to see your take-off. I'd like to help you, if I can. What is wrong here?"

"If you know anything about the Grito," Calderon Ruiz snapped, "you know it's a good time for foreigners to keep their heads down. That applies to whatever is going on here. Keep your ears in, gringo!"

"A little hasty, aren't you?" Knight drawled.

Calderon tried to control the dislike that had so quickly sprung into full being. "Perhaps. It is late and I had a hard flight. Pardon my hasty temper, but it is the truth, señor, at this moment." He gritted between set teeth, "I hate all foreigners!"

He paused in the door. His Mexican courtesy demanded that he

be friends with this stranger in his father's house. His courtesy fought with his dislike, and lost the battle.

"*Hasta mañana, señor,*" he said curtly.

"*Hasta mañana.*" When the door closed, Knight groaned, "Katie, bar the door! What a shape to be in!"

AT nine in the morning, Knight was awakened by a peon shaking his shoulder. The man pointed to hot chocolate and sweet rolls on a tray.

"*Señor Ruiz* desires to see you at once, *señor.*"

Knight dragged himself out and let a cold shower run over an aching head and numb body. By the time he had eaten and dressed, he looked normal. His head ached, but his memory had straightened. He could recall everything up to the time he had started for Worrell's room, and from the time he wakened in the brick wall.

He met Justo Ruiz in the patio. A yellow butterfly danced in the sunlight between the waxy jasmine and a climbing rose.

Justo Ruiz carried the marks of a sleepless night. Too often, his hand ran nervously over his white hair and goatee. The bandage was off his head. An iodined cut blazed on his temple.

"*Señor,*" he said hesitatingly, "I will ask that you attend the funeral of Miguel Ayala this morning. See what you can see. The murderer must be a maniac. If it is, which of us is it? We are so few."

Knight gave the promise. He went toward the dining room. A low, penetrating voice floated from the dining room.

"You've got to go, Malory. He's only a peon, but you can plead curiosity."

"I can't, Alek. I can't stand the

sight of a dead face. Why go at all?"

"To look in the coffin," Alek said viciously. "Be sure it's Miguel they bury. I won't be sure he's dead until he's under the dirt."

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Knight.

They stared into the face of the man they had encased in a brick wall, expecting him to stay there forever.

Malory did not betray the shock. His haunted eyes were steady because of a tremendous inner effort. He was an excellent actor. He lifted the hand bearing the double eagle cameo, in a comradely salute.

"Coffee? Want some *habenero* in it?"

"Don't do it, Knight," Alek advised in tones too merry. "He can think of the damnedest mixtures." He stirred his coffee and the spoon rattled in the cup.

"Two days' riding does a man up," said Knight. "I slept like the dead."

Neither of them answered.

THE funeral was held in the old village church. Women in black, with worn black shawls over their heads, fanned themselves incessantly. Men in white cottons knelt on the stone floor, each with his straw sombrero across his legs. They stared curiously at the American.

Malory won his argument. Alek attended the funeral. Before he took his seat, he minced up to look into the white face in the coffin. After the mass, he was the last to look into the coffin. He was making certain it was Miguel who was buried.

Six peons carried Miguel to the door and the padre followed for the last prayers. Men with candles pre-

pared to follow the coffin, which would be carried on the shoulders of Miguel's fellow servants.

There was a sudden movement among the Indians gathered outside. Two of them ran. The women began to scurry into the church.

A squad of cavalry had come among them. They formed a semi-circle. Their sabres gleamed in the sun. One rode his horse up to the church and touched his sabre point to the coffin.

"Padre, this must be opened. We must look in."

Shocked by the order, but terrified by the soldiers, the Indians obeyed. Off came the coffin top. The officer looked in. He winced, as if the sight struck deep.

"We will take charge of the burial. It will not take place in San Pedro. Return to your homes. Sergeant, send for a hearse."

The peons huddled into knots and shuffled away with many backward stares. The officer dismounted and stood by the coffin with head bowed.

Knight touched his arm. "Lieutenant, I met you last year in Torreon."

"I remember," the soldier said. "Señor, they got a good man this time. The best there was. What he was doing here, I don't know, but there will be another in his place."

"You mean Miguel Ayala was a secret agent!"

"Si, señor."

Knight quietly withdrew. There could be no doubt now that everything occurring at the Ruiz house had some connection. The two deaths, the attack on Justo Ruiz, and the strange midnight sword salute were all beads on the same string. A royalist plot was under way. Malory had as good as said

so when he had asserted, "You can't keep royalty out of Mexico."

"I'm here to protect Calderon and preserve the honor of Justo Ruiz," Knight said to himself. "Where does Calderon stand in this plot?"

CHAPTER V.

"I LOVE MY HONOR MORE."

KNIGHT returned to the house. Looking for Justo Ruiz, the first person he encountered was Malory, in the library with a bottle of *habenero*. The blinding tropical sunlight accented his sallow face and haunted eyes. He was gazing at the Austrian eagles on his cameo when Knight entered. He smiled cynically.

"So the sneaking Miguel wasn't a peon after all," he remarked. "Agent, eh?"

"Who says so?" Knight countered.

The bottle clinked on the glass. "Saw the parade go by. Suspected it before that. You need good eyes in Mexico." He drank and sighed, drew his hand over his lips.

He filled a slender glass with golden liquor, and held it out. A peculiar smile lighted his eyes. "Drink?"

Knight thought he recognized the taunt in that smile. He noticed, too, that Malory had two glasses. The haunted drunkard was prepared to share his liquor. Had he, Knight wondered, offered such a glass when Knight was on his way to Worrell's room the night before?

The American stuffed his hands in his pockets. The knuckles were bruised by his knocking at the bricks of his tomb. His head ached with his knocking at the closed door of memory.

"Suppose you drink it," he challenged.

Malory looked insulted. "I don't

like to drink alone, not when it's a toast. You remember I offered a toast to Miguel."

"I won't drink to him," Knight said stubbornly. "I didn't like the way he watched me. He had cat eyes."

Malory squinted at the sunlight through the liquor. "Yeah, he had good eyes. You need good eyes in Mexico."

"So you've told me before. Just what do you mean?"

"I mean you want to be sure you see what you think you see!" He caught his breath; he had said too much. He amended the slip with, "Suppose you had met one of the Indians going into the gun room just before Miguel was found. Suppose he carried a sprig of jasmine. In the light of after events, you might have said he carried a stiletto. That," he hiccupped, "is psychology!"

"Yes, that's true. I guess you do need good eyes. All right, you drink again to Miguel. I still don't like him."

Malory was more than willing to grant the request. "Here," he said sharply, when Knight started from the room, "where you goin'? I don't want to be alone. I keep lookin' at Maximilian there on the wall, and think of the blood dripin'."

"Nothing will happen to you," Knight assured him, "unless you're in Miguel's profession. I'll be back."

KNIGHT strode quickly from the room. Malory's eagerness to hold him had roused his suspicions. He felt again the alarm that had come the afternoon before, when Alek had assured him that Ruiz had gone to the mines.

He went upstairs two steps at a

time. At the head of the stair, he met a maid.

"Señor Justo Ruiz?" she smiled, in answer to his question. "He is gone. He went in the car with Señor Kresge. He will be back soon."

"I hope so," he replied. A trip to the garage confirmed the maid's story. Kresge and Ruiz had driven away not ten minutes before Knight's return.

The mechanic, a plump boy who spoke with a lisp, told him they had gone to Tres Casas. Alek never had seen the ruin and Señor Ruiz wished to show it to him.

"*Bueno*," Knight said. To himself he said, "Rot! Alek was in no mood for sight-seeing. I wonder whether Ruiz has learned Calderon is here?"

He decided to wait an hour before following to the Tres Casas. He wanted to be at the house when Alek drove in. The library called him, with Malory's hints of needing good eyes in Mexico. Malory was drunk enough to say what he least expected to, but Malory was not in the library.

He could not find Worrell, to ask about the note he had taken from the wastebasket. A quiet search for Calderon Ruiz was equally fruitless.

He was cooling his heels in the garage when the car drove in. The chauffeur, a lean, scarred veteran of the revolutions, eyed Knight suspiciously; he eyed all foreigners the same way.

"Did Señor Ruiz come back with you?" Knight asked.

"Yes. Why not?" was the surly reply. "He is in the gun room now, with Lieutenant Calderon Ruiz."

Knight muttered his relief. He went to the house and entered through the dining room from the

garden terrace. He went directly to the gun room, to see for himself that Justo Ruiz had returned safely. A bold entrance, apology, and withdrawal would be enough.

He crossed the corridor and entered the gun room.

Justo Ruiz stood beside the case of dueling pistols atop of which Miguel had been stabbed. The case was open. Justo was extending a velvet-lined box. One pearl-handled pistol gleamed against the velvet.

Its mate was in the hand of Calderon Ruiz. He stood erect, heels together, head up. His eyes were as steely as though they watched the sky lines from a cockpit.

His steady hand pressed the pistol to his ear.

KNIGHT'S noisy entrance stayed Calderon's hand on the trigger. He lowered the gun. His expression shifted to infinite weariness, which gave way to loathing.

Justo Ruiz moved his head slightly, merely enough to acknowledge the American's presence and to show he waited for him to leave. But Knight did not go. And Justo remained with his hands outstretched. Calderon slowly lifted the pistol to his ear.

Knight reached up to the nearest plane model. It was the silver-painted duplicate of the "Grito," the plane that was to fly the ocean. Knight moved it gently. A vagrant sunbeam danced on the silver wing.

Calderon saw it. He snatched the pistol case, put the gun in and threw it onto the shelf.

"I won't do it. I'm disgraced, but I'm not guilty. I won't give the appearance of guilt by killing myself."

"I love you, Calderon," his father said sternly, "but I love my honor

more. You had the plans. They are gone. You aren't worthy of the life I gave you."

"Dying won't help. I'll find the plans, and kill the man who took them."

"Took them?" Justo asked acidly. "Or bought them?"

Calderon whitened and lost voice under the insult.

Justo turned to Knight. "You have seen so much, you may as well know all. Calderon was intrusted with the carrying of certain fortification plans to the capitol. He says they were stolen. I offer him an honorable way out and he refuses. The loss is known. Colonel Bravo telephoned me."

"Suicide," said Knight, "lets the stain lie on your name forever. He is right. Try to get the plans back. Let him die fighting."

"The Sixteenth meant so much!" Calderon exclaimed. "I, who was to have become famous for a flight, will become infamous as a traitor." He stalked to the window, pounding a fist in a palm.

"I thought you told me," Knight murmured, "that Calderon always goes his way alone. How did he happen to tell you of the loss?"

"He didn't. He never confides," Justo answered. "Some one called Colonel Bravo, of the police. Bravo called me." His white head bowed. "You think me harsh, no doubt; but he faces dishonor."

"We'll fix it. Give us time. By the way, I attended the funeral. You can drop your maniac theory."

Justo looked up in bewilderment. "Oh, you mean on Miguel's death?"

"Yes. He was an agent, killed in line of duty."

"In my house!" Ruiz exclaimed. "Miguel an agent, killed in my

house!" His glare met his son's eyes as Calderon spun round.

Calderon smiled bitterly. "And you think I killed him? Hardly. I'm going now, but I'll be back with the plans."

He walked smartly toward the patio. A stifled sob, "Calderon," escaped Justo Ruiz.

CALDERON stalked three steps. Suddenly he broke his step, whisked a rapier off the wall and ran to the corridor doors. In entering, Knight had not quite closed them. Calderon plunged the cold steel through.

The house echoed to an unearthly scream.

"Didn't expect it, did you?" Calderon said brusquely, flinging the doors apart. "What were you trying to find out?"

A man was there, fallen to one knee. He clutched his arm where the rapier had run through. He was not one to conceal pain. He lifted a pain-contorted face. It was Worrell.

"You didn't have to do that," he whined. "I wasn't listening. I wanted to know who was in here."

"Why?" Calderon thundered.

Worrell conveniently fainted.

Calderon wiped the bloodied rapier on Worrell's coat and replaced it in the rack on the wall. He bowed to his father, glared at Knight, and left the room.

Knight made a tourniquet of a handkerchief for Worrell's arm. Three peons carried him to his room. Two maids came running with bandages and salves. A plump Indian woman tended the wound with a facility born of many a Mexican battlefield.

"He did not have to faint," she said to Knight, as she deftly wound

a bandage. "It is not so bad. He was afraid."

"He's not like the rest of us," he replied. "He has ants in his head."

"Si!" She nodded sagely. "But I think he put them there himself. He wants revenge. I have seen men look for it. If they get it quickly, *bueno!* If not, they get the ants."

Worrell's head wagged on the pillow. The Indian woman smoothed his unruly hair. His tense hand pushed her aside.

"Who was in that room?" he demanded.

"Justo Ruiz, his son, and myself," Knight answered.

Worrell relaxed. "O. K. That's all I wanted to know."

Knight signaled for the women to leave. "Now, I want to know something. Yesterday, after Miguel was killed, Alek put a note in the library wastebasket. You got it. I want it."

"Me!" Worrell's eyes became saucerlike. "I never got any note."

Knight fingered in the ash tray and held out three corn-husk cigarette butts on his palm. The tobacco appeared to be mixed with alfalfa. "Smoke these?"

"No," Worrell lied.

"So you didn't get the note and you don't smoke these. That makes you twice a liar."

"I'm telling the truth about the note, anyway."

Knight shrugged. The three cigarette butts with their greenish tobacco, told him a good deal about Worrell's strange actions, his apparent drunkenness, his hilarity and sudden anger, his loss of space sense and time sense.

"Ever hear of Carlotta and the drug that drove her mad?" he asked. "You didn't? I'll tell you some day. Do you know these cigarettes incline the smokers to murder?"

"I didn't smoke 'em," Worrell snarled. "And I don't know about the note. You can't hang Miguel's killing on me."

Impelled by anger, Knight left the room hurriedly and raced down the stair. Too late, he saw a servant carrying up Malory's *habenero*. They collided. The bottle flew from the tray, struck the wall and broke.

The liquor showered Knight. One sleeve of his coat was drenched. He returned to his room to change his clothes. To get there, he had to pass a nook made by a semicircle of potted oleanders. It contained an armchair and a table supplied with magazines and writing paper. The oleanders screened passers-by from view.

As Knight passed, Alek said, "Oh, Malory!" from within the nook. Knight halted. He could barely see Alek bent over the table, writing a letter while he talked.

"Good work, Malory. Too bad Knight walked in, though. Calderon was ready to shoot himself. He may do it yet. Anyway, with the plans on his mind, he won't be bothering us. I want you to stop drinking. You just had one. I can smell it. I don't want you upsetting plans. I'm going to have all Mexico under my thumb, Malory." Here was no boast. Here was confidence in his own ability. "Alek Kresge, maker of emperors!"

Knight slipped into his room. At first he was baffled, and inclined to believe that Alek was teasing or tricking him. Then, lifting his arm, he got a whiff of the sleeve. That was it. Alek had smelled the *habenero* and taken for granted that it was Malory.

"I've learned one thing. Calderon's trouble is that he tried to

break the plot. Doesn't confide. Probably tried it single-handed."

Alek was the brains of that plot. He controlled the police, thus covering his murders. He had engineered the theft of the plans to discourage Calderon. So much was clear.

Clear, too, was Knight's duty to aid Calderon, though the aviator might kill him for his pains.

He looked at his watch. "Three o'clock, September 12th. I've got until midnight of the 15th to bust up the plot and get those plans. If I don't, it'll be 'Katie, bar the door' for Calderon. Justo Ruiz wasn't foolin' when he said he loves his son, but he loves his honor more!"

CHAPTER VI.

CONSPIRATOR 18.

WATCHING from his room, Knight saw Alek leave the writing nook and go downstairs with his letters. The dancer's yellow roadster was brought around. He drove away like a streak of yellow flame.

Knight asked a servant whether Malory had accompanied Alek, and was told that Malory had gone out some time previously and had not returned.

"Alek'll pick him up," he reasoned. "Alek's going to the post office. That's thirty minutes from here. I've got an hour."

He looked over the railing into the patio. Assured that the servants were not watching and that all second-floor doors were closed, he slipped into Alek's room. He hung his coat on the doorknob over the keyhole, rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

At the end of thirty minutes, he knew what every drawer and suitcase and cold-cream jar in the room

contained. He knew the secrets of the clothespress, and the mattress, and the over-stuffed chairs. But he knew nothing more about Alek Kresge, and he had not found the stolen plans.

Twenty minutes sufficed for Malory's room, with the same result. Knight rolled down his sleeves and buttoned the cuffs. He pulled on his coat, peered cautiously out the door. All seemed to be clear. He was by the oleanders of the writing nook before he fastened the lower button of his coat and lighted a cigarette. He looked at his watch.

"What time is it, gringo?"

Though the sudden question was intended to surprise him, he did not start. His arm lifted leisurely and shot forward to free the watch of the coat sleeve. Pretending to look at it, for he knew the time to the minute, he looked through the oleanders.

Calderon Ruiz sat there, grim of mouth, accusing of eye.

"Time?" Knight drawled. "Four twenty, on the 12th of September."

"You've spent an hour in those two rooms. Alek and Malory are out. What did you want in there?"

"Plans. Army engineers drew plans of certain fortifications and gave them to an aviator for delivery in Mexico City. They're gone and it's goin' to be 'Katie, bar the door' for an ocean flight, if they're not found."

Calderon was out of the nook and around the potted oleanders in a flash. "And you thought you would get them and collect on them. Is that it, gringo?"

Knight stood squarely on his feet. His elbows were in and his fists ready to double.

"I wasn't concerned about you," he said evenly. "Except that you're

the son of Justo Ruiz. I'm going to help you. We'd work better in double harness."

"I told you once to keep your ears in, gringo. I'll handle this myself. I lost the plans. I'll get them back."

"You didn't lose them. They were stolen because you tried to break a royalist plot single-handed, instead of reporting it."

"*Bueno*," Calderon said. "I'll get them back without a foreigner's help. My honor is concerned, gringo."

"Your honor," Knight returned evenly, "doesn't amount to a hoot with me. I have a hunch this party is going to cost your old man money. I'm going to protect his bankroll. See?"

Wheeling abruptly, Calderon marched off.

Knight saw Worrell sway down the promenade toward him. He flicked the cigarette butt into the patio, and went to meet the wounded man. Worrell's face was sickly white. His good hand caught the iron railing for support.

"Knight!" he said huskily. "That note you said Alek put in the basket and I took. I found it in my shoe. I still don't remember." He broke off. "Are we alone?"

"Yes."

"Hell's going to pop in Mexico, Knight. We Americans have got to stick together!"

"What now, on top of everything else?"

Worrell glanced cautiously around. His eyes bulged, and he kept trying to swallow a lump in his throat. "We're going to be killed. Every American in Mexico. That is, every republican. We're trapped! Look at what the note says."

He passed a slip of paper to

Knight. On it was written, in Spanish:

Tres Casas at eight o'clock, September 12th. Viva José Augustin, and death to all republicans!

Knight wagged his head sadly. "Worrell," he said, patiently, "other countries besides the United States have republican parties. Mexico, at present, is a republic. Go back to bed. Stay there to-night. You're safe. Honestly," he added, "if you weren't so tragic, I could laugh. And if you weren't so funny, I'd cry over you."

When the trembling Worrell was gone, Knight read the note again.

"Tres Casas," he murmured. "That's where Justo went with Alek just before he ordered Calderon's suicide. Looks as though Justo is doubling on me. But I'm hired and I'll earn my pay. José Augustin! I wonder if his real name isn't Josef, over in Austria."

He went to his room, crawled into bed and slept, to waken promptly at seven.

At eight o'clock, Knight crept between two cactuses on the mountainside. The round leaves of the head-high plant screened him effectively. He wore black breeches, black shirt, and black riding boots. In his pocket was a mask made of a black scarf. The automatic lay snug against his side. In his pocket, easy of access, were brass knuckles.

A few stars were out, but no moon broke the dark of the great buildings on the mountainside. Far below, scattered points of light marked San Pedro. To the left, a square of lights outlined the military landing field at Campo.

A shadow obscured the square of lights. Gravel crunched lightly

underfoot. A whisper answered a whisper, and the great door of Tres Casas groaned a protest at opening.

Five times the whispered password admitted a man to the Tres Casas. Knight left the protection of the cactus, and moved closer to the door. Here was danger of discovery. He risked it to get the password, but failed to catch the faint whispers.

He was sure that the plotters met in the center building, probably in the round room that had been the original building. He stole around to the side, where a gun emplacement of rubble rose to a shell hole in the stone wall. The uneven masonry offered toe and finger holds. By clinging with his knees and glueing himself to toe holds, he laboriously climbed the twenty-five-foot wall.

He arrived, by wriggling through the shell hole, in a high, square inclosure. The windowless walls were pitted with ports and blackened by the smoke of soldiers' cooking fires. He dragged himself through the hole to a narrow ledge running around the room. He crawled around this ledge to a square air vent, from which he could see into the round room. A three-foot-thick wall separated the two rooms, and this was the width of the air vent. It was long enough to let him lie flat.

The circular room below him was lighted by seven thick wax candles in a branched candlestick. Eight men sat in two military rows facing the candles. Each was masked, and clad in a black cloak and a soft hat drooping over the eyes. More men came in constantly until there were three rows of four men each and one of three. A man in the doorway cried:

"The Chief!"

They rose as one man and stood at attention. Two men marched to the candlestick, and did a right about. The sixteen saluted and the two touched finger tips to their hats. The taller of the two men, who acted as aid, might have been any one, for he had no outstanding characteristics. The short one, the "Chief," walked with a mincing step and saluted with a graceful, but unmilitary, curve of his hand.

"That's Alek," thought Knight. "He's running the party, sure enough. Alek Kresge, maker of emperors! Darn if he ain't. That tall one must be Malory."

"No. 18!" Alek called.

"*Si, señor!*" The man in the door saluted.

"You have your orders."

"*Si, señor.*" The man in the door turned smartly on his heel and walked out.

ALEK signaled the others to sit down. He and Malory remained standing. "Gentlemen," Alek began, "the plan rolls to its successful conclusion. Ninety hours from now, Mexico will have an emperor. He is on the high seas."

The girlish voice barely carried in the high, domed room. Knight had to strain his ears to hear. He forgot where he lay. He forgot all but the slight, black-cloaked figure in front of the flickering candles, the effeminate voice pronouncing Mexico's fate.

"The money we lacked is now assured. Two agents who threatened us are gone. One man alone stands in our way. For him we have the well in the patio. Gentlemen, he should be here to-night."

"To-night," a gruff voice muttered in Knight's ear, "he is here. We

thought you would find that note, Calderon Ruiz!"

There was no room in the air vent to stand up and fight. Knight flipped over on his back, avoiding the blow of a pistol butt. His assailant was a lightweight; he had removed his cloak, but kept his hat pulled down to meet his mask. He snapped his hand back and rapped at Knight's temple with the gun butt.

Knight warded off the blow with his forearm. His right hand had plunged into his pocket when he flipped to his back. The brass knuckles shone evilly, marking the course of a right to the jaw. The jab cut, but did not stun.

The Mexican slashed in viciously with the pistol. His rapid, shifting attack kept Knight constantly defending with his left, while the Mexican's head darted to right and left, cleverly evading another collision with the brass knuckles. The pistol butt flashed toward the bridge of Knight's nose.

Knight's forearm crashed with the Mexican's forearm; his hand clamped on the man's wrist. Using the other's stiff arm for a brace, he heaved himself to his knees. His right crossed in a short jab. A dull crack announced the impact of brass knuckles with jawbone. The Mexican sank down quietly.

Knight took one swift look into the meeting room. Alek stood, pointing up. Malory aimed a long flashlight beam into the air vent. Some of the conspirators had disappeared. Others ran for the doors. In their black cloaks, they resembled a flock of bats.

"Did you get him, No. 18? Did you get him?" Malory boomed.

Knight answered. "No, *señor!* He has gone through the shell hole."

An angry cry from a dozen throats

buzzed about his ears. Men ran into the square room. A finger of light traced on the smoke-blackened walls, running up toward the ledge. Escape was cut off.

Knight swiftly adjusted the Mexican's mask as a gag. The man wore a silk sash that did excellent service in binding his hands to his feet, behind his back. Knight searched his pockets. In the outer coat pocket he found a metal shield, such as the police use. He took the soft hat, adjusted his own mask.

NOW the finger of light played on the shell hole. It raced over the walls and showed that the ledge he was on disappeared into a square hole in the wall on the left. He scuttled along the ledge. The light struck him.

"Who is that or I'll shoot!" a man yelled.

"No. 18!" Knight answered.

He ducked into the hole. His feet tangled in the cloak dropped by real Conspirator 18 on his way to the attack. Knight donned it. He ran down a sloping runway of rough stone to the domed room. The exits were crowded with men, all staring at him.

He shrugged defiantly. "He heard me coming, and ran."

"It sounded down here as if a struggle went on," Malory said suspiciously.

Knight shrugged.

"Too bad," Alek said sweetly, as others came in to report that the fugitive had escaped. "He is dangerous, that Calderon Ruiz. Perhaps it is as well that he escaped. We may make use of him yet, with his plane."

Alek marched to the candlestick. "Gentlemen, attention! Quickly now. José Augustin is on the high

seas. Money is coming. We will carry the army. We have a coup planned different from any coup tried before. It cannot fail."

He paused. A deep-throated man muttered, "Viva, José Augustin!"

"But we are in danger," Alek went on. "A blue print exists. I learned of it to-day. It is a drawing of the national capitol. Each door and window carries a name. Our names are all there. Calderon Ruiz drew it. That blue print must be secured to-night."

They remained silent and attentive. Alek drew a silk bag from his pocket.

"Each man will show his number before he draws. Here are fifteen white dice and one red. The man taking the red die draws the mission."

At the order, they arose and marched forward in single file. After drawing, they formed a straight line across the room. The flickering light of the candles elongated Malory's tall figure, and made Alek a distorted gnome.

Man after man thrust his hand from under his cloak into the bag, after showing a badge similar to the one Knight had taken. Each kept his die in his closed hand. When Knight came to the bag, he saw Alek's eyes glittering behind the mask. The eyes watched him alertly, for Alek was suspicious of every man around him.

He peered closely at the badge, and murmured, "No. 18."

Knight reached into the bag. He got a die. He did not move on at once, for Alek was still bent over the badge. Knight's skin could not betray him; many Mexicans are white. Alek nodded for Knight to go on.

The line of men stretched across

the room, strange black figures in the candlelight. A bat wheeled in the dome.

"Who has the red die?" Alek asked. "Who will fulfill the mission of getting the blue print to-night?"

Sixteen hands were extended and opened. Fifteen held white dice; one held a red.

"I have it," said Knight.

CHAPTER VII.

THIEF.

RANKS were broken at once. Knight went to Alek for his orders. The instructions were simple.

"Go to 75 Mina Street. Proceed from there."

Knight went down the mountain-side alone. He followed some of the plotters to where their cars were parked, and chose one carrying the decorative plate of the Campo Militar. When the owner drove away, Knight was lying on the running board. The car stopped for the sentry at the Campo gate. Knight vanished into the darkness.

It was a two-block walk from the Campo to 75 Mina Street. The street lamps made lonely pools of light in the darkness. Knight's footsteps rang on the pavement. A church clock chimed eleven as he came to the austere gray house, fronting on the sidewalk. The shutters behind iron-barred windows were closed, but he discerned a pin point of light. The entrance carried a silver name plate:

COLONEL ELIAS BRAVO

Knight hammered the door knocker. Within the house, a parrot screeched a harsh call, ending in a hollow "Death!"

After long delay, the knock was answered by an Indian girl, who opened the speaking port and fixed him with solemn eyes. She did not appear to be startled at the sight of a masked man, cloaked, with soft hat drawn low.

"Tell the colonel that I am selling a special brand of Austrian wine. I am sorry to disturb him, but I must see him at once."

She disappeared silently. As silently, the door opened. Her hand alone appeared, gesturing for him to enter. He went into the parlor, where a circle of chairs did silent homage to a picture of the president of Mexico on a small table.

Through an arch, he saw a heavy-set Mexican in white linens, seated at a desk, writing. The man was aware of his presence. At the maid's one musical word, "Señor," he nodded and continued to write. He carefully laid down the pen and came through the arch, wiping his spectacles on a fresh handkerchief. He put the handkerchief in his breast pocket, adjusted the spectacles and peered at Knight.

"You have good wine, señor?"

"Vintage of '18," Knight answered, conveying his number. He added, "Carlotta herself trampled the grapes."

"Ah! Poor Carlotta! A true empress. Mexico destroyed her, but she does not hate us. She walks still in her beloved gardens."

As a warning, she walks, thought Knight. He said: "Of a truth, you cannot keep royalty out of Mexico."

"True." Bravo peered through the spectacles. "These masks are the foolishness. Schoolboy tricks. Take yours off."

"My mission being what it is, I would rather not."

THE Mexican shrugged. He smoothed one stubby brown hand with the other. "A dangerous mission is yours. However, since you drew the red die, a crisis has arisen." He put two hands on Knight's arms, under the cloak. "To get the blue print is not enough. We must have a man killed, a man very dangerous to our cause. There is not time to meet again and cast lots. One die must serve for both theft and execution."

"One moment, colonel, before you go further. May I ask why you put your watch in my pocket just then?"

Knight drew out the watch and put it on the table.

Bravo's heavy expression did not change, but a glint went through his eyes.

"Many would draw the die and take the chance, but we must be sure of our men, señor. It is not enough to want to serve. One must have the ability. You"—he tapped Knight on the chest—"you will succeed."

The explanation left the American cold. He could well believe that the Mexican had tested him for alertness, but he did not believe the reason. The true reason was to discover how easy he would be to kill. The tapping of his chest had the same objective: it was to learn whether he wore armor. Had Alek recognized him? He did not think so. Rather, he carried the number of the man who was sent to capture the supposed Calderon Ruiz at the meeting, and who had failed. Alek Kresge would not want to be burdened with such a man.

"Now, señor," the Mexican proceeded, "for the blue print which names our names. It was drawn by Calderon Ruiz. Could you gain his confidence and obtain it?"

"Not a chance!" Knight said. "He hates me."

"Then you must get it from his desk at the Campo. The window near it is guarded by a soldier. Ruiz requested the guard to-day, pleading important papers on his flight. I saw the blue print in his hands. I supposed, of course," he said, in brusque insult, "that he would be taken to-night."

It struck Knight that the colonel lied when he said he had seen the blue print. But it was no time to wonder how the colonel knew of it, as long as he did know.

"I shall get it," Knight said quietly.

For several seconds, he had felt the peculiar tingling which means that some one is staring. The hard gaze was a magnet, impelling him to look to the left. He glanced the other way, into a wall mirror. It reflected a gaudy serape hanging lengthwise on the wall. A blond man, long-faced, hard-eyed, peered round the serape. He dodged back to cover.

The colonel bowed Knight out of the house. Until he was far down the street, he could hear the parrot shrieking, "Death!"

THE lonely blobs of light under the street lamps made the outer darkness seem impenetrable. Knight marched steadily on, without a backward glance, until he was halfway between the street lamps. A deep-set entrance swallowed him.

Mina Street that night was like a trick clock, in which one figure vanishes and another appears. Knight disappeared into No. 89; the blond man emerged from the door of No. 75.

He paused, looked up and down the street. A slight, nimble man

appeared under the street light and pointed toward the Campo. The blond set off in a march step. The other fell into step beside him. Rubber soles concealed their footsteps. They were close to Knight before they spoke.

"I don't see him now," the nimble man said in annoyance.

"We will see him at the Campo. That is soon enough," the blond replied. "Let him get in. Shoot to kill. After things have quieted, I'll just—"

Knight did not have to hear it, to know the plan. He was to be made the victim of a trick as old as the oldest spy system in the world. They would let him try to get the blue print. They would shoot him. Naturally the guard would not expect a second attempt the same night. The blond would take advantage of the guard's relaxed vigilance to get the blue print.

Knight removed his shoes and carried them to the corner. He left the street where the two men marched. Shod once more, he set off at the double for the Campo. He vaulted the low stone wall around the Campo when the sentry's back was turned. The cloak hung over his arm, ready to be dropped or used.

Calderon Ruiz's desk was in the administration building. A small plaza, shaded by fig and orange trees, separated the drive in front. Knight lingered under a fig tree. The building's dark bulk cut off the landing-field lights. The plaza broke the illumination from the gate. He could make out the shapes of things near him—trees and benches—but all movement in front of the administration building was hidden.

He could hear the steady tramp

of the guard. A match flared, showing the soldier's dark face under a garrison cap. The soldier resumed his pacing. The cigarette glow went back and forth, twenty paces one way, twenty paces back.

The leaves of the fig tree trembled when a shoulder brushed them. Knight's two companions had come up.

"Stay here," the blond whispered. "I'll be away while it happens, because they may search."

"He should be here now," the nimble one muttered in annoyance.

"He'll be along. Watch the cigarette, and you'll know what's happening."

Knight saw him move a few paces. After that, the night hid him. The American counted to fifty, slowly. By that time, he judged that the blond was out of hearing.

He slid under the fig tree and came up beside the nimble man. Knight pushed the gun against his back and smothered his mouth in the cloak.

"Hands over your head, señor. March toward the soldier. One queer move and you die."

They left the protection of the plaza and moved noiselessly across the intervening space. Knight walked in back of his prisoner, with an arm around his neck to hold the cloak in place. The nimble man sheltered him from a gunshot.

The moving cigarette glow halted. The soldier called out, "Who goes?"

"Friend."

"Halt until you give the password."

Knight forced the unwilling prisoner nearer. He scraped his feet on the gravel.

"Halt!" the sentry's voice rang out. "Halt, or I shoot!"

Knight shifted the pistol to the

nimble man's shoulder, and pulled the trigger. A push hurled the wounded man against the soldier. Knight slid around the corner of the building.

The sentry let off a fusillade and howled for the guard. The Campo became a disturbed ant hill. Other sentries repeated the shouts. A bell clanged in wild alarm. Lights sprang up in the long barracks. An ambulance siren split the night.

A sergeant's guard raced for the administration building, throwing cartridges into barrels and adjusting bayonets on the run. The administration building floodlight blazed out, showing the soldier standing at the ready beside a crumpled figure. Then he was blotted out by the ambulance. The guard trotted up. The grounds swarmed with soldiers.

KNIGHT had sped across the plaza. He slid under a bench while a squad trotted by to man the gate. Leaving the plaza, he ran toward the hospital, the building farthest from the shooting scene. The ambulance returned, and the unconscious man was carried in, under guard.

By degrees, the ant hill quieted. Soldiers returned to barracks. The lights winked out. Knight crossed to the plaza and to the corner of the administration building. No gravel crunched under his feet that trip. The sentry did not know that a man stood within touching distance as he walked his post.

Watching for the blond man, Knight was startled to discover suddenly that the blond stood in front of him. The man took no pains to hide.

"Who goes?" the soldier demanded in a taut voice that told of a nervous trigger finger.

"Hospital," the blond gasped. "I must find the hospital."

"What the devil's in your hand?" the soldier exclaimed. "Don't fall against me! You scratched me!" The sentence ended in a heavy sigh, and a light thud. The blond man had broken the soldier's fall. The blond returned the hypodermic needle to his pocket and got out a jimmy.

Knight continued to watch from around the corner. The window creaked and groaned, and gave. The blond man listened for an alarm. Quiet reigned.

The blond hoisted himself in the window. Knight waited until he heard a desk drawer squeak under the jimmy. Cloak and hat he dropped. He stole to the window. His hands found the sill. His toe found a jutting stone in the wall. Noiselessly, he went up and over.

The light of a dark lantern showed where the blond worked. He had a drawer open, and was rummaging through a neat stack of papers. Pulling one out, he replaced the tumbled papers. He got up to gather together his loot and tools.

He got up, to meet a pistol that forced his teeth open and lay cold on his tongue.

Knight pocketed the blue print, took the blond's pistol, and snapped off the lantern. He hooked it to his belt. A moment's search discovered the hypodermic needle. That, too, he pocketed, shivering.

"Back to the window," he whispered.

The blond obeyed. He may have thought the window would give him a chance to escape. Knight quashed his hopes by ordering:

"One leg over the sill. Now the other." He suited action to the word. When they were in the win-

dow together, with the gun still in the blond's mouth, he ordered: "Careful. One, two, jump!"

Their feet thudded on the gravel in unison. The pistol had clicked on the prisoner's teeth. "Back!" Knight whispered. He recovered the cloak and hat. "Back!"

He backed his prisoner to the plaza. There was no reason to look behind, but as he came to the plaza trees, Knight felt a sudden desire to look over his shoulder.

He saw a man running toward him; the fellow must have come directly from the doped soldier. No shout for help shattered the night. The man sped, black and ghostly, straight toward him. He was close, otherwise Knight could not have seen him. No sound marked his running. A pistol gleamed in his hand.

Knight had no intention of letting the blond man go free. He wanted the blond out of Bravo's sight for a while.

He urged the man into the deep dark of the trees, thence across an open square where the statue of a patriot reared in the plaza. Beside the statue, he wheeled and waited, with the pistol still in the blond's mouth.

Suddenly, without noise to give warning, the running shadow darted around the statue. Knight struck him across the jaw with the pistol. The man slumped into the bushes at the statue's base. It was done before the prisoner realized that the pistol was not in his mouth.

Knight spun him around and jammed the gun in his ribs.

"Now, run!"

They sped to the Campo wall and slid over. At that moment a taxi rolled out of the gate, after bringing home an officer. Knight hailed it. They sped away. He did not

know that a man shambled dizzily to the gate and showed a card to get the taxi license number from the sentry.

IN whatever town he worked, Knight always hired a room in a quiet street. At any hour of day or night, he could gain a hide-away without delay; it was a place in which to interview those he did not care to have come to the scene of his activities.

He had such a room in San Pedro. There he took his prisoner.

The blond man sat limply beside him in the taxi, with his head down and hands clasped loosely. At the house on Mier Street, he obediently got out and watched the taxi drive off. With the pistol in his ribs to remind him of the shortness of life and the wisdom of silence, he went up the crooked stair into a sparsely furnished room. He permitted Knight to gag him and bind him to the bed. His eyes threatened revenge, but they could not pierce the mask and cloak.

Knight turned out the light, locked the door and stole down the crooked stairs to the street. A church clock chimed three. He stopped to take a breath of calm air. He examined the loads in his pistol, felt of the brass knuckles in his pocket, and made sure he still had the blue print. Down the street, a taxi stood in front of an all-night café.

"I could go a cup of coffee," said Knight to himself.

The mask went into his pocket. He hired the taxi, told the driver to wait, and entered the café.

He did not go beyond the second booth. Familiar voices there halted him in his tracks.

"I have looked for you for an hour, Calderon."

"There is work that must be done, father. I could not use your house, even if we were on good terms. You shelter a despicable Yankee there."

"Knight has the great curiosity, no?" Justo Ruiz answered. "I think he goes where angels fear to tread to-night. Let him hang himself, Calderon. I want to make peace with you."

Knight did not wait to hear more. He marched out to the taxi, snapped: "75 Mina Street!" and threw himself in the seat.

"Let me hang myself, eh?" he thought, in cold fury. "That screwy double-crosser!" His hand touched the blue print. "I've got this. I'll put across a business deal they won't forget!"

Absorbed in his plans, he was unaware that a shadow had detached itself from the café building and now lay flat on the running board.

At Colonel Bravo's house, he paid off the driver. His hand rested on the holstered pistol. He hammered the door knocker. Colonel Bravo was awaiting his call. A light promptly snapped on in the hall. The door swung open, flooding the street and doorway.

Knight's heart thumped within him, and he recoiled against the doorway, momentarily forgetting that he was masked.

A man stood facing him in the area of light. He had a purple bruise along his jaw, the exact shape of a pistol barrel. A sprig of leaves had stuck to his hat when he fell at the base of the statue in the Campo. His mouth was grim, and his eyes hard and purposeful.

It was the big-nosed agent who had questioned Knight about his visit, and warned him to keep out of political trouble.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAVO'S THREE PRISONERS.

COLONEL BRAVO had answered the door himself. The heavy-set man blocked the entrance and blinked at Knight.

Knight drove an elbow into his stomach. Bravo's breath went out in an "Oof!" Knight stiff-armed him back, lunged inside and slammed the door in the agent's face. His hand instinctively went to the mask; it was in place. A false security led him to reason that the agent had walked the two blocks from the Campo and had met him by chance.

"Now, señor," Knight said grimly to Bravo, "I report."

A lamp cast a faint-green light in the shadows. Bravo turned on the upper light and a floor lamp. He wiped his glasses carefully, adjusted them on his thick nose and peered heavily at Knight.

"You!" he muttered. "You! Here!"

"Why not? Señor Colonel, my mission was successful. I have the blue print. The man who was to shoot me was himself shot. The blond man who was to succeed after I failed, is a prisoner."

"Stop! There is some mistake."

"Quite a mistake," Knight rapped out. "I was betrayed. Why? My grandfather fought for Maximilian. I would give my life's blood for José Augustin. Yet I am sacrificed—I, who alone succeeded in getting the blue print naming names."

The Mexican's heavy eyelids drooped. "You failed to get Calderon Ruiz at the Tres Casas. There was some doubt about your ability."

"That was no reason for killing me. I am the supporter of José Augustin, the Austrian, who is—"

A heavy finger closed his lips. "Sssh! You don't know who may be listening!"

Knight struck the hand away. "I can tell you who may be listening. A Federal agent was watching the house when I came up."

"That is not true." In spite of his contradiction, Bravo believed the bad news. His heavy face broke into sweat. He mopped at his brow and cleaned his spectacles. He blew on his icy hands to warm them. "There is no time to waste. Let me have the blue print."

"It isn't here," Knight answered. He drove on in the face of the gathering storm. "I know where it is. Colonel, you have made the most terrible mistake of your life. You caused to have stolen a certain plan of fortifications. It is hidden where a thief can get at it and sell it, perhaps to the Yankees."

It was a shot in the dark, based on Bravo's call to Justo Ruiz, informing him of the loss of the plans. The shot worked. Bravo's eyes shuttled to a wooden chest in the corner.

"The theft was necessary. A certain young man knew too much and was about to tell. We got his mind off it, no?"

"You only roused him to stronger action. No matter. It is Mexico who loses if the plans are sold. Mexico comes before José Augustin. Give me the plans."

"No, señor!" Bravo said firmly.

"Then the blue print goes to Mexico City. Your name," Knight added softly, "is on the main entrance of the capitol drawn in the blue print."

"Your name, too!"

"It will be erased."

"You are bluffing," said Bravo.

The house echoed to the clatter of the door knocker.

"Ah!" the colonel breathed, "here is my real agent. Here, Señor Bluffer, comes the blue print."

