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SPICY- ADVENTURE STORIES

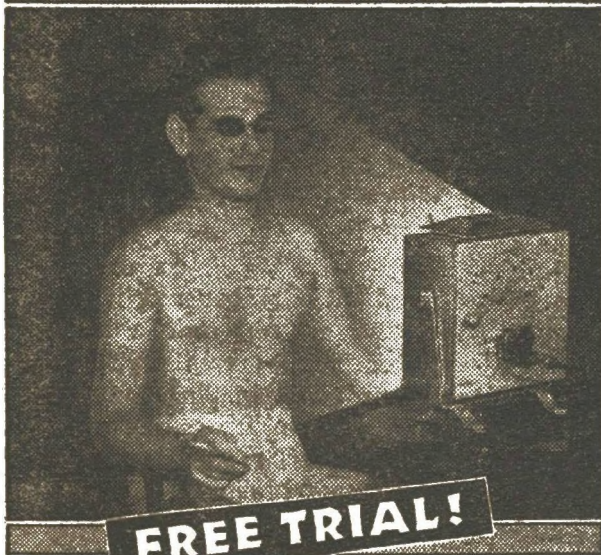
VIPER PIT

by
Alan Anderson



Have that healthy **TAN** that Men and Women Admire!

IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE 100%



SUN RAYS IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH AS WELL AS YOUR APPEARANCE!

Health Authorities tell us we would be in better health if our modern living conditions did not exclude practically all sun light from our bodies. Most of our skin is covered by clothing, and when the sun light finally reaches the few exposed portions of our skin, it has lost much of its health-giving energy in the soot and dust of the atmosphere. Those of us who live in cities or work in offices all day seldom have an opportunity to expose our bodies to the direct ultra-violet rays... unless we own a Health Ray Sun Lamp. Then it is easy!

It is possible to greatly increase youthful vigor and vitality through ultra-violet rays... to prevent colds... to overcome listlessness and anemia... and especially to aid in the treatment of rickets. Build up your own resistance and that of all your family by this simple, quick method! A sun lamp used to be a luxury... now it is an inexpensive necessity!

TESTED AND APPROVED BY 'CHILD LIFE'



Products advertised in Child Life Magazine are all tested and approved in their laboratories. They say, "It is a pleasure to advise you that the publishers of CHILD LIFE have granted your company the 'Seal of Approval' on 'Health Ray' Lamps and Carbons. This Lamp has been in constant use by a reputable physician and is still perfect."

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When answering advertisements please mention SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES



For the Honor of the Duchess

DAVE LURTON buttoned his overcoat at the neck with numbed fingers; even during that second or two, his throat was drenched with the rain. It was coming down in pailfuls. His hat was a soggy mess, his shoes squished dismally. And it looked very much as if he would have to give up all hope of finding shelter, and spend the night in the open.

"Romance!" Dave muttered. "Bah!"

He cursed the folly that had led him, the representative of a responsible firm of manufacturers of roofing material, to yield to the impulse to find a short cut to the capital of the tiny Austrian Duchy of Lichtenberg. He had abandoned his car two miles back, hopelessly bogged. And there wasn't a sign of human habitation anywhere.

By
LEW MERRILL

Lurton was looking for Romance. But how could he expect to find it trying to sell a new roof for the palace of Lichtenburg? It's only when the Duchess is in trouble—with the whole army against her—that he finds romance means danger and death!

The sunny afternoon had been so tempting, and Lichtenberg, the capital of Lichtenberg, had seemed so near when Dave essayed that disastrous short cut, because of the romance of the forest. Romance, Dave knew, was his short suit, and yet he was always leading from it. That idea of getting a contract to re-roof the palace had been pure Romance. And yet, what a commission it would mean! And what an advertisement for the Nuroof Company of Roaring Falls, Pennsylvania!

MR. ALF JONES, the American consul at Freiburg, where Dave had been staying, had just laughed when



With a scream, Lotta threw herself between him and his assailants.

Dave broached the subject. After a few drinks he had become more explicit.