He went to answer the door. Knight followed him, with the pistol aimed at the middle of the heavy-set back. Again the knocker clattered. Bravo opened the door far enough to admit a young Mexican soldier. The soldier burst in, flipped off a salute and lashed into voluble Spanish.

"Señor Colonel, we have in the Campo hospital a man who was shot attacking the guard at the administration building. We have in the prison a *blanco* who was found bound and gagged in a house on Mier Street. A Federal agent turned him over to us for safe keeping. I thought you would wish to know, sir."

Bravo's heavy face was like iron. "Those two are bandits," he said grimly. "I would not be surprised if you had to shoot them while attempting to escape. Dawn comes in an hour. I shall be there."

"Si, señor. They will try to escape."

THE soldier saluted and left. Bravo turned. He did not start at the unexpected sight of Knight standing behind him. He merely nodded.

"You were not bluffing. They did fail. Now I begin to believe you have the blue print. Now you, señor, with that pistol, you are in position to give orders. But not for long. Surely you do not wish to have three in the death party an hour from now?"

"Hardly. Nor do you wish it. Else the blue print would go to the capitol, and you might be one of a death party some dawn soon."

There was murder in the man's heavy eyes. "Señor," he said

suavely, "I would not quarrel with a man like you. I will give you the plans. There must be a time and place for the exchange of courtesies. Here? At noon?"

"Here," Knight returned. "Now."

Bravo emitted a sigh of resignation. He returned to the arched nook and knelt before the oaken chest. Knight stood behind him, holding the pistol close to the heavy head.

Bravo opened the chest. He took out a brief case on which the lock had been broken. He laid it on top of his head.

Knight took it. "Close the chest." It thumped shut. "Stay as you are."

Resting the brief case on the colonel's head, Knight drew out a sheaf of plans. His trained eye picked out the hidden gun emplacements, air fields and ammunition depots; he otherwise quickly translated straight lines, wavy lines and circles. He did not need the letter that accompanied the sheaf to know that these were the plans intrusted to Calderon Ruiz for delivery in the capitol. He closed the case and strapped it.

"Get up."

Bravo rose and wheeled with amazing agility. "And the blue print?"

"Oh, yes, that blue print of the capitol with the names of the men who hope to be inside it by the 16th." He pulled it from his pocket and tossed it on the chest.

Knight backed to the door. He gripped the brief case tightly under the cloak and watched the colonel intently, while listening for a possible attacker. He got to the street door. The hand that held the pistol turned the knob.

"When do you return," the colonel asked, suavely, "for your orders on the man to be killed? You

remember you drew the red die and shouldered both missions."

"To be sure," Knight said smoothly. "I shall be back!" He bowed. "Viva José Augustin!"

"Viva!" the colonel returned weakly.

KNIGHT backed out, taking the key with him. He locked the door, tossed the key in the gutter and strode rapidly to the corner. There, seeing no sign of the big-nosed agent, he stripped off the mask. He swung the cloak over his arm to cover the brief case. He scowled at the reddening dawn.

A cruising taxi picked him up.

"The house of Justo Ruiz," he directed. "There's ten pesos in it if you get there in ten minutes."

"Oh, señor! It cannot be done!" Then the driver sent the car forward like a bullet, to prove himself wrong.

Knight sat with the brief case between his knees. He was on the edge of the seat, ready to drop to the floor.

Looking toward the street, he found himself facing his own reflection in a mirror. It gave him a shock. The outline of the mask was printed there in clean white lines. The rest of his face was dirty and sweat-streaked. A cut on his chin had bled and closed, unnoticed. A bruise purpled one cheek. Evidence of his climb into the Tres Casas was there, alongside marks of his battle with the real Conspirator 18 and his dodging of soldiers at the Campo.

"Katie, bar the door!" he muttered. "What a night!"

He patted the brief case fondly. Justo Ruiz would advise Calderon to let the Yankee hang himself, would he? He would hire a man and then double-cross him? Also,

he would pay for those indiscretions in fifty thousand solid pesos. Then it would be Los Angeles for Señor Knight and good-by to Mexico, with the big-nosed agent.

"I won't give a hoot whether Alek puts over his coup or not; won't give a hoot what happens to the honor of Justo Ruiz."

He was almost hurled to the floor with the abrupt swing of the motor to the curb, in a screaming protest of brakes. He went for his pistol. The driver was crouched, peering out at a soldier who had halted him by holding a rifle with both hands above his head. A siren screeched. Knight glanced at the now familiar stone walls running the length of the street.

"This is Campo Militar!"

"*Si, señor.*" The driver was blissfully unaware of the pistol's menace. "The police may need the car. I think prisoners are escaping."

A fusillade of rifles crackled through the dawn. The siren had stilled its howl. Tension gripped the Campo. The soldier brought his rifle to the ready; the driver dug his fingers into the upholstery in suspense; a sergeant in the gate went to one knee, the better to see, with a hand shading his eyes from the rising sun.

Two pistol shots cracked in the Campo.

The sergeant rose and nodded. The soldier waved the car on.

"Any soldiers hurt?" the driver inquired.

The soldier grinned cockily. "No. Two prisoners tried to shoot their way out. They missed. We," he said, significantly, "did not miss."

The car raced away. Peace rolled over the Campo. Thus Colonel Bravo's veiled order of execution was carried out. Two men who

might have talked, would talk no more.

"Tough luck," Knight commented.

Early morning scenes rolled by. The Campo walls gave way to a field of tall corn and then to brightly colored houses set among cypresses and pepper trees. From the hurtling car, Knight idly watched the familiar, dawn-drenched scene to which he would say good-by that morning. He would say good-by as soon as he exchanged the brief case for fifty thousand Ruiz pesos.

A squad of soldiers came into view, stocky, brown-skinned men in varying shades of khaki, rifles on shoulders, arms swinging to the smart rhythm of their march. They marched in double file. A prisoner shambled in their midst, ineffectually trying to match their military step.

The car sped past. The soldiers' faces were a blur. But the prisoner's face was clearly etched—Worrell. His head of unruly hair was flung back. His shallow eyes stared ahead, seeing nothing. He was afraid, terribly afraid, but he set his teeth into his lip to make a show of bravery.

"Worrell! That damn crazy Yankee. He must have got his revenge."

But Knight knew that was not it. Worrell had done something to rouse Alek's ire. He was being sent to Colonel Bravo's "care." It was due to Worrell that Knight had gotten the note which sent him to Tres Casas and ended in his getting the stolen plans.

"The crazy gringo. Only one of the plotters can get him out of this jam. O. K. I report to Bravo for his murder detail. Katie, bar the door!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN WITH ANTS.

DO you know what day this is?" the driver grinned, as Knight paid him off.

"Dawn of September 13th."

"Si. Three days more, then the Grito! It is the great day, señor!"

"You're telling me!" Knight murmured. The look of hurt in the Mexican's eyes rebuked his rudeness. "I know. I've seen it," he smiled. "You shoot off firecrackers. You throw stones through windows and have grand street fights in the name of independence."

The Mexican agreed enthusiastically. "And there is music and marching soldiers, and the flag. Oh, it's *bonito!* For the Grito on the night of the 15th, the president must be in the capitol. But on the Sixteenth, he will be in San Pedro."

Knight bade him good morning and turned away. The president would be in San Pedro on the Sixteenth, and on the Sixteenth the serpent would wriggle mightily in the eagle's beak. The president would be deposed by a coup never used before.

He entered the gate in the great cactus hedge around the Ruiz estate. Great cypresses and pepper trees cut off the early sun. Knight gazed down long gloomy aisles between the trees. Not a leaf stirred. A smell of damp earth clung to his nostrils. The silence in the Ruiz garden was like a thick blanket.

He shivered. "These dawns are chilly! No wonder they say Carlotta haunts this place. It's only fit for a ghost."

Off to the left, something moved in the trees. He blinked and muttered something about tired eyes. Again he saw the movement, and his eyes ached with the strain of dis-

tinguishing the thing from a drooping pepper tree. He increased his pace.

"Eyes tired," he said. "No sleep. Imagine things."

Nevertheless, he slipped the brass knuckles on his left hand. He wanted the right free for the gun. The cloak over his arm concealed the brief case.

The attack came without warning. The gloomy aisle in front of him was suddenly blocked by five peons. Each lifted an arm, and Knight faced a hedge of machetes.

The American stood with his left arm over the brief case, hand on hip, elbow out. His right arm was crooked close to his side. It was the careless position of a man, unsuspecting of danger, about to make a casual remark.

"Good morning, Juan, and to you, Armand. Sorry to disturb you. I am a guest of Señor Ruiz. I shall tell him of the good watch you keep."

"I'll tell him that, thief," Juan said, gruffly. "Give me the brief case."

"Don't be silly," Knight begged.

As one man, Juan and Armand came for him. The American's right hand emitted blue flame. Armand's scream rang down the gloomy aisles, hard on the whine of the bullet. As for Juan; Knight side-stepped and lunged forward. The first move dodged the machete; the second dropped the cloak over Juan's head.

The Mexican did not try to escape the cloak. He flipped the machete to his other hand and swung from the side, straight in for Knight's ribs. It was a blow to cut the American in two.

The cloak muffled the pistol shot. The machete bit damp earth. Knight stood over Juan's body.

"Four shots remain," he said softly. "Sheath your machetes, Indians." When the steels had disappeared, he promised, "Señor Ruiz shall hear of this."

"Señor Justo Ruiz," one said boldly, "sent us after you. But I have no stomach for lead. Pass, señor."

"Take up these two and go ahead of me."

He followed their noiseless march to the house. They went on to the peon quarters. The dining-room door stood open. He vanished within, unnoticed by the peons. Swiftly he crossed the corridor and entered the gun room, closing the door with his foot.

CALDERON paced the room. He heard the door click, halted, saw Knight. He sprang for the table where lay his belt and pistol.

"Stand where you are!" Knight cried.

Calderon saw the American's gun. Knight let fall the cloak, disclosing the brief case.

Calderon's eyes blazed. His hands opened and closed. He licked his lips hungrily.

"I am indebted to you for a hot greeting outside," Knight said.

"Why not? Do you think we are dull, we Mexicans? Colonel Bravo telephoned my father that a man in black took them. He also saw some sandy hair. That would be you, gringo."

"You know, of course, that Bravo stole the plans."

"I am no fool. But that is not the point. You have them. What is your price, gringo?" The scorn in his tone made Knight's fists itch.

"My price," he said evenly, "is airplane passage to the border."

"Oh!" Calderon sneered. "You're leaving us?"

"I am not. I want passage for a young Yankee with ants in his head, named Worrell. I don't know why he's in prison, but I'll get him out."

A change came over Calderon Ruiz. It was like a wind, parting heavy clouds and setting them adrift.

"Will you permit me," he asked courteously, "to see the plans?"

Knight tossed the brief case on the table.

The examination was soon over. "Señor Knight, a peon has better manners than I have displayed. You will pardon me. The flight was on my mind and when I discovered the plot, it unbalanced me. Truly, I hate all foreigners." He added, "I didn't know you were this sort."

"It's forgotten," Knight replied. "Will you run Worrell to Laredo? Do you know why Bravo arrested him?"

"Two answers," said Ruiz, as he put on his belt and fastened the brief case to it. Then he paused. "No. It was not for any crime he committed here."

"Then he must have stumbled onto some information of importance to Alek Kresge. There is a chance that Bravo will arrest me when I go to the prison. If I have not called you in an hour, get in touch with the American consul. Let Bravo know you've done it. The consul is afraid of his own shadow, but Bravo won't want the new government embroiled at the start."

"Good. The plane will be warmed up, ready to go. Will you breakfast?"

Knight suddenly realized how hungry and dirty he was. "Yes. And I guess I'd better wash."

For the first time, the aviator

smiled. "Better. You're rather terrifying. The hombre of ants in the head may be afraid to go with you."

THEY sat down at the breakfast table, and the Indians scurried to provide an early meal.

"If you have room for three in your plane," Knight said, "I think I'll go with Worrell. I'm tired of Mexico."

"I have the room, señor, but not the inclination to take you out. A coup is to be pulled like none ever used before. Will you help me break the plot, amigo?" He saw Knight hesitate and went on, eagerly, "I know certain names. I could denounce them, but they are my superiors, powerful enough to get away with a denial. The plot centers here in San Pedro. I must ruin the coup."

"How did you happen to learn of it?"

"I decoded a letter that got in my mail by mistake."

"I'll help you. I can execute a certain mission for Bravo, to set myself with him, and at the same time free Worrell." To himself he said, "Katie, bar the door! That's a Mexican, for you. I hated him and was going to make him pay through the nose. First thing I know, I've promised that I'd do something for him."

Calderon broke into his thoughts. "The only man who can beat them is the one clever enough to recover these plans. May I ask how you got them?"

"I got them at a cost to you. The plotters knew of a blue print you made. I got it and exchanged it for the plans."

"But, but, señor!" Calderon stammered. "How could they know

of that blue print? I told only my father of it, the moment I was about to kill myself."

"So your father knew of it?" He kept his thoughts to himself by saying, "Alek and Malory are in this house. They could have overheard. Alek is the brains of the plot."

"Yes, I know." Calderon broke a roll thoughtfully. "A coup never used before. Señor, what could it be?"

"Alek's smart as a whip," Knight said, getting up. "Sweet, clever, and ruthless. Katie, bar the door to such a man!"

TWENTY minutes later, Knight walked up the steps of the Campo prison and asked for Colonel Bravo. A soldier opened a glassed door and admitted him without announcing him. Behind a flat-topped desk, the heavy-set Mexican blinked.

He had never before seen Knight unmasked. He looked at the straight, hard mouth and the expression that told of a cool, fast brain. While trying to place the man, he recognized the sandy hair and the decorated gunbelt.

"You again?" he exclaimed weakly.

"In the flesh," Knight assured him. "In spite of a slight obstacle, I delivered the plans."

"The obstacle?" Bravo asked, sparring for time to think.

"Two machete men."

"And they are—"

"Dead." While the colonel gasped, Knight went on, "I drew the red die at the meeting. I am now prepared to kill your man."

"Sssh! Not so loud!"

"Name the man."

"I shall detail some one else to the same duty," the colonel suggested. "You know my system.

Two must try, that one may succeed."

"I refuse to be tricked again," Knight said firmly. "You Mexicans have a proverb, that it is foolish to put two saddles on the same horse. I'll work alone. Name the man."

Bravo did some hard thinking. He had been forced to report to Alek Kresge on the loss of the plans. Alek had recognized Knight's description and ordered his arrest. At the same time, the Yankee had done some fast work in outwitting the two men detailed to kill him. And Bravo wanted a certain man killed, a plotter who was on the fence, ready to go with the coup if successful, or to turn State's evidence if it failed. Bravo's course lay open, get the Yankee to do the murder, then arrest the Yankee.

"I'll pay you five thousand pesos. Satisfactory?" he hazarded.

"Sure. I expect to be paid. I go where the money lies."

"Ah! The man is José Martinez, secretary of police. Now, you want to do it alone?"

"Easy," Knight retorted. "He has an appointment for this afternoon with a Yankee named Worrell. I shall be there."

The Mexican blinked. "Worrell? The secretary has the appointment with him?"

"Yes. You are told, doubtless, that the secretary is not at home. That is a lie. Anyway, he comes out to meet Worrell."

"True. He is the very devil to find these last two days. Worrell is a prisoner here. Brought in for disturbing the peace. I shall ask him where this appointment is."

"He won't talk. American police have tried it on him. He has ants in his head, and forgets very easily. I shall be responsible for him as your prisoner. Let me take him to

meet the secretary. Then one stroke of the stiletto, and it is done."

The colonel jerked some papers into a pile. "We argue too much. If it is true that we do not put two saddles on the same horse, it is also true that two men do not try to ride the same saddle. Both of us cannot give orders."

"Then do not argue. Give me Worrell. By night the secretary will be dead."

THE colonel pounded on the desk. Then he turned and roared out an order that sent every man within hearing scurrying. Some rushed around, in pretense of being busy. Some scuttled away and returned with Worrell.

Worrell's eyes stared beyond the room; he did not see Knight at first. "Hello!" he cried. "Say, you talk their lingo. Tell 'em I don't know what this is about. I was in the patio, reading a letter, when they came after me."

"Perhaps you were reading out loud. It was rather early in the morning. You're in for disturbing the peace. Get this, Worrell. Listening? I'm standing good for you with the colonel. If you escape, I go to prison. That date you had with the secretary, remember? I'm going to be there with you."

Worrell looked blank. He ran his hand through his unruly hair. His shallow eyes begged Knight to tell him what to say. Suddenly he gulped, as if the information were something to be swallowed. "Yes, I get you," he said hazily. "Sure, I won't try to escape. I'll take you straight to the—to that guy."

Knight bowed to the colonel. The two Americans left the prison. Knight's hand was firm on Worrell's arm. "Steady, old man. A plane's

waiting. You'll be over the border by night."

In the prison, Bravo picked up the telephone. "Get me Agent Duran. Hurry. Duran? . . . Follow the gringo called Knight. He is leaving here now. Don't interfere, no matter what he does, unless he or Worrell tries to leave San Pedro. In that case, arrest both of them. Don't let them get near a plane."

At the gate, a sedan with drawn curtains drove up. The driver opened the door. They got in, to find Calderon Ruiz sitting there. The car drove away.

"The plane is ready," said the Mexican. "I thought this would save time."

"Plane?" Worrell asked suspiciously, "What plane?"

"While you were being marched to the brig this a. m.," Knight told him, "two men were shot. Their offense was the same as yours."

"Disturbing the peace?" Worrell asked vacantly.

"Disturbing the right of a certain colonel to plot against his government. I'm afraid you know too much for your own good. Ruiz will fly you to Laredo."

Worrell reached for the door. "Not me! I came here to get a man who escaped justice. Neither of you would blame me if you knew the thing he did. It was him, I bet, had me thrown in the jug. I'll get him, now that I'm free."

"You're not free," Knight reminded him. "I'm standing good for you. Bravo bought somebody in exchange for you. Your only chance to escape the firing squad lies in going over the border."

"After I've done my work, the firing squad is welcome to me. I won't leave Mexico," he said flatly. "I won't leave San Pedro until I've done what I came to do."

CHAPTER X.

A BLOODY STILETTO.

KATIE, bar the door!" Knight muttered. "You've cost me fifty thousand pesos!" He felt weak when he looked at the brief case fastened to Calderon's belt, and thought of how he had exchanged it for Worrell's passage.

Calderon had lifted the curtain to look out the rear window. "A car followed us from the Campo. I recognize the man in it. It is the truth, señor, I think Worrell would not have got out of San Pedro, anyway." His direct eyes met Knight's. He added, "Keep your ears in, gringo!"

Knight's eyelid lowered in a serious wink. He knew what a dangerous course he had chosen in agreeing to kill the secretary. It was doubly dangerous because he had no intention of committing the murder.

Calderon returned to Spanish, a language Worrell did not understand. "This intended murderer, will you let him run loose?"

"Hardly. I'm hostage for him with Bravo. I'll lock him up with the secretary, while I play marbles with the plotters."

"But they know you got these plans!"

"But Bravo thinks I go where the money goes. I claim to have killed the secretary, I get Bravo's confidence, and so perhaps learn something about the plot. We may fail, but we cannot let a chance go by."

"I'd like to get off the ground with this," Calderon said uneasily, tapping the brief case.

Knight nodded and signaled for him to stop. He and Worrell got out. The Ruiz car drove on. Another sedan promptly drew up at the curb, without offering to let

them in. This doubtless, was the car that had followed from the Campo. Knight saw that the man in it was not Big-nose; that much, at least, was off his mind.

He and Worrell strolled toward town until the impatient agent in the following car offered them a lift.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "630 Bolivar," Knight answered. "I'm going past there."

The car raced toward the town, reckless alike of road ruts, loaded burros, and peons. It drew up in a narrow street of two-story houses of many colors, with first-floor windows barred.

Knight walked boldly up to No. 630, with Worrell trailing uncertainly. A shriveled woman in black squatted beside the door, selling roses.

"The house is empty, señor," she whined.

"I am the new tenant," Knight answered.

A knot of twine stuck out of the fancy scrolls on the door. Knight gently pulled on the twine and pushed the door. A bolt slipped. The door opened. Thus do ingenious Mexicans get along without keys.

"Come on. Make it snappy," he said to Worrell, when they were inside the empty house.

THEY ran up a narrow stair and came out on a roofed porch. Knight walked the ledge overhanging the patio, crossed the roof of a shed, and climbed over to the patio of the house on Mier Street, where he had rented the room. Again, they walked the patio wall and went through a roofed porch to the room where he had left the blond man, only to lose him.

"That big-nosed bum may be back, but I'll chance it," he said to himself. "This time he'll have a hot time gettin' in."

Worrell immediately walked out on the balcony overlooking the street. "What street's this?"

"Come off there!" Knight jerked him inside and slammed the doors. "You're an escaped prisoner. Don't show yourself. I'm going out pretty soon. You stay till I get back."

"O. K.," Worrell answered sullenly.

Knight sent the porter out to buy two heavy chains and padlocks.

"What are those for?" Worrell asked, his shallow eyes drawing to suspicious slits.

"We're going to have a visitor. I hope," he added, half to himself, "he has better luck than my guest of last night."

"Who was that?"

"A blond guy. Bravo shot him this morning. Oh, this is a hot dish you've stuck your fingers into, Worrell."

Worrell paid no attention. He looked through the clothespress and through all the dresser drawers. He sat on the bed, twisting his hands together. "Got a cigarette?"

Knight gave him one and watched him smoke it. He could tell the taste was not to Worrell's liking. Worrell wanted something that is not found in tobacco.

"Where'd you get the habit, Worrell?"

"What habit?" The question was like a lie.

"Marihuana. You didn't learn that in New Jersey. How long have you been in Mexico?"

"Two months. But I don't smoke marihuana."

"Came here to kill a guy."

Worrell crushed the cigarette under heel. "Like that," he said.

"What did he do?"

"It wasn't so much what he did, as the way he did it," Worrell said, grinding his teeth.

"Were you at the Ruiz house when they found that guy in the wall?"

"Uh-huh," came the wary answer. "Got any idea who killed him?"

"Me? No. I was asleep."

"Where were you when Miguel Ayala got it?"

"Asleep. Yes, I was asleep."

Chains rattled with the porter's knock. Knight adjusted them on the doors. "I'm going out, but I'll be back soon. I'm locking you in, because of what happened to the last guy. *Bueno?*"

"*Bueno,*" Worrell answered. He really was not listening. He was staring, in deep distaste, at the remains of his cigarette.

KNIGHT went out into the street. He crossed a small plaza and strode down a residential street. At a pink house he clattered the knocker.

A stony-faced Indian maid opened the door an inch. His knee and shoulder pushed it wide enough to let him in. She began to chatter excitedly. He thrust a peso into her hand. Before she recovered from the shock, he had crossed the patio and entered a windowless dining room.

The secretary, a fat man with hair parted in the middle and a dab of mustache over a smirk, breakfasted alone. He started at the unexpected sight of a man all in black standing beside him. The fat man shuddered, for his political tactics of standing on the fence and jumping with the winner, came from physical cow-

ardice. The shadow of a private executioner darkened all his days.

Now he felt cold iron against his ear. Holding his head still, he cast a sidelong glance at the pistol in a steady hand.

"What have you come for?" he asked, terrified.

"I have come to kill you."

The secretary clutched the table. He sprang up, holding to the table for support. The chair fell over.

Knight broke through his panic by saying, "I do not wish to kill you unless I have to. I must insist that you come with me without calling for help."

The secretary stood paralyzed. His eyes bulged. His knees shook. His finger nails were broken by the clutch on the table.

Knight repeated, "Come with me, quietly."

The secretary recovered somewhat. He touched his mouth with a napkin, and asked the maid for his hat. With Knight at his side, he walked out of his own house, too terrified to cry for help. He obediently got into a car and, on Mier Street, got out again.

Dully he entered the house, without looking at the number. They met no one in the hall or on the stair. Knight opened the padlocks and unwound the chain from the bars of the double doors. The secretary stumbled in and dropped on the bed.

Knight threw the bolts on the door and looked over his shoulder into the room. "Where are you, Worrell?" he called. His voice rang on emptiness. He looked under the bed and in the clothespress and on the street balcony. "Katie, bar the door!" he said.

The man with ants in his head was gone.

WHEN Knight went out on the balcony, a girl on the next balcony giggled guiltily and ran inside. Made reckless by his dope craving, Worrell had risked the broad jump between houses and escaped. Thus had two of Knight's plans for that room gone awry. He reentered the room, cursing to himself.

"How long must I stay here?" the secretary asked. "If you're going to kill me, please do it now. I can't stand waiting."

"To-day is the 13th. On the Sixteenth, you'll be out. Maybe before then, if you want to talk about the plot."

"I'll tell you all I know," the secretary said in feverish eagerness.

"How is the coup going to be handled? It's new."

"Never used before. But how it will be done I don't know."

For an hour, Knight questioned him, learning nothing more than he knew before.

"Who is this Alek Kresge? A secret agent?"

"*Si, señor,*" the secretary sighed enviously. "In the great War, he did work for Austria. Malory acted for Germany, mainly in the States and Mexico. He is not much good now, this Malory, except to carry out orders."

"What faces haunt him?"

"Who knows?"

Knuckles rapped at the door. The secretary scurried into a corner.

Knight drew his gun. "Who is it?"

The answer came with a merry chuckle. "Worrell."

He reeled in and lay down on the bed. "Put one over on you," he giggled. "Guess you thought I wouldn't be back. How long was I gone? Three days?"

"Two hours," Knight said briefly.

Worrell scowled. "Why don't you laugh? Hold that against a guy?" he demanded in rising anger.

"Hardly," Knight soothed. "You are smart."

"You said it," Worrell grunted. "Lot of 'em," he said, thick-tongued as a drunk, "don't give me credit. You do. Alek does. Damn li'l sissy, but a reg'lar guy. He gives me swell cigarettes. They make me feel strong."

Knight thought, "He's on a real toot this time. I wish he'd come to the sleepy part of it."

Worrell giggled. "Wouldn't think Alek had strength enough to knock out Justo Ruiz and put him in the clothespress that day. 'Member the day? It's months and months ago."

"Day before yesterday, to be exact," Knight said evenly, in spite of the leap of his heart. "Why did Alek knock him out?"

"How do I know?" Worrell snarled. "Got enough to do trackin' down my man. When I get my hands on him," he roared, flinging himself to his feet. His eyes focused on the cringing fat man in the corner. "Who's he?"

"A guest. Say," Knight asked confidentially, "was Alek strong enough to knife Ayala and that other fellow?"

Worrell's eyelids lowered slyly. "I don't know. I was asleep." He stole a glance at the secretary. "Have him come over here. He must be half a block away." He yawned. "I'm sleepy. I been walkin' ever since I left here, a month ago." He lay back on the pillow. His eyes watched the secretary slyly. He slept.

Knight was suddenly tired. He had not slept since his rest of the previous afternoon and it was now eleven o'clock. Worrell slept peace-

fully. Knight's head ached; the dope Alek had shot into him had robbed him of his usual endurance. He wanted a clear brain before he fenced again with Bravo or with Alek.

"You slept in a bed all night," he told the secretary. "I'm going to put you in the clothespress. Don't worry. You're perfectly safe. The doors are bolted."

The fat man obediently squeezed into the press. Knight used the fat man's belt to fasten his hands, and Worrell's belt for his feet. He closed the press, took off his clothes and flopped down beside Worrell. He was asleep instantly.

It was late afternoon when he wakened from a muddled dream, in which a blood-spotted Worrell staggered from the Ruiz gun room carrying a *marihuana* cigarette and Calderon's plane. He thought that Worrell was babbling of strength and courage.

He came wide-awake, with a strong sense of having failed to answer when some one called on him for help. His opening eyes lit on the shut clothespress. Conscience-stricken, he bounded off the bed and opened the press.

The secretary lay on his back. His fat face stared vacantly at the ceiling. His hair was neatly parted. His clothes were smooth, such of them as could be seen under a horrid crimson mantle.

The secretary had not died for lack of air; his throat was cut from ear to ear.

Knight turned to call Worrell. There were red streaks on the hop head's face. His shirt sleeve was crimson to the elbow. Beside his hand, where it had fallen when he relaxed in sleep, was something resembling a red stick: It was a bloody stiletto.

CHAPTER XI. THE PENCIL.

KNIGHT opened wide the windows. He needed all the air he could get. The sun was going down. The street was empty. In the distance, a drum beat a march step.

"Blind idiot!" he reproached himself aloud. "It was all perfectly clear. Worrell comes to Mexico to kill a guy. Alex hops him up on *marihuana* and he kills the two men Alek suggests. Murder was seething in him to-day. And I made a man defenseless—and slept!" It made matters little better to know that the secretary had come to a self-made destiny. "And I wanted him alive, to produce if Bravo tried to hook me on a murder charge. Well," he said grimly, "I've set my course with Bravo. I'll go on with it."

"What time is it?" Worrell asked sleepily.

"Four thirty. Rise and shine. We've got work to do."

Worrell sat up and yawned. "I sure slept." His eyes fell on his shirt sleeve and the blood-stained knife. "Why, look! What happened? Did somebody try to knife me?"

"Remember this morning, Worrell?"

"This morning? Why, yes. Bravo pinched me and you bailed me out. You wanted me to go to Laredo, but I couldn't. I'm glad I didn't go. After I left here, I went to the Ruiz house. I think I got proof of the identity of the man I'm after. Then I came back to tell you—" His voice faltered. "I must have gone to sleep. I sleep a lot. Oh, I remember. A fat guy was here. Did he try to knife me?"

"No," Knight said dryly. "You tried to knife him. You succeeded."

"I didn't! What're you tryin' to do? Kid me?"

Worrell rushed to the open clothespress. The shock of one good look made him reel.

"Snap out of it," Knight ordered. "We've got to clean up here. It's a mess."

Worrell beat both fists against the wall behind him. "Sure, it's a mess. There's blood on my sleeve!" he choked in dry sobs. "You put it there. You're in with these greasers! Got me in a jam so they'll hang me, and *he'll* go free. If I'm going to hang, I'll have reason for it. Murderer, am I? O. K.!"

He leaped to the bed and over it to land squarely in front of Knight. The light of madness glared in his eyes. In his leap, he had got the stiletto. He hit the floor with feet set wide and the knife above his head. He drove it down, with the force of his leap behind it.

Knight caught his wrist on the downstroke. He had braced himself. His shoulder muscles rippled and the veins stood out on his forehead as he matched his strength with the hop head's almost super-human power. He gazed steadily and coolly into the enraged eyes.

Worrell's hand slowly gave under the other's pressure. His arm went down and back, then up until his hand was under his own shoulder blades. The stiletto fell. Knight was shoulder to shoulder with him. Under his steady gaze, the wildness left Worrell's eyes.

KNIGHT released him. He sank on the bed, rubbing the injured arm.

"You won't hang, anyway," Knight drawled.

Worrell looked up in quick hope. "Sure I won't?"

"No," Knight said. "Mexicans execute with the firing squad."

"O. K. As long as I get the man I'm after."

"I said that to see whether you'd come to your senses. You're a *marijuana* dope, and you'll never be worth a hoot again, because the stuff shrivels the brain. But Alek Kresge did it to you, so I'll do what I can to get you out of this."

Worrell did not answer.

"Tell me," said Knight. "Alek had you kill two agents working in the Ruiz house. Did he mention a plot or coup? Why did he knock out Justo Ruiz? Do he and Justo have a secret understanding?"

"I don't know, except about the agents. I don't think I killed those men. I was asleep. I suppose I've seen and heard things, but all I retained was what had to do with the man I'm after. I'm on that guy's trail now." He reached for his coat. "See this?"

Knight snapped his fingers: Worrell was hopeless. His obsession shut out everything. Seeing what the man took from his coat pocket, Knight concluded the obsession had even shut out common sense. The object which Worrell drew out with an air of great importance was a pencil—a black automatic pencil.

"I'll tell you about this pencil," Worrell began.

Then Knight looked out the window. A Mexican in khaki and laced boots was strolling toward the house.

"Katie, bar the door! It's Big-nose." It was the man who had taken the blond thief from this very room.

The agent came to the house, talked with the porter and strolled

on down the street and out of sight. Knight had caught part of the conversation; the agent learned three men were in the room. Evidently, he intended to wait until Knight was gone before he investigated.

"Take off that shirt, Worrell. Scram out and buy a clean one. And get a raincoat for the stiff. Your height, sixty pounds heavier."

"What're you goin' to do?" Worrell asked.

"Take him with us," was the brief reply.

"With us! Where are we going?"

"To the only place we can go. Be back in ten minutes or I'll set the cops on you for his murder."

WORRELL washed himself and rushed out. Eight minutes later he was back. Knight had cut up a sheet. Using cold water from the second floor shower room, they cleaned the clothespress. Knight put the raincoat on the dead man, buttoned it up around the neck and jammed his soft hat on the head. He made a bundle of the bedclothes and Worrell's shirt, while Worrell gazed on helplessly.

"Slick as a whistle," he commented, looking around. "Get this, Worrell. He's drunk, sabe? We'll help him downstairs and into a car."

Worrell's knees gave. He grasped the bed for support. "I can't go on with this," he quavered.

Knight's open palm struck Worrell's cheek in a resounding smack. Again he slapped. The marks of his fingers blazed red on the gray face.

Worrell let go the bed. "All right. I'm O. K."

"At this hour, the Campo is nearly deserted. Whoever sees him will think he's crooked."

"We're not going to the Campo!"

"We are. Straight to Bravo's

office. It's the only place in Mexico we dare go. There's a Federal agent on our tail. That bird who so kindly gave us the lift was an agent. He probably knows by this time where we are."

Worrell seemed about to rebel. Then an inward smile touched his lips. His eyes shifted cannily. He became agreeable, even eager.

Knight put his arm around the secretary and set a steady hand under his arm. Worrell did the same. Knight stopped long enough to chain and padlock the double door. They made their slow way down the narrow stair.

The porter met them in the dark hall. "Need help?"

"No. Keep away," Knight warned. "He's mean when he's drunk."

He let the body sag to the lower step while Worrell went for a car. At once, he was back, urging, "Hurry!" Getting the secretary into the car was almost too easy. It was an open automobile, Knight scowled at that, but did not change taxis. The real danger would come at the prison.

The driver took a roundabout way to the Campo. After the second unnecessary run up a side street, Knight asked:

"Isn't this a 'free' taxi?"

"No, señor," the driver returned. "This car is like the bus. I drive the route."

"That means you can take another passenger!"

The driver only nodded. He was drawing to the curb for a dapper, slender man who hailed him with a cane.

"Driver!" Knight exclaimed. "Twenty pesos if you don't take him."

"I must take him, señor. It is the

law. He will sit with me," he added soothingly.

The passenger got in. He adjusted his hat to a more becoming angle. His hands moved gracefully. His effeminate face, delicate eyebrows, and professional smile, turned on the three in the back seat. It was Alek.

"Good afternoon," he greeted sweetly. He greeted each of them by name, and bit his lip in annoyance when the secretary did not answer. He repeated louder, "Good afternoon!" There was a pause. "He sleeps well," he observed.

"Drank a little too much," Knight answered briefly.

Alek's delicate eyebrows lifted to indicate shock. "Really! The secretary of police a drunkard. He seems to be badly done up. It must have been a *bonito* party."

"Just one-man affair!" Knight growled.

The lifted eyebrows questioned the reply. Alek looked piercingly at the secretary and hunched down to peer under the soft hat. "He sleeps well," he commented softly.

Knight's heart dropped. He could hear the tragic whisper of Macbeth, "Duncan is in his grave. After life's fitful fever, he sleeps well."

Alek faced ahead, and did not betray further suspicion by word or sign. Knight stared at his back. He tried to read the mind of this man who had made a hop head of Worrell, gained influence over Justo Ruiz while ruining his son, contrived the murders of two agents, and walled up Knight. Austria's best spy in the War, now a maker of emperors. Did he believe the secretary was in a drunken stupor? Or, where another would have shouted, "That man is dead," did he comment softly, "He sleeps well"?

Knight glanced at Worrell. The hop head stared at Alek with a dreamy expression. He fingered the pencil in his coat pocket. Worrell was far, far away from the speeding car with its cargo of dead man, and spy, and private agent. He was mentally confronting the man he wanted to kill, the man whose guilt was somehow connected to the pencil.

The taxi route went past the administration building in the Campo. Alek Kresge got out. His farewell was a lesson in politeness.

ONLY Knight answered. Worrell was swathed in dreams. The secretary leaned heavily against Knight's shoulder. The motor raced. The gears clashed. The car sped toward the prison.

"Worrell! Snap out of it! Here's where you watch your step. Stay with me. And keep your mouth shut."

"O. K."

The car stopped. A sentry looked hard at the three men as he passed. A soldier lounging in the door made ready to obstruct their passage. Knight got out first and with slight help from Worrell, lifted out the dead man.

The driver grinned. "He will have the aching head to-morrow."

The sentry halted to stare openly. The man who came up to halt them, blinked at the secretary and made confused motions with his hands.

"I shall call some one to take him in," he stammered. "Where does he think he wants to go?"

"We've got him," Knight said. "If he comes to, he'll start to fight. Stand aside."

The soldier stood aside. The three passed within. The secretary's feet dragged and flapped. Knight supported most of his

weight. Worrell urged him along, anxiously.

The two soldiers exchanged knowing, envious grins. "It is a beautiful drunk, no? And he can afford good liquor, the secretary."

Knight's arm ached when at last the secretary slumped in a chair in the colonel's office. The desk was cleared and the curtains drawn. Apparently Bravo had gone home, which was as Knight had hoped. He had brought the stiletto, carefully wrapped. The secretary's fat hand hung down at the side. Knight placed the stiletto on the floor.

"So!" he said. "He was seen coming in drunk. In the morning, he'll be found a suicide. Now you and I go to Bravo's house."

"For what?" came the harsh question.

Knight looked up. Worrell was gone. In his stead was the uniformed, accusing Colonel Bravo.

Bravo peered at the body. "What is this? What have you done? This man is dead."

"As you wished him to be."

"I?" The heavy-faced man was not a good actor, but he tried mightily to register surprise and indignation. "I wished this? He was my amigo, my aid, my right arm. You are a prisoner, Señor Knight. You and Worrell will die for this murder."

"Slow up!" Knight suggested abruptly. "You offered me pay for a job. I'll collect, one way or another!"

He paused. There were two doors to the room. One led to the hall, the other to another office. Under the office door trickled a liquid resembling water. It ran swiftly, forming a pool under the desk and around the secretary's feet. Knight and Bravo sniffed.

"Watch out!" Knight warned. "That's gasoline!"

"How did it get there? Oh!" he howled. "What's that?"

The next room rocked under an explosion. The door seemed to bend inward, while the flames forced themselves through. Fire raced underneath. Instantly the whole floor was ablaze. The desk blackened and crackled. Flame licked at the secretary's trousers.

Bravo lunged for the body. Knight met him with a braced shoulder and ran him backward into the hall.

The office where the fire started was a raging inferno. Knight looked back into Bravo's office. He had to keep his arm up against the heat. The draft from the open door sent fire racing up the window curtain and along the woodwork. The secretary's body blazed.

Men raced through the halls, shouting for guards and keys. Above, the prisoners shrieked and pounded at the bars until the prison was a hell of hideous clamor. A fire siren howled somewhere. Nearer, close by the prison walls, came three explosions.

Knight met the wild eyes of a running soldier. "Cars! Automobiles! That's what you heard blow up," the soldier explained. "He got the gas from them to pour in the window. He started it with a pencil."

"A pencil! Who? The gringo? Wait!"

But the soldier had run on into the flame and smoke.

Knight ran outside. Flames seared his face. Screams and sirens and flame roar beat on his ears. He ran down the steps. Some one clapped him on the back.

"Hey!" Worrell chortled. "Did you see it? I've got him. I know who he is. Did that colonel try to

pin the murder on you? Oh, I'm not dumb now. I know. He offered my freedom for the death and now that the murderer's done, he'll shoot us."

"Not if you sit tight. We'll get out of it."

"I don't have to get out of it. I'll take the blame for this murder. I killed him, like I killed the other two guys." His voice rose in an excited howl above the din of the fire. "It doesn't matter. Before they get me, I'm going to commit another murder, anyway!"

Knight grabbed at him. Worrell dodged, laughed wildly, and raced away into the billows of smoke.

CHAPTER XII.

JUSTO SHOWS HIS HAND.

SOLDIERS balked Knight's attempt to catch Worrell. They would not let him run along the building. He was driven back, step by step, until he was outside the fire lines.

"That's that," he said, wiping the smoke stains from his face. "No chance to squirm into Bravo's confidence. I've got to work on somebody else to find out how Alek will run his coup." He did not guess that he held the secret for breaking the coup. He had yet to learn what the coup would be and what part Worrell and Justo Ruiz would play in it.

A hand dropped on his shoulder. "Hello, buddy. This your idea of pleasure?" He did not have to look around to know this was Big-nose, the agent. "It was your card, wasn't it, that said you came to Mexico for pleasure?"

"Oh, cut the comedy," Knight begged.

The agent's eyes were hard. "It's no comedy, buddy. I told you the

other day to stick to pleasure and you ain't done it. I'm just tryin' to decide whether you come under Article 33."

"I? A pernicious foreigner?" Knight said earnestly. "Amigo, that shirt isn't my size. See the flag up there? It flies for a Mexico that's good enough for me."

"I see that flag," the agent answered. "I see the serpent of conquest doin' some wide and handsome wrigglin'. Come along. We're goin' to tête-à-tête, you and me."

They strolled to the wall and sat down. Knight opened a package of American cigarettes. The Mexican took one gratefully. The wind blew the smoke from the burning prison the other way. Fire apparatus was streaming in the gate. Soldiers herded the prisoners to the airplane hangars.

"What've you got on Mier Street," the agent asked. "A private hoochgow?"

"The chain on the door, you mean? I've got some private stock I don't want the porter to get into."

"The private stock you've put in," said the agent, "wouldn't get a mouse drunk."

"Mexicans," Knight sighed, "can think of the politest ways to call a man a liar!"

The agent crossed his knees and hunched up comfortably. "Let's go back to our last conversation. You've been to the house of Justo Ruiz. What do you think of his zoo? Got a taste for knicknacks, ain't he? Meet Malory?"

"I did," Knight drawled. "I wish I knew what faces he's always trying to drown."

"Malory isn't his real name. Twenty years ago, he was a man to be reckoned with. He was in your business. War came along and he

hooked up with Germany. Did his work in Mexico and the States. Nobody heard from him after that until a year ago. He's been here since. Has he made the crack to you, that you can't keep royalty out of Mexico?"

Knight grunted.

The agent refused to be discouraged. "Meet Alek Kresge? Sweet, ain't he? Dangerous. He has no more feelin' than a dentist's drill. And is he clever? My eye! Drug expert. Can put a guy to sleep, or make a hop head of him, or kill him off altogether, and the guy don't know it's happenin'."

"And that," Knight said, "doesn't come under the head of pernicious foreigner?"

The agent shrugged with out-spread palms. "He ain't done nothin'." He returned to his questioning. "How's the white-haired aristocrat, Justo Ruiz? Pretendin' to be worried about Calderon, he sends for a private agent, meanin' you. But he ain't coöperatin' is he?"

With an effort, Knight maintained his poker face.

The agent crushed out his cigarette. "Got another? I like 'em. Say, what brand does that bird Worrell smoke? Not our brand, hey?"

"Who knows? He's got ants in his head."

"Yeah?" the agent said. "And blood on his hands?"

KNIGHT was saved from answering when the roof of one wing of the prison fell in with a roar and a high leap of flame. A deep-throated roar of triumph broke from the prisoners in the hangars. A rifle cracked. Cavalry-men began to patrol the Campo. Machine-gun squads took up positions at the hangars and along the

wall. A plane droned in circles above them.

"Not much chance for a revolt to gain headway here," said Knight. "Mexico's army isn't to be sneezed at."

"A revolt wouldn't get to first base. But how about a coup?"

"Still no danger," Knight said. "I've heard the president has the army tied around his little finger."

"He has. They'd stand on their heads or lay down and play dead dog for him. But suppose a coup is pulled that's never been pulled before?"

"There's nothing new under the sun," Knight said.

"This coup is going to be new. Come clean, guy. Didn't Alek Kresge get Worrell to kill Ayala and the one before him? Ain't Alek and Malory the brains of a plot?"

Knight was thinking then of how Alek had the San Pedro police under his thumb. If Colonel Bravo of the police were a conspirator, so might the big-nosed agent be.

"You're asking questions over my head," he said.

He got up. The agent's big hand pulled him down.

"Come clean, guy," he begged. "Who's the brains of the plot? What is this brand-new, original coup? Who's the new ruler of Mexico? How's he coming into Mexico? What part is Justo Ruiz playin' in it? Who is Worrell?"

"Ask Alek Kresge," Knight suggested.

"I'll ask you," the agent growled, "and I'll give you twenty-four hours to answer—or else."

He arose. The interview was over.

A passing soldier, with head and arm heavily bandaged, looked twice at Knight. An amazed expression

was set on his face. "Señor, what was in that pencil?"

Knight sighed. "What would be in a pencil but lead?"

"What pencil is this?" the agent asked, in quick curiosity.

The soldier recognized the authority in his voice. "It started the fire. Of that I am sure. I would be afraid to tell such a thing at the inquiry. They would call me loco. But I swear to you on the book, señor, I saw it happen!"

"Tell me."

"I saw the other Americano take the reserve can of gasoline from an automobile. He poured the gasoline in a window and laid a pencil in it. An ordinary black pencil. He put the pencil in the gas and ran. The fire started there."

The agent looked hard at Knight. "That was Worrell. I saw you come out of your house on Mier Street with him and the secretary. No use asking you what the pencil is. Soldier, I'll talk with you again after I've seen Worrell."

"You mention the secretary," the soldier said. "Colonel Bravo carried him out at great risk to himself. It was useless. The secretary was badly burned."

"Courageous man, Bravo," Knight said.

The agent hitched at his breeches. "Twenty-four hours, Yankee. Then talk—or else!"

KNIGHT bowed and strolled toward the gates. The ever-present taxis were there, discharging sight-seers for the fire. He hailed one.

"The house of Justo Ruiz. Hurry. It's almost seven o'clock."

He looked at the evening sky and wondered where Calderon Ruiz was flying. He felt confident that the plans were safely delivered. It was

the one certainty he had. He wished he could be as sure that the aviator would start his flight to Vienna on the Sixteenth.

He said to himself, "This coup is impossible." Then, "Nothing is impossible to a man who can make Justo Ruiz turn against his son. Alek did that."

The agent had spoken mildly when he had said that Justo Ruiz was not coöperating with his own private agent. Knight saw a series of pictures of the aristocrat: worried about his son; bewildered, saying a homicidal maniac had killed Ayala; amazed, hearing Ayala was an agent of police. He saw Justo Ruiz returning from Tres Casas with Alek. And then, the change came. Ruiz, demanding Calderon's suicide; telling Calderon to let Knight hang himself; betraying his knowledge of the blue print to the conspirators; ordering his peons to take the plans from Knight before they could be delivered to Calderon.

Fantastic and ugly as the picture was, its ugliest details were yet to be drawn.

At the Ruiz house, the gardener looked up from his roses. Yes, the young Yankee had come in the gate like a bull entering the ring. He was all set to gore somebody or get run through.

Knight ran into the house. He met Justo Ruiz leaving the library. The white-haired man was tempted to duck back. He thought better of it. He nodded coldly to Knight. His eyes were like a rat's, alert, suspicious, and dangerous.

"Is everything well with you?" Knight asked.

"Of course." Ruiz pointed to the library. "Wait there. I have something I want to do." It was a curt order, lacking his usual dignity.

Knight paused, his headlong

flight after Worrell temporarily forgotten. He watched Justo Ruiz's straight back and proud white head go up the stair.

"Hopping mad," Knight concluded. "Mad enough to spill the beans if he's handled right."

KNIGHT ran up the stairs. Long residence in Mexico had given him the habit of moving softly. He arrived at the top as quietly as a wraith. The corridor stretched before him, closed doors on one side and on the other was the patio and open sky. A blood-red sunset dyed the corridor a suggestive crimson.

Justo Ruiz strode through the crimson haze. At the writing nook, he stopped and talked to some one. He kept his voice low, despite his anger. Knight heard the low, angry mutter without distinguishing the words. Death was in that low muttering. Knight's pulse quickened to it, as the pulse quickens to a distant drumbeat.

Ruiz took a threatening step toward the oleanders. His hands were set like claws. He was ready to spring on the man in the nook.

The oleanders swayed. Alek Kresge appeared, not six inches from the clawed hands. Justo's angry mutter paused. Alek spoke in gentle, soothing tones. It was the quietly condescending tone one uses to an animal. A light, quick side step took him out of Justo's reach.

Now their voices mingled; an angry mutter and soft tones that at once soothed and insulted. While he talked, Alek was retreating to his door. One hand turned the knob behind him; the other was out to ward off attack. He lifted his voice and Knight could hear what he said.

"I hopped him up and told him whom to kill. Was it my fault if he knifed the secretary instead?"

Then Knight knew it was he whom Worrell was supposed to kill.

Again the angry mutter mingled with Alek's soft tones, until Justo Ruiz cried out, "You, a maker of emperors! I can break you in two!"

Ruiz sprang. Alek squealed like a frightened mouse. He dodged the lunge. A knife gleamed in his hand. He was trying to open the door, but for some reason could not turn the knob behind him. He stabbed out.

Ruiz clutched the knife hand, jerked it high, and twisted it. The knife whirled over the rail into the patio. Alek, wrenching free, tried to duck away. Ruiz's two hands clawed his throat. He slammed Alek back against the door. The muscles swelled under his coat as he slowly choked the life from the maker of emperors.

"Señor! Señor!" Knight shouted.

He ran down the corridor. Ruiz's face was a mask of fury. Alek, purple-faced, sagged in the murderous grasp. Knight tore at Ruiz's arms to break his hold, but the wrists were like iron. The American's strength was as nothing compared to the strength in this hold.

Knight set his feet squarely. His fist went over in a short, hard chop. It connected with the jaw. The throttling hands went limp. The tall man fell forward.

Alek fumbled at the knob. The door swung open. He stumbled out, blinded and choking. Without a word for his rescuer, he slammed the door. Justo Ruiz was crumpled against it.

"Katie, bar the door," Knight muttered, looking down at him. "He was mad. He was peevied.

And that was no revolt against a man he feared. That was an out-and-out quarrel!"

Knight had clung to two possible excuses for Justo Ruiz's contradictory actions. One was that he suffered from the head blow received the day he was put in the clothespress. The other excuse was that he stood in fear of Alek Kresge since the visit to Tres Casas.

Something in his voice and manner during the fight made Knight discard both excuses. Justo Ruiz knew what he was about.

CHAPTER XIII.

JUSTO RUIZ CONTRIBUTES.

RUIZ stirred and slowly sat up. His senses returned with a shock. He clapped a handkerchief over his face, shook off Knight's proffered assistance and reeled to his own room.

Knight lingered in the corridor. He hailed a servant in the patio. "Send Señor Worrell to me."

"He is not here, señor. He has not come in."

"The gardener told me he came in the gate!"

The servant ran up the stairs. He flung open Worrell's room and spread his arms wide to indicate that it was empty.

The hop head apparently was wandering in the garden, hiding in the gloomy aisles under the pepper trees until he could gain the house under cover of darkness.

Knight locked the windows and communicating doors. He pressed a coin into the servant's brown hand.

"You know the gringo has ants in his head. To-night he is worse than usual. To get to his room, he must come up the stairs. Lock him

in when he arrives. If you see him and he does not come up, stay with him."

The man nodded. He felt in his sash for his knife. "I shall stay with him."

This was the only step Knight could take to protect Worrell's unknown victim. He dismissed it from his mind, together with the threats made by Big-nose, and the trouble likely to come from the secretary's murder. Bravo had not saved the body from the fire for nothing, but he would not act until the morrow. Meanwhile, there was the night in which to work on the mystery of the coup.

Yellow light flooded the corridor. Justo Ruiz came out of his room. He had doctored the slight bruise and brushed the dust from his clothes. His white hair was smooth, his goatee perfect. Tall, aristocratic as he was, his very manner made Knight take a deferential step back.

"Señor Knight," he said, "I regret the incident. I beg of you to forget it."

"Forgotten," Knight answered. "Sorry I hit you." He paused. "If you think," he hazarded, "that Alek needs to be strong-armed, I'm good at it. Or, if he's exerting pressure, there are ways to stop him."

"I don't know what you mean," Ruiz said coldly, "by hinting at intimidation. It does not matter. We quarrelled and I am short tempered. I shall apologize and our friendship will continue."

Knight shrugged.

Ruiz held out a letter. Knight thought that his lips were unusually tight and his breathing quick, as if he were about to plunge into something he feared.

"Go to Mine 17. If it not far. Take this letter to the paymaster at

COM-4B

the mine office. It is an order for money. The mine got the pay roll to-day, but they won't need it until to-morrow. I need it to-night. It is in paper, not heavy. You know the opening to the old Cerro mine? Meet me there with the money. I would do this errand myself, but I must be elsewhere."

Knight pocketed the letter.

"One moment before you go," Ruiz said. "I want you to explain what you meant by Alek's 'exerting pressure.'"

"He's sweet, but he has no feeling," Knight replied, doing some fast thinking. "I've met men like him who used threats to obtain money. They're dangerous."

"And you noted a change in my manner, that led you to believe I was threatened?"

"There is no change in your manner, señor," Knight answered truthfully. He wondered where the conversation was leading.

Ruiz changed subjects abruptly. "Is my chin coloring where you hit me? Look closely."

He came near. Knight could smell disinfectant.

"There is a slight mark, señor. A bruise. It will leave soon."

"Good. Now come. I shall have the car brought round. You must hurry. You can be back in an hour, but it will be full dark then, and you don't want to meet bandits on the road."

Knight followed him down the stairs, still wondering just what lay behind the question Ruiz asked him. The Mexican did not speak again until Knight was in the car. He had already ordered the chauffeur to drive to Mine 17. He leaned inside the car, with his back to the driver.

"No one else knows of your trip, señor. It is unusual to bring money

back from the mine. You should not be stopped."

"I won't be!" Knight promised.

"Don't let the paymaster refuse you the money," Ruiz added. "I must have it to-night!"

THE mine was ten miles from the Ruiz house. After leaving San Pedro close to the Tres Casas, the road ran through the mountains. It was a twisting, narrow path, built more for mules than for automobiles.

The Indian chauffeur drove recklessly. Both arms hugged the wheel. He was doing sixty when he passed the workers' houses, and almost that much when the brakes screamed on under the flare light at the mine office.

A barefoot Indian went after the paymaster. This was a lean, brown Mexican who squinted at Knight and frowned when he failed to recognize him. After reading the letter, he pursed his lips in a long whistle.

"Why does the señor do this? True, we received the pay roll to-day, but this will clean it. We pay off at noon to-morrow to let the men go to town for the holidays. Will he send us more?"

"I dare say he will," Knight answered. "Twenty thousand pesos will hardly break Justo Ruiz."

The paymaster examined the signature at different angles. He looked along the flat surface of the paper for erasures, and held it up to the light to detect inserts on the amount. All the while, he was furtively surveying the American.

"It carries the signature of Justo Ruiz," he admitted, "but why use us for a bank?"

Knight watched the mountain shadows deepen with every minute of delay. "It's up to you. Give it

to me or not. But decide! Want to say you paid off ahead of time?"

The paymaster refused the responsibility with an eloquent palm. "He would find out I lied. When Ruiz cracks the whip, we jump, señor."

"Jump, then. He's in a hurry."

They went into the office. The paymaster counted off the packs of money. He made a brown paper parcel of them, and put it in a bag to be slung over Knight's shoulder. He carefully clipped Knight's receipt to the Ruiz letter, and locked them in a safe.

The paymaster saw Knight into the car. He was uneasy about the affair and reluctant to see the money go.

"Armed?"

"Pistol."

"Let me send some men with you."

"Forget it. They'd call attention. I'll ride alone. Adios!"

When Knight said, "alone," the chauffeur put down a rifle he had lifted from the seat beside him. He had been ready to object if the paymaster insisted upon sending guards. Knight looked closely at him as he expertly maneuvered the car. He was a tall Indian. Knight could not recall having seen him before. He was not the regular Ruiz driver.

Knight drew his pistol and examined the loading. He felt of the two extra clips fastened to his filled cartridge belt. He swung the money sack to his back, where it would not obstruct his actions. He sat on the edge of the seat, with a hand on the door, ready to drop to the floor or jump.

The car slowed twice in its wild career down the trail. Each time, Knight laid the pistol within an inch of the driver's head.

The driver hugged the wheel. He held the car to the trail by sheer strength as he hurled it around the curves.

They drove a mile, five miles. There came a curve of the road where Knight could see the wide valley and the lights of San Pedro winking into being; they were almost through the dangerous canyon. Tall cacti watched them speed by, like sentinels at attention.

WHERE the road sprawled out before a canyon opening, a flashlight signaled up and down. Gunfire splashed red on the night. The brakes screeched. The car skidded half round in stopping. The driver was responsible for the skid. He had taken his hands off the wheel to pick up the rifle.

Leaving the car to steady itself, he turned and leveled the rifle across the seat at his passenger. His finger was on the trigger, but it did not pull. Lead from Knight's gun tore through his heart too soon.

Five horsemen rode out of the canyon, firing as they came. Knight accounted for the first man. The others stormed about him. A hail of lead pattered on seats and floor boards. The windshield shattered to bits. A bullet hit the money bag and gave it a wild fling.

Knight had the door open. He held his fire until a man on a horse careened up from the rear. The Mexican leaned over to plant a bullet at short range; he leaned straight into the mouth of the .45. The .45 coughed.

Knight ducked under the falling body, scrambled around the horse's dancing heels and slid into cover of the bushes. The attackers rode full speed around the car. They poured

lead in with the extravagance of hired gunmen.

Knight held his fire. The horsemen slowed to a stop. The dust settled. Only the hard breathing of the horses broke the quiet. One of the men dismounted and looked in the car. He snapped on a flashlight.

"We shot the driver, not the gringo!"

Knight was not eager to exchange lead with four men. He wanted to get the car, if possible, for a walk down the mountain and across to the Cerro mine would take two hours or more. He had crouched quietly in the bushes.

Now the horsemen began to ride in and out of the bushes. Knight's escape was cut off in the rear by a wide, deep gully. The riders threatened to find his hiding place at any minute. One man came so close that Knight could smell horse sweat and leather. The rider turned and came back. Another crossed from the right. Knight was about to be caught.

He slipped from the bushes and darted across the trail into the canyon. A man shouted. The horsemen rode at him. Then a fifth horseman sprang into view at the canyon mouth. He had been awaiting just such a move on the part of the gringo. His yells accompanied the cracking of his gun; his horse barred the canyon entrance.

Knight put lead into the horse, and circled him to run into the canyon. Again the Mexican stopped him by jumping from his falling mount, directly in front of Knight. Two guns roared in unison. The Mexican's bullet whined off up the canyon. Knight's bullet ended its whine in the thud of a hit.

A man appeared out of nowhere to stand at Knight's elbow. At the same minute, the automobile spot-

light was turned on the scene. Three men, afoot, were running up; they had left their horses the better to close in on the gringo. One had a gun; two had knives. Knight noted these details as a trained fighting man does, while his active attention was elsewhere.

Alek Kresge was the man at his elbow, shrilling:

"Attack! Attack!"

KNIGHT fired at the nearest man. The Mexican spun and fell. A knife glinted in the spotlight. Knight dodged it by tipping his head to the side. His arm looped around Alek's neck and he jerked the little spy in front of him.

It was then the strange thing happened. Alek had a knife in his hand and the hand was up. When Knight flung him in front for a shield, there was a split-second tableau. One man was running up from the spotlight, bent over at the hips to be less of a target. The other two, knifers, were in throwing stance. Knight was holding his fire for the most dangerous. The attackers hesitated when they saw that Alek was in danger.

In that split second of suspended motion, Alek's knife hand struck forward. The steel became a streak of light. Then the knife hilt stuck out from an attacker's neck like a savage decoration. The wounded man fell. The other two melted into the shadows; they had done what they were paid to do. They galloped away up the trail.

"Please let me go," Alek begged. "You're choking me."

Knight released him. He could not kill the spy in cold blood, even though he was sure the spy had caused the attack and had turned only when he saw that it had failed.

"Sorry," Knight said. "I grabbed

you without looking. Let's get out of here."

Alek recovered his knife. Keeping an eye on him, Knight pulled the driver into the tonneau and, leaning over the back of the bloody front seat, drove. It made driving hard, but it was clean.

"Thanks for helping," he said, as his foot pressed the starter. "Were you out for a walk?"

"Strolling," Alek Kresge answered sweetly.

Neither man spoke again until they arrived at the Cerro mine. Knight called, and Justo Ruiz came into the light. Justo Ruiz spoke to Alek, then leaned over to say something to the driver. By the dashboard lights, he saw that the driver was the American. For a full minute, he stared blankly.

Knight put the money sack into his hand. "All there, señor. We had company on the way down, but it did not cost you anything—in money."

"Too bad," Ruiz murmured. "Come with me, Alek. Thank you, Knight."

The two walked rapidly into the darkness.

"Too bad!" Knight echoed. "He means too bad they didn't get me. If ever a man was framed, I was. And Alek, smart little Alek! Changing sides when he saw he was out-classed."

He drove down to the suburbs of San Pedro, then walked to Tres Casas. He climbed the gun emplacement, entered through the shell hole and made his perilous way to the air vent.

He looked down on the same scene he had witnessed before, with the thick candles lighting the group of cloaked, masked men. They listened in rapt attention while Alek Kresge talked.

"As I promised you, we have the money. We need only to arrange to bring José Augustin from ship to shore. The emperor of Mexico must be smuggled in. We have the money to pay for it."

He held up the money sack that the paymaster had given Knight, and that Knight had given to Justo Ruiz.

"Oh, Calderon!" the American whispered. "Oh, brave and loyal Calderon Ruiz! This is the man who demanded your suicide. This is the honorable Justo Ruiz!"

CHAPTER XIV.

A PICTURE.

ON the morning of September 14th, the house of Justo Ruiz wakened to a calm and cloudless dawn. A fragrance of coffee and oranges and freshly baked *pan dulces* floated from the kitchen. Soft-eyed Indian girls in pink dresses moved noiselessly from kitchen to dining room. A porter sang while he splashed water from a pail to potted geraniums. An air of excitement pervaded every Mexican in the house.

A tiny boy lay in watch for Knight when he came down. "Two centavos, please, Señor Americano!" he lisped. "Do me the favor to give me two centavos. I must have me fireworks for the Grito." He clutched the two centavos in an eager hand and scampered away.

The porter glowed his, "Good morning!" He fumbled in his sash and brought out a small flag. "For the Grito!" he grinned. "Fiesta! It is the beautiful flag, no? Many of them will wave on the Sixteenth, when the president comes to San Pedro." He sighed in anticipation. "Don Calderon flies over the sea

that day. It is the great day for the Ruiz house, señor."

Knight nodded. He wished the porter would put the flag away, for he kept twisting it and the serpent wriggled in the eagle's beak. "Don Calderon had not returned from Mexico?" he asked.

"Five minutes past, he landed. Here he comes."

Calderon Ruiz strode in, tossing his aviator's helmet at a worshiping peon. His heels rang on the tiles. Triumph was in the swing of his stride, but his eyes were worried and he was in a bad mood.

"Coffee," he snapped at a maid. "Pronto! You"—to Knight—"come in here." He entered the dining room, jerked out a chair and sat down, shifting the silver and coffee cup irritably. "Are Alek and Malory still accepting my father's hospitality? What have you found out on the coup?"

"Tell me first whether you delivered the plans."

"Delivered. Safe. I am free," he said ironically, "to make the Grito flight. What's new on the coup?"

"Not much new. Alek is the brains; Malory the aid. The high emperor of Mexico is on the high seas. They have money to bring him from ship to shore." He dreaded the moment when he would have to tell how they got the money.

"Yes," Calderon nodded. "He will have to be smuggled in. You still don't know how the coup will be handled?"

"I don't know. It will be sprung when the president comes to San Pedro on the Sixteenth. Alek does not pretend to have more than a handful of army officers with him. The president wears the army like a finger ring. And soldiers are the backbone of any coup. They say it

is a coup never used before. I say, it will have to be."

Calderon broke a hard roll as if he were breaking Alek Kresge's neck. "They are smart, the devils!" He glanced up at a man entering the room. "Well? What do you want?"

The brown, lean paymaster of Mine 17 saluted Knight. "Stepped in to tell you I got a check to cover. All is well. I hear you had some visitors on the way down. I saw the driver. A contact shot got him. Didn't they hit you?" Without waiting for the answer, he went on, "You got the money to Señor Ruiz, anyway. Why the devil did he need twenty thousand pesos last night? Oh, pardon me, Don Calderon! I should not have said that."

"Twenty thousand pesos!" Calderon's face was hard as stone. "My father? What is this?" he snapped at Knight. "After you gave him the money, where did he go?" His fist pounded each question on the table. "You, paymaster, get out of here."

The paymaster scuttled away.

"Knight! What did my father do with the money?"

"Slowly, amigo."

"Slowly, the devil! Look here!" He whipped a check from his pocket and spread it on the table. "My father banks in Mexico City. Yesterday I was asked to verify his signature on this check. See who got the money."

His forefinger slid along the line "Pay to," and halted on "Alek Kresge."

Knight said, "He took the money to the Tres Casas, where the plotters meet. He gave it to Alek. It is to be used to bring the new emperor of Mexico from the ship to San Pedro."

The chair fell over with the force of the aviator's rising. "Now we un-

derstand why he wanted my suicide!"

"I am wondering whether Alek has some hold over him."

"None whatever." Calderon spoke calmly, controlling the sorrow that tore at his heart. He carefully folded the check. "Justo Ruiz has known what he was doing from the first. He wanted to betray Mexico to the royalists. He betrayed me on the blue print and demanded my suicide when he knew who had the plans. He tried to destroy me, his only son. That was the man I honored as my father."

"Where are you going?" Knight asked, when Calderon started to the door.

"Upstairs, to confront him with this." The aviator's tones were dangerously even. "He'll tell the details of the coup, or I'll throttle him. My father! I'll kill him with my two hands."

CALDERON strode down the hall and ran up the stair. Knight was two steps behind him. At the top, the aviator stopped so abruptly that Knight ran into him. Calderon clutched the stair rail for support. He passed a hand over his eyes, as if to wipe away a mist.

"Something is wrong with me!" he whispered.

"Sick?"

"I feel all right, but I saw the president. I saw him as plainly as I see you. The president of Mexico is in this house—or I am going mad."

The two ran along the corridor, while Calderon explained that as he came up the stair, he saw the president in the shadowy corridor. He had blinked to make sure it was no apparition and when he opened his eyes, it was gone.

They met the porter by the writing nook.

"Have we more guests this morning?" Calderon asked.

"No, señor. Señor Justo Ruiz went out very early with Señor Kresge. Señor Malory is in his room. There is no one else up here."

"I imagined it," Calderon said. "I never had such a thing happen before. I am overwrought, between the flight, the junta, and what my father has done. Perhaps it was a good omen."

Knight turned to the porter. "Do you know where Señor Justo went with Kresge?"

"Si. I heard him tell the driver to take them to the Tres Casas." He looked around him and whispered, "The hombre of ants did not come in. All the night we watched."

Knight answered Calderon's unspoken question. "Worrell got away from me. He's doped with marihuana till he's nuts. At Alek's suggestion he's done three murders. He's set for another. It hasn't anything to do with you."

"All that goes on seems to connect with me sooner or later. I hope Alek's coup is not for Worrell to kill the president. No," he said, with a shake of his head, "that would not carry the army. Let us—" He broke off to say coldly, "Good morning, Señor Malory."

Malory, haunted of eye, emerged from the third door beyond them. He was too far away to have heard the low-voiced conversation. He nodded to Knight.

"Still loose, are you? Very clever way you had of disposing of your victim's body. Burned it right under Bravo's nose." He laughed dryly. "Good morning, lieutenant. You look excited. No use getting

excited. Take it coolly and drink it away. Liquor'll drown anything, but faces."

"Let us go," Calderon said to Knight. With fists doubled against his legs to keep from attacking the haunted drunk, he went rapidly down the stair. He shouted to a servant in the patio. The man ran out and had the engine running in the aviator's roadster when the two came out.

"Where to, señor?" the peon asked.

"Vera Cruz!" Calderon retorted. He threw in the gears and left at full speed. "'Where to, señor?'" he mocked. "I trust no one in this house, any more."

AT Knight's suggestion, Calderon drove up the trail toward the Ruiz mines, and parked the car in a gully under a blanket of vines. They crossed the mountain to the Tres Casas. Trees and thick shrubs sheltered them until they were within a few feet of the entrance. Great clumps of cactus offered further protection. Each man had a pistol and a flashlight. They walked in quietly.

They were in a low-roofed entrance hall, leading in the round room of meetings. The sunlight followed them but a short way. In the round room, barely enough light to see by filtered through the firing slits. They stopped, to let their eyes become used to the half light, and to listen for voices. All was quiet, with the unearthly, expectant silence of old buildings which have seen too much of the work of traitors.

Calderon looked at Knight. The American shook his head to tell that he had heard nothing of Alek or Justo.

"Did that peon lie?" Calderon whispered.

"No. They've come and gone. Let's look around, anyway."

To their left was the chute down which Knight had run to become Conspirator 18. Behind them lay the narrow opening to an old, unused tunnel, and beside it were the patio doors, locked from the other side.

They went into the round meeting room. Knight pointed to the chunks of wax on the floor, mute evidence of many nights the thick candles had burned. With gestures and finger countings, he showed Calderon how the cloaked men stood while Alek directed the meetings.

Calderon pointed to the wall, where a square of canvas leaned against the rocks.

"What is it?"

"Never saw it before. Be careful."

The aviator picked up the square bulk. It was an oil painting, framed without a glass. He held it so that the light from a gun slit fell on it. His left arm was around the portrait, and the frame rested against his shoulder. He was facing the door.

The portrait was of a cheerful-faced, yellow-haired young man in a blue uniform.

"Austrian," Calderon remarked. "He is wearing some order symbol on a gold neck chain. Aren't those the Austrian double eagles?"

As if the word were a signal, the room was suddenly filled with blinding light. An explosion echoed from the walls. Knight choked on stinging smoke. After the one blaze of light, the room fell into doubly thick darkness.

"Picture!" Knight exclaimed. "They got a shot of you, holding

that portrait of José Augustin. It was a plant!"

He yelled some of this back over his shoulder as he ran for the entrance. His flashlight pierced the rising cloud of powder smoke. He ran through the entrance hall. Calderon was beside him.

"Make the rounds outside," Knight directed. "I know all about this dump."

He dashed up the runway, the logical place for a photographer to go who was hampered by machine and tripod. The chute was empty. No one had been there.

He returned to the entrance hall to meet Calderon. While the Mexican stood guard, Knight entered the tunnel. There he found the camera, where the photographer had thrown it after removing the film holder.

"He must have run out and ducked into the shrubbery. Let's go back to the house and try to catch him when he comes in. It was Alek or I'm a dunce!"

"So they have a picture of me that will effectively cashier me from the army if the coup fails," Calderon remarked, getting into the car. "For that, I can thank my father. They expected me to come to the Tres Casas."

He was shaken in spite of his discipline and cold facing of facts. He loved his father. The morning's disillusionments had uprooted the foundations of his life. "I can't believe it!" he cried out. "I can't believe this of Justo Ruiz."

"He received a terrific blow on the head," Knight reminded him.

"Nothing in his actions or speech show an unbalanced mind," he answered, once more cold and level of voice. "No, señor, I crossed the path of the man who built up the

Ruiz mines. That was just too bad for me."

THEY made the run to the house at sixty miles per hour through the streets of San Pedro. The gate porter, gardener, and house servants assured Calderon that no one else had come in. Neither Alek Kresge nor Justo Ruiz had returned.

An hour dragged by. The patio floor was strewn with Calderon's cigarette butts. To Knight's question, he answered that he awaited Alek's move.

"I think I know what use he will make of that picture." He hissed, "Here he is."

Alek Kresge minced into the patio. He was in white linens. His smile was as bright as the morning. He spoke sweetly to a servant. Nothing in his manner betrayed his lack of feeling which, with his brilliant mind, made him the most valued of Austrian spies. He, who so callously destroyed men's minds and lives, avoided crushing a flower as he minced into the patio.

"My dear lieutenant," he said sweetly. "I am delighted to find you here. Have you noticed that when a campaign is well planned, all things fall into place, even the most casual of meetings?"

Calderon's eyes were narrow. He flipped a cigarette butt into the patio gutter. His teeth showed in a thin white line between his compressed lips. His two hands were spread flat on his belt.

Knight stood close to him, his itching fingers on his gun butt.

Alek saw these threats and pretended not to. From the broad side pocket of his white linen coat he took a photograph. He held it out, to let the two men see an excellent

likeness of Calderon holding the portrait of the Austrian pretender.

"Did my father come with you?" Calderon asked. "I want to see him."

"He will not return until evening," Alek said, as if it were of no importance. "Lieutenant, I should like to have you go to Vera Cruz to-day. You can make it in three hours. You shall take a passenger from a certain ship and bring him here to-night. Or shall I send this picture, with a letter of explanation, to the proper authorities?"

"Wouldn't that ruin your plans?" Knight drawled.

"Not at all. José Augustin would still arrive. The coup can be run through, I might add, without me. It cannot fail now."

"The threat is unnecessary," Calderon said suddenly. "Where my father goes, I go. I shall be glad to smuggle José Augustin into San Pedro."

Alek smiled. "You remind me of a drowning man catching at a straw. There will be two passengers. One is the guard. Do not plan on shooting the emperor."

"I had no such plan," Calderon replied grimly.

Alek minced out.

Calderon slowly put a cigarette in his mouth, struck a match and lighted the cigarette. He stared at the match box, which carried the arms of Mexico.

"The ghost of Carlotta walked," he murmured. "She walks in the garden only when evil befalls the house. I am an only son. But who knows, the Grito flight might have ended the same way."

"I don't understand your meaning," Knight said, though he did understand and his blood ran cold.

"Alek will forestall all chances of shooting the pretender. But

there is one thing he cannot forestall." The aviator smiled grimly. "Planes, señor—planes have been known to fall."

CHAPTER XV.

VIVA, JOSE AUGUSTIN!

THIS is no time for emotional fireworks," Knight said earnestly. "That might get you a swell headline, but what good would it do? A better way—"

"There is no better way," Calderon interrupted. "True, I'll get headlines. Then other pretenders to a throne in Mexico will know it is not so easily gained."

"Come here," Knight caught the uniformed arm, spinning the aviator back on one heel. "Are you going to play Indian and kill yourself because some cuss took your picture? That's what it amounts to." He knew he talked wildly. He sparred for time. "Prefer going down with the plane, rather than face an inquiry?"

Calderon smiled as if Knight were a child who could not understand. Gently but firmly, he disengaged his arm. He took one step backward and set his weight on both feet. He looked at the backs of his muscular hands. His eyes narrowed, and the pupils became bright points. With the killer's expression came the chop of a fist, rapid and powerful.

Knight heard his own teeth click, and felt the merciless crack of his neck. When the darkness passed, he was lying on the patio tiles, and the servants buzzed about him. Calderon was gone; had been gone, they told him, over five minutes.

"A great guy," he commented, as he rose dizzily. "Salute, Don Calderon! But you're too swell a guy to go out this way."

The floor rocked under him as he

ran out the door. He did not need to ask which way Calderon had gone. He could hear the steady beat of the warming plane. The aviator had used a car between house and landing field. Knight ran, cutting through garden and cornfields.

A peon followed him from the house, yelling something that Knight could not catch. Knight kept on. The Indian pursued, as silently and patiently as fate itself. Through a cactus patch, over a hedge and out on the field ran Knight.

Calderon was climbing into the plane. As he slid into the cockpit, he saw the two men leap the hedge. Peons bent at the wheel blocks, watching a man carrying a red flag. The aviator lifted his arm. The red flag swung up. The peons whipped the blocks free and scampered out of danger. Wind tumbled Calderon's hair. The speeding plane blinded Knight with a small hurricane of dust. When he could see again, the plane was in the air.

Knight turned away, with an arm up to protect his eyes and nose against the sand. The peon who had run with him pulled his arm down. His face was expressionless.

"Señor, please attend Señor Ruiz at once. He asks to see you without the delay."

"Oh," Knight answered. "Come in, has he? Came in with Alek, I bet, and couldn't face his son."

The peon trudged gravely at the American's heels, until they came to the library. There he opened the door. Knight entered the presence of Justo Ruiz.

The curtains were drawn in the library, darkening the room and cutting off the air. Justo Ruiz sat in the high-backed chair.

"Well?" the American queried.

"You cannot help Calderon,"

Justo Ruiz said tersely. "I have decided to let the young fool go his own way, without interference. How much do I owe you, señor?"

"You mean I have failed to protect him?"

Ruiz smiled cynically and smoothed his white goatee. "No, you have done well. Almost too well," he added. "Suppose you aid Calderon in this. The hot-headed boy will be into some other trouble. Whether he survive or perish, it is better that he do it alone." He held out a filled check. "Five thousand pesos, señor?"

Unable to kill the gringo, they were buying him off.

"I want nothing," Knight said coldly. "If I don't succeed, I don't take pay. I'll leave. You will pardon me if I don't take my bags out at once. I should like to be your guest until Calderon starts the Grito flight."

"No hurry. Stay as long as you like." The tone was flat and uncordial.

Knight walked out, feeling useless.

HE started some of the men on a hunt for Worrell and warned them the man with ants was on a killing streak. They would not be likely to bring him in alive, but that no longer mattered; *marihuana* is a dope that does not release its hold. Worrell was beyond redemption.

Knight spent several hours skulking in the halls and listening at doors, but heard nothing. He learned that Alek had gone on to San Pedro.

In midafternoon, Alek returned. He rushed into the living room, arriving as the telephone bell rang. It was a long-distance call. Alek said:

"Si. I want the call from Vera

Cruz. . . . Yes, Thirteen?" He listened an instant. "Ah! So? . . . To-night at the usual place. . . . No, we are not rid of him—yet." He rang off.

Knight did not know whether the news was good or bad. But he knew well the meaning of the last remark. Without delay, he left the Ruiz house and went into the mountains. He doubled on his track until he was sure he had lost any possible pursuit. Until the sun went down, his binoculars were busy on the sky and the landing field near the Ruiz house. An Indian woman sold him food. Sunset found him on the mountain, watching the Tres Casas.

There the night would bring the plotters. If the plane had gone down, it would bring argument and discussion of a new coup, or at least some details of their plans.

"I'd like to know what Calderon did. Alek was cold-blooded on that telephone call. Katie, bar the door!"

He did not go at once to his listening post in the air vent. He stayed outside, with ears cocked for a plane.

Night fell like a velvet pall. Three times he saw shadows move around the entrance of the Tres Casas. They were such shadows as bushes might have made, dipping in occasional breezes. There was movement in the dark, then no movement and no sound.

He moved nearer to the entrance. Suddenly he halted. His outstretched hand had touched a silk mantle. The other man stood quietly, invisible in the darkness. So still was he that the American could hear his breathing. It was almost a pant, tense with excitement.

The man in the mantle did not move. His breathing quickened. The darkness moved in front of

Knight and he knew another man had come up.

"*Gracias a Dios,*" the newcomer whispered. "He is here!"

"Careful!" whispered the other. "Come inside. Oh, amigo, this is too much. Unbelievable! He is truly in Mexico? And Calderon Ruiz?"

The newcomer answered, "Truly in Mexico." He did not answer the question about Calderon Ruiz.

THE two went inside the Tres Casas. Knight stood beside the entrance. His heart was thundering in his breast. "He" could only be José Augustin. Ruiz had failed to keep his boast of smashing the plane. The pretender was in Mexico. Surely and irresistibly, Alek's plot rolled to a successful conclusion. Alek Kresge's "maker of emperors" was not an empty vaunt.

"They've got this far," Knight said to himself, "it looks as though they'll go whole hog. What is this coup, I wonder?"

He started into the building, to be stopped once more by the quick, smart tread of feet. From the sound he judged that a squad of some ten men was advancing on the Tres Casas. They marched quietly, but their formation and steady tread made it impossible for them to move silently.

They came up the stony, creeper-grown causeway to the entrance. There they halted. Sabres rattled. The American knew the invisible men had formed a guard of honor on both sides of the entrance.

Came a whisper, "Carefully, your highness."

And the answer in a vigorous whisper, "That's the watchword of royalty these days." Evidently José

Augustin was enjoying the adventure thoroughly.

Knight had moved down the guard of honor, finding his way by the breathing of the men. He was within touching distance of the two who spoke. The two had paused to exchange whispers. By a hand motion between them, the American discovered that they had not linked arms, nor was the servile Mexican aiding the pretender with a hand on his arm. The pretender was about to enter the files of the honor guard.

"Onward," José Augustin whispered.

Knight reached out for the pretender's head and found it in the dark. The instant his hand touched the cap, he let fly with the barrel of the automatic to the base of the skull. Without a sound, the Austrian collapsed. Knight caught him as he fell, picked him up like a baby and bore him away to the bushes.

It was no easy matter to tiptoe with a hundred and twenty pounds in his arms. He thanked his stars that the pretender was a small man. Silence held behind him for a full minute. Then whispers grew into an excited murmur of voices. A warning hiss quieted them.

A dark lantern threw its gleam over the creepered causeway, over the time-battered stone statues at the entrance and over the rocks and bushes. Men poured out of the Tres Casas. Keeping out of the light, they made a beating search. Time and again two of them, meeting, gave the password in time to keep from killing each other.

They went over the bushes carefully. Then, overcome by panic, they slipped off separately.

By that time, Knight was loading his unconscious prisoner into a taxi. He took José Augustin to the house of Justo Ruiz. The pretender wore

a long black cloak. Knight wrapped him in it and carried him into the house. He had prepared a story for the guards he had placed for Worrell, but it was not necessary. They had departed to more agreeable places. He stole, unseen, into the hall, dimly lighted by a lamp. Up the stairs and along the dark corridor he went, to his own room. He put the prisoner on the bed, and closed doors and windows. Then he turned on the light and looked down at the yellow-haired, pleasant-faced young Austrian.

He bandaged the head and tied the pretender to the bed. He was ready to adjust a gag, when the Austrian regained consciousness. José Augustin stared hazily into the unfamiliar face. He tried to move, and could not. The gag muffled a game grin and a sporting, "Well, you got me."

"I wish," Knight answered, thinking of Worrell, "I could be one half as sure of keeping you."

CHAPTER XVI. PERNICIOUS FOREIGNER.

KNIGHT arranged the gag to permit the Austrian to talk; it could be drawn tight instantly. The man's eyes told as much as his tongue could about his character. They were blue, of unfathomed depth—the clear, intelligent eyes of a ruler. If Alek Kresge intended to play the power behind the throne, he had chosen the wrong man.

The Austrian lifted his chin to get his lips over the gag. "When," he asked, "does the shooting begin?"

"It need not begin at all if you give us the inside on the coup."

"No, thanks. I knew what risks I took."

"Dead game, eh? You may have

heard of a certain Austrian archduke named Maximilian. He was game, too, and all he has to show for it is a tombstone. You could do a lot of good in Austria. Why should you die to protect Kresge and Malory, Justo Ruiz and Colonel Bravo?"

A shadow flickered through the deep eyes. "So you know the plotters. But you don't know the inside on the coup? The only strange thing about the coup is that no one ever thought of it before. It's really quite simple. A new twist on an old, old custom."

"Simple, eh?"

"So simple that it cannot possibly fail."

"No coup can succeed without the army. The president of Mexico wears the army like a finger ring."

"Yes," the Austrian agreed. "That's what makes it so simple." His eyes went to the door. "What," he whispered, "is that sound?"

Knight listened. Now that their voices had ceased, the night wrapped the house in a mantle. The closed windows muffled all sound from the garden. The Austrian's eyes were on the door. Knight watched him intently, suspecting a trick. The room was heavy with silence. A knowing smile formed on Knight's lips. A sarcastic remark lay on his tongue.

Then he heard it.

The sound was a slow, dragging shuffle from the stairs. Some one was trying to creep up quietly, but his leaden feet announced his coming on every step. It was the stealthy approach of a man under a great mental weight, the weight, say, of *marihuana*. The dragging shuffle came up the corridor. Outside Knight's room, it stopped.

He took his eyes from the Austrian then, and he saw the doorknob

turn under stealthy pressure. Knight flipped the sheet over the Austrian's face. He eased himself from the chair and drew his pistol. He turned off the light and snapped on a flashlight. His pistol hand turned the key. He was ready to kick the door shut.

THE intruder tried the knob again. This time it worked. The door opened two inches and stopped against Knight's foot. The flashlight glared into the blinking eyes of Calderon Ruiz.

"Knight? Let me in, quickly. They're coming." He slid inside, shut the door, and leaned limply against it. "Well," he said heavily, "I failed."

"Who's coming?"