"You gotta undershtand, very conservervative folks in Lichtenberg," he explained. "Palace probly hasn't been roofed since Julius Caesar or Gustavus Adolphus deshtroyed it. Beshides, they're not thinking of roofing now. If Duchess Cecile don't make up her mind to marry her cousin, Duke Michael, mighty shoon, there's going to be revolution. Folks want a man at head of Shtate, not a woman. You're crazy, Lurton, crazy. Letsh have another!"

JUST as Dave was preparing to climb a tree for the night, or burrow under one, suddenly the forest ended. Cleared land appeared, and a light not far ahead.

Dave quickened his water-logged shoes into activity until he saw the cottage in front of him. It was substantially built, and looked like that of a prosperous farmer. Two horses were standing at a hitching-post before the door, but the light came from the rear. Dave moved slowly around to the kitchen door.

Three men and a woman were in the room. The woman and one of the men were old, obsequious, bent with toil. The other two men were in military uniform. One was red-haired, with a Hitler mustache, the other black-haired, arrogant, with upturned mustaches in the Kaiser style.

"It is a great honor," mumbled the old man.

"It is your right, Herr Schmidt," replied the black-haired officer graciously. "When, four hundred years ago, your ancestor saved the life of his ruler on the field of battle, it was solemnly agreed that in the future every reigning Duke should select at least one of his mistresses from his descendants, provided, of

course, that she pleased him. So bring forth the girl, that I may assure myself there is no blemish upon her."

"Lotta, come forth!" called the old woman sharply.

A girl moved slowly forward into the light of the lamp. She was clothed only in a nightdress. Fair hair and eyes of violet blue, a face red with confusion. Little bare feet beneath the hem of the nightdress, planted firmly on the floor.

"Come, Lotta, let the Herr Duke look at you!" said the old woman harshly. "*Gott in himmel*, would you expect your grandfather to buy a cow before he had examined her?"

The blood rushed to Dave's face. He realized then that the man with the black hair and upturned mustaches was none other than Duke Michael, cousin of the ruling Duchess Cecilie, and suitor for her hand—or claimant for her throne, if she refused him!

DAVE saw the girl tremble and hang her head. Her face was fiery red. The old woman stepped forward; there was a faint protest, and the nightdress had been pulled down from her shoulders and lay upon the floor.

As the Duke walked around the girl, inspecting her as if she were some pedigreed beast of the fields, Dave felt a mad impulse to rush in and strike him to the floor. Mingled with this was the faintness of his senses at the sight of the girl's nude figure.

He had had plenty of Romance, but never yet had he felt such a thrill, at once pure and sensuous, as now. Lotta was flawless, from her white shoulders to the tips of her slender fingers:—the small, firm, rounded breasts that she was covering with her hands, the slim waist and widening hips, the tapering columns of the thighs.

He clutched at the thick stem of a vine to steady himself, and heard himself cursing. He poised himself for a leap against the door.

And then a hand clutched his wrist, a little hand, and, in the darkness, he saw a woman standing at his side.

"Don't be a fool," she whispered in German. "What business is it of yours?"

"They're selling her," Dave muttered. "That innocent little country girl, as if she were an animal of the fields."

A scornful laugh answered him. "You had better go away quickly, my American friend, before Duke Michial discovers you," said the woman.

She was slight, slim, veiled; it was impossible for Dave to see her face. He stood, still trembling with indignation; he saw the girl, Lotta, still standing in the lamplight, her hands now over her face, and all the softly moulded contours of her form revealed. The Duke was licking his lips.

"Ja, bring her to my hunting-box in the cart tomorrow," he said, pushing open the door.

"You swine!" roared Dave, and leaped, fists flailing.

A HEFTY punch caught Duke Michael on the jaw and sent him reeling back. For an instant there was dead silence; then the Duke and his attendant had whipped out their swords, and it looked like Dave's finish.

But, with a scream, Lotta threw herself between him and his assailants, and that gave Dave a chance to speak.

"I'm an American," he shouted. "You can't murder me and get away with it, even if you are the cousin of the Duchess Cecilie. I lost my way in the forest and saw a light here, and I heard your vile bargain, to buy this young girl—buy her for your own foul purposes! I'll

print that story in every newspaper in every civilized land unless you let her go!"

"*Ach Gott!*" With the ferocity of a tigress, Lotta threw herself upon Dave, now quite forgetful of her nudity, scratching his face and tearing at his hair. "My Duke! My Hero Duke!" she screeched. "You will not let him take me from you?"