"Alek, Justo Ruiz." His voice quavered on his father's name. "Colonel Bravo." A weary sigh escaped him, ending in a shaky laugh. "Yes, I failed. I had an amphibian. I was to make a landing close to the ship. He would jump off and I would pick him up. So I thought! When I got there, two planes were ahead of me. They attacked, with machine guns. I still don't know how I escaped being shot down. They tried to get me. While I was fighting, I saw a man jump from the ship. One of these planes picked him up. That's it, in short. They weren't official planes. I don't know the meaning of it all."

"Colonel Bravo tried the same thing on me," Knight told him. "You were sent out to be killed, also to attract attention while the Austrian jumped ship. It's of no importance, anyway." He laid the pistol barrel across the aviator's lips before the angry retort could burst out. "The Austrian is here, all tied up. If Alek is downstairs, we've got

these guys by the seat of the pants on a downhill drag."

He turned on the light. An aghast Calderon Ruiz turned the sheet back and looked into the challenging eyes of José Augustin. He drew up the sheet again.

"It's he. Yes, we have these fellows now. No need to try to break the coup. They cannot go on without the pretender." He firmly put thoughts of his father out of his mind as he said, "We'll call the guard and it will be over. Let's go."

He went out first. Knight turned for a last look at his prisoner. He went over the various locks on windows and communicating doors, then turned out the light and stepped into the corridor, and turned the key. He left the room, reluctantly. He was sure of victory. Nothing could possibly go wrong now. He was not a man who believed in omens. And yet there was something ghastly in that still figure covered by the sheet.

"I feel sorry for that guy," he said. "And I don't know why. Whatever happens, he won't feel sorry for himself."

They went noiselessly down the stairs. The weight of failure was off the aviator's mind, and he could move as lithely as an Indian. A crack of light came out of the library. The dim-lit hall and patio were silent. Knight softly pushed open the door.

ALEK sat in the high-backed chair, with his clasped hands on a table. His face looked old and tired. Justo Ruiz stood in the shadows with an arm on the mantel. Bravo, arms folded and chin on chest, paced up and down the room.

"We had formed a guard of honor," Alek was saying. "The em-

peror said, 'Forward!' He did not speak again. When we dared to show a light, he was gone."

"Knight is at the bottom of it," Bravo growled. "I wish I had knifed him the first time I saw him! The next time I won't stay my hand."

"The next time has arrived," said Knight. "Drop the gun, colonel! You, Alek, keep your hands on the table. Justo Ruiz, come into the light where I can see you. Better make a search of them, Calderon."

"I hear you outflew them," the colonel drawled.

He got no answer. The three men were disarmed. Justo Ruiz and Bravo took their places beside Alek, who remained seated with his hands on the table.

"Now," said Knight, "we talk turkey. Your emperor is my guest. He has talked. Clever coup you framed, Alek, even if it was only a new twist on an old custom. Damn simple. Guess that's why I didn't see through it, because it was so simple."

Alek smiled patronizingly. "José Augustin is a politician. He repeated to you what I told him and all I told him, of the coup. He couldn't tell you more, because he doesn't know it. Suppose you do turn us over, lieutenant. Your father is one of us. Your army career is done. Is it worth it? Can't we come to some agreement?"

A tense silence gripped the room. The hopes of three men twined and hung across the silence like a taut rope. Calderon cut the rope with one curt word.

"No."

Bravo leaned forward. "You will call the guard?" he asked. "In that case, I shall ask for your arrest for the murder of the secretary."

"The secretary died in the fire!" Knight snapped.

"But he didn't! It seems you had him in a taxi, bringing him to the prison. Alek Kresge will testify he was dead then. I'll take both you and Worrell with me when I go to-night."

"You won't take Worrell," Knight said. "He's gone. I haven't seen him since the fire."

"He is in this house to-night. He slipped in ahead of us."

Knight went cold. He could see Worrell creeping through the shadowy halls, with murder unleashed in his doped brain. Mentally, he went over every lock in his room. He was sure of them, and yet he had been sure that Worrell could not escape the room on Mier Street. The hop head had cunning.

"None of us in this room," Alek said sweetly, "has anything to gain by calling the guard."

"If that's the case," said a new voice. "I guess it's time I stepped in."

ALEK glanced over his shoulder, for the voice had come from behind him. The shadows back of the chair moved. A man glided behind Justo Ruiz and Bravo. He came by degrees into the light, moving cautiously to forestall a move on the part of any of them. Knight saw first his laced boots, then khaki breeches and shirt, and a big hand holding a long .45. He looked above the broad shoulders to the face of Big-nose.

"All right, you birds, line up," Big-nose directed. "We'll hash this out at headquarters."

Suddenly Bravo snapped his fingers. The agent took a quick step back, and the gun muzzle weaved, ready to spit lead into any one who moved. At the snap, Knight had in-

voluntarily looked up; he looked into a mirror. He caught a glimpse of a white face. Some one was looking in the door, and that some one was no Mexican. The shadowy mirror did not register the reflection clearly, and he could not make out the features. The face was there and gone.

"Hold it, you birds!" the agent ordered.

Then the light went out.

Knight had not yet given up his gun. He was aiming it at Alek. As the darkness fell, his finger pulled trigger. The bullet screeched amid a tumbling of chairs, a quick scramble, and the agent's roar, "Stand still!" A man lunged past Knight. The light went on. The agent stood beside the lamp, with one hand still on the cord. The gun weaved, menacing each in turn. Calderon, Knight, Bravo, and Justo Ruiz had not moved.

Alek's high-backed chair was empty.

"He's the prize," said the agent crisply. "Lieutenant, I trust you. Watch these two guys. Knight, you're after Alek's scalp yourself. Come along, and shoot first."

They ran into the hall. The agent started for the patio, turning on Knight's cry, "There he goes! Up the stairs!" The fleeing man was at the head of the stairs. A bullet whistled after him. The two men pounded up the stairs, two steps at a time. At the top, by the light from the patio, they saw the fleeing man scuttling past the writing nook. Again Knight fired. A wild, challenging laugh floated back.

They sped down the corridor and around the turn. At the other end of that promenade, roses climbed on a lattice to the roof. They heard the lattice clattering and vines breaking under clambering feet.

Over the roof edge went the pursued. He threw himself flat to avoid a bullet that blared from the agent's gun. As Knight ran lightly up the quivering lattice, a foot kicked out for his head. He dodged, grasped the roof edge and hauled himself over.

The fleeing man ran to the edge of the flat roof, then turned to face them. Two flashlights glared on him. Trembling, unruly of hair and wild of eye, he stood with both hands out to show they were empty. His clothes were damp and earth clotted.

"Damn it," the agent snapped. "It's only the hop head."

"Only the hop head!" Knight echoed sarcastically. "I wouldn't give two cents for a certain man's life. Come on, let's get to my room."

"Easy now," the agent counseled.

But Knight was taking nothing easy. He held to Worrell's arm and ran back to the lattice, with the agent hot at his heels. Over went the three men, one after another, like squirrels tumbling down a tree. The lattice broke under the agent. His ankle turned and he cursed. Knight ran, without stopping to see what damage had been done. Vaguely, he heard the shouted threat, "I'll fire!"

The agent did not fire. At a limping run, he caught up. He was beside them when Knight fitted the key to the lock.

Knight turned on the light. He saw first that the communicating door had been forced. Then, dreading it, he turned his eyes to the bed. There was no crimsoned mantle this time. There was a sheet thrown back, and the hacked ends of straps and neckties used to fasten the Austrian.

He was gone and with him was gone the agent's interest in the men in the library. Trust Colonel Bravo to have a good excuse for being there!

"He's gone," Worrell said hoarsely. "It was awful. I nearly killed him. My brain was whirlin' and somethin' pounded in it to make me kill him. But I didn't. I cut him loose. He ran."

He ran! And Alek saw him and turned out the light and went along. It was the Austrian's white face he had seen in the mirror.

"I remember," Worrell rambled on, "killin' Ayala and the secretary. I don't want to kill any more men except"—the voice dropped to a sly hiss—"the skunk I'm after."

Cold iron touched Knight's wrist and something clicked. He still retained his hold on Worrell's wrist. He tried to jerk away and he pulled Worrell with him. Handcuffs fastened them together.

"O. K.," said the agent. "Come along, you birds. Mexico has an Article, No. 33, for pernicious foreigners."

"He's crazy," said Knight. "Doesn't know what he's saying."

"The hell he doesn't. Anyway, I've got your number. Remember that blond guy you kidnaped? Remember breakin' into the administration building at the Campo? I followed you that night, buddy, all the way. Also, I've heard about that trick pencil. Kidnaping, theft, murder, and arson. Come along."

"Are you," Knight asked, "one of Bravo's agents?"

"Not me, buddy. I work out of Mexico City. But Worrell and you'll have to be the guests of Colonel Bravo to-night. He'll go with us to the Campo prison."

"Katie, bar the door!"

COM-5B

CHAPTER XVII.

GRITO DEATH.

GIVE me a cigarette," Worrell begged feverishly.

The agent got out a package, tipped one into Worrell's hand, and watched him light it. He watched closely until the third bilow of smoke had come out the white nose. He thumbed the package into his shirt pocket.

"Don't taste so good, does it? Another kind you'd like better? A kind that taste like straw was mixed with the tobacco?"

"You're talkin' over my head," Worrell drawled.

"I'm talkin' over the head of the guy that killed Ayala. Wasn't there one before him? A fellow you thought was just another peon? Didn't Alek get you to kill them? Where'd the secretary come in? How did you start the prison fire with a pencil?"

Worrell groaned. "I don't know. I can't remember. I don't know what's happened to me since I came to Mexico."

"You'll find out what's goin' to happen," the agent promised grimly. "Come along. You," he said to Knight, "might help yourself by answerin' the questions I asked you. Some of 'em, I know already. Alek is the brains of the plot. Miguel Ayala had a hunch he'd crack down with a royalist plot. Alek smuggled his man in to-night. Wanta tell me what the coup is? Is Justo Ruiz in on it? He'll gum up Calderon's overseas flight if he is. Well?"

Knight fingered the handcuff, saying nothing, while Worrell smoked half a cigarette and Big-nose strapped Knight's gunbelt on above his own. The temptation was strong to take the agent into his confidence. But he might easily be

under the orders of Bravo and Kresge.

"I'll bargain," Knight offered. "You take us straight to Mexico City from here, omitting the stop at the Campo prison, and I'll tell what I know."

"What's the matter with the prison? Is it going to be blown up to-night?"

"I don't want to meet the fate of the last two men you gave to Bravo for safe-keeping. I heard the guns the morning they died."

"They tried to escape. You be careful and nothing'll happen to you. You'll only be there a couple of hours. It's past midnight now. There's somethin' I've got to do in San Pedro."

"O. K.," Knight said resignedly. "If you hear a volley about dawn don't bother to stop by for us."

They descended to the library. The three men stared at them eagerly.

"Gone," Knight told Calderon. He tilted his head back and to one side, indicating that he spoke of the prisoner in his room. "I'm pinched for theft. Remember the blue print. Carry on."

"One moment, agent," Calderon said. "You need more handcuffs. You were after Alek. Colonel Bravo is in with him, and also—" He paused. He could not pronounce the name that would send his father to the firing squad.

"Of course I was here," Bravo said. "I had Kresge at the point of confessing a smuggling job. You must have heard that, agent. You were behind the chair."

"Neither of you said much," the agent replied. "I'll ask that you keep to your quarters to-day, colonel, till I get this mess straight." He looked hard at Justo Ruiz, did some mental gymnastics and shook

his head. "I don't know where you stand in this puzzle," he admitted. "Come on, Bravo. We'll cage these birds."

FIFTEEN minutes later, Knight and Worrell were back where Worrell had been before Knight made the ill-starred attempt to get him out of Mexico. The cell looked into the yard of the Campo prison.

Worrell threw himself on the bunk, hands over his face. "Give me a cigarette," he groaned. "Haven't you got an American cigarette? Those he gave me were rotten."

"What you really want is the kind Alek gave you. Isn't it?"

"Yes, damn you! They didn't do any harm. They made me forget things for a minute."

"Why," Knight asked, "did you come to Mexico? Whom did you want to kill, and why?"

Worrell ran his fingers through his hair and wiped his sleeve over his face. "I must remember," he said hazily. "That's right. I've got to do the thing I came to do. But it's hard. I know the man, but can't get at him. Funny, ain't it, how easy I can get at the ones I don't want to kill?"

"I asked you the man's name and why you want to kill him."

"I got trace of him first in '26. I was only a kid of fifteen, but I started after him. I've followed him plenty of places. I didn't know him, really. Had a hunch. Now that I'm sure of him, I can't get at him, see? Ain't it funny?"

Knight sighed. Worrell's mind was all over the place; he talked plenty and told nothing. Knight shook the man's knee.

"Worrell! Will you tell me what that man did?"

"Not yet," Worrell said firmly. "You might guess who he is and warn him."

"Is it Alek Kresge?"

Worrell looked him squarely in the eyes. "No. It is not Alek Kresge."

Knight wondered then why the face of Justo Ruiz swam before his vision.

Worrell fretted for a smoke until fatigue overcame him. Knight crawled into the upper bunk and fell asleep. They were awakened by a guard with bread and coffee.

Knight looked into the prison yard. Five guards leaned on their rifles, and gazed at his window. To the left of the window he saw a barred door. The section of prison opposite had been burned; a door stood open on heat-warped hinges. The two Americans were in a cell that invited escape.

The guard was fumbling at the blanket near Worrell's feet. When Knight turned, the guard grinned sheepishly and left.

"How careless of him," Knight commented. "I do believe he failed to lock it!" He roused Worrell. "Rise and shine. Until you've drunk the coffee in a Mexican jail, you don't know what dishwater is."

Worrell was in a vile humor. Knight held his peace and waited for the agent. He did not mention the guard's actions. The sun mounted until the blinding sunshine forced the waiting guards to seek shade. The guard was changed three times, and the sun glared down from directly overhead. Still the agent had not come.

WORRELL grew tired of quarreling and threw himself on the bunk. The afternoon brought a guard who made a swift inspection of the bunks and

scowled at Knight. Darkness brought a guard who whispered that for a peso he would open the door.

"Peso!" Worrell snarled after he was gone. "With Mexicans, it's always a peso!" The word ended in a hiss of excitement. "Look there, on my bunk! Look!"

"Pistol? What of it? You're not going to fall for that?"

Worrell picked up the gun and eagerly examined it. "Loaded. Ready to go. When the guard opens this door, we'll shoot him. Then we'll grab his keys and make for the outer gate."

Knight took the gun from him and tossed it on the bunk. "Forget it, kid. Haven't you ever heard the long and imposing list of men who were shot trying to escape? They've been laying for us all day, hoping we'd do that. The gun's a plant."

Worrell sank back. "They won't kill me," he said fiercely, "till I get the man I came after." He tried to forget it, but the gun was a magnet to draw his eyes. "We just might make it," he whispered. "It's loaded. There're only five guards in the yard."

"Quit it," Knight snarled. "Do you think this is a vacation for me? I sit here while Alek runs loose and his plans go ahead like a damn machine."

"We just might get out."

Knight cursed him for the ants in his head. He picked up the gun to hurl out the window, but the thing stuck to his hand. He could not get loose of it. He snapped the safety catch and fingered the trigger, knowing himself to be a fool. The odds were a thousand to one against him if he tried to shoot his way out.

He heard two guards coming toward the cell. Holding the pistol close to his leg, he waited. The

guard opened the door. Before he could step in, the other man elbowed him aside. It was Big-nose.

"Hi!" he hailed. "Think I wasn't comin'? I'm kind of surprised to see you. I don't know why Bravo has a grudge against you, but boy, he's hot after your scalp."

KNIGHT let the pistol drop into his boot. The agent was careful to handcuff Knight's right hand to Worrell. He marched them past disappointed guards and a scowling Bravo, to his car.

"Where are we going?" Knight asked.

"To Mexico City. I got wind of Alek Kresge's whereabouts. Heck, I can smash that coup by two minutes' talk. Alek can't be bought or scared. Just one thing makes him jittery. That's the double cross."

His sedan stood in the shadow of the trees. Before the fire, the prison lights had blazed on that spot. Now, with the near wing destroyed, the trees were in darkness. The agent gestured for them to get in.

Knight pinched Worrell's little finger. His free hand pushed Worrell's head forward. "What's the matter?" he snapped. "Are you sick?"

"Yes, I'm sick," Worrell exclaimed. "Catch me!"

He tumbled forward. The agent bent to catch him before his head could strike the running board. Worrell straightened. Knight's foot shot past. His toe connected with the agent's temple. The agent slumped forward.

Knight went through his pockets, got the key and unlocked the cuffs. They tumbled the agent into the car. Knight drove away from the prison.

"He's comin' to," Worrell exclaimed, after they had driven some distance.

Knight stopped under the drooping boughs of a pepper tree. He handcuffed the agent to the rug carrier and strapped his feet to the footrest, to keep him from calling help by kicking the doors. The agent was still wearing Knight's hand-worked gunbelt. He took it back, and returned the compliment by buckling the agent's on above it.

He drove recklessly toward the Ruiz house. He wanted to get there to tell Calderon that Alek had gone to Mexico City. The road led through San Pedro. The plaza blazed green, white, and red lights. Flags draped the municipal building. A crowd had gathered, half drunk, gay, ready for a fight. A squad of soldiers stood with rifles at ease. A drum and bugle corps marched up and the crowd cheered wildly.

"What's the show?" Worrell asked.

"Grito."

"I thought it was to-morrow."

"It begins at eleven on the night of the fifteenth."

"The Grito was in 1810. And they still get up in the middle of the night to celebrate it!"

"They do more than that. If a Mexican wants to start a revolt, he usually does it at the Grito."

"With everything against him," Worrell repeated, "he started out. Like I did, after the man who—" he cut off.

At the Ruiz house, Knight locked the handcuffed agent in the car. Worrell went directly to his room. He was licking his lips and looking about him hungrily.

"Light in the library," Knight said to himself. "I'll hail Calderon, then go fasten up Worrell."

He looked into the library and forgot all about Worrell.

Alek was in there, pacing the room. He beat his fists at his temples at every step. After crossing the room four times, he stopped and with head thrown back, tossed up his arms in a gesture of despair.

"Alek Kresge, maker of emperors," he said bitterly.

"Very dramatic performance," said Knight dryly. "So you've heard about Bravo, have you?"

Alek snapped to attention. "Bravo! What has he done?"

"He's given you the double cross. They offered to make him brigadier, and did he bite! He's talking now."

"I think you're lying," Alek said dully, "but he can't hurt me worse than I've been hurt. Malory has thrown me over. Liquored nerves gave in at the last minute. I can't go on without him." He looked long and hard at Knight. "Would you like to know what the coup was?" Alek was a born performer. He had planned the coup partly for the dramatic smash of it. He could not let it go without at least one man being amazed by it.

"If you planned it," Knight returned, "it was clever."

"I planned it. It was clever. Look here, I'll give you the film of the picture I took of Calderon Ruiz. I won't need it." He handed Knight the film. "Burn it."

When the film was an ash, Alek said: "I'm giving up, because I know when Malory has broken. It isn't just momentary discouragement. The coup is simple and quite unusual, though the idea behind it is old, very old." He broke off. "What's that noise? Is that a mob?" He ran to the light to turn it off.

"It's only the Ruiz peons celebrating the Grito."

"Watch them," Alek commanded in a dry whisper. "It may be a trick to kill me."

"It isn't. Come, tell me about your plan."

"No, no! Watch them!"

Knight stepped inside the heavy window curtains. He did not want to be silhouetted against the light as a target for stones. Torches flared amid the trees. A mob of peons marched through the garden where Empress Carlotta had walked. They cheered and howled. They fired off firecrackers and pistols. One of them beat a drum. A fusillade from pistols roared out. They burst their throats with "Viva Mexico!" The crowd swept on, cheering and shooting.

Knight's ears returned to normal. In the room behind him he heard Malory's voice, awash with liquor and trembling with remorse.

"I'm sorry, Alek. It was nerves. I'm all right now. I'll go on with it. All hell can't stop me. This time to-morrow, José Augustin will be emperor of Mexico." He waited for an answer, and got none. "Alek," he begged, "Alek!"

Knight peered between the curtains. Alek sat in the high-backed chair, dimly seen in the shaded lamplight. Malory was rounding the table to get nearer to him.

"Alek, please listen." His voice sharpened. "Alek!"

Then, as if Alek Kresge himself must be surprised to hear it, Malory exclaimed:

"Why, Alek! You're dead!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

MASKS OFF!

WHOMO killed him?" Knight asked.

Malory started. He moved swiftly away from Alek, as if leaving the body would lessen the appearance of guilt. When he saw the questioner was Knight, he tried

to compose himself. He went to a side table for bottle and glass. His hands trembled, and the haunted look was terrible to see.

"Have a drink?" he asked. "You can't drown this, but at least we should toast Alek, who died at the height of his triumph."

Knight withheld his comment on that until he had looked at the body. The stiletto was driven into the back, and the bleeding was mainly internal. The knife had red and white fingerholds and a brass knob. He doubted not that Worrell's finger prints were on it.

"Alek didn't exactly triumph, did he? Without him to run the show, the coup won't come off. This is tough on José Augustin."

"Ah, but the coup will come off. Alek's plans were perfected. Everything is ready. José Augustin has been trained from boyhood to rule a nation. All hell can't stop us now. We need only to carry out Alek's orders, already given."

"Suppose the plotters are arrested?"

"Who would arrest them? The agent suspected Alek, but does not suspect any one else. Calderon Ruiz knows them all, but the picture and his father's part in it will carry him down with us."

Knight withheld the news that the picture was burned.

Malory squinted at the light through the liquor. "The coup cannot fail." He drained the glass, shivered, and set it down with a thud. "Stop that walking around, will you? You drive me crazy. What're you looking for?"

"You and I found the body," Knight explained. "I'll have to tell the police what I saw."

"So you will," Malory answered in a calmer tone. "Look well. Be sure. You need good eyes in Mex-

ico." A thought struck him. His eyes flicked to a clock. "The police!" he said hastily. "You call them. I'm leaving. There is something I must attend to." His eyes focused on Knight. "You look shaky. Take a drink. You can drown this. You can drown anything, but faces." He stumbled out the door.

Knight let him go. If Malory wanted to take his "faces" out of Mexico, Knight would be the last to stop him. Without Alek to direct him, he was a harmless drunk.

"I'd like to know what faces he's trying to drown," Knight said to himself. "But even more, I'd like to know why he harps on the need of good eyes in Mexico."

He went into the living room and picked up the telephone. He set it down as gingerly as if a scorpion rested on it.

"Pause!" he advised himself. "You are supposed to be on the way to Mexico City. The agent is out in front, locked in his car. The police would find him. Bravo will pinch you. If you so much as stub your toe on the way out, you'll be shot. Even if you do not die, you go straight back to your cell. Not so hot!"

He returned to the library. Only one course lay open.

"Katie, bar the door!" he said, when he thought of it.

KNIGHT paused inside the library. A brooding silence lay on the house. "Alek, amigo, because you died at a most embarrassing time, the announcement of your lamented death must wait twelve hours—until eleven o'clock to-morrow, amigo." He knelt and quickly arose. "You had the decency to bleed little, and on a small rug, anyway. Yes, Alek, I'm

going to put you where you tried to keep me."

The corridor and patio were quiet. He set a stop to hold the front door open. The night was chilly and refreshing, though weighted heavily with flower scent from the garden. He walked down a gloomy lane between ancient cypresses and came to the wall around a sunken garden.

It took some time to find the loose bricks. Two times those bricks had been pulled out, and each time an Indian workman had piled them back in without mortar. Knight pulled them out and set them in a neat pile. He worked rapidly.

Once he thought a shadow flitted past him, and some one whispered. He ducked behind the sizable pile of bricks. There was a strong sense of a presence in the garden, as of some living being in the long, gloomy tree aisles.

"Damn place is haunted. No wonder they say Carlotta walks here."

He tore out the last bricks and ran to the house.

The library was as he left it, except that the curtains bellied in the breeze from the open door. He opened the windows to clear the air, after turning out the light. He worked by the light of his flashlight.

Alek was small and easily handled. After removing his own coat and shirt, Knight wrapped the body in the rug and carried it out. His feet scuffed on tiles and then on the outer gravel. Grass muffled the sound when he drew near the wall. The bricks of Alek's tomb went swiftly into place under his deft hands. The trees whispered. The last brick went into place.

He reached down to be sure there were no more. Something brushed against his leg. A cold hand touched his hand.

Knight, with two guns on, dared

not fire. He judged where the unknown's neck would be and lunged for it. His grip closed on the neck, on a furry neck. The thing collapsed with a snarl. Claws scratched his arm.

"Dog-gone dog!" he muttered. He patted the silky head, and the dog licked his hand in quick friendliness.

Knight never remembered the second trip to the house. But there he was in the library, a fresh cigarette between his lips, buttoning his shirt. He took the blood-spattered chair and table to his own room and locked them in.

"Katie, bar the door!" he muttered. "The things I've done since I contracted to guard the honor of Justo Ruiz!"

He stopped to look in Worrell's room. The man of ants slept peacefully. Knight was surprised to see that his hands were clean. That momentary mystery was laid by the color of the water in the wash basin.

"And you looked me in the eyes," he murmured to the sleeping man, "and told me Alek Kresge was not the one you were after. Now was he, or wasn't he? I wonder if you'll ever tell the truth?"

THIS death, Knight told himself, was not all bad. It removed Bravo's sole witness to prove that the secretary had not died in the prison fire.

He returned to the library and turned on the light to make sure that all was clear. Apparently nothing had happened there. Any one who discovered evidence of a tragedy would need good eyes.

"Good eyes! What does that face-haunted Malory mean by the need of good eyes?" He paced the room. Once he stopped by the death spot, trying to recall Alek's presence, hop-

ing thus to get some idea of the coup the spy had planned. "A new coup, never before used. I almost heard it from his lips."

It was ironic to know that in celebrating their independence with a noisy parade, the peons had sealed Mexico's fate. If Malory spoke the truth about the coup's certainty, the peons had saddled themselves with an emperor.

Wrapped in his thoughts, he did not hear a car in the drive. Heels clicked on the hall tiles and Calderon Ruiz stood before him. He was dirty and unkempt.

"Good weather reports," he said. "It looks as if I go. I'm ready." He twisted his cap in his hand and slapped it against his leg. "I can't believe that I'm not going."

"You may go, at that," Knight told him briskly. "Alek Kresge is dead. Malory boasts that the coup can go on without him. How about it? Want to get Malory drunk and question him? He might tell enough to warrant telephoning Mexico City."

"And my father would go down with them," Calderon said slowly. "I would rather kill him with my own hands."

Knight could not refrain from sarcasm. "It might save his honor."

Calderon failed to get the cynicism. "Do you know his favorite verse, paraphrased to fit me? 'I could not love you, son, so much, loved I not honor more.' Yes. He said that in suggesting my suicide."

"Want to take him out by plane? There's time."

"No!" He strode up and down, saying the things he had planned to say to his father. "I have not been able to see him to-day. He is always out. He won't face me. They framed me on the stolen plans and took a picture to ruin me. He stood

by and watched. My father! He's not my father!" He halted, fists clenched, facing the door.

Justo Ruiz stood there in a black satin dressing gown. His white hair was smooth, his goatee perfect, and a serene expression rested on his aristocratic face.

"What is this, son?" he asked, with calm dignity.

"You—" Calderon stammered. He could not say another word. Filial respect was stronger than his sense of injustice.

"Well?" Justo Ruiz persisted. "Malory tells me a murder has been done. I see no evidence. What have you done with the body?"

"Drop it, Knight," Calderon said. "I want to think."

"Enough thinking and waiting has been done," Knight said. "Señor Ruiz, the plot is about to smash. Do you want to stick it out, or shall your son fly you to the border? He knows you're in on it. He knows about the money and other things."

"So this," Ruiz sneered, "is what I have to show for years of effort with my son. My part in this plot is not your affair, Calderon. It's mine. You have no right to question me."

CALDERON began to unbutton his uniform blouse. "Very well," he said. "I can't betray Mexico for your sake. Neither can I betray you for Mexico's sake. I'll leave the service and be done with it."

"Button that blouse!" Knight interposed. "Button it! Where's your gun, lieutenant?" His own gun was in his hand. "Justo Ruiz, stand where you are. Calderon, you said you would kill this man. Now, by heaven, kill him!"

"He's my father!" Calderon whispered.

"He's not your father," Knight rapped. "He isn't the Justo Ruiz who hired me to help you. He's the Justo Ruiz who gave money to the plotters, who told of your blue print and double-crossed me when I tried to get the plans to you. Stand still, Justo! Your number's up."

Calderon slapped his hands together, and jerked his pistol. "Gringo, we've had enough of you. Get out."

He advanced threateningly on Knight.

"Stand back!" the American ordered. His eyes were on Justo Ruiz. He talked to Calderon out of the side of a grim, hard mouth. Suddenly he moved. Before either of the men could stir, he was standing behind Justo. His hand struck down over the serene face. He gave two quick tugs.

"The stage lost a great actor when you turned spy!" he exclaimed.

He was holding a white wig and false goatee.

Before him, with head unbared, stood Malory.

"This is why you told me to look closely at your face, and why you asked if there'd been a change in your manner," Knight went on. "This is why Justo changed after the trip to Tres Casas. He went with Alek, and you, Malory, came back!"

Malory bowed, like an actor acknowledging a curtain call.

"Malory!" Calderon exclaimed. "Where is my father?"

"Alive and well. He had to be to sign the checks and orders. We told him he was paying to preserve your honor. I took his place because you were causing trouble and we needed money."

"Never mind that! Where is my father?"

"Where you can never find him,"

Malory answered. "Now, listen well, you two. I don't want to repeat. José Augustin is to be put on a Mexican throne. If either of you make a move to arrest me or others in the plot, Justo Ruiz will die of loneliness, hunger, and thirst." He emphasized each of those words. "Well?"

"It looks," Knight drawled, "as though Mexico is going to have an emperor."

CHAPTER XIX. THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

THE clock in the library chimed twelve times. The three men stood silent until the last echo had died away.

"The Sixteenth," said Calderon. "El Grito!"

"The Sixteenth!" Malory said exultantly. "The dawn of the empire!"

The air became electric with hatred. Calderon's hand tightened on his aviator's helmet. He felt the gun strapped under his khaki blouse. His thoughts were easy to read; he was picturing himself sweeping the balcony of the municipal building with a plane's machine gun. The coup might carry the army, but it would not carry Lieutenant Calderon Ruiz.

"Your flight," Malory said smoothly, "has the sanction of the emperor. It will add to the glory of Mexico."

"And when I complete it," Calderon said bitterly, "you will publish the picture of me with José Augustin's portrait?"

"That's done with," Knight interposed. "This ash tray contains the ashes of the film. Alek gave it to me in a fit of despondency before he——"

"Did he give it to you?" Malory

asked, "or did you take it after you stabbed him? Also, if you'll pardon my morbid curiosity, I should like to know what you did with the body."

"There was no stabbing," Knight said coolly. "And no body."

"Clever at disposing of evidence, aren't you? First the secretary, and now Alek. By the way, when last we met, this time yesterday morning, you and Worrell were under arrest."

"Call Colonel Bravo," Knight challenged. "He'll tell you that the big-nosed agent, who happens to be a Federal man, took us out of his custody. The agent and I came to an understanding. He, too, is trying to break the plot." He rocked on his heels, his head tilted cockily. "Go ahead. Call Bravo."

Malory eyed the gun in his hand. "Remember, if you kill me, Justo Ruiz dies of hunger and thirst. Don't try shooting me in the back."

"I would never shoot any man," Knight said earnestly, "who is haunted by remorse. The faces you see, Malory, are worse than any hell the hereafter can devise. If I had my way, you'd live forever."

Malory whitened. He sagged inside his clothes. An arm pressed over his face to shut out the faces that had suddenly ringed him. By a mighty effort, he gained some control over himself. His lips moved in soundless word. "Only eleven hours more. Hold up." He straightened, holding himself up stiffly, went to the side table and got the *habenero* bottle and glass. By clutching the bottle tightly, he poured the liquor without spilling it.

He held the glass to the light. Confidence flooded him once more. "Señores, a toast! José Augustin, third emperor of Mexico." He

drank it. "Thus I drown your weak challenge to the coup." His haunted eyes blazed as the liquor struck him. "You can drown anything but faces," he added, as a taunt to Knight.

He brushed his hands together. "I must get some sleep. I'll take your word about your parole, Knight. Remember, if any member of the plot is arrested, Justo Ruiz dies." He waited for the clock to chime a single note. "Half after midnight. *Hasta mañana*, gentlemen—until the eleventh hour."

He bowed out, not turning his back to them, and they heard him march confidently up the stair.

"Where is Alek?" Calderon asked.

"Bricked up in the garden wall. He made the tomb and trained his own murderer. His death won't rise to confound us. But there is something that must be done. Have you a servant nervy enough to do what he's told?"

"The chauffeur was ten years in the army. He once kept bandits from a mine by manning a pass with a single machine gun."

"Call him, will you?"

IN a few minutes, the lean veteran presented himself, buckling a gun on over his blue livery. Knight led him out to the car and pressed a roll of bills in his hand, together with the handcuff key.

"Drive this man as far as you can by eleven o'clock. That's all. Then free him."

"Señor," the man assured him, "he will bathe in the ocean."

In the library, Calderon paced like a caged beast. His face was haggard.

"I have come to a decision, Yankee," he said. "In Mexico, we believe that one man frequently has to die for the good of the whole nation. I am going to telephone

Mexico City. My father will understand—afterward."

"Forget it," Knight said roughly. "This thing I call a brain is beginning to work. The real Justo Ruiz went to Tres Casas with Alek, and the false Justo returned. I went to Tres Casas one night when I got hold of a note meant for you. The plotter discussed putting you in the well. That's where Justo Ruiz is rooming. In the forty-foot dry well of the Tres Casas."

"I'll get a rope. My car's out in front."

The aviator started out, only to step back for a man entering. It was Worrell, with hair unruly and sleepy eyes.

"I heard voices and came down," he said hazily. He looked around the room, twisting his hands uneasily. "Knight, the water in my wash bowl is red. Has another accident occurred?"

"Yes. You got your boy friend, Alek."

Worrell winced. "So I've done it again. Tell me this—about *marijuana*. Can I be cured of the habit? The truth, please."

"No, you cannot. Suppose they lock you up for two months. You'll crave the weed, but the desire won't drive you mad. The minute you're out, you'll go back to the smoke."

"And when I smoke, I want to kill. I'm not much use to the world any more, am I?" He snapped his fingers, disposing of the subject. "You want to know where Señor Justo Ruiz is. He's in the Tres Casas well. I don't know why I didn't tell before. This other is on my mind."

"We're going there," Calderon said. "I'll get a rope." He ran out.

"A rope won't do any good," Worrell sighed. "If you try to get in

from the top, rocks fall on him. They arranged it, you see. I'll go with you. I'll get him out. You have to go through a tunnel."

"You'll stay right here!" Knight rapped out.

He had the engine running when Calderon jumped into the roadster. They drove through the San Pedro streets, where an occasional Grito merrymaker fired a pistol or howled, "Viva Mexico!" as they sped by.

San Pedro behind, they raced up a mountain road and around the curves to the Tres Casas. The old buildings bulked huge and dark. Calderon tumbled out, running, as the car rolled to a stop. He dashed for the main building. Knight had to sprint to catch up.

"Have your gun ready," he warned. "They thought of everything else. They may be expecting this."

THE big door resisted their efforts. It was built to withstand battering-rams, and its old hinges stuck. The two men crashed their shoulders against it. The door moved an inch. They backed off for another try.

"Guns!" Knight whispered. "Here comes somebody."

"Hold your fire," Calderon advised.

A man came up the causeway, in a stumbling, unsteady run. He ran full into Knight and clutched at him for support.

"I'll do it," he panted. "You'll be killed. Came in the rumble seat. Stone hit me. Like to knocked me out."

"You damn hop head!" Knight growled. "All right, throw your shoulder here."

Under their combined weight, the door creaked open a foot. Calderon

entered first, followed by Knight and Worrell. The interior of the building was as dark as a pocket.

"We go through the patio to the well," Calderon whispered.

"Patio door's locked from other side," Knight muttered. "No good, anyway. Stones ready to fall on him. Have to take the tunnel."

The whisper echoed and fell away on emptiness.

Knight held the pocket torch out arm's length at the side, and snapped it on. It lit up an empty hall and an empty room. He heard Worrell mutter, "Hurry." Calderon was trying the patio door. Knight said, "Tunnel," as he bent to duck in. Worrell elbowed him aside and scrambled in. Knight was right behind him.

The tunnel had been built for troop movements by one of the many armies that had occupied the Tres Casas. Falling rock had clogged the entrance until only one man could get through at a time. Once inside, the three could run abreast. Worrell sprinted hard to keep ahead. In spite of his unsteady run, he managed to keep three strides in front of Knight. Knight had his finger on the trigger. At the first sign of a killing tendency on Worrell's part, he would shoot.

The tunnel bent. Worrell disappeared. Knight sped around the turn. He almost fell over Worrell, who was bent from the hips, with his back under a rock.

"Now," Worrell said, "pull out the stones that're piled here."

Knight pulled them out, one by one, until two remained which held up the weight of the stone over Worrell's back. It left a small opening, barely large enough to squeeze through. A man working from within the well, would have been crushed

by the falling stone if he tried to work his way out.

"I'm holdin' it," Worrell gasped.

Knight stuck his head through the opening, and flashed the light. Before him stood Justo Ruiz, dirty and unshaven. He had a rock in each hand, and was prepared to defend himself.

"I am here, father," Calderon called. "We are much the fools for not being here before."

KNIGHT wormed back and directed Justo's escape. Worrell slid from under the rock, which remained precariously balanced.

They hurried round the turn and on to the entrance, through which only one man could go at a time.

"Stop, please," a clear voice drawled. "Throw your light here, Señor Knight."

The light flashed on the round snout of a machine gun placed in the entrance.

"There is plenty of time," said the bell-clear voice. "I am not needed at the municipal building until ten o'clock. I shall give you an hour to say your prayers. You are condemned, gentlemen."

Knight thought he saw a gleam of buttons. He fired. The bullet twanged off the machine gun. The gunner chuckled. Knight fired again, aiming for a rock at the entrance, hoping for a ricochet to put the gunner out of action. He emptied the clip.

Quiet fell, only to be shattered by the chatter of the gun. They were close enough to be cut to pieces, but the gunner aimed up. The bullets whined over the four men, who had fallen flat. The slugs whined along the tunnel roof. The spent lead spattered around the prone figures.

"Anybody hit?" Knight asked. He got three, "Noes."

"Next time," said the clear voice, "I'll aim low. I'll sweep the tunnel. Gentlemen, I would advise you to say your prayers." Behind them, there was a tremendous burst in the well, and a screeching of slugs. "Grenade," said the gunner. "We have you bottled."

For some time, no one said anything. Knight felt Calderon creeping past him. His hand closed on the aviator's shoulder, pulling him down.

"You have the flight to make," Knight whispered. "Where does this tunnel go?"

"Nowhere. Never finished. It extends a few feet beyond the turn into the well, and then ends."

"Take these two and go back as far as you can go. Watch Worrell!"

CALDERON retreated. Knight crawled forward. He had a gun in one hand, the flash in the other. A faint scuffling told him the others were going down the tunnel. He moved slowly, to give them plenty of time. He lifted his knee clear of the stone for each forward move. After an eternity of crawling, he reached out. His hand found the machine gun.

There was barely room for him to crawl up beside it. He slid a hand to the trigger in the darkness and then, raising his hand, reached farther. His fingers found buttons and a woolen sleeve. The gunner was tucked in behind rocks, with his arm thrust out to fire the gun. Knight lifted the pistol.

Behind him, the tunnel echoed to the crashing of rocks. There came a pained scream, like that of a trapped animal. A grenade burst.

Above the screeching of slugs, a man howled:

"Ow! You cursed greaser. You got me!"

"Adios, poor Worrell," Knight thought.

A pistol crackled somewhere in tunnel or well. The gunner's arm tensed as his finger closed on the trigger. Knight fired into the man's arm. He heard a scramble in the gunner's rock emplacement. The arm was withdrawn and another stuck through. The machine gun clattered.

It shook Knight's body as if he were an empty sack. This gunner, unlike the other, took no chances. He swept the tunnel with lead. The gun lifted and fell. Bullets raced down the stone floor, whined off the ceiling, spattered the walls. It took Knight, shaken and jiggled by the gun barrel, two full minutes to get the pistol against this gunner's arm. He fired. The gun fell silent.

Knight hurled it back and scrambled out. Some one was running from the patio door, which stood open. Knight snapped the flash on a bloody, shattered man who staggered toward him.

"I tried!" the shattered Worrell gasped, and pitched down at his feet.

CHAPTER XX.

VIVA MEXICO!

APISTOL roared, to drown the agonized cry. Knight felt the shock of a hit. His pocket torch was knocked from his hand, and his left arm was numbed to the shoulder. He dodged quickly to the side, after firing haphazardly to get the sniper to fire again. The gun flame came from the runway. He was watching there, and his finger squeezed trigger the instant he saw the flame. A body thudded off

the runway into the open. The sniper did not fire again.

"Calderon Ruiz!" Knight shouted.

"Here, señor, both of us. Are you hurt?"

The two Mexicans wriggled out of the tunnel hole. Calderon turned on his flashlight. The bullet shock Knight felt had been a slug hitting his torch. He was unwounded.

"Your damn hop head," Calderon said, "tossed the rope up to a stone on the well. He climbed it, took the falling rocks and grenade slugs, and shot the man who leaned over to pitch the grenade. He's a killer born, that gringo!"

"Shot him!" Knight echoed. "Where'd he get the gun?"

"You had two holstered, señor. And now you have but one. He is cunning, that hop head."

While Knight looked at Worrell, the aviator examined the three men who had been posted to trap them. Two were dead, one wounded. Worrell had several slight wounds, none of them apparently serious.

"Excitement knocked him out," Knight reported.

"These men are of Bravo's police," Calderon told him. "The wounded one is delirious and muttering orders. It seems, Yankee, that Bravo's orders are to shoot to kill, no matter where we are seen."

"We won't go back to the house," Knight said, and looked out the door. "Dawn's coming. I know an Indian woman near here who'll give us breakfast. Your father's weak from hunger. We want you in good shape for the flight, and my engine needs stowing. Let's go."

"You insist that I make the flight. I was advised," Calderon added whimsically, "to keep my mind off the flight for a day or two before. I have done it, no?"

They made the wounded policeman comfortable and left him in the Tres Casas. It was a short drive to the one-roomed adobe hut of the Indian. Worrell was reviving in the clear air. By the time the Indian woman was cooking coffee and baking tortillas, he seemed to be entirely himself.

"You see, Knight, I didn't kill Justo Ruiz," he said suddenly. "I haven't got the man I came after. I won't now. It's too late. I think I ought to tell you about it and about how the pencil comes in." He gasped for breath. "I must have caught cold. It hurts to breathe. It's those cigarettes, I bet."

"No doubt. The pencil?"

"My father and brother worked in an ammunition plant in the War. A spy started a fire. He used an acid pencil. See? Nobody paid any attention when he left a common pencil near inflammables. It caught fire. The plant went up. Hundreds died a horrible death. I learned what he looked like and started after him. But he dodged me, time and again. In passing years, his face changed. See? But I knew he was an agent and I found out what name he went under. Even then, I wasn't sure until I found a pencil in his belongings and tried it at the prison. His name—" He choked painfully and struggled for breath.

"His name is Malory," Knight finished. "And he still sees the faces of men burning to death. Let him live, gringo. He's in a worse hell than you could send him to."

"I won't get him, now," Worrell gasped. "Is that coffee I smell? Give me some."

"Let me look at you," Knight ordered. "You're hurt."

"Naw, I've got a cold. That's all. You better get going on your own

affairs. Ain't this the day they pull the coup?"

KNIGHT jerked himself out of contemplation of the fifteen-year-old tragedy, to face the tragedy that hung over Mexico. "Yes, this is the day. And the coup can't fail, because it will carry the army, and the guy with the soldiers runs Mexico. How can you coup a president who wears the army for a finger ring?" He smacked a fist into palm. "The thing I call a brain is working! A toast to you, Alek Kresge! You were dog-gone smart. Lieutenant, what's the program for to-day?"

"The same as usual. The president always comes to San Pedro on the Sixteenth. In the municipal building is a small room containing relics of Benito Juarez. It was Juarez who, in 1867, preserved Mexico's independence and ordered the execution of Maximilian. At eleven o'clock, the president goes alone to that room. He stays ten minutes, alone. He comes out on the balcony, speaks, and repeats the Grito ceremony of homage to the flag. That is all."

"How simple!" Knight murmured. "And I didn't think of it. Katie, bar the door! I must be getting half-witted."

Calderon looked at his watch. "It is the seventh hour."

"What preparations do you have to make for your flight?"

"None. All is finished. If the weather is made to my order, we go."

"Then let's get to a telephone, so you can turn in on the plotters. Shoot to kill, will they? We'll stay out of sight until it's time for you to go."

The four of them got in the roadster and drove down to a bakery.

Calderon went in. Ten minutes later, he came out, smiling grimly.

"In Mexico, plans were made to be changed. I called the home of every conspirator and all the places I could think of where they might be. I telephoned Mexico City. The agents here for the celebration will be ordered to gather them up for questioning." He paused.

"But the agents won't find them?" Knight said softly. "They've been hiding out since last night?"

"That is so."

"We sit on the mountainside until ten thirty. Is the Campo Militar well policed?"

"With Bravo's men? Not to-day. They are all at the municipal building. Soldiers guard the Campo."

"Then we do this. We brave the police lines at the municipal building, at the last moment, on the chance that they will be too busy to notice us. Your uniform will get me inside the building. There you leave me and drive to the Campo. I can break the coup. All right?"

"All right!" Calderon echoed enthusiastically. "You know now what the coup will be?"

"I am sure of it. It's an old, old custom, with a new twist."

"Viva Mexico!" said Calderon. He added, after a moment's thought, "And viva the gringo who saves her, señor!"

"If I remember correctly," Knight replied. "I started out to save the honor of Justo Ruiz."

The hours passed rapidly. Calderon Ruiz put implicit trust in Knight; he did not ask how he would break the unbreakable coup. Justo Ruiz slept. Worrell, chin in fists, gazed into the sky. Ten thirty came. Calderon pointed to his watch. They arose silently and got into the roadster. Worrell was the last one in.

ALL of San Pedro and the Indians from the country round about were in the plaza in front of the municipal building. The crowd swayed against the police lines and good-naturedly hazed the officers. The policeman who let Calderon and Knight through, glanced at them worriedly. He entirely forgot the two he was to shoot on sight, because five Indians were trying to jostle their way through the lines.

Calderon pointed to the flag-draped balcony. Three army officers in khaki smoked and talked there. The sun gleamed on the gold half moon set at the front of each collar.

"Plotters?" Knight asked.

The aviator shook his head.

They entered the municipal building, where officers strode up and down. Soldiers stood at ease at the pillars and on the wide stair, arms resting on their rifles. To Calderon's question, some one answered that the president of Mexico was in the mayor's office.

"He hasn't gone to the room of Benito Juarez?" Knight asked.

The officer looked at him curiously. "No, señor."

"Good." Knight walked smartly down the hall to a small door, hidden by the curve of the wide main stair. "This door opens on a small stair which leads to the Juarez room. Am I right? The president enters the Juarez room from a balcony door and enters it alone. Right?"

"Right and right." Calderon tapped Knight's arm excitedly. "There are two of the plotters. They saw some one by this door and walked out. They've ducked the agents in the crowd."

"They'll be back. We must act quickly. I want to look in here."

He tried the knob. The door was unlocked. He jerked it open. The space between door and stair was empty.

"Skunked?" Calderon asked.

"Looks that way. Oh, wait! Here's another door under the stairs."

"Yes. That closet is used for old records."

"There's more than records in it now, I bet." He opened the closet, glanced in, and shut it quickly. His eyes shone, and he found it hard to breathe steadily. "Let's go, José Augustin is in there. I shut the door before he could see who I was."

They withdrew to a seldom-used side door, within sight of the inclosed stairs. Knight pressed Calderon's hand.

"Good luck."

"*Gracias, señor.* Good luck to you. *Viva Mexico!*"

Calderon Ruiz slipped out the side door.

Within five minutes, six men had made their way quietly through the crowd and had gone through the door to the inclosed stair. All but one was in uniform. The last man was tall, heavily cloaked, and soft-hatted. The hat was pulled down over his eyes, and he muffled his face with the cloak. When he had passed through the door, Knight sauntered up and shot the two outer bolts.

"Very quietly done," he said to himself. "The crowd in the plaza won't know how near they came to an emperor. Now, for the guard!"

KNIGHT turned and caught his breath. A man stood at his elbow. Knight was staring into the hard eyes of Big-nose, whom he had dispatched by motor to the farthest possible spot.

"Goin' somewhere, Yankee?" the agent drawled. "You forgot a date

you had with me, didn't you?" He answered the American's unspoken question with, "We got pinched for speedin'." He tucked Knight's arm in his. "You hurt my feelin's, forgettin' me like that."

"Listen, amigo," Knight said rapidly, "Mexico is in a tight spot."

"You're in a tight spot, Yankee."

"But, listen! You're a made man. Inside that door——"

"Boloney!" the agent snorted, drawing him along the hall. "And where's that hop head pal of yours?"

"Listen, inside that door are six men who're going to make the president prisoner when he enters the Juarez room. Inside that door is a——"

"O. K. I believe you. Come along. I'll be back at that door in five minutes."

"There isn't time!"

"Boloney. Oh, here's your hop head pal!" He shoved a gun against the American's side and urged him down the hall at a run. Soldiers, standing at ease, watched curiously. Officers turned to laugh.

Then all of them snapped to attention. The mayor's office had opened. The president of Mexico was coming out. He was a tall man, slender, with black pompadour and a heavy black beard. In the plaza, a band broke into the national anthem. Cheering almost drowned the music.

The mayor and governor followed the president up the wide stairs to the balcony. Five officers marched behind them. In the hall below, the soldiers turned toward loud-speakers. There were other loud-speakers on the plaza, and at the Campo Militar, that the president's message might be carried to every peon and every soldier in San Pedro. In barracks and houses throughout Mexico, radios were tuned in.

When the president appeared on the balcony, the cheering rocked the building. The band played, almost unheard. At the Campo, artillery boomed a salute. The voices of the guns were muffled by the roaring of the crowd, who cheered with lifted fists and the waving of small tricolor flags.

"There's a popular guy," said the agent. "He can make any of 'em jump through the hoop. Here's your friend. Hey, you! C'mere."

Worrell reeled toward them. Two policemen who had been about to stop him, recognized the agent and let him go. His hair was unruly, as usual. His eyes were clouded over. His face and clothes were blood-smeared.

"Wipe your nose!" the agent exclaimed. "Don't you know it's bleedin'?"

Worrell rubbed the back of his hand across his nose. "I got a cold. Knight, I been lookin' for you. I —say do I imagine it, or are they doin' a lot of yellin'?"

The agent was listening to the message coming over the loud-speaker. "President's ready to come out. He didn't stay in the Juarez room as long as usual. Hurry, you guys! I want you in the hoosegow so I can hear that message. Damn it, there he is."

THE president made a short introduction and broke full into his speech. "Soldiers of Mexico!" the loud-speaker boomed. "I know you as my most loyal supporters. Never did a president of Mexico have the army so completely at his command. You do not question. You obey for the good of Mexico."

Knight whirled on the agent. "Hear that? Know where it's leadin'? You've heard of that old cus-

tom of an actor taking the ruler's place. That's going on now. He's going to renounce the presidency, declare for José Augustin, and carry the army with him. Go open that door!"

"You're in enough trouble, without makin' a crack like that. Better keep your mouth shut, Yankee."

His own mouth was shut by the impact of Knight's fist. As the agent slumped, Knight turned and ran into the building. No one paid him attention. All were absorbed in the speech.

"It is time for the eagle and the serpent to take their rightful place before the world!" the president proclaimed.

Worrell ran unsteadily behind Knight. Within the municipal building, a cordon of soldiers had been thrown across the wide stairs. Knight ran full at them. He knocked one aside and burst through the opening. He heard cries of "Halt!" and angered curses in which the name of gringo figured. He heard the clatter of rifle bolts. The soldiers hesitated to fire, because of the danger of the bullets striking the balcony.

Knight slid out quietly. The guard of honor, the mayor, governor and army officers, were in a line along the balcony rail. In the middle, a tall, bearded man talked into the microphone. "It is time that the green, white, and red of Mexico be known as the colors of an empire! Soldiers, follow me! Mexicans, join me! I declare——"

Knight stepped up beside him. "Your number's up, Malory. Pipe down on that line of bunk."

Into the microphone, in a murmur that would be broadcast over the building, the supposed president said, "Some one take this lunatic away." His voice rose and boomed

out, "Soldiers, the time has come to—"

"Stop it, Malory," Knight said grimly.

The officers turned and saw Knight. Two of them moved toward him, to push him off the balcony with the least possible excitement. Knight whipped out his guns.

"Stand back! Malory, get off this balcony! Gentlemen, an artist of make-up is taking the place of your president."

Into the microphone, Malory whispered, "Hurry. He's an insane killer. Hurry!" Louder, so that a cheer swept from the crowd, he shouted, "The colors of Mexico will be the colors of empire. Soldiers!"

Malory stopped speaking.

Worrell had pushed past Knight. He thrust his dusty, sweat-streaked, bloody face in front of Malory. He was gasping for breath.

"Hul-lo, Malory!" he drawled in a hollow whisper. "Remember seein' me before?"

MALORY looked full into the bloody face, the very image of one of those terrible faces he remembered, wrapped in flames. For a long second, he stood there, staring down and fighting with the demons within himself. Then he sagged inside his clothes. He clapped his hands over his eyes.

"These faces!" he screamed. "You can't drown 'em. Years I've seen 'em, sleeping and waking. Bloody faces. Burned faces." He began to tear off his disguise as he reeled away from the microphone. He stumbled into the Juarez room. Soldiers who had run up the stairs and officers off the balcony alike stood aghast at the sight of their president suddenly gone mad. He tore

off his wig. He plucked out handfuls of the false beard.

Knight shook the arm of the mayor of San Pedro. "Get out there to the microphone. Tell them that a lunatic did that screaming about faces. Tell them he's been captured and the president is all right." He turned to a soldier. "Downstairs, in the inclosed stairs, you'll find the president a prisoner. The officers with him are conspirators."

The strong voice of the mayor rang over the crowd, while a squad of soldiers pelted down the inclosed stairs. They came up, escorting the somewhat disheveled president.

"You are unhurt, excellency?" some one asked.

"Untouched." The president straightened his coat and smoothed his hair. "There are going to be some vacancies in the army. Where are the colors? Give me the standard. You say that man made a speech. I won't try to fix it up. Flag-waving covers a multitude of wrong remarks."

He strode to the balcony and displayed the colors over the railing. The crowd broke into thunderous cheering, drowning the drums and bugles, drowning a chorus singing the national anthem.

Worrell tapped Knight's arm. "I got him. Got him at last."

"Come here," said Knight. "We'll do something about that bleeding nose. You're a mess!"

"Nothing to be done," Worrell replied quietly. "Those rocks that fell on me in the well did somethin' to me inside. I'm done for. Listen! Listen! Is that a plane?"

IT was indeed a plane. Silver wings shining in the sun, it circled the town and swept away into the blue distance. Knight watched it until it was only a silver

dot. Then it was shut from his view as a tricolored banner on the plaza flagstaff snapped open in the breeze, and the silver plane was shut out by the picture of an eagle on a cactus, with a serpent in his beak.

"Funny," Worrell whispered, "when the flag waves that way, it looks like the serpent is wrigglin'."

"Let him wriggle. He won't get loose from the eagle this time."

He aided Worrell to a chair. Bending over him, he heard voices behind him. They were the voices of Justo Ruiz and the big-nosed agent.

"I will ask," Justo Ruiz was saying, "that you forget what this

American did. He saved my honor. His theft and kidnaping were in Mexico's service. He broke a plot."

"Sure," the agent blustered in his favorite language, American. "I knew all along. I knew who was doin' what. I put Knight wise to a lot of things. I give the plotters the works. I'd like you to say a good word for me to the boss."

"Indeed?" Justo said in gentle sarcasm. "We are indebted to you?"

"Nobody else. I had to let the coup start to-day to nab 'em. But I been givin' the conspirators the run-around for a week."

"Katie!" Knight murmured prayerfully. "Katie, bar the door!"



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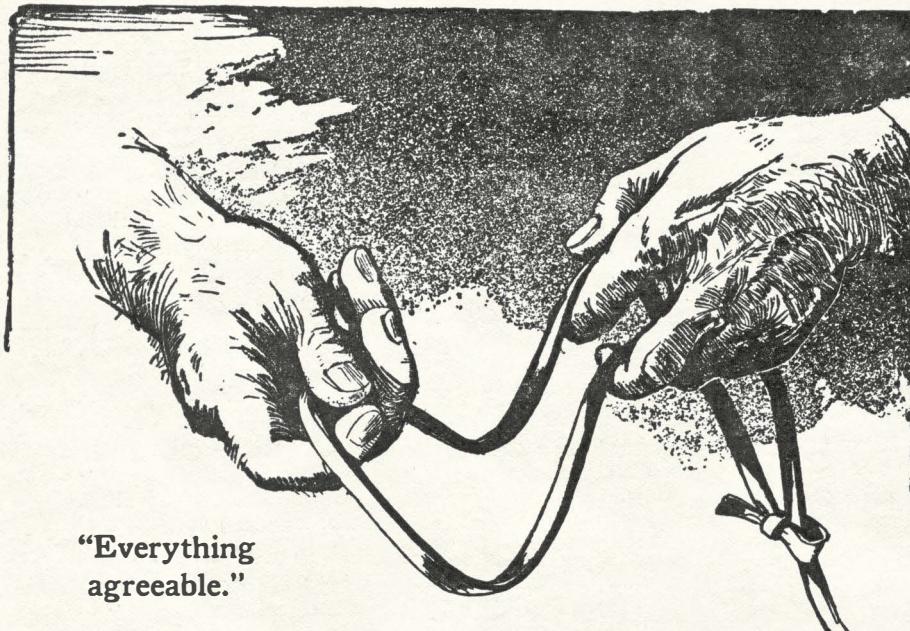
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PAYMENT DUE

By William Merriam Rouse

TWO burly fists leaned on the flat top of a scarred desk. Truman Gale was fighting mad. He had had to bend his six feet two of brawn to get his knuckles down to the paper-littered surface. He wanted Blackwell Eames, cringing behind the desk, to have them right in front of his eyes.

"I'll give you three days!" rumbled Gale. "Until Thursday night at midnight! Then you'll return my old notes and accept the new ones, as you promised! I'm going to make you keep your word!"

Eames, glancing out of the window, saw a State trooper standing in front of the drug store on the far side of Main Street. Color came back to his narrow face.

"Threats are dangerous to the man who makes them!" he sneered.

"You've got to do what's right even—"

"Right?" interrupted Eames. "What I've done is perfectly legal! I gave you an accommodation of five thousand dollars for six months. Now the notes are due. You can't pay. Gale Farms will have to be sold to satisfy the claim. The law is on my side!"

"And the broken word is on your side, too!" blazed Gale. "A month ago I told you I had the money to pay the notes, but that if you'd renew I'd put it into water and lighting systems. You promised. Now I've committed myself to contracts. You're planning to force a sale of the property and bid it in!"

"Maybe!" Eames smiled.

"You said—"

"A verbal agreement is practically worthless."

Eames caught the trooper's eye. He beckoned.

"If you take my home away from me legality won't save you!" Gale shouted.

A cough came from the doorway. The trooper was standing there with thumbs hooked into his gun belt.

"How d'ye do, Jarvis," said Eames. "Come in and have a cigar!"

Truman Gale nodded to the trooper and turned to go.

"That rat is afraid of me," he said, pointing to Eames. "I suppose he called you for protection. Well, he needs it!"

Jarvis made no reply as he helped himself to a cigar.

Gale went out. He could not have done better for Blackwell Eames if he had been coached.

"Thanks for coming in," Eames said, rubbing his hands together. "Truman Gale is a violent man. I'm beginning to think that he's dangerous!"

"Uh-huh," commented Jarvis.

"I'm about to bring an action against him to collect on some notes."

The trooper studied the end of his cigar.

"It might be advisable for me to go out of town until after Thursday. The notes are due Friday."

"Might be."

"I don't want him to do anything that will get him into trouble," Eames said softly, as though he were thinking aloud.

"No."

Trooper Jarvis, apparently having decided that he was no longer needed, went out.

Eames's mouth drew back in a wolfish smile. He placed the tips

of his fingers together and winked at the ceiling. His thin shoulders shook to a silent laugh.

"I'm leading him right by the nose!" he whispered.

EAMES rose and went out briskly into the sunshine of Crocusville's principal business street. He turned in under a black-and-gold sign announcing that Oliver Parker was an attorney at law.

Mr. Parker was a round little man who wore glasses and a baby stare. He looked smooth on the outside; he had proved many times that he was smooth inside.

"Ollie," said Eames. "Gale is making threats. Those notes, you know."

"Want him put under bonds to keep the peace?" Parker giggled. That silly giggle was very valuable. It disarmed his enemies. He got up and closed the door of his office. "I might be able to frame Gale and get him into jail, but that's dangerous business in a bush-league town like this. These hicks haven't found out yet that justice is blind!"

Blackwell Eames tried to look shocked.

"My dear, Ollie! You astonish me with your brutal suggestion! It has occurred to me that I might save the poor man from himself by going out of town for a few days—until Friday, perhaps. He gives me until Thursday night at midnight to accept new notes."

"Think he'll quiet down by Friday?"

"He might—quiet down."

"Then why consult me?"

"You know I have recently acquired a rather lonely camp in the mountains?"

"I begin to see that you've got something up your sleeve!"

"Nothing at all, Ollie, except to protect myself and save that poor, misguided man from violence. It might be well for me to go to camp for a few days—and shoot partridges."

"Somebody is going to get nipped! What do you want me to do?"

"Under the circumstances don't you think it would be perfectly justifiable for me to have a bodyguard? A man who would not hesitate to shoot in defending me from attack. Gale has made threats in the presence of Trooper Jarvis."

"You old fox!" exclaimed Parker. "Blackwell, you'd have made a fine shyster! Even I take off my hat to you! If Gale lives he'll fight hard. If he doesn't live he can't fight!"

"I thought possibly that in your practice of the law you had made contacts with the—the underworld. Not that I want anything questionable done. But I suppose a professional gunman would make the most resolute guard?"

"Doesn't even want to hire his own gorilla!" giggled Parker. His eyes took on a speculative look. "I can get you a man. I'll promise somebody who'll eat shingle nails for breakfast. But you'll have to pay well and when due, Blackwell!"

"A thousand?"

Ollie Parker's feet thumped to the floor. He whistled softly.

"When Blackwell Eames mentions paying out a grand and doesn't get green around the gills I know he means business! I can get you a man who'll murder his own grandmother for a thousand!"

"Murder!" exclaimed Eames. "You horrify me!"

"Don't get horrified," giggled Parker. "I'll have a man for you not later than to-morrow morning. Spread the news that you're going to be at your camp."

"It will probably slip out," said Eames.

GINO RABITSKI sat beside the oilcloth-covered kitchen table and fiddled endlessly with a piece of old harness strap which he had found in the woodshed.

Blackwell Eames was fascinated by the appearance of his hireling in the lamplight. At the same time he was driven into something like a fit of nerves by the constant restlessness of Rabitski's hands. The thick fingers rolled and unrolled the strap, tried its strength, worked it soft and pliable.

Rabitski's black and bristling hair ran down to a peak on a low forehead. Sullen and suspicious eyes were deep set. His hunched shoulders would have done credit to a gorilla.

"I'm glad I hired you," began Eames, clearing his throat.

"Yeah?"

"This situation is rather delicate——"

"Spill it!" interrupted Rabitski. "Youse want me to croak a guy. Youse going to nurse him out here and put him on the spot."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Eames. "I wouldn't think of such a thing! Gale, who has been pointed out to you, has made threats. He'll follow us. You're hired to protect me."

"Come clean," advised Rabitski. He struck a match against a thumbnail and lighted a cigarette.

"If he should be killed in a murderous attack on me we would be held blameless."

"Nuts!" remarked Gino. "You mean they can't prove nothing. But I gotcha. I'll croak 'im!"

"You shock me, Gino!"

A smile flickered over Eames's tight mouth. He glanced down at

the shotgun on the floor beside his chair. He was not trusting entirely to the protection of anybody.

Suddenly the smile froze on Eames's face. He had glanced through the window past Rabitski's shoulder, and into the face of Truman Gale.

With a shout Eames leaped to his feet. Rabitski was up, pistol in hand. At a sound from the door he turned. A slip of white paper was sliding in over the threshold.

The gunman bounded across the room and threw open the door. His automatic spat flame into the darkness, then he leaped aside; but no answering shot came from the night. After a long moment Eames went forward and picked up the slip of paper. It bore three words in Gale's writing.

Two days more.

"I'll get him next time!" growled Rabitski.

"I hope so," said Eames, shakily. He announced that he was going to bed. Rabitski was to sleep downstairs, but Eames had chosen a second-floor bedroom for himself. He locked and bolted the door, then went to bed. A flashlight and the shotgun were on the floor within reach.

Wakeful, he wondered why he could not save the sheaf of twenty-dollar bills which he had in his pocket for the gunman. He might denounce him for the murder of Truman Gale. Would any one believe Rabitski's story? The man must have a criminal record. It was an idea worth turning over.

DUSK of the second day in camp had closed in. Rabitski sat with his chair tipped back against the wall, rolling and unrolling the harness strap. By

now Eames did not like anything about him. He moved, for one thing, like a monstrous cat. Every time that Blackwell Eames looked at his bodyguard he thought of tigers and mountain lions.

It was impossible to get behind the gunman. After Eames had noticed that Rabitski took pains to face him on all occasions he tried deliberately to outwit the fellow. It could not be done.

Even when they worked side by side at the stove the gunman contrived to stand so that he could watch his employer. Eames wondered whether the big brute were suspicious of him because he kept the shotgun constantly at hand. He had explained that it was on account of Gale.

"For Heaven's sake, light the lamps!" exploded Eames.

Rabitski got up and obeyed. Eames carried his gun to the table beside the stove and opened a can of beans. Rabitski brought the coffeepot.

"If Gale shows up to-night—" "I'll blast him!" promised Gino.

They had supper cooking when a sound outside the door brought them both to their feet. Even while Eames drew back the hammers of his weapon the doorknob began to turn. His finger hovered against the triggers. He saw the gunman crouching out of the line of fire with drawn automatic. Every hair on Eames's head was standing up. If that door did not open in a split second he would send the contents of his shotgun through it!

The door did open, with a jerk. The sleek form of Ollie Parker stood in the doorway. His mouth gaped wide as he looked from Rabitski's automatic to the shotgun. His glasses fell off.

The weapons were lowered slowly.

The lawyer tottered into the room and sank to a chair.

"You gentlemen were mighty near having a homicide to explain," he said, when he could control his voice. "I didn't know you were as scared as that! Gale must have your number!"

Rabitski holstered his pistol and sat down with a grunt. Eames had already wilted to a seat. He put his gun on the floor and wiped a wet forehead.

"Don't come in here again without knocking!" he said hoarsely. "I was sure it was Gale!"

"You certainly do look funny!" giggled Parker. He lighted a cigar. "I came out to look the ground over before you need me. I've got to be the mouthpiece after it's finished."

"Gale was here last night and left a note," said Eames. "Rabitski fired at him!"

"Then he's a bigger fool than I thought! He's trying to get himself convicted in the first degree!"

"What do you mean, first degree?" cried Eames. "Do you mean he's going to kill me? I guess not!"

Ollie Parker was enjoying himself.

"You're scared stiff, Blackwell! What I mean to say was that Gale is fixing himself so he can be knocked off and no harm done!"

For the first time Gino Rabitski grinned.

"It's no joke!" flared Eames.

Suddenly he leaped to his feet, pale and shaking, and pointed to the door. A little slip of paper lay just beyond the threshold. Gino Rabitski was already in motion. He shot the length of the room and vanished into the night.

For many seconds stillness gripped the room. Then the sound of a single shot came in from the cool darkness. Blackwell Eames drew a deep

breath and relaxed. He picked up the slip of paper. It bore the words:

One day more.

"It looks as though Gino had reduced the time," he remarked, as he handed the paper to Parker.

Ollie Parker did not have time to reply. Rabitski returned, but not as a conqueror. He dragged himself into the house, with a hand against the wall for support. The automatic dangled in the other limp hand.

"Did you get him?" hissed Eames.

"He damn near got me!" gasped the gunman. "I thought I nailed him, but he was just playing dead! He trun me down and like to busted me back and both arms! He faded!"

Eames felt himself sagging with fear. At the same time he was furious.

"What good is Rabitski?" he demanded of Parker. "I'm paying for protection?"

"You'll get what you've bargained for," Parker assured him. "Gino's a gunman, not a collar-and-elbow wrestler!"

EAMES was convinced that one day more with Rabitski would drive him mad, but the time was now eleven o'clock Thursday night and the end was near.

For the past two hours the gunman had been padding up and down the kitchen, more than ever like a giant cat. All day, when not actively engaged in something else, he had fingered the strap.

Eames thought with satisfaction of the time when those hairy wrists and thick hands would stop moving forever; for while the slow hours passed he had worked out a scheme for saving his thousand dollars.

By Ollie Parker he had sent a note to Trooper Jarvis explaining that he had begun to fear the bodyguard

whom he had hired to protect him from Truman Gale. Would the trooper come to see that he got safely back to Crocusville Friday morning?

Parker had been instructed to deliver the note late Thursday evening, so that Jarvis could not possibly come ahead of time and upset the fate awaiting Gale.

Eames had found by experiment that he could swing the muzzle of his gun casually in the direction of Rabitski without arousing suspicion. It would be easy to send a charge of shot into him after he had done his work, then he would say that the gunman had tried to hold him up.

This evening, while they were at supper, another note had been slipped under the door. It said:

To-night.

Gale had been clever, but his campaign of terror was not going to do him any good.

Fifteen minutes before midnight Eames rose, shotgun in hand. He was calm now. Rabitski halted and looked at him with sultry eyes.

"Take the door," Eames ordered. "I'll watch the window, but he'll come through the door."

"O. K.!" growled Rabitski.

Eames set his chair directly in front of the only window in the room. He raised the sash a little and rested the gun barrel on the sill. If he should be obliged to fire, which was hardly possible, he did not want to fire through the glass, then make a plea of self-defense.

He sat comfortably with the gun pointing out into the night. The stock was across his knees. Pretty soon there would be a pistol shot on the other side of the room. He did not doubt that Truman Gale would attempt to come in. The man was

stubborn enough. And before morning something would happen to Rabitski.

The gunman had stopped his packing. That was a relief. He had to be alert to meet the visitor who was coming, for Gale had proved that he could handle Rabitski.

Eames heard a faint sound like the click of a door latch. He set himself for the report of the pistol, but the stillness stretched out unbearably. He preferred not to see, but he would have to turn in a moment more. He could not stand this strain of waiting.

Suddenly he felt, rather than heard, a movement close behind him.

His head jerked and was held as in a vise. A band pressed viciously around his neck and drew in, tighter and tighter.

Even as he choked and gasped and beat his hands against the air astonishment took possession of him. This couldn't happen! He was being strangled! The gun slipped from his knees. The chair was swept from under him and his weight hung from the merciless band that encircled his throat.

He was being hanged by the neck, and slowly. His desperate fingers laid hold on the terrible thing that was taking his life. Then, as the room became misty and faded, Blackwell Eames knew that he was clutching the harness strap that had been Rabitski's plaything. A roaring cataract of sound filled his ears — faded.

GALE chuckled as he moved silently through the under-brush. Eames would be scared enough by this time to do as he was told. Gale had taken the measure of the big plug-ugly with him and he was not worried. He would turn the knob of the door and

push it open without standing in front of it. In order to get a shot at him the bodyguard would have to step into the doorway. All Gale wanted was to get his hands on the man.

Fifty feet from the shack he stopped suddenly. The door had opened. The form of the guard was outlined for a moment. Then he stepped out into the darkness and started at a trot along the path that led to the road.

Gale was bewildered. The door of the shack remained open. He went forward cautiously and waited outside, listening. At length he stepped to the doorway and entered the room.

Blackwell Eames lay on the floor dead, with lolling tongue and distorted face. His hands were set against a leather strap that was buckled tightly around his neck.

At the sound of a footstep behind him Gale whirled. He looked into the round face of Ollie Parker, staring without expression at him and at the gruesome sight on the floor.

"I—I—" stammered Gale. "He was like that—"

Parker adjusted his glasses and giggled.

"You're the guiltiest looking man I ever saw! But don't worry! I saw Blackwell's gorilla leave and I saw you come in. You haven't had time to do it!"

Gale leaned weakly against the wall. Parker knelt by the body of his client.

"Just as I thought!" he exclaimed. "Wallet gone! I warned Blackwell against hiring a gunman, but he

would do it! We must be careful not to touch that strap. Finger prints, you know. Rabitski waited until the last minute, didn't he? Perhaps he thought they'd get you for it."

"I can run him down in the woods!" cried Gale.

"Trooper Jarvis will meet him on the road. I've had a little talk with Jarvis. Blackwell sent him a note saying that he was afraid of Rabitski."

"I never meant to hurt the man," said Gale, solemnly. "I was going to spank him until he kept his word. That was all!"

Ollie Parker was not listening. He giggled at his own thoughts.

"I might as well tell you this, for it's going to come out when they get Rabitski's record. The fellow had a pretty smooth brother who didn't look like him and who didn't use the same name. Once upon a time Blackwell hired the brother to do some work for him, and somebody was killed. Eames double-crossed Rabitski's brother and let him hang. And now poor Blackwell is strangled! Too bad he happened to hire a member of the same family as a bodyguard!"

Truman Gale stared hard into the round, smiling face before him. Light was breaking.

"I wonder," he said, at length, "who will handle Eames's estate?"

"Oh, I wrote the will and I'm named as sole executor!" Parker giggled again. "Thinking about those notes? The estate will renew 'em. We want to have everything agreeable."



SQUEEZE

By Kenneth Keith Colvin

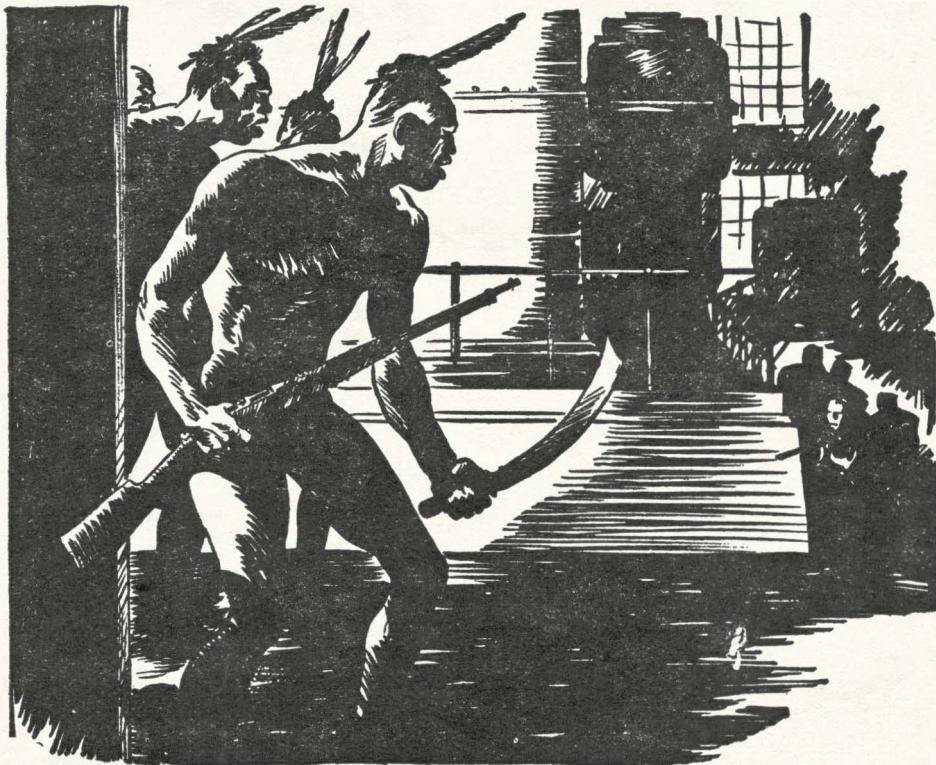
A Yankee who knew how to "watch out."

WARNING came to Gilman just before he started to Taichu. He was having a final drink at the bar of the Foreign Club in Taihoku when Keller called him aside. This club in Taihoku, the capital, is one of the few places in Formosa where Americans and other outsiders can feel free from the prying suspicion of the Japanese officials, for Japan runs the island pretty much as a closed corporation.

"You want to watch out for those two chaps, Komatsu and Hirata," said Keller quietly. "They won't waste any love on you."

"I know who they are, of course, but I've never seen the gentlemen," Gilman grinned. "What have they got against me?"

"Not a thing personally. But you're a company man." Keller shrugged. "It comes down to a matter of 'squeeze.' What the boys in certain circles back in the States would call percentage, I think."



Gilman, big-boned, lanky, and blond, swallowed the rest of whisky and soda. He glanced at his watch.

"My train leaves in fifteen minutes. I've got to get a ricksha and jump to the station. Spill it quick, Keller."

"Just this," said the other. "Things didn't go the way Komatsu and Hirata expected on that deal for the dynamo. They used all their influence to swing it to the German crowd—the Von Hueglin people. Meant plenty of yen in their pockets. Now, since our outfit stepped in and sold to the government here there's no squeeze for that pair. We don't pay that kind of graft and they're sore."

"I see." Gilman nodded. "Still, why should they pick on me? I had nothing to do with the deal from the sales end. I'm only going up in the hills to inspect the installation job, wire the switchboard, and make the final hook up."

Keller grunted. He had been with the company agency in Tokio and later down here in Formosa for years.

"Mind your step. Don't trust those Japs any further than you have to."

"Right. I'll remember."

Gilman grabbed his suitcase, left the club and hailed a passing ricksha. He made the south-bound train with little to spare. The three-hour ride down the flat western coast of the island to Taichu was devoid of interest. On one side were level rice fields with an occasional floundering water buffalo and coolies; on the other the view was cut off by high and rugged mountains.

Gilman was going into those mountains. High up on the forested slopes were the camphor stations and camps. Up there were the fierce Taiyals and other tribes—all takers

of heads. The coolie camphor gatherers worked under the protection of guards drawn from the Japanese police and military forces on the island.

A guard line—three hundred miles of high, barbed-wire fence—completely inclosed these savage tribes in their mountain fastnesses. At every camp and station along the line there was a Japanese medical man, a Japanese commander and his detachment of guards, for there was raiding at some point along the line every week of the year.

At some of the stations, wherever there was a waterfall or dam to supply the power, the barbed-wire fence had been locally electrified. In these places were electric lights. There was a telephone system around the entire guard line.

Recently, because successful Taiyals raids had all but annihilated two of the guard posts, the Japanese government in Formosa had decided to electrify the guard line throughout its length. All posts would have the advantage of the electrified, barbed-wire fence and high-powered search-lights.

The project was practically accomplished now. The government had harnessed the largest of the mountain streams in the vicinity of one of the main stations along the line. A building had been constructed for this central power plant. The dynamo, the transformers, and other machinery had been purchased from Gilman's firm and had been assembled.

Gilman was going up to inspect the installation, look after any necessary adjustments, and make the final hook up whereby the central power plant would take over the work of all the various local units along the line.

Komatsu, one of the two Japanese

Keller had mentioned, was in command at the largest of the stations where the new central power plant was located. The other, Hirata, was the medical officer and nominally second in command, though Komatsu had an assistant, a cousin Soga, who carried the title of assistant commander, and who did most of the work and went out with the guards that protected the coolie workers.

By the time Gilman left the train at the little town of Taichu, he had wholly forgotten Keller's warning. For the ascent of the timbered slopes that lay to the eastward he shifted to other transportation. Awaiting him in Taichu were two Formosan coolies and a hand car with a superstructure of bamboo over the small platform.

With the coolies afoot and pushing the car, Gilman set off through the green foothills. Presently they struck the steeper slopes and the narrow-gauge track climbed up and dipped down ahead of them. Forcing the car along now called for everything the coolies had and Gilman was humane enough to get out and walk.

Halfway to the top was a rest-house. This proved fortunate, for as they neared it one of the men pushing the car lost his footing and slipped off the narrow right-of-way. He dropped a dozen feet onto a bulging shoulder of the slope and lay there groaning after a futile effort to rise and climb back.

His companion and Gilman got him up to the track again. When the American looked him over he found a bruised and swelling ankle. It was a bad sprain, possibly a fracture, and Gilman loaded the coolie on the car. The incident seemed trivial at the moment. Gilman knew

he could get another man or two to replace this one at the rest house. They moved on and ten minutes later arrived at the group of buildings which marked the halfway point.

No one was in sight on the platform beside the track. Gilman went off among the buildings looking for men and shortly returned with two coolies at his heels. Coming around the corner of the flimsy depot he halted, for now there was sudden activity on the platform.

A squat Japanese in some sort of uniform was just approaching the hand car. He was shouting angrily in his own language at the injured coolie stretched on the car. The latter tried to move, but apparently was not quick enough to suit the Japanese, who dragged him off and flung him down on the platform.

The coolie lay there grasping his ankle and groaning. The Japanese spat an oath. Then deliberately he landed a solid kick against the coolie's ribs.

In a few strides the long-legged American was across the platform, caught the Japanese by the neck and whirled him about.

"That's my man!" he snapped. "Keep your hands off him!"

The little, yellow man squirmed in Gilman's grip. Whether by accident or design one of his arms flailed up awkwardly and his open palm caught the American a light blow in the face. Gilman held him at arm's length and shook him like a rat. The man sputtered oaths and clawed for the pistol belted at his waist.

It was the wrong move. Gilman kicked his feet from under him and promptly took the gun away. He tossed it across the track and far down the slope. Then he spun the man around and gave him a by-no-

means-gentle boot toward the buildings. The man landed on hands and knees, picked himself up, snarled a furious curse at the American and darted into the little depot.

Gilman helped the injured coolie back on the hand car, climbed aboard himself and, with three men pushing, continued on his way. They had scarcely left the resthouse behind when the injured man turned to him. His dark, slant eyes held a doglike gratitude and he spoke in Japanese.

"I am grateful. Yet perhaps it was a mistake to do what you did to that one back there."

Gilman was somewhat surprised to hear the man speak in Japanese. Most of the Formosan coolies speak a Fukien dialect which Gilman did not know. This one was evidently more intelligent than most.

"It was no mistake," he said grimly. "If it was I'll stand by it."

"But that Japanese was an officer, master."

"Yes," nodded Gilman. "I noticed. I noticed also that he was exceeding his authority like many of them do."

Meanwhile, back at the rest house, the Japanese Gilman had booted flew to a telephone. When he established his connection he snarled into the mouthpiece:

"The American comes. I have already had trouble with him. He has left the resthouse and will arrive within two hours."

There was a further interchange, then the Japanese hung up the receiver. He spent some time scrambling down the slope and retrieving his pistol. After that he summoned a couple of coolies, had them shove another hand car from a siding, and ordered them to push him up the mountainside in Gilman's wake.

GILMAN reached his destination a little before dusk. He was met at the track by both Komatsu and Hirata. They shook hands with him in Western fashion. Komatsu was an oily, little, mustached man, thin-featured and too skinny to look well in the mustard-colored uniform he wore. Hirata, the doctor, was likewise in uniform, but did a better job of filling it out. His round face was pock-marked and dominated by a pair of glittering, jet-black eyes.

The station was larger than the American had anticipated. There were scores of huts for the coolie workers, a barracks for some fifty guards, Komatsu's house, and another for the doctor. The guardhouse, with its three machine guns, was close to the barbed-wire fence and Gilman had a look over the electric barrier into the forbidding territory beyond.

The land had been cleared for a hundred feet beyond the fence. This barren strip outside the barrier afforded no cover and served to prevent surprise attacks. At the edge of the cleared space the forests of trees, great ferns, and tangled undergrowth reared darkly.

Komatsu suggested that Gilman wait till after dinner at his house before he looked at the power plant and the machinery that had been set up. The doctor pleaded certain professional duties and departed. During the meal, Komatsu set forth the plans that had been formulated for putting the power plant in operation.

"The government has been unable to send up an extra force of guards, so we must rely on secrecy. All the machinery has been put together and stands in its proper place. You will have several hours this evening in which to make any needed cor-

rections. Local power can be suspended all along the line at midnight to-night and this central plant be operating a half hour later.

"The wire, of necessity, will be dead during that half-hour interval. And there will be no lights or telephone service for any of the stations," he went on. "But it is an excellent time to accomplish the transfer. This station has never been raided and no raids have ever been made at midnight. They usually occur just before morning. The machinery has been brought up here and assembled quietly, thus the Taiyals can know nothing of what has gone on here. Is it agreeable then to you to start the new machinery to-night?"

"Perfectly," Gilman assented.

"Very good. Many of the coolies are away at the camps back of the line working camphor trees. A number of our guards have also been moved down the line to the two stations that were nearly wiped out a few months ago. Yet I think I can furnish any workmen you may require."

"I won't need any," said Gilman. "All the real labor's done. It's all technical from now on—wires to connect with the control switches and so on."

"Well, you will be working late," observed Komatsu. "I shall have a servant bring supper over to you around midnight. Better, I'll have a man remain over there and you can send him out for anything you want."

The meal finished, Komatsu accompanied the American to the building that housed the machinery. The power plant had been built of the local stone and slate and was a sturdy structure. Inside Gilman found the dynamo and the other big

electrical engines all in place on low, massive concrete bases.

He fell to work on a thorough inspection, and Komatsu took his leave.

THE Japanese had walked no more than a hundred yards from the power plant when a shadowy figure emerged from the darkness of a pile of bags containing camphor chips and accosted him.

"I saw you pass with the American just now and hid," said the shadowy one.

"That was wise in view of the trouble you had with him at the resthouse," grunted Komatsu.

"I should like to cut his throat," snarled the other. "What have you and Hirata arranged?"

"Come with me, cousin. You will see." Komatsu shrugged. "He suspects nothing. Even if he did he will not be able to prevent what will happen."

The two had moved on as they talked and now they passed beneath a light. The man with Komatsu was the one with whom Gilman had had the run-in at the rest house. He was Soga, the assistant commander at this station.

"Gilman is not armed. At least, I did not think he has a weapon on his person," said Komatsu.

"How do you know?"

"His baggage is at my house. One of the servants went through it and found a pistol. I had it unloaded and replaced. If he has it, the gun is useless."

Komatsu chuckled and led the way toward a small, lighted building that adjoined Hirata's house. This was the doctor's office and dispensary. Hirata was there ministering to the ailments of a dozen coolies, camphor gatherers, and workmen about the station. He

abandoned his patients, however, when the two officers entered.

"Is it ready?" asked Komatsu eagerly.

The doctor shot him a look from his jet eyes, smiled slightly and nodded. He passed through a door to one side into a small office and returned after a minute with two dark bottles. By their labels these bottles contained imported Japanese beer. He handed them to Komatsu.

Soga slid his inquiring gaze from them to Hirata.

"Poisoned?"

"No—just drugged." The pock-marked doctor laughed. "The American will be as one dead for several hours. When he awakes much will have occurred."

"Bah! Why not kill him?" Soga demanded.

"That would invoke too much investigation and we do not want it." Komatsu shrugged. "By drugging him, the machinery can be smashed and this American and his company discredited with the government. Our object will be attained."

"The other commanders will attest the fact that power was lacking," Hirata laughed confidently. "For my part I don't trust the savages too much. Those Taiyals know the time of the raid? They know what to do?"

Komatsu nodded, a little flame in his dark eyes.

"I conferred with the chiefs two nights ago. It is settled. They come over the wire at midnight, lie in hiding for thirty minutes, then swoop down on the station. A few coolie heads will be taken in the course of the raid, but the Taiyals understand that they are to concentrate on the power house and ruin the machinery."

Hirata was satisfied. Komatsu

made some further explanation to Soga.

"We bring the American here after he is drugged and take him back when the raid is over. Saturate his clothing with wine and place empty bottles in the power house. We keep out of the way during the attack. Without leadership the guards won't do much."

"You think the government will repudiate the purchase of the machinery from the Americans and deal with the German company?" asked Soga.

"Certainly. The terms were that the machinery was not to be paid for until it had been officially inspected in operation and approved by our engineers." Komatsu made a gesture of finality. "It is unlikely that our engineers will sanction the purchase of broken machinery. The matter will be reopened with the Germans."

Hirata promised to put in appearance at Komatsu's house as soon as he had finished at the dispensary. He went back to his patients and the other two Japanese withdrew.

OVER at the power plant, with plenty of time before him, Gilman had set about inspecting the job. He spent several hours checking everything in careful fashion and found that the company workmen had performed their task perfectly.

Next he turned to his own specialized work of connecting up the proper wires with the right switches on the big switchboard.

Midnight was approaching and he had nearly finished, when one of Komatsu's servants showed up with a tray of cold food. Conspicuous on the tray were the two bottles of beer and Komatsu had seen to it that they were invitingly cooled.

There were two or three small rooms off the big main room containing the machinery. In one of these was a table, a battered desk, and two folding camp stools. Gilman told the servant to put the tray on the table and depart. Another of Komatsu's servants had been around all evening to run errands or otherwise look after Gilman's wants. This man could take back the tray and the empty dishes.

The American worked a few minutes longer at the big switchboard. The hands of his watch showed exactly midnight. He knew it would require no more than ten minutes to finish his job. But he would have to wait until twelve thirty to throw the master switch which would set the power plant in operation. All stations along the guard line had been notified of this time. To shoot several thousand volts into the barbed-wire barrier in advance of the hour set might be to accidentally electrocute some one.

Gilman was hungry and thirsty. A very salty dried fish had been served during the meal at Komatsu's house earlier that evening. The officer had not left the matter of his thirst to chance.

He decided to forego the remaining work for a few minutes and crossed over to the room where the tray had been put. The food looked tempting enough, but it was the beer Gilman wanted first. There was an instrument for opening the bottles and a porcelain goblet on the tray. He decapped the nearer bottle and, ignoring the goblet, raised it to his lips.

On the very brink of tilting the bottle Gilman stayed his hand. There came sudden clamor and commotion out in the main room of the power plant. Then three men appeared in the doorway.

COM—8B

One of these was the coolie with the broken ankle in whose behalf Gilman had acted at the rest house. He was supported by the other two whom Gilman recognized as the Formosans who had pushed his hand car up to the station.

"*Matte!*" The injured coolie flung out the word sharply in Japanese pointing at the bottle in Gilman's hand. "Wait! Have you drunk of it, master?"

Gilman stared in blank astonishment from the man to the bottle and back to the man.

"No. Not yet."

"Then do not touch it! It is drugged!" The coolie grunted to the two with him and they helped him into the room. "I was at the place where the doctor, Hirata, looks after the sick to-night. He fixed my ankle. There I heard talk between this doctor and the Japanese officers, Komatsu and Soga. The beer is drugged, or poisoned, master! Those men have treachery in their minds! You must act at once!"

His speech was rapid, panting. For an instant Gilman eyed him incredulously. Then Keller's warning flashed into his mind and he was hurling questions.

"You are sure of what you say? What do they mean to do?"

"I am sure. They did not know that any of the coolies could understand their talk and I heard, master." He of the injured leg spoke with conviction. "Taiyal men—the men with the blue faces from beyond the wire—will be here soon! This machinery will be broken! There will be killing. That much I know. You must move swiftly, master. For those three Japanese will be here even sooner than the men who take heads. I would have come and told you these things before now had

there been any one to bring me. The two with me can be trusted."

Gilman's mind, stunned in that first moment of the coolies appearance, began to function. If he slipped away from the power plant with the three coolies and hid, he could probably insure his safety. But what of the machinery? The injured man had said the Taiyals were launching a raid and that it would be smashed. Trickery and worse was afoot if Komatsu and other Japanese were working with the savages!

His eyes flicked to the watch on his wrist. Nearly ten minutes past twelve. A decision had to be made and Gilman made it instantly. He meant to remain, to protect the machinery and save it if possible.

Even as these thoughts rushed through Gilman's mind, the coolie with the broken ankle had gone on talking.

"The Japanese will come to see if the beer has made you sleep. They spoke of taking you away until after the raiding and the fighting is over. If you would flee I have a hand car waiting on the tracks and another man besides these two to push it. If you stay and fight, then we stay also, though I have a useless leg and in fighting can do little. Nor have we guns to fight with."

"You've done enough," said Gilman swiftly. "Your name?"

"Chong."

"All right, Chong. I think our chance of keeping our heads is better if we fight for them. It is too late to run. Here!" Gilman took the other bottle of beer from the tray and pulled the cap off. "Let your men help you into the room next to this one. Empty the beer and have one of them bring the bottles back to me. Tell him I send him for one of the machine guns at

the guardhouse. Quick now! We've got to handle the Japanese when they show up. Send your other man into this room when you hear sounds of fighting. I'll have need of him."

CHONG grasped the two bottles of beer and hobbled out, assisted by his men. Gilman was all action. He strode after them as far as the doorway and called to the servant from Komatsu's house. The little brown man came on the run. As he reached the American's side, one of Chong's companions returned with the bottles. Gilman seized them and addressed the servant.

"Go to the guardhouse with this coolie. Get a machine gun and ammunition. Be back here with it in ten minutes. It is Komatsu's order."

The servant's widening and astonished eyes told Gilman that he was not in on the plot of the Japanese officers. He pushed the man toward the door of the power house and gestured to the Formosan coolie to follow.

"Make speed!" he snapped.

Once he had seen the pair out of the power plant, Gilman darted back into the room where the tray of food and beer had been left. He stood the empty beer bottles on the table near the tray and dragged up one of the stools. Now he slumped forward, one arm outflung across the table, his head resting on it and his face turned away from the door. He maintained this limp position while precious minutes ticked away.

Time was vital. In ten minutes he could have completed the wiring of the switchboard and turned the current into the barbed-wire fence. Yet to what avail? The Taiyal raiders were probably already over the barrier and hiding somewhere out in the darkness beyond the confines of

the station. If Komatsu had made a traitorous deal with the natives he had undoubtedly told them the wire would be dead from midnight on.

Moreover, Gilman dared not go back to work on the switchboard. The three renegade Japanese were coming here to take him away until the raid had been staged and the machinery smashed. If they found their original plans had miscarried there would be nothing for them to do but jump him openly, and they were three to one. Gilman had to dispose of the Japanese first and by pretending he had drunk the drugged beer he would at least have the advantage of surprise.

He heard the scrape of the outer door of the power plant and the shuffle of feet came to his ears. Then a Japanese voice which he knew as Komatsu's reached him.

"We'll find the American in one of the little rooms." The voice sounded nearer. "Ah! This way. He is here, Hirata. He's sleeping."

Gilman tensed. In his left hand, which dangled between his knees, he gripped his automatic. The three Japanese moved into the room and were almost upon him.

"The action of that drug is rapid," chuckled the doctor, bending over the American. "He will be in a coma for—"

Gilman rose up. His right hand, flung across the table, caught up one of the empty beer bottles as he moved. The bottle fell on Hirata's head and shattered. Under the blow the doctor crumpled without a groan. Gilman's pistol drove out and took Soga full in the face and he, too, went down.

With a heave the American overturned the table upon the startled Komatsu. The Japanese commander was sent reeling up against the

opposite wall. On the floor Hirata was out cold, but Soga, his face streaming blood, was rising dizzily, groping for the weapon belted around his tunic. Gilman's boot caught him under the chin and he collapsed.

The American's automatic swung up and covered Komatsu.

"Put up your hands!" he snapped.

An oath burst on Komatsu's lips. The American's gun was useless. He had rendered it so by having one of his servants unload it. The Japanese swung away from the wall and clawed for his own pistol. Gilman squeezed the trigger, the gun clicked dully and in that instant the game and his life hung in the balance.

He sent the automatic hurtling at Komatsu and leaped over the table. He was into the other with both fists pumping before Komatsu's pistol was half out of the holster. Komatsu was hammered back against the wall. Gilman got home with a solid crack to the jaw and the man was knocked sprawling and lay still.

The American pulled up, breathing hard. It had been sharp and desperate work and it was only the beginning. The coolie hidden with Chong in the adjoining room had appeared. He stood staring in the doorway. Chong, despite his broken ankle, had dragged himself after his companion.

Gilman stooped, got Komatsu's gun, then gathered in Soga's weapon. One of these he turned over to Chong. The doctor, Hirata, was unarmed.

"Have your man find ropes. Tie these dogs up," he ordered the injured coolie.

Chong grinned and flung the order at his companion. In less than three minutes after they had entered the room the Japanese were bound

and helpless. At this point, with Gilman's watch showing twenty-five minutes past twelve, the other coolie and the Japanese servant arrived with the machine gun and ammunition belts from the guardhouse.

The servant gaped at Komatsu and the other prisoners, but Gilman offered no explanation. His movements and orders were swift, precise. He ushered his small force out of the room where the Japanese were captive, closed the door and crossed over to the big, round, metal-protected dynamo. The two coolies aided Chong and the servant carried the machine gun.

THE massive dynamo offered them the best protection. Stretching away from its raised base to the door of the power house was a clear sweep of twenty yards, an alley down which the American could pour a stream of bullets.

They had three automatics with Gilman's gun. Chong had recovered it and taken a few extra clips from the prisoners. The weapons and clips were distributed among the three coolies, and the American took charge of the machine gun. The servant was to help him in keeping the ammunition belts clear and feeding.

Gilman had placed the weapon with the muzzle projecting over the concrete base of the dynamo.

Gilman now had a moment to take stock. There were windows in the power house, but they were high up in the walls and gave him small worry. The Taiyals would attack the place directly. To get at the machinery they would have to come through the door and they would be anticipating no resistance.

The single door to the power plant toward which the machine-gun

muzzle pointed was unlocked. Gilman had left it so. The raiders could get in, but he told himself grimly that a lot of them were not going out of the place again. Outside the station was dark, the local electrical unit having suspended at midnight. Within the power house, however, Gilman had a few working lights, the current furnished by a series of small batteries in one corner.

He turned to Chong.

"The Taiyal men will have only arrows and spears?"

"Nay, master. There will be rifles among them. There has always been smuggling of guns to these tribes up here. The Japanese themselves do it. The three whom we have tied in that little room have doubtless made money in that manner."

"You could prove that against them?"

Chong shook his head.

"No matter," grunted Gilman. "If we beat off the Taiyals and keep our heads I'm taking those three Japanese down to the coast to-morrow and to Taihoku. You'll go with me, Chong. We'll turn them over to men of their own government and tell just what happened up here. When you tell what you heard pass between them I think they will be stood against a wall and shot."

"You are wrong. They will not pay for their treachery."

"And why not?"

Chong shrugged. "I am a coolie and a coolie's word is no good against the Japanese. They are the masters. I will not be believed, nor will you."

"So that's the way it is!" Gilman frowned and compressed his lips. His mouth was a hard, straight line. "In that case I'll——"

Whatever the thought in Gilman's

mind it was not completed. At the other end of the long main room of the power house the door scraped. It was drawn cautiously ajar and an ugly face was thrust inside. The American and his little force had ducked and were well out of sight behind the dynamo.

The eyes in that face at the far end of the room darted all around the interior of the power plant. It was a hideous countenance. Forehead, cheek bones, and the bridge of the nose were tattooed blue. In the knot of black hair on top of the head was a hawk feather.

Now the savage slipped his lean, powerful body entirely inside and stood crouched in a wary attitude. He had a rifle in one hand and a long, curved knife in the other. He uttered a sound that was half hiss, half grunt. Immediately the door opened more fully and a dozen semi-naked figures crowded inside.

Behind these, others blocked the doorway. The leaders pointed at the big electric machines and broke into excited talk among themselves. If they were under the impression that the power house was deserted, Gilman swiftly dispelled it.

THE American took his automatic from the hand of the crippled Chong. He made a curt sign to the two armed coolies. Without warning the three stepped from behind the big dynamo and cut loose. The coolies were no marksmen, but not even they could miss that massed target in the doorway.

From the natives burst wild yells of surprise and pain. They mingled with the abrupt, thunderous reports of the weapons. The long room echoed with an incredible din. Gilman emptied his gun, and as the wave of powder smoke lifted he saw

a half dozen of the head hunters dead or wounded in the doorway. The wounded crawled out into the night and he let them go.

"That took their breath a bit," he chuckled grimly to Chong, handing back the empty automatic to the latter.

Chong shoved a new clip into the pistol.

"But not for long, master. They have courage and they will rush this place."

"Let 'em," grunted Gilman. He had dropped down behind the machine gun and was ready. "They won't go far against this."

Already there was answer to their pistol fire that had caught the Tai-yals knotted in the door. That door, the only entrance to the power house, had been left open by the natives in their mad scramble to get out. Rifles flashed in the darkness outside and bullets began to pour into the building. They clanged against the metal casing of the dynamo, thudded into the stone wall behind and one whining piece of lead ricocheted and raked Gilman's cheek.

He wiped blood away and held his fire. Save for stray, glancing bullets they were well protected. Off in the direction of the guardhouse a machine gun opened up and he sensed that the assault on the power plant would not long be delayed.

It came—a sudden, silent, headlong rush! Yet the savages were shrewd and there was order in the attack. No mob trying to jam through a space too narrow to admit it. They streamed at the doorway in a thin column.

Just as the head of the column swept into the power plant the machine gun hammered. Gilman fired one short burst and another. At the short range those gusts of lead were

deadly. The doorway was instantly a shambles with men down inside and out. The machine gun lifted to a high, stuttering whine. The American ran through the rest of the belt, spraying bullets into the night.

He turned to help the servant insert a fresh belt and in the same instant the window high in the wall behind them caved in with a clatter of glass. Rifles banged out. The servant rolled over. Next to him a coolie pitched down. Naked torsos and ugly faces showed above the window sill.

Propped up against the dynamo, Chong went into action. The automatic in his hand flamed abruptly and the blue, tattooed faces fell away from the window.

Gilman got a fresh belt inserted and sent a dozen shots high through the doorway. Outside there was some rifle fire returned, but that was all. No second attack materialized and there followed silence.

The servant was dead, but the coolie who had gone down revived, showing only a bullet-split scalp. At length Chong spoke to his men and the one with the wounded head climbed to the shoulders of the other and took a cautious look through the broken window. He grinned and chattered down at Chong in his own tongue.

"We have beaten them, master," Chong announced. "He says the Taiyals have withdrawn to the fence. They depart into the forests on their own side."

"Good! They show sense. With that pile of bodies blocking the door and this machine gun, there is only death for them here. We've done a good job. There will be rewards for you and your men."

"But is the task completed?"

Chong nodded toward the room where lay the three Japanese.

"No," said Gilman gravely. "It isn't."

In the heat of the fighting he had temporarily forgotten his prisoners. Striding across to the little room he flung open the door. The three prisoners had regained consciousness; they glared up at him from the floor. Gilman returned their looks and shrugged.

"The Taiyal men are gone. Their attempt to damage the machinery has failed. You three swine will pay for your treachery. To-morrow you go down to Taihoku and I take you before the authorities. Colonel Nurashima will have you shot. I know all the details of your plot and have Japanese witnesses to swear that they are true."

Gilman's last statement was hardly exact, but he had a definite reason behind it, and the three prisoners had no way of knowing how he had discovered their duplicity or whom he could summon as witnesses. Casually the American glanced at the litter of broken dishes and spilled food on the floor, caused when he had overturned the table that held the tray. A sharp-edged carving knife that had been on the tray with a joint of meat was gone. His gaze passed idly over the small window in the wall and back to the Japanese.

"You haven't a chance to escape," he told them. "I'm posting a man outside the door. He'll be armed and one whom you can't bribe. I seriously advise you not to try to escape. In the morning we start for Taihoku."

With that he closed the door, left them and went back to Chong.

"Have your men assist you over there and sit in front of the door," he requested in a low tone. "Pres-

ently those three Japanese will cut themselves loose and climb out of the window. Do not try to stop them. Simply make a sign to me and let me know."

"But, master," the coolie protested. "You mean to let them—"

"I have work to do," Gilman cut him short. "Wave your hand to me when they have departed."

Gilman went to the big switchboard and labored rapidly and expertly for several minutes, keeping one eye on Chong. Shortly the coolie lifted a hand and signaled. The American disconnected a heavy wire and pulled a switch. Then he walked over to where Chong was stationed. The coolie jerked open the door of the little room and Gilman saw that it was empty.

"Master, it was a mistake to let them go," Chong objected earnestly. "You may come to regret it. They would be better dead."

Gilman's face was stony, his gray eyes enigmatic.

"I think," he said quietly, "that justice in this matter will take care of itself."

GILMAN and Chong were in Taihoku by noon the following day. The former immediately hunted up Keller and found him in an agitated state.

"Good grief!" cried Keller. "What happened up there? We've had the news of the raid, but I want the story from you and I want facts."

"All right," Gilman nodded, and gave him facts. "After the coolies and I beat off that Taiyal raid," he concluded, "I talked with those three Jap crooks. Warned 'em against trying to escape, but they didn't know how much evidence I had against them and they got loose and lit out."

"Anyhow, by the time they got to the fence and started over it I'd thrown the switch. The juice was on and they bumped right into it—ten thousand volts. Their bodies were picked up at separate points along the wire this morning."

Keller was aghast, almost wordless.

"We are supposed to appear at the foreign office in ten minutes," he groaned. "Colonel Nurashima and a board of inquiry will be there. Man, we're in a mess! We can't tell 'em what you've just told me. It won't do. Ruin all the prestige the company's built up out here. You don't understand the Oriental mind."

"Don't I?" Gilman smiled wryly. "You let me do the talking at the foreign office. I'm the one they want to see. All I ask is that you won't be surprised at anything I say. At least, don't show it. Come along."

At the foreign office Gilman stood up before Nurashima and a dozen other little, brown officers impressively.

"Gentlemen," he declared gravely. "Through regrettable accident Japan has lost three brave men. Their magnificent courage and zeal for duty led them to their death. They attempted to follow the savages who had fled beyond the wire. In the power house I knew nothing of their movements and I had thrown the full current into the fence."

"They were instantly electrocuted." He paused and swept the long table with his glance. "It is impossible to restore their lives, but with your permission I shall lay before my company to-day a request for a monument to their memory."

Only Keller was aware of the cynical note in Gilman's voice.



COLTS ALTER CASES

By Hal Dunning

CHAPTER I.
PREY FOR POSSES.

THE roar of six-guns broke the evening quiet in Tanks Canyon. Powder smoke wafted out the open door of the sheriff's office as a muffled cry of pain carried along the road. Cowpokes dashed into the open, drawing guns and eager to mix in the excitement. There came a wrathful howl:

"Allen's breakin' loose!" A boyish figure ran from the sheriff's office and disappeared in the gloom. Flame flashed from the shadows when Sheriff Spurlock stumbled into the open, his bloody right arm dangling, his left hand waving a Colt. Then there came a creak of rusty hinges as a stable door was flung wide, a drumming of hoofs as two grays streaked off into the night with a huge dog bounding beside them.

Jim-twin Allen
—a real gent!



Men sprang to their dozing horses. Dust clouded the air. Spurs dug sharply as riders sped up the slope behind the town in pursuit of the escaping outlaw.

The news of "Jim-twin" Allen's escape circulated rapidly. Travelers brought it to scattered cow towns and remote mining camps. Men left their work and strapped on guns.

"Hunt for Allen! There're big rewards on his head. Find him and you'll collect plenty!"

Fresh placards appeared on countless trees, stating the high price offered for the White Wolf's pelt.

A score of times word flashed from town to town that Allen had been captured. But it soon became certain that Allen, in his uncanny way, had eluded all hunters and slipped unseen into far country.

A hundred and fifty miles separates Tanks Canyon from a range of rugged hills staked out in small mine claims. This desolate coun-

try lay silent under a full moon and a clear sky. At widely separated points lights gleamed from shack windows. Riding wearily along, between the trees, a lone rider stealthily avoided these shacks.

He slumped in the saddle, his moccasined feet dangling. His moth-eaten gray jogged along the trail slowly, head lowered. At her side trotted a huge dog that again and again turned gleaming, yellow eyes up at the rider. A second gray ambled behind. They were a slow procession through the black shadows.

"We've got to keep trailin', old lady," Jim-twin Allen urged, while Princess's ears twitched. "They're still gunnin' for us."

A sound among the trees, from the rear, brought up Allen's head with a jerk. His hands went to the butts of his twin Colts as he listened. The silence was disturbed by the pounding of hoofs on the slope below. A rider was coming rapidly along the trail.

Princess became tensely alert. A hostile growl trembled in King's throat. Allen's fingers strayed along the empty loops of his gun belt as he sat motionless. He had no cartridges except those which filled the cylinders of his twin weapons. He dug in his heels and urged Princess quietly along the trail as the other rider came closer.

The hoofbeats ralled like muffled thunder. Allen glimpsed the rider on the slope below, traveling like the wind. Again he kicked his old gray's ribs, and Princess bounded ahead. Allen twisted in the saddle, thumbs drawing tensely across the hammers of his guns.

A sudden blow caught him across the shoulder. A low-hanging limb brushed him backward. Princess bounded on, as Allen pitched to the

rocky trail. A stone drove hard against his head.

The night shadows closed in on him. Unconscious, he sprawled in the shadows.

ALLEN was first aware of light shining dimly upon his face. He rolled his head and felt the softness of a pillow. He heard a growl that seemed to come from far away. He blinked, and tried to raise himself to look for King.

He found himself lying on a cot. His ankles and wrists were bound. Lamplight revealed a square room. A table was in its center, and a man was seated beside it. The man was bending forward, with a gun in his hand leveled at Allen.

His young face was wind-burned, his blue eyes glittered. He said nothing.

Allen remained silent, also. Then he heard King's growl again and he located it behind a closed door. Claws scratched at the panels as Allen sank back. Again he looked at the man seated beside the table.

"No use tryin' to get away this time, Allen," the young man said. "I've cached your guns, and your dog's locked up in the bedroom so he can't get out. Soon as you're able, I'm ridin' you into Lost Spring to the sheriff."

"'Ve you fed my grays?" Allen whispered.

"I've took care of 'em, Allen. You'll be gettin' some grub yourself in a minute—I reckon you need it. It's plumb queer the way this happened. I never thought it was you I was chasin' at all."

"In case you're curious about the man who grabbed you, Allen, my name's Bud Bolton. Me and my partner, Chris O'Kane, run the New Moon Mine up here. It ain't much, but we're makin' it pay, or we was,

until the thieves began stealin'. I thought you was one of 'em who'd been robbin' us. I never even realized you was Jim-twin Allen till I brought you in here."

Allen smiled forlornly. "King must've thought you was goin' to help me," he said, "or he'd have wolfed you pronto."

"He begun snarlin' soon as I got you here, so I locked him up where he can't do any harm. I reckon I played in luck to-night—grabbin' you. I can make good use of the reward money, but it ain't only that I'm thinkin' of. Outlaws like you need stringin' up.

"Once Sheriff Birch grabs onto you, you won't stand a chance of gettin' away again, Allen. You've come to the end of your trail."

"I reckon so," Allen said quietly, closing his eyes.

He looked up again when a door was opened. A woman entered the room, carrying a bowl of steaming soup in one hand and a cup brimming with black coffee in the other.

"Chris, are you sure that's Jim-twin Allen?" she asked.

"No doubt of it, May."

"I'd never have thought so," she answered, her voice kindly. "Why, he's only a boy."

May came closer and gazed down at Allen's freckled face, still finding it difficult to believe him the notorious outlaw. Then, disregarding her husband's protests, she put the soup and coffee on the table and loosened Allen's wrists. Bud Bolton leveled his gun grimly as Allen rose.

Allen ate the soup and drank the coffee avidly. When he finished he looked up at Mrs. Bolton, grinning broadly.

"That sure tasted beautiful. I'm plumb grateful," he said. "I reckon even outlaws 've got to have grub."

"You are Allen?" she asked.

"Yes 'm." His face became wistful. "There's no use tryin' to argue about it."

"It doesn't seem possible!" May exclaimed. "The terrible things I've heard about you can't be true."

"Shucks, I reckon that don't matter. There's plenty of folks who'll enjoy seein' me get hung. I reckon I had to hit the end of the long trail sometime."

May turned to her husband. "Bud, are you really going to take him to Sheriff Birch?"

"Reckon I am. We'll be rich when we collect the rewards on Allen's head. We can sell out our half of the New Moon and go somewhere that's a fit place to live."

"But, Bud, I don't want money that'll be paid as the price of a man's life!"

Bolton shook his head. "Allen's got it comin' to him. If we didn't collect the bounty on his pelt, somebody else would. We're plumb lucky."

Then Bolton stepped forward. "Feelin' equal to it, Allen?" he asked. "No good'll come of wastin' time."

Allen rose to his hobbled feet a bit unsteadily, but he said, "Shucks, I can make it. I'm ready to go, Bolton."

He made no protest as Bolton lashed his wrists together again. Then the young miner untied Allen's ankles and stepped back, leveling the guns. He said grimly:

"Your hoss is still saddled, Allen, so ride her. It ain't far to town. Lucky for you your last trip 'll be short."

May watched anxiously as her husband prodded Allen toward the door with his gun. Allen was just outside when he turned and smiled back at her.

"I'm much obliged for the grub," he said.

She kept a concerned silence, and watched from the doorway as Allen swung into Princess's saddle. Bolton mounted a calico and shifted into position behind Allen. As they jogged off, the woman stood framed in the doorway.

Allen glanced back once. He was leaving King and Honey Boy behind; his only hope was that they would be properly cared for. He gazed ahead again and rode at a steady gait, while Bolton followed. No word was spoken.

The house was out of sight, and a trail winding into a valley lay ahead, when irregular hoofbeats sounded. Allen peered down the slope at a roan which came bounding from among the trees. Its mane was tossing, the stirrups of the saddle swung loosely. It shied toward the trail—riderless.

WHY, that's Chris's hoss!" Bud Bolton exclaimed.

The roan nickered and danced to a stop. Bolton commanded Allen to stay in the saddle, and slipped down. He caught the roan's bridle and, while he leveled his Colts at Allen, ran his hand over the saddle. He felt a sticky wetness, saw dark color on his fingers.

"Somethin's happened to Chris."

Allen's keen eyes were directed at the grassy ground. "The trail leads down over the crick," he said quietly. "I reckon your podner can't be far off."

Bolton remounted his calico. "I've got to find Chris, but I'm takin' you in to the sheriff just the same. You try gettin' away, and I'll plug you. Now, ride ahead!"

Allen obeyed silently. The trail down the slope was easy to follow. It passed across a creek and wound

on. Bolton urged Allen ahead more rapidly, into the valley. They were half a mile farther on when Allen exclaimed:

"There he is—lyin' on the ground beside those rocks."

Bolton could see nothing in the moonlight; Allen's keen eyesight amazed him. A moment of quick riding passed before he saw the dark figure on the ground. Anxiously he forced Allen to ride close. Dismounting, he ran to the still form.

"Chris! Chris, are you hurt bad?"

Allen remained in the saddle, watching. The territory was strange to him but thoroughly familiar to Bolton; he knew that any attempt to escape through the darkness would be futile, with Bolton's horse fresh and Princess as worn as she was. He saw glistening wetness on Chris O'Kane's shirt, and shook his head.

"He's hard hit, Bolton."

Bolton scarcely heard. His partner was lying with eyes closed. He shook the man, and aroused a moaning response. O'Kane's eyelids fluttered; his breath came fast.

"Bud! Bud! It—was—"

He groaned with pain. Bolton supported him. His eyes widened and his lips mumbled again.

"Shields and Coran, Bud. They—done it. I caught 'em—in the—mine."

"Chris, hold on! You sure it was them? Shields and Coran?"

"Sure, Bud."

Bolton stared anxiously at his partner's white face. "We've got to prove it on 'em! Chris, you're hurt bad. Can you hold on till I get you to town?"

"Bud, I'm—goin'."

Bolton's throat went tight. He freed one hand and fumbled in a pocket of his coat. He brought out

an old envelope and the stub of a pencil. He thrust the pencil into O'Kane's trembling fingers, and held the paper against a flat rock he picked from the ground.

"Write it down, Chris. Put it in writin' that they shot you and you caught 'em robbin' the mine. Sheriff Birch knows your handwritin'—he'll know it's the truth."

O'Kane strained with the effort of writing. When his head lolled, Bolton shook him, and he strove anew to finish the message. Soon O'Kane's hand dropped limp.

"Sign your name, Chris, sign it?" Bolton urged.

O'Kane's next effort was his last. He scrawled with the pencil, then sagged back. Bolton thrust the envelope into his pocket, and lowered the man gently. He rose and gazed down, and awkwardly pulled off his hat.

"I'll get 'em for that, podner," he said softly.

CHAPTER II.

BULLETS BAR THE WAY.

ALLEN remained in the saddle, watching Bolton. The young miner unstrapped a blanket and spread it over the still form on the ground. He brought stones and weighted down the covering to keep the body safe from prowling beasts. When he finished, he sighed, then said softly:

"I'll be comin' back, Chris."

Grimly he pulled into the saddle of his calico. His gun came again into his hand as he eyed Allen.

"Ride ahead!" he commanded. "I've got two reasons for wantin' to get to Sheriff Birch now."

"You takin' your podner's message to the sheriff, Bolton?"

"Pronto!"

As Allen dug in his heels, a star-

ting report shook the air. Flame flashed from up the slope. In the moonlight a gun glinted, and a black hat was visible for an instant. A second shot roared out as Bolton turned his horse.

Instinctively Allen's hands jerked toward his holsters; but they were empty, and his bonds were tight. He glimpsed Bolton aiming upward, as Princess whirled. Bolton's gun crashed, and as Allen bounded away his spurs rattled.

"Stay close, Allen, or I'll——"

Another report thundered into Bolton's words. He was in the open, and the last bullet had come from a point distant from the first. Desperately he galloped away. Bullets followed him and ricocheted sharply off near-by rocks.

He raced after Allen, toward a pass that led to a mesa. Twisting back, he saw movements against the slope. Two men were scrambling down. An instant later shod hoofs scraped on rock; two men were giving chase. Bolton fired as he plunged through the pass. Allen swerved sharply, racing Princess through the shadow of the hill.

They were streaking across the mesa when the two pursuers came into view. The ground ahead was rolling, the only possible shelter was behind bushes and clumps of trees. Allen zigzagged Princess sharply, and glanced back. He saw Bolton swaying in the saddle. Almost at once Bolton slipped sidewise, and fell.

Allen turned. The two riders were rushing closer as he dismounted. His bound hands hooked under Bolton's right shoulder, and he dragged the man toward a growth of saplings. Warm wetness covered his hands.

Allen dropped to his knees over

Bolton. "They got you! Your leg's punctured!"

Bolton tried to straighten up. He swung his gun toward Allen and gasped: "Don't try gettin' away!" Then he fell back and the gun dropped from his hand.

"Reckon those skunks 're Shields and Coran, Bolton!" said Allen.

Bolton was lying flat on his back. Allen reached for the gun lying in the grass, but hesitated. His fingers strayed over Bolton's pockets and felt a knife in one of them. He fumbled it out, warily watching the bushes opposite, opened it with his teeth, and sawed the blade against the rope binding his wrists.

Bolton saw his act and struggled to reach the gun, but Allen snatched it up. The young miner sagged again, gasped:

"Reckon you're gettin' away again, Allen!"

Allen's eyes were shining with yellow light. His face was hard as he peered across at the bushes.

"Maybe," he said.

"They'll kill me like they killed Chris if they get the chance! They'll drive May off of the mine and she won't have nothin' left!"

"I reckon that's what they're aimin' to do, Bolton," Allen said quietly.

A shot suddenly crashed from the bushes; the bullet clicked through the wall of saplings. Allen dropped low. He fired once in return, and saw the attackers duck. His eyes gleamed like those of a wolf.

Quietly he turned back. He reached into the pocket of Bolton's jacket. Bolton seized Allen's wrist desperately. Allen crouched stiff, his eyes gleaming.

"You can't take that from me, Allen. I reckon I see it now! You're in with 'em. You'll tear up what Chris wrote and—"

"You're makin' a mistake, Bolton," Allen said quietly. "You never heard of a wolf runnin' with a couple of coyotes. I reckon you can't blame me for figurin' on gettin' away, but there's somebody else I'm thinkin' about.

"I hate the guts of any man who fights a woman, and that's what Shields and Coran are aimin' to do. Mrs. Bolton was plumb kind to me, and I ain't forgettin' it. She wouldn't stand a chance agin' 'em alone. There's only one way of drawin' 'em off of you and provin' they killed O'Kane. I'm takin' that paper, Bolton!"

"Allen, you're trickin' me!"

Allen's shining gaze silenced Bolton. He pulled his hand from the pocket, clutching the envelope upon which Chris O'Kane had scrawled. Quickly he came to his feet. His voice rang out so that it carried across to the men behind the bushes:

"I'm takin' the paper to the sheriff, Bolton!"

He fired once through the saplings, then ran to Princess and jumped into the saddle. The old gray whirled into the open. Bullets sang through the moonlight as Princess streaked off across the mesa.

ALLEN glimpsed Shields and Coran leave the bushes and rush to their horses. As Princess swung along a dry creek bed, they raced after. Fire flashed again from their guns as Allen examined the cylinder of the Colts he had taken from Bolton. Only one cartridge remained in it.

The mesa dipped into a valley, and Allen turned Princess up the slope. The old gray was laboring; the climb drained her strength. Shields and Coran had gained by

the time Allen sped across the crest of a hill and into the rocky flat that lay beyond. He swung along a trail that wound through a jumble of outcropping rocks.

A sheer wall of rock reared up suddenly before Allen, and he was forced to swing aside. A bewildering maze was before him. Princess bounded, working her way quickly past piled rock, but each way gave into more black confusion. The echoes rattled, making the placing of Shields and Coran impossible. He was forced to work his way on blindly.

Another rocky barrier forced him back. Princess spurted into a narrow passage. Then Allen's keen eyes sensed a movement ahead. A shadow moved, and a shot rang deafeningly against the wall. Allen gasped, reining in sharply, and Princess turned. Instantly Allen realized that both ways were cut off.

Shields and Coran were closing down on him from opposite directions. Their familiarity with the flat had enabled them to ride around and block the way. A gun blasted behind Allen again, and almost instantly another crashed behind him. His quick glance about showed him no possible shelter in the passage.

He dropped out of the saddle and crouched. A thumb pressed hard on the hammer of the Colts. There was silence as the two men waited to rush.

They moved suddenly and at the same instant, charging into the passage at Allen. He dropped back against a rock. Princess squealed with fury as the two other horses rushed close. Allen was aiming carefully when firing rocked the air again. His body was jolted by the power of the slug that hit him. His bullet spangled into the ground.

He fell forward and lay still.

CORAN dragged his horse to a quick stop. As Princess danced near him, he shied her away with a swing of his hat. He looked warily at Allen, and his voice rang along the passage.

"Watch him, Rush! He may be playin' possum!"

The moonlight gleamed on Coran's face. His jaw was square and brutal, bristling with a short black beard. Shadows blackened his small, deepset eyes. A scar puckered one cheek and drew a corner of his mouth into a continual leer. His gun was steadied at Allen as he advanced slowly.

At the other end of the passage Shields moved as cautiously. The gauntness of his face gave his features a peculiarly cruel aspect. His evil eyes were slits as he swung from the saddle, watching Allen. He came forward, one slow step after another, until he saw the moonlight glistening wetly across the rock on which Allen sat.

"Reckon we got him," he declared.

He holstered his gun as Coran strode close. He stirred Allen with his boot and laughed.

"Shields, we got to shy back and finish off Bolton," Coran said impatiently. "If he gets to town and tells the sheriff——"

"No matter if he does," Shields answered. "It'll only be his word agin' ours. He ain't got a mite of proof. This kid's got the paper—you heard him say so."

"Get it offn him, then!"

"I'm aimin' to. You keep your head. I reckon you savvy now it was lucky we kept watch on O'Kane. If we'd gone off, the way you han-kered to, we wouldn't 've knowned about O'Kane writin' the message. I'm handlin' this."

"Let's get that paper."

Coran was reaching down toward

Allen when a startled exclamation broke from his lips. The apparently senseless victim of their bullets sprang to life. One bound brought Allen to his feet. His hand was gripping the barrel of his gun, and he swung it desperately. Coran's Colts flashed as Allen leaped upon Shields.

Shields recoiled, his hands snapping holsterward. Allen's fingers gripped his wrist. He flung up his arms, attempting to thrust Allen back. The two men squirmed in a silent struggle as Coran stepped toward them. He swung his gun toward Allen's head just as Allen twisted to see the movement.

Allen tore away and struck out desperately. His fist drove hard into Coran's face. Coran flung his arms around Allen and they fell. Once they rolled over. Coran's hand was still gripping his gun; he whipped it up and struck.

Allen moaned and he went lax upon the rock.

"I warned you he might be playin' possum!" Coran gasped, springing to his feet.

Shields's gun was leveled as he jerked at Allen's outflung arm and turned the little outlaw face upward.

"He ain't playin' possum now!"

The wound in Allen's side was still bleeding; he sprawled limp and unconscious. The two men towered over him, their eyes glittering. At last they holstered their guns.

"Now get that paper!"

Shields fumbled into Allen's pockets. As he did this, Coran picked his hat from the ground, where it had fallen during the struggle, and pulled it angrily upon his head. Shields rose with a paper and glared at it.

"Reckon that's it!"

"What's it say?"

"I caught Shields and Coran robbing our mine and they shot me. Signed, Chris O'Kane." Lucky for us the sheriff ain't ever goin' to lay eyes on this."

"We've got to get rid of it, Shields!"

Shields's answer was to strike a match. The flame caught the paper, and the flaring yellow light shone grimly in the two men's eyes.

ALLEN was dimly conscious of the two men standing beside him. His side throbbed; his head ached dully where Coran's gun had struck. The voices he heard seemed miles distant.

"We've got to finish off Bolton, I tell you!"

"Never mind Bolton. If he ain't finished already, it don't matter. We're headin' for town."

"For town! When maybe Bolton—"

"I told you I'm runnin' this show!" Shields snapped. "There's nothin' to worry about. I've got a plan that'll get us in the clear."

"Birch ain't no hombre to trifle with, Shields. If he—"

"I told you to leave this to me! If Bolton tells his story to the sheriff, it'll be so much the better for us, accordin' to my plan. He won't get nowheres with his story, then no matter what happens later we won't be touched. The mine's as good as ours, now."

"You must have that plan figured out plumb slick to be so sure—"

"I tell you we'll be able to get rid of Bolton later and nobody'll ever think we did it. After that—why, drivin' that woman off 'll be easy. If she don't go of her own accord, she'll turn up missin' some day."

Heels grated on the rock as the two men moved away. Then horse-

shoes rang on the rocks and the two rode off.

Allen raised his head, with a straining effort, and saw them vanish in the shadows beyond. For a long time he lay still, while Princess came close and looked down at him.

At last he gripped Princess's trailing reins and dragged himself up. He tottered, hung to her neck for support, and at last stood. Braced against a rock, he ripped off his shirt, tore it to strips and bound them over the wound.

The cool wind cleared his head, and a measure of strength came back to him. He dragged himself slowly into Princess's saddle. The old gray moved carefully along the passage, seeking her way out. Her head lowered and her nostrils quivered as she followed the scent of the other horses. Soon she came again to the mesa. Then she galloped smoothly and silently while Allen swayed in the saddle.

Lights appeared in the distance: the town of Lost Spring.

CHAPTER III. KILLERS' ALIBI.

ALLEN raised his head dizzily to see shining windows. Princess slowed down, walking uncertainly along the one street through the town. Sitting up straight, Allen glimpsed a small shack located opposite the Lost Spring Bar, and above its door was a sign declaring it to be the sheriff's office.

Allen eased from the saddle, steadied himself, then walked slowly toward the door. He pushed it open to find a shaggy-headed man seated at a desk. As the man turned toward Allen, the lamplight glittered on a star pinned to his vest.

COM-9B

The sheriff jerked up in alarm.

"Say, kid, you're hurt!"

Allen settled firmly on his heels, relieved that the sheriff had not recognized him. He said huskily: "You're Birch?"

"Sure. But you've got to have a doc, kid! You—"

"Bud Bolton—sheriff, he's hurt. He's out on the mesa. You better go out and bring him in."

"Bolton?" The sheriff grasped Allen's arm. "What's happened?"

"Bolton got plugged and his podner got killed. It was done—Allen sucked a deep, painful breath—"by a couple of skunks named—"

His head lowered and he began to topple. Birch's hand tightened to steady him.

"Two skunks named—"

Allen would have dropped if Sheriff Birch had not caught him. The big man lifted Allen and carried him to a bunk. He was pouring whisky between Allen's lips when a chunky man entered the room.

"Chuck, run and get the doc!" Birch ordered. "Get him back here quick. This kid come to tell me Bud Bolton's been shot—and I'm headin' out to find Bolton!"

The surprised deputy trotted up the road toward the home of the town doctor as Sheriff Birch strode out the door. He swung into the saddle. Dust billowed in the air as he sped toward the mesa.

Two men standing just inside the bar watched him ride into the night. Shields and Coran exchanged a quick glance. Without speaking they stepped outside and crossed the road. The door of the sheriff's office was standing open, and through it they could see that the shack was empty, save for the still figure in the bunk.

Coran glanced quickly up and down the road and his hand swung

to the butt of his gun. Shields gripped it.

"Let go!" Coran exclaimed. "We can't take any chances of—"

"You loco fool, you can't plug him here!" Shields snapped. "That kid's sure hard to kill and there ain't no use tryin' it again. I tell you the plan I got—"

"You ain't started it workin' yet!"

"That's because my—" Shields turned toward a rider jogging down the street. "That's because my man wasn't in town. There he is now. We're goin' to have a little savvy with Clayt Thomas, pronto."

"Thomas—"

"Head after me!"

The two men returned to the Bar, following the man who had just left his horse at the hitch rack, as the deputy hurried back to the sheriff's shack with a white-haired man who was carrying a medicine case.

ALLEN became aware of movements and talking around him. The odor of medicines was in the air, and the pain in his side had diminished. He blinked in the lamplight, and looked across the shack toward a bunk in the opposite corner. Two men were bending over another person who lay there.

When the doctor turned away, and Sheriff Birch straightened, Allen saw that the man in the bunk was Bud Bolton. Bolton's wounded leg was bandaged; his face was white with pain. He lay with eyes closed while the doctor left the shack and Birch stepped outside.

Allen was still until Bolton's eyelids fluttered and his head turned. He looked across, saw Allen, and frowned.

"Reckon you're feelin' better now, ain't you, Bud?"

Bolton elbowed up. "Did you—

did you give that paper to the sheriff?"

"They caught up with me, Bud. I only had one bullet and—"

Allen broke off as Birch strode back into the shack. He stopped short, his sharp eyes shifting from the one wounded man to the other.

"I want to know who did this shootin'—and why!" he exclaimed. "I ain't aimin' to let any killers run loose around here. Bud, who did it? You tell me their names and I'll—"

Bolton was eying Allen grimly. "Sheriff, I reckon you don't know who that gent is, over there in the other bunk."

Allen's throat tightened.

"No matter who he is!" Birch boomed. "I'm aimin' to get at the bottom of this. Chris O'Kane killed, and the both of you plugged. Who did it, Bud?"

Bolton asked quietly, "He never told you, sheriff?"

"Him?" Birch jerked a thumb toward Allen. "That kid come in so near dead he couldn't talk. Before he could tell me any names he keeled over. He tried to tell me, but he couldn't. He's a friend of yours I never met up with before, Bud, but he must 've rid through hell to get here."

As though making a sudden decision, Birch turned to the sheriff and talked rapidly.

"Birch, the two skunks who did it 're tryin' to get the New Moon away from me. They killed Chris to-night when he found 'em robbin' the mine, then they tried to kill me. They're due for a hangin', sheriff—Shields and Coran."

Birch's shaggy eyebrows arched. "Shields and Coran? You sure of that, Bud?"

"Certain sure. Chris put it in writin' before he died. I ain't got

the paper any more. He"—Bolton's eyes turned to Allen—"he took it."

"They cornered me and got it from me, sheriff, and burned it up," Allen said quickly.

"Burned it up!" Bolton exclaimed. Birch boomed an oath. "You had a written statement from a dyin' man, and you let it be took away from you and burned up? That's powerful bad. That would 've been strong evidence agin' the killers. What other way 've you got of provin' it, Bud?"

"No other way," Bolton said wearily. "No other way except my word."

Birch turned to the door. "That might be enough, Bud. I'll soon find out. Shields and Coran 're in town. I'm goin' to bring 'em in, pronto!"

BOLTON looked at Allen as the sheriff strode out.

"I can't figure you, Allen," he said quietly. "You come in here hurt bad, to tell the sheriff who killed Chris, when you might 've got away."

"I reckon so," Allen answered.

"Why'd you do it, Allen? I was ready to turn you over to get hung and yet you—"

"I reckon when there's skunks to be exterminated, I plumb forgot about everything else, Bud," was all that Allen would say.

Sheriff Birch tramped back into the shack. Three men followed him in. Shields was the first; Coran was the second. They gave only a glance at Allen and Bolton, and turned to the sheriff. Birch faced them grimly.

"Now, Bud. You say again what you just told me."

"Those two coyotes—Shields and Coran—'ve been robbin' the New Moon. To-night they killed Chris

O'Kane, then tried to kill me. I swear it's the truth, sheriff!"

"What've you got to say to that, gents?" Birch demanded.

Shields's grin widened. "I say there ain't a mite of truth in it, sheriff."

"Bolton's wrong, accusin' us of that," Coran added. "We wasn't anywhere near the New Moon to-night, and we don't know nothin' about it."

"Sheriff, I'm tellin' you the truth!" cried Bolton. "I saw 'em both! So did All—so did my friend. They're lyin' out of it!"

"Steady, Bud, steady," Birch cautioned. "It looks like it's comin' down to your word against theirn, and that makes it plumb uncertain. Again I'm askin' you: Have you got proof of what you say?"

"I had it, but they got hold of it and destroyed it. Chris wrote it out that—"

"But you ain't got anything else, Bud?"

Bolton's face clouded. "No, sheriff. There ain't nothin' else."

The sheriff's eyes had not left Shields's and Coran's hard faces. "Now, you gents," he said firmly. "'Ve you got any way of provin' you *didn't* do it?"

"I reckon we have, sheriff," Shields said quietly.

"Well? What is it?"

"Why, Coran and me, we ate supper over at Clayt Thomas's. We started playin' cards right afterward and kept it up until a little while ago. We just rid into town for a drink. I reckon you can take Clayt Thomas's word for that, sheriff."

"What about that, Clayt?" Birch asked.

"That's right," answered the third man who had entered the shack. "Shields and Coran was at my place

all evenin', so they couldn't 've done what Bud Bolton says."

Bolton's face turned white with fury. "That ain't so, sheriff!" he declared. "Thomas is lyin' the same as Shields and Coran!"

Thomas was a small man with wizened face and shifty eyes. He scowled at Bolton and his jaw hardened. "Go easy on that talk, Bolton," he warned. "I been ranchin' in this country twelve year, and I reckon Sheriff Birch knows my standin'. You—nobody knows much about you. You ain't one to say I'm lyin', and if you said it any other time I'd—"

"Hold on!" Birch ordered. "Hold your tongues, both of you." He turned to Bolton. "'D you see their faces, Bud, when they did it, as you say?"

Bolton's face clouded. "I knew it was them."

"'D you see their faces—clear?" Birch persisted.

"No, sheriff," Bolton admitted. "But they used their guns. Look at their guns and you'll find 'em dirty."

The sheriff nodded. "Reckon I'll do that right now. Hand over your Colts, both of you."

"Why, sure, sheriff," Coran answered, and Shields echoed, "Glad to—it'll help clear us."

Birch inspected the guns. He swung out the cylinders, smelled of the bores, and promptly handed the weapons to their owners.

"Clean as a whistle, both of 'em," he announced.

Shields and Coran holstered their Colts, smiling wryly. Bolton's frown deepened and his eyes blazed with fury.

"Well, Bud?" Birch inquired. "Anything else you got to say about this?"

"I know they wasn't playin' cards with Clayt Thomas!" Bolton in-

sisted. "Why they shot my friend here, too. He'll tell you it was them!"

The sheriff's sharp eyes turned on Allen. "How about that, kid?"

"They sure look like the two gents who threw lead at us, sheriff," Allen answered quietly. "I'm sidin' with Bud."

Clayt Thomas stepped forward angrily. "Look here, Birch. The kid's word is no good, not agin' mine. Who is he, and how come he's mixed up in this? He's a stranger, and what he says ain't worth listenin' to."

"Just the three of you gents was playin' cards, was you?" the sheriff asked.

"Why, no," Thomas answered. "Lanky Nelson sat in with us. If you want to hear what he's got to say—"

Birch stepped to the door. His voice boomed as he called the name of "Lanky" Nelson. Immediately the slat doors of the Lost Spring Bar swung open and a lean man strode out and called:

"Want me, sheriff?"

"Tell me what you were doin' this evenin' after supper, Lanky," the sheriff asked casually.

"Why, I was playin' cards with Clayt and Shields and Coran over at Clayt's. The game broke up just a little while ago and we rid into town for a few drinks—"

Sheriff Birch nodded. "All right, gents," he remarked. "I reckon it's settled. You can leave."

CHAPTER IV. ALLEN'S RUSE.

THREE was silence in the shack as the three men walked out. Bud Bolton remained elbowed up on his bunk, dumfounded. As Birch was closing

the door, hoofbeats sounded in the road outside, and a rider swung out of the saddle near the office door. He stepped in, flapping a dusty hat against his legs.

"Evenin', sheriff. Got a letter for you. Picked it up over at the Forks."

Allen looked out the window as Birch took the envelope and ripped it open. He saw the four men talking together on the other side of the street. Lanky Nelson mounted and began to ride off as Birch made an exclamation.

"Everything starts happenin' at once! Here's word sayin' they think Jim-twin Allen's hidin' out in these parts."

Allen's gaze shifted quickly to the sheriff's face. Bolton peered at Allen wonderingly. The sheriff scowled and tossed the letter aside.

"If Allen's around here, it's my job to go lookin' for him. Nobody's safe while he's on the prod. Now, listen here, Bud Bolton. Seems to me you've made a mistake about Shields and Coran, and if you ain't got anythin' else to say I'm ridin' out to look for Allen."

"Sheriff, they're lyin'," Bolton declared. "They fixed it up between 'em so's—"

"Now, wait a minute, Bud. Clayt Thomas made a good point about that. He's been ranchin' around here a long time, and we all know him. You ain't been here a year yet. You seem like an upstandin' sort, but Thomas's word carries more weight. As for Lanky Nelson, he—"

"Sheriff, they're lyin' all the same!" Bolton persisted. "I reckon everybody knows that Thomas and Nelson 've played cards with Shields and Coran plenty. Shields and Coran 're a couple of sharpers, and they've made big winnin's since they

come to town. I've heard plenty of talk that Thomas owes 'em money—Nelson, too."

"I reckon that's true, but that ain't proof they're lyin'."

"They'd back up Coran and Shields for money. It's a cheap way of payin' off their gamblin' debts, sheriff. Just for agreein' to Shields's and Coran's story, they are—"

"But you ain't got no proof of that, either, Bud," the sheriff declared. "Addin' one accusation to another don't prove the first. Maybe you're right, but till you get solid proof, I can't act agin' 'em."

Bolton sank back hopelessly as the sheriff turned toward the door. Then Birch stopped, halted by Allen's saying:

"Wait a minute, sheriff. I reckon this matter ain't settled yet. There's another way of provin' that Shields and Coran are guilty."

BIRCH scowled. "I warned you, kid, I ain't got any time to waste—"

"You got to listen, sheriff!" Allen insisted.

Again, he glanced out. Lanky Nelson had jogged away, but Thomas, Shields, and Coran were still standing outside the barroom. The rancher was turning to enter the building; Shields and Coran were gathering the strings of their ponies, preparatory to mounting.

"I'm listenin', kid, but you've got to talk fast!" Birch snapped.

"Bud told you about Chris O'Kane puttin' it in writin' who shot him, sheriff. I reckon that'd be proof, wouldn't it—that paper?"

"That'd be proof positive, kid, but you said that paper got burned up."

"You got to move fast, sheriff—before those two skunks get out of

town. They might find it accidental, then there wouldn't be any proof at all. Go after 'em, sheriff——"

"Find what?"

"Go stop 'em, sheriff! Take Coran's hat off of his head. Look in the sweatband and—they're headin' off!"

"What, kid? What're you sayin'?"

"Do just as I said, sheriff!" Allen raised himself painfully. "Look inside Coran's hat and—stop 'em before they leave town!"

Birch, still frowning, looked out and saw Shields and Coran pulling into their saddles. The sheriff stepped out into the road. Puzzled, he called to the pair.

"Get down a minute, both of you," he commanded. "I reckon there's one more point to clear up before you light out. Get down, I said!"

The two men obeyed warily.

"Pass me your hat, Coran!"

"What's ailin' you, sheriff? Wantin' my hat——"

The import of the letter which had been delivered to him still occupied the sheriff's mind. He was eager to ride off in search of Jim-twin Allen. He took another step, snatched at Coran's hat. The two men watched him cautiously as he turned out the stained sweatband.

An exclamation crossed the sheriff's lips. He drew out a folded bit of paper. He flattened it quickly and turned so that the light from his office enabled him to read.

"Bolton's tellin' the truth!" he exclaimed. "You did it!"

ONE second of tense inaction followed, while Birch stood paralyzed with amazement. Shields and Coran faced him uncertainly. The sheriff's exclamation prefaced a quick movement of his hand toward his gun. At the same

instant Shields's and Coran's hands snapped to their Colts.

"Let 'em alone!" Birch roared.

A shot blasted from Shields's six-shooter. His draw was lightning swift, but his aim was poor. The slug ripped through the side of Birch's loose vest as Shields leaped backward. Coran fired a split second later, and the report of his gun rocked into that of Birch's.

The sheriff sprang away, swiftly swinging the hat he still held in his left hand. It slapped hard against the rump of Shields's pony, then Coran's, as Birch fell to a crouch. Both horses bounded away. Again reports rocked the air as Shields and Coran bounded for the shelter of the shadows beyond the saloon windows.

Birch grimly dropped to a half crouch, his legs straddled. His gun blazed again as darkness enveloped the two men. Flame spurted near the corner of the building opposite, and a low moan came from Birch. He took a step forward, tottering. His second step threw him into the road as his knees gave way, and he rolled over in the dust.

Jim-twin Allen, raising himself in the bunk had seen the battle through the open door. He was straining to swing his feet down when he glimpsed Bud Bolton struggling off the other bunk. Bolton balanced on one leg and hopped toward the door, grimacing with pain. He snatched a six-shooter from the sheriff's desk and leveled it through the doorway as Allen drew himself erect.

Again a shot roared from the depths of the shadow across the road. The bullet sang through the open door, close past Bolton's shoulder. Allen gripped Bolton's arm and gasped:

"That's your gun, Bud! It's

empty! Get back or they'll plug you!"

He thrust Bolton aside and took a tottering step through the door. His movements brought a return of the sharp pain in his side. Flattening against the wall, he watched the deep shadow on the other side of the road. Between him and the two killers Sheriff Birch sprawled helpless in the dust.

His fingers closed about the sheriff's gun as Shields and Coran rushed. Each fired a shot at Allen before they grabbed at the pommels of their saddles. Allen's bound carried him away from Birch. He swayed, leveling the gun at the fugitives. His eyes were shining with yellow, his face was merciless, and his voice rang tonelessly:

"Hang on your ears!"

Two more bullets answered his command. Instantly Allen was a weaving shadow—a baffling target. His movements were lightning fast.

Flame and smoke poured from Allen's weapon. The reports were a long, throbbing burst. Mixed with the roar came a shrill scream from Shields, a coughing cry from Coran. Shields crumpled, clawing at his bullet-pierced throat. Coran stumbled to his knees and dropped forward with a red patch glistening over his heart. The dust swirled over them as they lay still.

Jim-twin Allen stood motionless, his eyes still yellow, his face old and sad. Men were beginning to hurry out of the saloon when he turned and walked slowly toward Birch. He stooped, and detached from the sheriff's clenched fingers a crushed paper. In the dim light the scrawled words danced before his eyes:

I caught Shields and Coran robbing our mine and they shot me.

Chris O'Kane

ALLEN staggered into the sheriff's shack and sank upon the bunk as excited men lifted Sheriff Birch and helped him through the door. His right arm was hanging broken. Allen was scarcely conscious of the hubbub as the old town doctor was brought. Quietness filled the shack as Birch's arm was probed and bandaged. Allen rolled his head to look across at Bud Bolton.

"I reckon they're got, Bud," he said quietly.

Birch sat weakly in his chair as the doctor was dressing his arm.

"I'm in a pretty shape to go out huntin' for outlaws!" he boomed. "If Allen's anywheres near here I won't stand a chance agin' him now!"

The sheriff came to Allen's bunk. He took from Allen's fingers the crumpled bit of paper bearing the statement written by the dying Chris O'Kane. He studied it, settling again into his chair, and sighed.

"That's Chris's writin', all right. I'd know it anywhere. He certainly names Shields and Coran as his killers. Kid, I thought you said that paper got burned up!"

"I reckon it did—and it didn't," Allen replied. "I couldn't tell you about it sooner, sheriff, because I wanted to find out what kind of trick Shields and Coran was aimin' to put over on you."

"Kid, you've got me plumb puzzled!"

Allen smiled. "Shields and Coran got me cornered when I was bringin' that paper in to you, sheriff. They knew I had it. I got hit and my last bullet was gone; I knew I didn't stand a chance agin' 'em. So I—"

Allen sighed as the sheriff's eyes studied him keenly. "While I was

lyin' there on the rock, in the shadow, with Shields comin' at me from one side and Coran from the other, I got that envelope out of my pocket. I tore the front and back apart. Then I wrote on the back just what Chris O'Kane wrote on the front. Shields and Coran couldn't see what I was doin'.

"Then I had two papers, one in Chris O'Kane's writin' and one in mine, both sayin' the same thing. I put the one I wrote in my pocket. The other one I folded up and kept in my hand. When Shields and Coran come close, I jumped up and started to fight 'em. I never stood a chance agin' the two of 'em, and I knew it. Before Coran hit me with his gun, I knocked off his hat and fell with it. I slipped the paper Chris O'Kane wrote inside the band of his hat and—"

"By damn!" Sheriff Birch cried. "You sure figured fast, kid!"

"Shucks, I knew they was lookin' for the paper signed by O'Kane. Not knowin' O'Kane's handwritin', they thought the paper they found in my pocket was writ by him, so they burned it. I heard 'em plannin' to make it look like they didn't do it, and I figured it would be better to let 'em play their hand before I played mine."

"You sure proved it on 'em, kid! They got Thomas and Nelson to lie for 'em all right. I'll settle with those two. You stopped that pair of skunks in the nick of time, too. They'd have got away if you hadn't drilled 'em!"

Bolton was watching Allen with amazement pictured on his face. "Gosh, you certainly got that paper through. If you hadn't done it, they'd've got scot-free!"

"I reckoned," Allen said softly, "that couple of skunks needed exterminatin' bad."

Birch was still staring at Allen wonderingly. "Kid, you can handle shootin' irons better 'n anybody else I ever saw. How'd you learn to do that? Who are you, anyway?"

It was Bud Bolton who answered. "His name's—Wilson, sheriff. He's the finest gent I ever met up with—and my best friend."

DARKNESS filled the sheriff's shack. The town was quiet. In his bunk, Jim-twin Allen lay awake, listening. There was no sound from the other bunk.

Allen threw off the blanket that covered him and, grimacing with pain, came to a standing position. He made no noise as he moved toward the door. He was opening it when a soft whisper surprised him.

"Jim Allen."

Allen turned. "You awake, Bud?"

"I haven't closed my eyes all night, Allen. I been thinkin' about you—tryin' to figure you out. I ain't got nowhere. I reckon I'm plumb glad I didn't tell the sheriff who you are, Allen. I meant what I said to him—about you bein' the finest gent I ever knew."

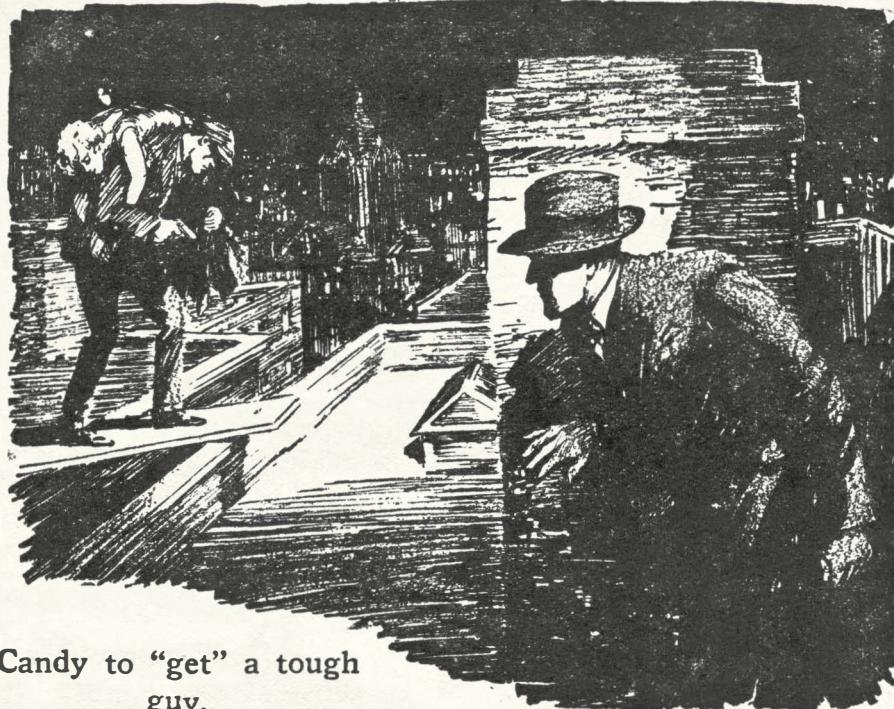
"Shucks, I reckon I couldn't help doin' what I did."

"Come closer, Allen."

Allen moved to the side of the bunk. Bolton's hand extended and something metallic came into Allen's fingers.

"That's the key to the room your dog's locked in, Allen. You'll find your other gray out in the stable. I reckon all I can say is I hope you never hit the end of your trail."

Bolton's hand gripped Allen's. Allen's eyes were sad as he turned and sidled through the door. There was silence for a moment, while Bud Bolton listened. Then on the night wind, came the sound of a horse galloping along the road.



Candy to "get" a tough guy.

LICORICE DROPS

By George Harmon Coxe

THE taxi pulled out from the curb. Detective Sergeant Ray Sparman, having directed the driver to headquarters, settled himself in one corner of the seat and glanced at the wide-eyed young woman beside him.

His alert blue eyes observed the dark-haired girl; tall and slender—too slender, Sparman thought, as though the smartly plain clothes she wore had taken much of a small salary that should have been spent for food. Her attractive face had a pinched, tired look, but the clean-cut chin was firm.

"A game kid," Sparman thought,

and looked out of the lowered cab window.

Darkness was closing in rapidly on the early-summer evening. The streets were alive with traffic. Roadster tops were down; sedan windows were lowered as every one sought to take advantage of the fresh coolness of the evening.

The cab stopped at the corner of Charles and Boylston Streets. Sparman saw the traffic light was against them. He had just turned to look again at the girl when it happened.

He felt the cab tilt slightly under some new weight. A rough voice, low yet clear, rang in his ears.

"Hold it!"

Sparman quickly turned his head. Framed in the lowered window was the head and shoulders of a chalky-faced, pale-eyed youth. In a thin hand a snub-nosed automatic was steady. Over the man's shoulder, Sparman caught a quick glimpse of a dirty-faced driver of another taxi, crowded close. Sparman went rigid for an instant. Then he inhaled slowly and inched his right hand toward his hip.

"Hold it, copper!" The voice was sharp now. "Hold it, or you'll have a dead doll in your lap."

Sparman's hand stopped. He heard the door at the other side of the taxi open. A dark-skinned man with a felt hat pulled low, sidled into the cab, dropped to the seat on the other side of the girl, pressed a gun against her side.

The traffic light flashed green. Gears meshed hurriedly. The thin youth opened the other door, pulled out a side seat and dropped into it, facing Sparman.

"Get goin', punk!" he snapped to the driver. "Out by Jamaica Pond." He reached toward the detective's pocket.

Sparman's muscles tensed. The youth sensed this and barked:

"One screwy move and she gets it!"

Sparman relaxed, felt his gun withdrawn, saw it disappear in the youth's pocket. A coldness swept over his body as bitter thoughts whirled through his mind.

TWO days before, the Automatic Manufacturing Co.'s paymaster had been murdered and a pay roll of twenty-six thousand dollars snatched. The policeman who was the guard had been left for dead with three slugs in his body. The only other witness, Ruth

Borland, who had seen the whole show from an office window, now sat beside him.

The police went looking for Louis Maier, found him, slapped him in jail. Within twenty-four hours he was out on twenty-five thousand dollars bail; the wounded policeman's statement had been incoherent, and the girl had not yet been found.

Sparman had just located her, was taking her to spend the night at headquarters so she would be safe for the grand jury, which met the next morning. With the girl as witness, they would indict Maier so he could not be bailed. By the time of his trial the policeman and the girl would see that he got the chair. Now—

The cab was stuffy—stuffy with the stale, hot smell of whisky breaths and licorice. A momentary feeling of weariness settled over Sparman. Usually there was an air of competence about him that suggested he was put together in one piece of good, sound stuff. He was young for a detective sergeant, called a "comer" by his superiors.

He laughed as he thought of the word, and there was a chilled harshness in the laugh that echoed through the cab. The man in front of him stiffened, the trigger finger curled. Then he grunted and relaxed.

These two men, Sparman realized, were the imported gunmen whom Maier had hired to do the job with him. Ironically enough, he now sat with the three people he most wanted, and he was helpless to hold them. The girl had trusted him—

"Pull up here!"

The command to the driver checked Sparman's thoughts. He looked out as the cab stopped. They were by Jamaica Pond, in a parklike section of the city. Across the Pond

traffic was heavy—pleasure traffic. Any taxis that passed would have fares. Unless he could pick a ride it would be a mile walk back to Huntington Avenue.

The youth with the automatic opened the cab door and backed out. "Come on, copper," he sneered. "A little exercise'll do you good." Then to his partner, "Watch her, Manny."

On a sudden impulse, and under the cover of darkness, Sparman slipped a leather-covered identification card from his vest pocket. He found the girl's hand. It was damp, cold. He pressed the card into her fingers, squeezed the hand reassuringly. An answering pressure rewarded him. Then he got out.

The youth escorted him a few feet down the road and said:

"Get wise to yourself, punk. The girl'll be O. K. We'll send her on a little trip—unless you crowd us. That would be just too bad—for her."

AN hour later Sparman got out of a taxi in front of Captain Farrel's house, paid the driver and dismissed him. He stood at the curb for a moment, and mentally checked his decision.

He couldn't go back to headquarters with his story—not with a flock of reporters around. They had known he was going for the girl.

The simple daring of Maier's men would ruin the case against him, would put Sparman back on a beat. But there still was a chance and Captain Farrel was the man to see. He crossed the sidewalk and rang the door bell.

A heavyset man in house slippers opened the door. He was almost entirely bald and his big nose was like a beacon staring out of a reddish face. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words died on his lips as the

grim-faced detective pushed into the hall.

"What the hell's the idea?" growled Farrel. "What's up?"

Sparman stepped into the living room, spun about and told his story to the astonished captain. When Sparman finished, Farrel swore, then paced the floor.

"You been to headquarters yet?" he snapped.

"No. The newspapers—"

"You're tellin' me," Farrel stopped pacing and faced Sparman.

"Why didn't you take a chance with those two rats? There ain't a man on the force that's as quick with the gun as you are."

"Maybe. But I couldn't be quick enough to save that girl. I might've got one of 'em; with a miracle, I might've got both. But not even a miracle would've saved her. She'd been out like a light. Then where'd we be?"

"Maier'll wiggle out of this if she don't testify. The cop's testimony won't be enough. Maier'll have a dozen witnesses to give him an alibi. He's got the smartest lawyer in town. But with that girl he's a goner."

Sparman snapped out a curse. "Suppose I'd been heroic and shot it out in the cab? There'd been three dead witnesses, maybe a dead cop. Maier'd give you the laugh."

"The papers'll say you were yellow," said Farrel.

"What do you think?"

Farrel looked up with a peculiar expression, as though he had just realized his accusation. He stepped over to the detective and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be a sap," he snorted. "I know you. You got brains—and you got nerve. That's why I've been watchin' you. We need men like you on the force, Sparman."

"It's a rotten break. It'll be tough on both of us, I guess. They've been riding me lately, and if I let you handle this alone and you don't come through, the papers'll have me hung for complicity in the job."

He held up his hand as Sparman started to speak. He caught the detective's glance, and a slow grin twisted his lips.

"But what the hell? Those newspaper birds have been doing this same thing for years and they haven't been able to hang one on me yet." He slapped Sparman's shoulder. "Got any ideas?"

"I want a gun, a car, and a couple of men," said Sparman, his eyes glinting.

"What're you—"

"I got a hunch. You know Maier always worked alone. He fingers a job, hires a couple of outside gunmen, pays 'em off in cash and ships 'em out of town. This job was done the same way, and I'm the only one who's seen these two guys.

"I think they'll hole up here in town for a couple weeks where they can watch the girl. I got the number of the driver in my cab. We'll get him up here."

"What good's that gonna do?"

"Plenty. The cab those two birds sprung from was a City cab, just like the one I had. My driver ought to know the other fellow. We'll get him, find out where those killers started from—at least we'll know the district. Then I got a couple other little things that may help."

Farrel whistled softly. "Hell," he grunted. "Why didn't you say so?"

Sparman grinned. "I wanted to find out whether you were with me on it, or whether I'd have to play it alone."

Farrel snorted disgustedly as he went to the telephone.

AT eleven o'clock a dirty-faced, tousle-headed taxi driver stood in the center of Farrel's living room and awkwardly fingered his cap. Sparman had located his own driver without trouble, and as he had hoped, this man had recognized the driver of the killers' cab.

Sparman knew this was his man. That one brief glimpse of the driver over the gunman's shoulder had done the trick. The driver was stalled.

"You got me wrong," he whined. "I don't know nothin' about it. You got me mixed up with some other guy."

"Forget it!" rapped Sparman. He glanced at Farrel, then at the two plain-clothes men who stood by the door. "You're the guy. I want to know where you picked up these men; how you found me."

"Listen—" the driver began.

"You listen! You're tangled up in a murder. For all I know you're mixed up in that pay-roll job. So speak your piece or I'll slap you in the can."

The driver gulped, his face paled. "They said they'd bump me if I squawked."

"Well, make up your mind!" Sparman's tone was relentless, and the driver blurted out:

"We were down on Chestnut Street looking for some dame when they spotted you. They waited until you came out of the house with the girl, told me to follow you."

"I didn't know what it was all about until they told me to pull up alongside you at Charles and Boylston. I saw one guy jump your cab; the other one jammed a gun in my neck and slipped me ten. 'Keep your mouth shut about this,' he said, 'or it'll be curtains.' That's all I know, honest."

"Where did you pick them up in the first place?" growled Sparman.

"Memenway and Boylston."

"Now we're gettin' some place."

The driver said: "Now can I go —you ain't gonna pinch me?"

"If your story's O. K., you're clear," said Sparman. And as the relieved driver backed out of the room Sparman turned to Farrel.

"We got a start now." He looked at the two plain-clothes men, then back at Farrel. "I'll take Flynn and Cotton. Before morning we'll have that girl back—alive."

"You got till ten in the morning." Farrel scowled. "Better check on Maier. We've had a man at the front and back doors of his apartment house since they sprung him this morning. Up till two hours ago he hadn't left the place. But check it."

Sparman nodded and left the room with the two plain-clothes men. Out in the police car, Cotton got in behind the wheel and Flynn sat in the rear with Sparman. By the time they had reached the corner of Hemenway and Boylston Streets, Sparman had explained what he expected to do.

As he got out of the car he said: "Maier only lives a couple of blocks from here. You go down and talk to the boys who are watching the place. Find out everything you can, then come back here and pick me up."

Sparman watched the car roll down Hemenway Street. He knew the district well. An old apartment-house section—cheap, and respectable enough after a fashion.

TRAFFIC on Boylston Street had thinned out. An almost empty street car ground its way toward Massachusetts Avenue; a man was trying to bump his car

out of a parking space; an idle group of students from the Conservatory strolled out of the corner drug store. He watched them a moment, then went inside.

At the soda fountain he lighted a cigarette and ordered a soda. "Got any licorice candy?" he asked.

A scrawny clerk plopped the drink down on the counter and said: "Yeah."

"Sell much of it?"

"No."

Sparman swallowed part of his drink, puffed on the cigarette.

"Sell any to-day?"

The clerk laughed. "Yeah, just after supper. Funny, you asking about it."

"Yeah." Sparman inhaled, surveyed the end of his cigarette. "Do you deliver things from this store? I mean, do customers call up for cigarettes, ginger ale, and that sort of thing?"

"Sure. We deliver in the neighborhood."

"Picked up any new customers for this delivery service in the past two weeks?" Sparman flashed his badge. "Think hard now, get it straight."

The clerk's eyes widened. He swallowed once. "I hardly know who—"

"Come on!" snapped Sparman. "Don't stall."

"Well, there's only one I can think of that's regular." The clerk's face brightened. "And say. That's the guy that gets the licorice drops."

Sparman grinned, though his eyes were cold. "What's the address?"

The clerk yelled an inquiry to another man, hidden by the prescription counter. "Hey, Stan, what's the address of that fellow that gets the ginger ale and the licorice drops?"

Sparman caught the address of a top-floor apartment near by. He thanked the clerk and left the store.

The police car was waiting for him, and as he piled into the back seat he said:

"Drive down to the next block." Then, "What'd you find?"

"Nothin' much," said Flynn. Kellogg was out front. He says Maier ain't been out once, but he's got a front apartment and he's seen him through the window several times."

"What floor is he on?"

"Top—the fourth."

Cotton could add nothing to this and Sparman said: "I gave that girl my identification card on the chance that she'd know enough to drop it where it would do some good. If any one found it he'd turn it in. It wouldn't be hard to learn where the finder found it."

The car stopped. He ordered: "Leave the bus here on the corner. Go down to No. 344. See if you can find that card—just on a hunch the girl was wise. I'll meet you there."

The three men got out. Instead of turning down the street with Cotton and Flynn toward No. 344, Sparman walked on down to an alley that bisected the block. He turned in here, waited until his eyes became accustomed to the darkened canyon, then walked down its length.

THE alley was not more than eight feet wide, and unpaved. Apartments backed up to it throughout its entire length and most of these rear walls were flush with the edge of the alley. Here and there a lighted window showed; but most of the windows were dark. Sparman went through to the next street, then came around to No. 344.

Flynn said, "We found it," and passed Sparman the card.

"Where?"

"In the gutter right in front of the house."

Sparman grunted with satisfac-

tion. "The kid knew her stuff. It checks with the licorice."

"What?" Cotton asked.

Sparman said: "We're getting hot. Maier's apartment is only a block away—beyond that alley back there. He's got these two birds in close where we can keep tabs on 'em. Maybe they've got the girl; maybe they haven't."

He cocked his head and looked up at the weather-stained façade of the brick apartment house. Two lighted windows on the top floor were the only sign of life.

"That'll be our apartment," he said. "And it looks like those birds are still up." He took out the gun Farrel had given him, spun the cylinder and put it in his coat pocket. "Cotton, you go back in the alley and watch this place. Flynn, you stay here and keep your eyes on those windows. I'm going up."

"Alone?"

"Sure. This is a personal job now."

As Cotton vanished around the corner, Sparman went up the steps to the darkened vestibule. The door was unlocked and a moment later he was climbing the steep stairs.

On the top floor he stopped and surveyed the narrow hall which ended in an eerie shadow. The air was stuffy, with the stale odor of a thousand greasy meals from the floors below. There was a door on his left bearing the metal number 4-A; opposite this was 4-B.

He moved past these doors to a spot midway between the front and back of the house. A dusty skylight was over his head. He pursed his lips thoughtfully and continued to the rear of the hall, looking for a ladder.

The hall was bare. He dismissed the idea, took out a bunch of keys

and attacked the rear door of apartment 4-A. Seconds later he was in the kitchen, standing motionless with his back against the door, listening.

He saw the dim outline of a doorway leading to a hall and moved toward it. At the other end of the passage he could see the worn furniture of the lighted living room. On tiptoe, and with his back against the wall, he sidled down the hall. He stopped for an instant, then stepped into the living room with his gun up.

A heavy table, littered with magazines, glasses, and bottles stood in the center of the room. Beside it, slumped down in a chair was a man. An open newspaper shielded his face. Sparman smelled licorice, caught the smacking sound of chewing. He stepped forward.

"Up with 'em!"

The man whipped the paper aside and was on his feet with catlike quickness. His dark-skinned features were convulsed. Slowly his hands moved upward.

"Hello, copper," he leered. "You ought to knock before you come in."

"Maybe you're right, Manny," Sparman moved toward the grimy front windows and raised one of them, "but I forget sometimes." He whistled through the open window and glanced quickly into the street below. Flynn moved out of an opposite areaway and sprinted across the pavement.

NOW what, copper?" Manny's thin lips twisted in a sneer as the three men moved back into the living room ten minutes later.

Sparman and Flynn had searched the apartment, had found nothing to tip them off to the girl's whereabouts. They had forced an en-

trance into the other apartment on that floor and found it untenanted. Sparman ignored Manny's taunt and addressed Flynn.

"I thought we might find her here," he said thoughtfully. "That would've made it simpler."

Flynn swore bitterly. He was a husky fellow and anger lined his big face. "Why don't I take a sock at this guy? Why don't we take him down to headquarters and put the screws on him? He'll talk."

"I doubt it." A frown slashed across Sparman's forehead. "And without the girl, he'd be out in twenty-four hours. Not even the cop could identify him—Maier's the only one he was sure of."

"That's a good story," taunted Manny, "stick to it."

Flynn grabbed the thin gunman by the throat. He spun him around and drew back a big fist.

Sparman snapped: "Don't mark him up. Put the cuffs on him." When Flynn obeyed, he continued. "We're pretty sure of one thing. Wherever this guy's partner is—the Borland girl'll be with him. We got some time; I'm gonna sit tight here and see what happens."

As he spoke, Sparman saw a brief flicker of fear cloud Manny's dark eyes. Then it was gone and he continued:

"You go back downstairs—"

"But—" interrupted Flynn, as a bewildered expression swept over his face.

"Listen!" snapped Sparman. "If this other bird comes here, he'll come from the girl. I want to know how he comes. If they've hidden her near by, he'll be walking. In that case, nab him or follow him upstairs."

"But if he comes in a taxi— I'll be sitting by the window. I'll see the cab and be ready for him. Your

job'll be to let him come up, but grab that taxi. We want to know where he comes from.

Manny laughed very sarcastically. "You think of things, don't you?"

Sparman sneered. He pushed a chair up to the window, pulled Manny over by the wall so that he could watch him as well as the street below, and motioned Flynn from the room. He heard the door close behind him as he settled himself to wait.

JUST how long he sat there, Sparman didn't know. He saw Flynn come out on the pavement and take his station in the opposite areaway. He held his gun on his handcuffed captive, but his eyes were almost constantly on the street.

"Drop it!"

Sparman froze. For an instant he hesitated. The voice came from the apartment door behind him, and there was death in the tone. He let the gun slide from his hand and turned around.

The pale-eyed, white-faced youth who had jumped his cab, stood in the open doorway. The automatic in his hand was steady and his lips were curved in a gloating grin.

"Nice goin', Sam," Manny approved.

Sam said, "Yeah," carelessly, then, "But what the hell kind of a game is this?"

Manny told briefly what had happened. "We got to scram. This guy's got ideas and it's the heat for us if we don't put him out."

He looked at the handcuffs on his wrist and said: "Your pal's got the keys, copper. Call him up here."

Sparman got up from his chair and watched the two gunmen with bleak eyes.

Manny said: "Get behind the door,

Sam. When the dick comes in the room, crack down on him with your rod. He's just a dumb cop. When he wakes up he won't know what it's all about. And that'll clear the front door. Then we'll take this wise guy for a ride. He knows too much to be runnin' around loose."

Manny grinned. Sam circled around behind the motionless Sparman and jammed the gun in the small of his back.

"Call that dick up here," he rapped. "And if you pull anything screwy you'll get a back full of lead."

Sparman pulled the curtain aside and whistled. He saw Flynn come out from the areaway and start across the pavement. A harsh laugh of triumph sounded in his ears from behind him. Sam jabbed the gun in his back and pushed him away from the window toward the center of the room.

Sparman stood with his hands hanging loosely at his sides; every muscle in his lean body was tensed and ready for action. For the second time that evening he was in a jam.

His muscles set. He spun side-wise and half twisted his body to the right. Then the stab of hot lead slashed across his ribs as the roar of the gun filled the room. Then his hands were on the gun.

He jerked the gun to one side as it roared again. Flame scorched his wrist. The fingers of his left hand twisted the gun away from his body. He cocked his right hand and hooked the fist flush to the astonished's Sam's jaw. The man's knees sagged. Sparman jerked the gun from nerveless fingers just as Manny's body crashed into him, hurtled him to the floor.

He rolled to one side and was on his knees covering the handcuffed,

wild-eyed Manny when Flynn burst into the room.

An incredulous look flooded the big detective's face. His mouth gaped, he gulped and stammered:

"What—where'd this other guy come from?"

Sparman ignored the question. "Take the bracelets off this fella," he rapped. "Cuff the two of 'em together." He felt gingerly of his side. He could feel the warm trickle of blood inside his shirt, but he was not seriously injured. The slug had only dug a furrow along his ribs.

He strode across the room to the telephone as Flynn handcuffed the cursing Manny to the wrists of the still unconscious Sam. A moment later he had his number and was barking staccato commands into the mouthpiece:

"I want a squad car—about four men. Get a warrant for Maier's apartment. Be there in a half hour and pick up Captain Farrel on the way. . . . No, you won't have to sneak in. Give him the siren when you pull in front of his place. Bust right in on him. There's a man at the back door."

SPARMAN looked at his watch —eleven fifty. He glanced over at the smiling Flynn, who sat in the big chair in the center of the room and covered the two glowing gunmen.

"It's about time for the pay off—if I'm right," he said. He took out his gun, spun the cylinder and cuddled it in his hand. "Take a look in the hall, Flynn," he continued. "See if you can find a ladder out there."

Flynn looked surprised and said: "I looked out there the first time I came up. There was no ladder out there then."

"I know," grunted Sparman. "But

that was then; this is now. Take a look."

Flynn left the room and came back a moment later with his eyes popping. "What the hell!" he said. "That ladder wasn't out there—"

Sparman grinned. "Watch these two birds!" he rapped. "I got things to do."

He left the room and found the ladder in the back of the hall. He carried it to the skylight, propped it against the casing, and soon was standing on the flat roof.

There was no moon, but chimneys and radio aerials made weird silhouettes against the clear sky. Farther downtown lights winked at him.

The gravel on the roof crunched noisily under his feet as he walked to the rear of the house and peered down on the three-story building opposite. Below, in the alley, he made out the shadowy form of Cotton.

Then a flash of light from a rooftop off to the left caught his eyes. He crouched behind a chimney and glued his eyes on the spot. For several seconds he could make out nothing, then he saw a dark blotch moving hurriedly toward him—on the other side of the alley.

The blotch took shape, became a man carrying a sacklike burden on his shoulder. The man stopped at the edge of a roof and put down his burden. He picked up a plank and slid it out across the alley to the roof of the apartment adjoining the one where Sparman waited.

Sparman's nerves tingled as the man again picked up his burden. He caught his breath and held it as he watched the short, perilous dash over that plank. Then the man was coming toward him.

The fellow gained the edge of the roof where Sparman waited. There

was a two-foot rise. The man cleared it with surprising agility. Sparman saw the set of the shoulders, the long arms, the neckless head. Louis Maier moved steadily toward him.

Sparman slipped his .38 from his pocket. Then he saw a brief flash of blue steel from Maier's right hand. His lips tightened and he hugged the chimney. The steps became louder. He could hear Maier's labored breathing. Then the man slipped past, three feet from the chimney.

Sparman took one long step. His left hand shot out and fastened on Ruth Borland's shoulder. He yanked the unconscious girl toward him.

Maier staggered, cursed in surprise. The girl's body slipped from his shoulder. Sparman saw the man recover and whirl toward him. He thrust the girl away, let her body slip to the roof as his finger squeezed the trigger.

The shots seemed to roar in unison. Yet Sparman knew his own shot was a watch tick ahead. This time there was no shock of hot lead—just a quick twitch at the collar of his coat.

SPARMAN grinned at Captain Farrel while the ambulance interne strapped up his side, fifteen minutes later.

"There's not much more to tell," he said. "I located these birds by some licorice drops and that identification card the girl dropped.

"But I was still fogged up about where she was until this guy, Sam, stuck me up. That made it easy. I knew he didn't walk in downstairs—Flynn would've got him; he didn't come in a taxi. There was only one other way: Over the roofs. And why?

"A hunch told me he came from Maier's and that the girl was with him. It was a swell idea. He'd been watched all day, hadn't left the house or had any callers. It was a cinch no one would look for the girl there when he hadn't even been out.

"That's where they took her when they snatched her from me. They had a plank on each side of the place where they crossed the alley so they could move either way. They had a ladder on this side. And the reason I didn't find it at first was because Sam had pulled it up to the roof when he went to Maier. When he came he brought it in."

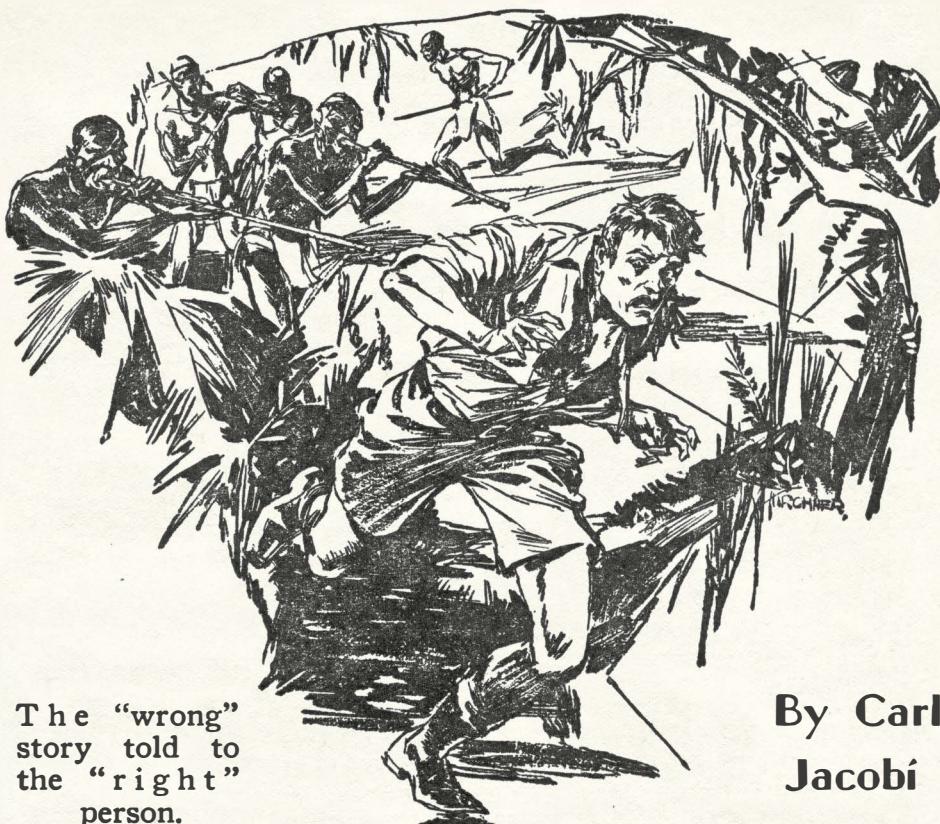
Sparman felt of the bandage at his side and slipped on his shirt. "I could've gone over the roofs to Maier. But I was afraid for the girl. If I crowded him he might've knocked her off.

"So I thought I'd give him a chance to run for it. I figured he'd have time to bring her over here after he heard your squad car out front—bring her over here and get back before you could break in his apartment." Sparman grinned. "And I guess he figured the same way."

Captain Farrel grunted. "A swell job—locating the two torpedoes," he said. "If you hadn't found 'em, Maier would've been set. But now"—Farrel cocked one eyebrow—"let's see how much riding these newspaper guys are gonna do. We got all three of the birds that shot the paymaster. And if Maier lives, we got our witness. As soon as she sleeps off that dope she'll be O. K."

Farrel rubbed his hands and a smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes as he turned to the plain-clothes men at the door and said:

"All right. Send those reporters in. We'll give 'em something to chew on."



The "wrong" story told to the "right" person.

By Carl
Jacobi

CROCODILE

SQUATTING before his tent, McNair heard the sounds from the shadows beyond the fire at the same moment that the Dyaks did: the thump of a discarded pole and the soft swish as a sampan nosed into the ooze of the river shore.

In silence he got to his feet, loosened the revolver in his coat pocket, kicked another piece of wood onto the dying flames. Visitors, white or native, were an occasion this far up the Mahakam in Borneo.

A moment later the reeds parted and a heavy, hulking white man strode into the clearing. His hat was gone, his clothes hung in tat-

ters, and there was a fresh scar across his left cheek.

"Gaynor," he said huskily. "Steve Gaynor. Come down from the Taban territory. Been on that blasted river six days. Can you give me a drink and somethin' to eat? I'm starved."

The man had been through hell, that was apparent. Six days alone in a sampan under a Borneo sun isn't any picnic.

"Come into the tent," he said. "I'll see if I can fix you up."

He led the way under the mosquito flap, lighted a carbide lamp and placed it on the folding table. Then he produced a whisky bottle.

"You look as though you were done up," he said. "Help yourself to some of this. I'll have something more substantial for you soon."

The stranger nodded and lost no time in complying. He reached for the whisky, fastened his lips around the neck and drank until he was gasping. McNair called to a Dyak standing outside the doorway, gave an order rapidly in Malay. "And hurry," he said. "The white sahib is hungry."

"Yes, tuan."

Then McNair moved over to an opposite chair, sank into it and crossed his legs slowly.

"Quinine?"

Gaynor shook his head. "No. I've been living on the stuff. How far to the coast?"

"About four days."

"Better than I thought. I figured five. Must've passed the last village in the dark. Either that or I was sleepin'."

A moment later the newcomer was wolfing a bowl of steaming rice. For a long time neither man spoke again. McNair got a pipe out of his coat pocket and packed it while he watched the man eat.

In the glare of the lamp Gaynor was not a lovely sight. His face was unshaven, stained with sweat and dirt, and livid in some places with insect bites. The eyes were deep-set, close together, and the mouth was a thin-lipped sullen line.

STEADILY Gaynor ate, until the dish before him was empty. Then he looked up abruptly and wiped his mouth.

"Seen you somewhere before," he said. "Used to be up in British North, didn't you, working for the Company? Surveyor or somethin'? What doin' down here?"

A frown crept across McNair's

bronzed face as he struck a match and moved it back and forth over his pipe.

"I'm still surveying," he replied as cordially as he could. "For a railroad. The Dutch are planning to run a narrow gauge through here in a couple of years. And you?"

"Me?" Gaynor snorted, and reached for the whisky. "Don't know me, eh? Well you would if you stayed in civilization long enough. Collecting's my racket—wild animals. Catch 'em alive, haul 'em back to the coast and sell 'em to an agent in Singapore. Ever hear of the Sintang python?"

"I don't believe so." McNair puffed slowly and shook his head.

"I caught that. Biggest snake ever come out of Borneo. Lost three natives getting the thing in a cage." He leaned back heavily, drew a dirty package out of his torn shirt and lighted a cigarette. "But it's too dangerous," he continued, "and there's not enough returns any more. I'm changin' my line to somethin' more profitable—rocks!"

McNair glanced across the table curiously. "You mean geology—"

"I mean jewels—especially emeralds. Got interested in 'em only a week ago. Easy to get, easy to hide through the customs, and big money."

"To-day's the fifteenth, ain't it?" he went on, helping himself to another drink. "That means near six weeks I been in this blasted jungle. Left Samarinda July 1st, coming up the Mahakam with twelve natives and a complete outfit. Went as far as I could navigate and crossed over into Taban country. Got a tiger and a black leopard, then had to leave everything and come back alone. Barely made it, too."

"Dyak trouble?" the surveyor

asked. "There's been quite a lot of it lately."

"Dyaks and everything else." Gaynor hiccuped. A deep flush had entered his cheeks, and it was clear that if the man drank any more he would be intoxicated. He leaned back now, studied the glowing tip of his cigarette before he spoke. Then he said:

"It's quite a story, stranger. Maybe you wouldn't be interested. Or even if you were, maybe, since you're workin' for the government — maybe you have a habit of passing things you hear along to the police."

McNair shrugged. "I'm surveying for a railroad," he said coldly. "My relations with the government go no further. Suit yourself."

FOR a moment Gaynor sat in deliberate silence, staring hard across the table. His small eyes inspected McNair critically. His mouth opened revealing yellow teeth, and closed again. Then he slapped both hands flat on the table and grinned.

"All started with a green-livered kid I met in Samarinda," he began. "Bloke called himself Fielding. That was his first name. He never did tell me the rest. Funny guy, wore glasses and always had some kind of a charm hangin' around his neck—miniature horseshoe. He came up to me at the river jetty just as I was startin' upcountry.

"'You're Steve Gaynor,' he says, in a soft voice. 'Aren't you?'

"'Sure,' I says. 'What about it, Baby-face?'

"'Steve Gaynor, the famous collector of wild animals? I want to go with you.'

"Just like that, he said it, as if I was takin' a pleasure cruise. A kid, mind you, all dressed spick-and-span

in that hole. Then he argued and talked blue murder for half an hour. Well, it's a funny thing. Seems he was fresh to Borneo, just come in on the boat an hour before, and he wanted to get used to his surroundings real quick. Had a date to meet some one there in Samarinda in a month or so, and he'd come early just so he could show that person he was an experienced white man in the tropics. You know, book stuff.

"The idea was, near as I could figure it out, I should let him string along in one of the sampans and give him a chance to help cage whatever I was after. Well, at first I just booted him out of the way. Me, Steve Gaynor, takin' a milk-drinkin' softy along. Not so's you could notice it. Then, the first thing I knew, I was lookin' into a fistful of money.

"'I'm willing to pay,' the kid says. 'This ought to be sufficient to cover the additional expense and trouble for my presence.'

"Cover it? Stranger, for the right amount of money I'd paddle the rajah to Sandakan and back and kiss his feet every five minutes of the way. I took one look at that handful of bills, and I said: 'O. K., kid. Stow your stuff and get in.'

Gaynor stirred restlessly, shot a quick glance over his shoulder at the triangle of blackness beyond the tent flap, then turned back satisfied.

"We made it fast to Laong Pinoh, the first village. Then the natives slowed me down for three days while they waited for some damn tabu of theirs to pass over. Fielding was a pretty good man to have along at that. Talked a lot of nonsense most of the time about the beauty of a parakeet's plumage and the verdure along the shore. And he kept makin' notes in a little book that was always open before him.

"But he was a good worker and, strange enough, a good shot. That sorta surprised me. On the night of the fourth day we found a cobra in our camp. I was nearest the thing, and before I knew it, it was ready to spring. The kid was cool as a cucumber when he pulls out a fancy pistol and blows off the snake's head.

WHEN I left Samarinda it was my original intention to go up the Mahakam as far as the Kutei, then follow that for a ways. But when I reached the fork all I had to show for my work was a black leopard, a couple of baby orangs, and a monkey. I left these at a native village to be picked up on my return, and decided to stick to the Mahakam if I had to go clean to Bulungan.

"Finally we got into Taban territory. No health resort there either, if you know what I mean. The Dyaks along the river are quiet and sullen, and it's easy to see white men ain't welcome.

"But I know what I'm doin', and one day in a village almost at the narrows the natives gives us the information I'd been hopin' for—man-eatin' tiger. It was a big fellow. Seems he'd killed five men of the village includin' the witch doctor, and the rat-faced chief was scared out of his wits. He offered anything to the man who could kill the pest.

"If it had been anything else, I might have hesitated. I get hunches sometimes, and I had one then that everything wouldn't turn out so well. Foolish, too, because if you look at it right I had the best luck in my life. Anyway, there's always an open market for tiger. So I started makin' preparations.

"Then the kid busts in. The

crazy fool wanted to know if I would give him my permission to hunt for the tiger on his own hook. Said I could go one way and he'd go another, and may the best man win. Well, I had his money, and it didn't make any difference to me if he got his head chewed off. I just laughed and told him to go to it.

"I wouldn't let him have any of my Dyaks, of course. He got his natives from the village, and we started off, me followin' the beast's most recent trail and the kid plumbin' into the jungle at random.

"For a week I stalked and baited that blasted tiger. For a week I worked my head off. I didn't get a glimpse of it. Finally, swearing mad, I trekked back to the village.

"Well, sir, the minute I entered the village I got the surprise of my life. There's a big cage right in front of the long house and a bunch of jabberin' natives standin' around it. I'll be blowed if in that cage isn't the biggest striper I ever saw or heard of.

"The kid, he just sorta laughs and begins tellin' me over and over how he caught it. All excited he was; so was the chief of the village. At first it didn't make much difference to me. This was my expedition, and anything caught during it was mine. The kid understood that before we started. Then the old chief announces he is going to keep his promise and pay Fielding for his services in ridding the district of a great danger. He goes through a long ceremony that night with the Dyaks dancin' like mad and the new witch doctor screamin' at the top of his voice. Drums poundin' everywhere. Finally, at the end of it all, he hands the kid something that glitters green in the firelight.

"'Keep it, tuan,' he says. 'It has been in my house for many, many

seasons, given to me by my father, and to him, by his father. I know not from where it came.'

"Fielding looks sort of dumb for a moment. He stands there like he'd just woke up from a pipe dream. Then he walks over to me, holds out his hand slowlike and says: 'Look. It's a real emerald.'"

Gaynor's fingers were trembling now as he lifted the whisky bottle and drained the last of the contents.

"Well," he said, lighting another cigarette. "It was an emerald all right. I don't know much about stones, but it's easy to see this one's worth a small fortune. The kid thanked the chief, made arrangements to have the tiger kept for us in the village, and the next morning we continued upriver.

FOR a while I kept my mouth closed and didn't say nothing. Then we hit slower current and there wasn't much poling to do. I had a talk and started claimin' my rights. I told Fielding flat that when we got back to Samarinda we'd sell the stone and divide it fifty-fifty. That was fair enough, considerin' it was my expedition and I was directin' everything.

"But he just looked at me in that quiet way of his and said: 'No. I caught the tiger. That's yours; but the emerald is mine. It was given to me and I mean to keep it. I paid you to take me along.'

"Of course I saw right off there was no use arguin'. So I sat back in the boat and kept quiet and watched the dirty river flow by. The kid was silent too. But he thought I was only in a sulk and I'd get over it in a while. The crazy fool didn't know Steve Gaynor. I ain't been done in yet, and no baby-faced kid was goin' to start it.

While I sat there, the old think box was workin' hard, tryin' to figure out a plan to get that emerald. It's a hard problem, but after a couple of hours I had it.

"You see, I couldn't just put a slug in the kid and take the stone. That wouldn't work because my Dyaks were coast Dyaks, and they'd be sure to report the matter soon's we got back in Samarinda. I had trouble with Dutch law once, and I know how fast it works. And I couldn't start a fight and take the emerald by force. Fielding wore that pistol in an open holster at his belt, and I'd seen before how quick he could use it. So I just waited my time.

"We camped that night at the narrows. The water was almost stagnant here and smelled strong. Lot of smooth shiny places along the shore told the story to any one that recognized the signs—crocodiles. The place was alive with 'em, and they was part of the plan. I'd been in that district before.

"All the time we was sittin' around the fire, talkin' and eatin', I was goin' over my plans, makin' sure there wouldn't be a single slip. Then after the kid had gone to sleep I got things ready.

"I sneaked down to the river with a big piece of fresh meat. I searched along the shore until I found a fifteen-foot length of bamboo, sharpened this at both ends, jammed the meat on one end and poked the other deep into the mud. The whole thing was hidden in the reeds so that even the natives wouldn't see it unless they were lookin' for it. Get the idea? That pole was slanted out over the river on a forty-five degree angle. The meat was hangin' there just over the water, just out of the crocs' reach. Before I had finished I knew the smell had

reached 'em. I could hear 'em slitherin' and splashin', openin' and closin' their jaws. Then I took a long piece of rope and stretched it on the ground between two stakes just at the river's edge, hiding it as well as I could in the long grass.

"Well, it was simple. It worked like clockwork. Next morning, when the kid wakes up he complains of a feeling of dryness about his face and forehead. That's part of my doings too. The day before I'd sprinkled some carbonate of lime on the sweatband of his helmet. It absorbs the natural moisture of the skin. I was figuring down to the smallest details, see, and I didn't want anything to prevent this from working.

"Naturally, the kid goes down to the river to wash his face, and he does just what I'd expected. He trips over the rope and falls head first into the water. There's a deep drop there, right at the bank. And as I said, the river was swarming with crocs—hundreds of 'em. With that smell of fresh meat hangin' over their heads all night, they were all crazy mad.

"The kid falls in, tries to swim back, and the next minute it happens. One of those big logs floatin' out in the center whips around and comes in like an express train. The kid screams and goes under.

"Course I pretended to the Dyaks I was excited and all that, and I did a lot of unnecessary shootin'. But in a few seconds a big splotch of red came to the surface, and we knew it was all over.

"I walked back to the camp, lookin' sad as I could and began to get my stuff together. For a while the Dyaks stood around quietlike, watchin' me. But gradually they began to get excited and started mumblin' and jabberin' amongst

themselves. Finally their leader came up to me and said they'd rather not move on for a while.

AND that, stranger, was part of my plan, too. You see, when a croc kills anybody, these Dyaks have a crazy superstition that they must kill every crocodile in the vicinity and rip it open until they come to the one whose belly shows it's the man-eater. Otherwise the dead man can never go to heaven.

"Fielding was white, but that didn't make any difference. He'd made friends with the Dyaks coming upriver, treated them like equals, and now that he was dead they wanted to protect his soul by having a croc hunt right away.

"Well, sir, we hung around that spot for two days, and by that time we'd killed nine of the things. Big fellows, some of them. I began to get a little nervous, thought maybe my luck had turned. But the tenth proved to be the killer. The Dyaks let out a howl when they found the stuff in its belly. A watch, a belt buckle, part of a ring, and a few other articles, includin' the emerald. Clever, eh? The kid out of the way by an unavoidable accident, which even to a Dutch official was fool proof, and I had the stone.

"Then I got excited and made my first mistake—not a big one, you understand. I'm not the kind that makes big mistakes. But just the same this one let me into a lot of trouble. I gave one of the Dyaks the watch, and another what was left of the ring, and I instructed all of them that if they were asked any questions back in Samarinda about the disappearance of Fielding, they should simply tell the truth: that he had been killed by an accident.

The emerald I didn't think to hide, but slid it openly into my pocket.

"The minute they saw the stone they wanted that, too. I said before that ever since we'd come into this district those natives had grown sullen and hard to handle. Now they began to get meaner than ever. I whipped one within an inch of his life to settle the matter.

IGUESS I started what followed by letting two of them have it with my revolver. Usually that's the only way: show them right from the beginning who's master. But they were aroused now, and in a minute there was a fight for fair. Those dirty heathens came at me with knives. I shot one in the stomach and another in the arm, and then it was give and take with my huntin' knife slashin' like mad. Well, it looked mighty black there for a while. I got this slice on my left cheek and a nasty jab in my leg above the knee. But gradually I worked my way backward out of the clearing and into the jungle. Then I turned and ran for it, ran like hell.

"Stranger, it wasn't easy. Takes brains to get out of a mess like that when you figure you're up against natives that know every trick there is. I doubled in my tracks two or three times, but even so they stuck right on my trail. The devils had blowpipes, and every time I broke into the open I'd hear a yell and see one of those poison darts go whizzing by my head.

"But I wasn't running blind. I was makin' a big circle that'd take me back to the river right in front of the camp. When I finally reached it I just had time to jump in one of the sampans, cut the others loose and pole like mad across to the other shore. I made it."

Gaynor hiccuped and twisted in

his chair as he suddenly came to a pause. He reached unsteadily for the bottle, felt that it was empty and flung it to a far corner of the tent.

"I made it," he repeated a moment later. "The emerald is right here on my person. It goes back with me to Samarinda, but it won't be sold till I reach S'pore where it'll bring a tidy sum with no questions asked. Enough to last me a long while, enough to stake me so I can get more of the things. Smooth, eh? Ain't one man in a thousand would've thought of a plan like that."

For a moment McNair sat in silence. His pipe had gone out. His lips were clenched motionless over the stem. A faint gleam had entered his eyes. The lids had narrowed slowly. At the base of his throat a nerve had suddenly appeared, twitching to the pulsations of his heart. He rose to his feet slowly.

"You bunk here," he said, pointing. "If you want anything, call one of the Dyaks. I'm going out for a bit of air."

Gaynor nodded, started to unbutton his shirt, then he leaned forward, drawing an ugly revolver.

"I said the emerald was on my person," he snarled. "Don't let that give you any funny ideas you can get it while I sleep."

McNair shook his head. "Don't worry," he replied. "I won't disturb you. I don't steal—blood stones."

He pushed aside the mosquito flap and went out, pacing by the sleeping natives to the black mound in the center of the clearing that had once been the fire. Mechanically his boot stirred the ashes until a few remaining coals gleamed up at him.

Half an hour passed and McNair did not move. He stood there, head bent forward, shoulders slightly sagging, eyes staring blankly into the deep shadows of the surrounding jungle.

Slowly a tremor swept through the surveyor. He turned and looked over his shoulder at the tent. For an instant he stared, listening. Then, very quietly, he strode across the clearing, pushed his way through the reeds and headed for the river.

MORNING came and Steve Gaynor was a changed man. His talkativeness had disappeared with the wearing-away of the whisky. He ate the breakfast McNair had served him in stony silence. If he remembered anything of the night before and the story he had told, he did not mention it.

"I'm leavin' right away," he said finally, the meal finished. "I'll be takin' some of your supplies and a Dyak too, if it's all the same to you. Sick of breaking my back on that damn pole."

McNair nodded and stood up. "I'll give you food and water, of course," he said. "And I guess I can spare a native to manage your sampan. But before you go I want you to come down the river a ways. There's a spot there I've selected to span with a bridge, when and if the government ever gets around to building this railroad."

Gaynor was moving toward the tent door. "What do I care about a bridge?" he said. "I got to get going. It's a long drag to Samarinda."

There was a queer tightening of the surveyor's lips as he stepped quickly to Gaynor's side and grasped the man's arm.

"You said last night you were interested in jewels?" he began significantly.

"Well—"

"Well, I found something in that river no one seems to have suspected was there before—not jewels, not emeralds, but something equally interesting."

Gaynor's eyes opened slowly. He got a cigarette out of his pocket, lighted it with a match scratched on his thumb-nail.

"Meanin' just what?" he queried.

"Meaning gold. Not a lot. A man would have to work for it. But it's there, washed down from the mountains. And if enough were panned regularly, there'd be quite a fortune for whoever wanted it. Now, are you interested in that site for a bridge?"

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked.

"Why? Perhaps because I'm lonely. It's two months since I've talked to any one but a native. Perhaps I'm looking for a partner. There's plenty there for both of us."

Gaynor stood still, thinking. Gold, was it? Good luck was coming in buckets these days. If Mc-McNair was right—well, it wouldn't be hard to get rid of him and work the claim himself. He nodded slowly.

"Let's have a look."

McNair picked up a shallow tin dish, stepped out of the tent and led the way in the direction of the river. Down through the tall reeds and rip grass he went with Gaynor, smiling and expectant, a few steps behind. Reaching the shore, the surveyor turned right, following the water's edge. He walked slowly and deliberately. His helmet was pulled far forward, hiding his face in shadow.

FOR a quarter of an hour they fought their way through the undergrowth. Gaynor began to lag behind and halted several times to scrape leeches from his legs and arms. But at length the two white men emerged into a wide, open space where the bank ran into the river in a tiny peninsula of sand.

McNair drew up abruptly and pointed. "The bridge will go across here," he said. "Two hundred and ninety-five foot spread. There'll be four wells filled with concrete for foundation with probably a center pier in the middle of the river. It's the best place—"

"Damn the bridge!" snapped Gaynor. "Where's the gold?"

For a moment McNair made no reply. He turned away slowly and stood frowning at the river. His eyes were sunken and bloodshot, betraying a sleepless night. His fists were clenched. Out there before him swirled the Mahakam, yellow and muddy, giving off a faint haze in the morning sun. A few low-floating logs mottled its surface. Beyond, stretched the jungle.

"I'm not so sure but what I've changed my mind, Gaynor," McNair said then. "Maybe I don't need a partner. Maybe there isn't any gold here at all. Maybe—"

"No go—" Gaynor stiffened, then took a step forward. "Tryin' to crawl out of it, eh?" he said. "Tryin' to pull the wool over my eyes. Well, it won't work. Damn you, give me that pan and I'll have a look myself."

He snatched the tin dish from the surveyor's hands, turned and strode toward the river. Moved straight forward down the little peninsula. It wasn't all sand, that arm jutting out into the water. The far end, made more fertile by the alluvial drift from the river, was a

thick mass of moss plants and heavy rip grass.

"Wait!" called McNair. "I'm warning you. Don't go any farther. There isn't any gold here and—"

But Gaynor, paying no attention, continued his advance. Three feet, five feet, and he was deep in the rank vegetation. Then suddenly his boot crashed into something hidden in the undergrowth. Had he looked down he would have seen a length of twisted rattan rope stretched taut between two stakes. But Gaynor had no time to look. He flung his arms wildly forward, sought to regain his balance, and fell with a heavy splash into the river.

On the shore McNair stood like a man in a dream, watching the drama on the stage of his making. His eyes were cold, his lips a hard line.

For a fleeting second nothing happened. Gaynor came to the surface sputtering, attempted to draw himself back to shore. Then one of the logs floating silently twenty feet away leaped into sudden life. It whipped around, revealing black eyes and the gaping jaws of death.

Gaynor screamed but once, then he was pulled under. The water boiled in a mad whirlpool. Air bubbles and miniature waves churned the surface. A sound, hollow and grating, came from somewhere below. Seconds passed and a ribbon of scarlet appeared.

McNair, standing on the bank, watched it widen, swirl gently, and give way to a yellow-brown flow of silt. A sob broke from his lips.

"It was coming to you, Gaynor," he said huskily. "The kid you murdered back there didn't lie when he told you he was going to meet some one in Samarinda in a month. He was going to meet me. Fielding—Fielding McNair—my son!"

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M. D. C., Clackmannshire, Scotland: It is not necessary to send a U. S. stamp, but an International Postal Coupon, which can be redeemed here, can be obtained at any foreign post office. All foreign readers, except Canadians, should send this postal coupon.

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that you are a Complete Stories reader
Take the liberty of sending your
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Enclosed please find addressed
(that, I am sorry to say com-
plete and it is stamp) also*

Your fine, small writing indicates that you are the mental type. You are alert, vivacious, keen-witted, and have fine perceptions.

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Mr. H. G. K., Ontario: I have just returned from a visit to Toronto, where I was surprised to find everyone so keen about graphology. The books on the subject were prized and hard to obtain, and the persons I met very well-read and enthusiastic on the science. Next time I make such a visit arrangements are to be made for a public appearance, then the

many readers of Complete may come and meet me personally.

The fault in your writing is of a general nature. You are extremely reserved, stiff, and undemonstrative—rather inclined to be cold and selfish. All this would change if you could be more expansive, more responsive to the small sentiments and emotions which are part of daily living. You feel deeply enough, but are unable to express your emotions graciously.

There is something a little heavy and inflexible in your character which casts gloom and tenseness where there should be lightness and adaptability.

Dear Miss Spencer.

I only hope this
my handwriting is suff
to analyze without to much
yourself. If you can tell
or business I'm best suited

As for business: "You have constructive ability and would do well in work which requires a constructive, orderly, solid mind. Mechanics would be suitable.

G. H. C., Illinois: I am very glad to hear from you again. Of course, I don't remember your writing because I handle such volumes daily, but since you wish me to stress occupational direction, I presume I covered your character in the first analysis.

Your writing indicates natural intelligence, but shows lack of definite training. You have an analytical, critical mind, also a quick, keen one. With this good start you are already several strides ahead of the ordinary chap. However, intelligence must be directed toward practical ends if

one wishes to make a profit from it. Since you have no definite talent, it would be wise for you to choose a line of business which interests you, then start from the bottom and work up. You can't expect to be your own boss at the start.

*indicated by my hi
writing. I don't like
inside working under a
a time clock. I want
be on my own, and
Response abilities are*

You would have made a fine doctor. There is a decided trend for science indicated—the uneven size of your script. Perhaps it is too late for you to start such a long course of training, but you might be able to get something suitable in the field of chemistry, pharmacy, et cetera. Your education is far behind your natural ability. Study and discipline are what you need.

A. K., Wisconsin: It is very creditable of you to want to do worthwhile things for the sake of the wife you admire and love so much. Your difficulty is lack of confidence. Although I can read this in your letter, I can also see very strong signs of it in those t-bars which do not cross the stem of the t.

*on the whole besides this. I
not know if it would
for me to play and improvise
on to go along. I play the
and like to play it. My friends
very well and should go to*

As for specializing on your music—why ask me? Don't you see that

if the will and wish are strong enough you would do it, anyway, regardless of what friends or I might say? That is the secret of success: to want to do a thing with all one's heart and to set about it regardless of all obstacles. Those lacking in courage can always find convenient excuses. And one excuse we all plead is lack of confidence in our own ability. It really is just a disguised admission of lack of courage. It is a universal failing.

Be willing to face failure. Even if you do not succeed on the radio, you will have the joy and satisfaction which musical training brings.

C. C. B., California: Yes, I do think that you have enough literary ability to make writing a hobby. Imagination and a quick, expressive mind are indicated in your script. You have the necessary enthusiasm and driving force, as well as the continuity of thought and fertile ideas.

*I have any ability in it
say tell all the bad things as
one without fear of offending
say use this specimen in
long as my name is not*

Those long, rapidly stroked t-bars with the tenacity hooks on the ends of some and sharp points on others are proof of will power, temper, critical faculties, and courage.

Your quick, fine writing shows your ability for financial work, so I am not surprised to learn that you have been successful in that line.

Also your very expressive, magnetic, and interesting personality makes you ideal for contact work.

You ask for the "bad things"—temper, which I have mentioned, a quick, impatient, sarcastic one. You work at great speed, are nervous and high-strung, so are likely to become irritable, temperamental, and erratic when under pressure. You are changeable and not always exactly unselfish in your dealings with others. Your love is exacting. Adaptability and versatility are strongly marked in your interesting and individual script.

A considerable number of Canadians forget to send a stamped, self-addressed envelope. In such cases I cannot reply. A coin or loose Canadian stamp with a return envelope is sufficient. Even if you think you have sent the proper coupon and return envelope, but have not heard from me, please write me again. Those who have had an analysis, but have a more specific question they wish answered, may write again—mentioning the former analysis, please—provided they send the coupon and return envelope. The heavy mails forbid complete, detailed analyses, but you are welcome to ask questions, but naturally only those which can be answered through graphology.

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versation of the average man or examine the papers and pictures which engross his attention, you are forced to conclude that the last thing which interests him is a real idea or a sound opinion. The minds of many men are congenitally lazy, and a book, a story, or a piece of writing which demands attention or mental effort is dismissed as high-brow hokum.

COMPLETE has never attempted to make readers of these morons. The editor assumes that his readers not only have minds, but that they know how to

use them. Many letters have confirmed his conviction that Complete readers are genuinely interested in the discussions which, from time to time, appear in this department. People are drawn to one another and develop that fine achievement called friendship, because they have opinions and codes of conduct in common. It has been the unfailing ambition of the editor to make the magazine and its readers fine friends because they have the same outlook on life and many opinions in common. The editor knows how quickly in this hurly-burly age of change and chance bonds are severed and friendships are broken. So few people are loyally attached to a cause, a paper, or a magazine. In their eagerness not to miss the latest book or the newest magazine they never come to know any books intimately or to read any magazine long enough to get its flavor.

The editor is self-opinionated enough to believe that all readers are not of this inconstant mind or so fickle in their tastes and judgments. He counts on old readers to keep their preference for Complete and expects to find a sufficient number of steady readers among the new ones to justify his faith in the future of Complete.

Hereafter, beginning with this issue, the magazine will be published once every three weeks in place of twice a month. It will be on sale a month previous to the date it bears and it will remain on the stands three weeks. We have found that it takes three weeks to circulate the magazine when it appears on the stands. There will be eighteen numbers a year in place of twenty-four numbers. The editor wishes here to anticipate any fear or dissatisfaction on the part of regularly paid subscribers. They

will be given the twenty-four numbers for which they paid. Their subscriptions will be extended to cover the full number of copies for which they subscribed.

At the same time, the editor wishes to assure all readers that the same high standard of fiction will be maintained in the magazine.

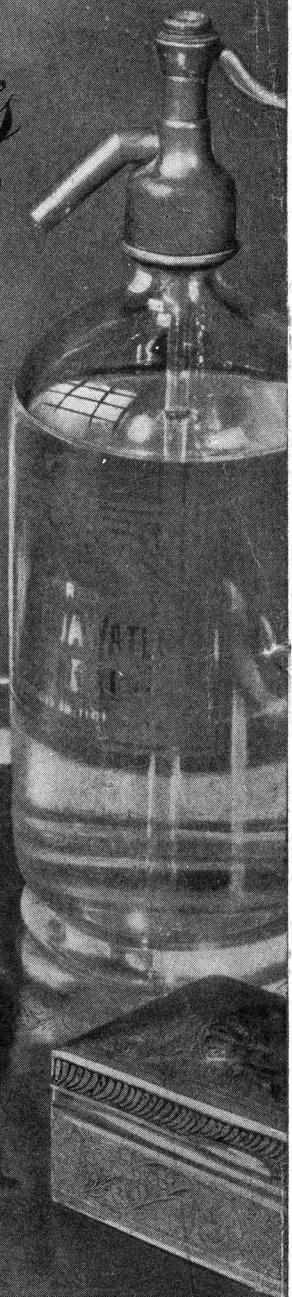
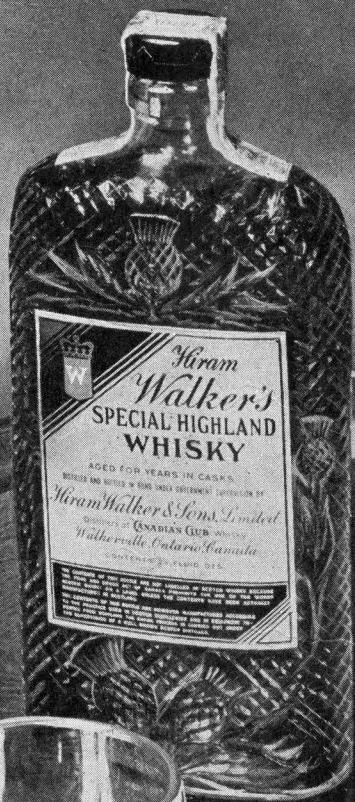
THREE are stories and stories, just as there are lives and lives. But normal human beings know that the best story is a story with some vital human interest; a story about human beings who live and love and struggle even as you and I, and not stories of sub-human monsters who never live, but crawl through blood and slaughter to their own ignoble deaths. It isn't so much what a man writes about, but how he sees it, and how he writes about it, that makes a story good or bad. No man can tell a tale without having something of his own personality shining brightly or glimmering darkly between the lines.

YOU may not always agree with the editor of Complete as to the merits of this or that piece. No editor can foretell what people will like next. He must fall back on his own courage and resolve to live or die on his own personality, on the things he likes or dislikes, on his own tastes, his own ideals, his own beliefs. Shrewd guessing and the watching of straws in the wind, are all to no avail. They will not carry a magazine very far. The editor's task is often a thankless task. A real editor tries to give his readers and the public *something a little better than they expect or call for*. Complete here puts the cards on the table, and leaves the issue in your hands.

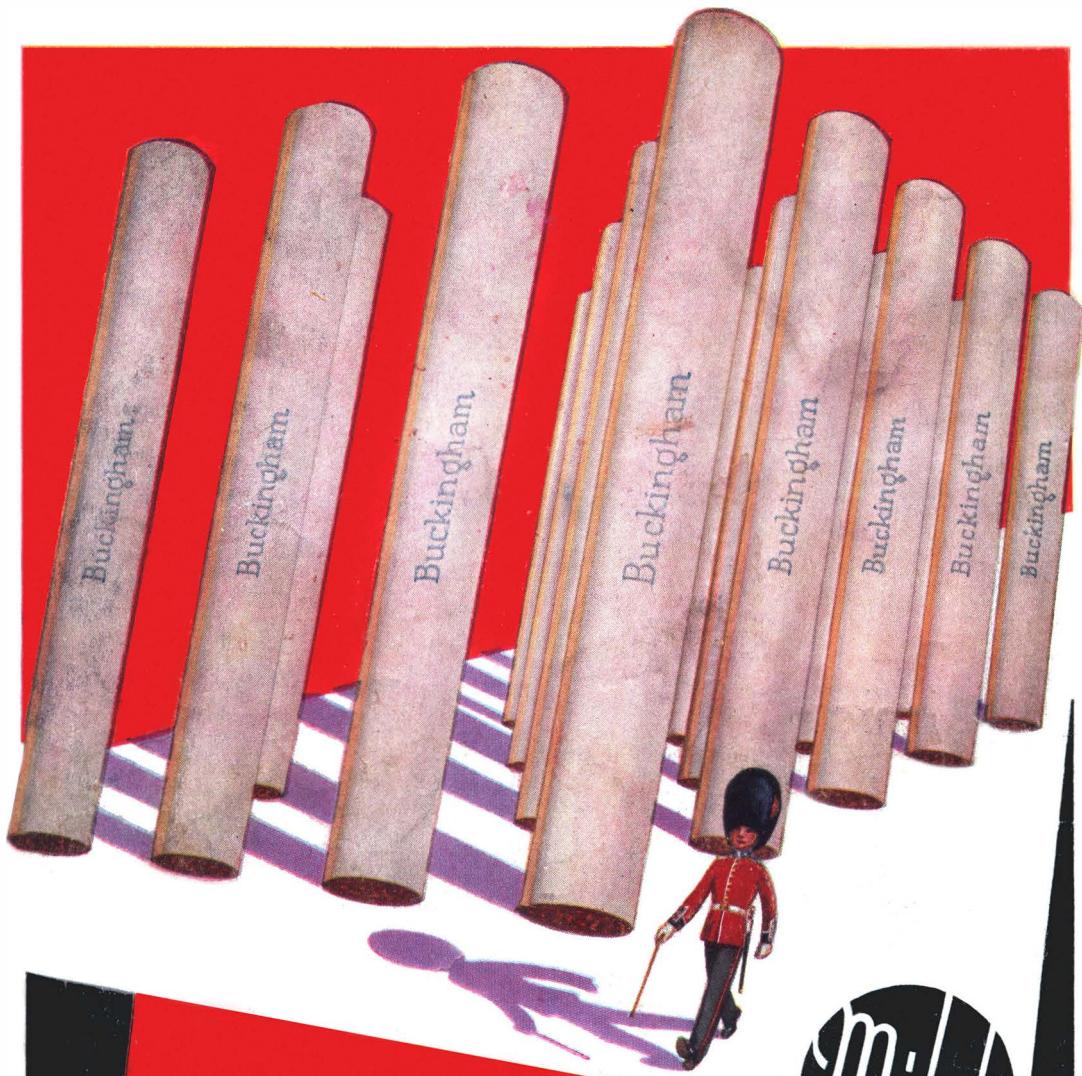
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