The old man and woman were adding to the uproar. Dave, astounded by this feminine perverseness, tried in vain to free himself from his assailant. And then of a sudden a million stars flashed before his eyes, and he saw the Duke's aide standing beside him, holding his pistol by the muzzle.

Dave reeled, and saw the officer coolly put the muzzle to his head—saw it with a detached and quite impersonal interest as he reeled backward. But before the man could pull trigger, there came an unexpected intervention in the shape of the veiled woman, who leaped into the room and struck up the aide's arm.

"No!" Dave heard her cry, as if from very far away.

But the figures were looking grotesquely small and far away, and then a black veil swept down over everything and obliterated the scene, and consciousness likewise.

ALF JONES, the consul at Freiburg, being awakened at six in the morning, was inclined to be distinctly grouchy. Besides, Dave's feet were leaving pools of water all over his bedroom carpet. However, a shot of whiskey, and then another, eased them both, and Alf listened to Dave's story with increasing interest.

"So you woke up to find yourself lying at the edge of the forest a mile out of town? And you've got a hazy idea

somebody brought you there in a car?" he asked. "Well, I'd say luck's certainly with you, me lad. Why, you poor sap, that innocent country girl has probly been looking forward to becoming Duke Michael's mistress all her life! Things like that happen in all the best regulated courts of Europe. That veiled woman probly came to take charge of the preliminaries for him.

"And this publicity idea of yours—why, you're nuts, lad. No paper in Europe would print that story. It's not that they're afraid. It's just not news. Try to get that through your thick dome.

"Now here's my advice. Get a garage to haul your car out of that swamp you left it in, then pack your suitcase and scam over the border. And don't think you've done anything romantic, either. You've just made yourself a damn' nuisance, and escaped being killed by a miracle. Now, how about another?"

Dave blew up. "Maybe I shouldn't have interfered," he admitted, "but I came here to proposition the Duchess on the subject of re-roofing the palace, and I'm going to do it."

Alf Jones looked at him ironically. "Okay, go to it, Lurton," he said. "Go to it. It don't matter that Duke Michael's due to pull his revolution any day now. It don't matter that I've got no funds for funerals, and you'll be buried on the parish. It don't matter—Oh hell, say when!"

DAVE had read plenty about the palace. It had been built in the eleventh century, and the mad Duke, the grandfather of the ruling Duchess, Cecilie, had held wild orgies there, filling it with masterpieces of painting and sculpture, and collecting the most beautiful women from all parts of the world, of whom he was a connoisseur. Among

other things he had built the great artificial lake, surrounded by a twenty-foot wall, whereon he had diverted himself and his guests in his pleasure-craft.

If revolution was brooding, Dave saw no signs of it in Lichtenberg when he arrived by the slow local train. Still, there were more public portraits of Duke Michael than of the ruling Duchess, Cecilie, who had been married in her teens to an aged prince of the Hapsburgs, and, left a widow soon after, had ruled the little duchy for the past two years with apparent success. Of course, if Duke Michael recognized Dave. . .

What happened was pure fantasy. Just because outsiders don't try to approach crowned heads, no crowned head has ever perfected the technic of aloofness that is used by a third-rate Wall Street banker, or the editor of a newspaper. Dave, waiting in the palace audience hall to see the head of the Public Works department, perceived a door opposite him open, and a lady emerge, followed by a gang of elderly men. Instantly everybody in the audience hall sprang to his feet and stood as stiff as a ramrod.

Dave recognized the lady instantly, because her portrait was in most of the hotels in Freiburg. She didn't look a day over twenty; she was petite and extremely pretty, with a great plait of red-gold hair coiled up beneath a very natty little hat. Her dress was simple but effective, and her little feet moved over the polished floor to the click-clack of high heels. Above the feet were two slender ankles, and, above these, two fairly substantial and beautifully rounded calves, and, above these, ravishing flashes.

Smiling and bowing to the bowing and curtsying throng, the Duchess Cecilie passed down the audience hall, followed by her frock-coated councillors.

"PARDON me, Your Highness!"

As Dave spoke, and the Duchess stopped, everybody seemed palsied with amazement. It was something that had never been done, and therefore couldn't be happening. Guards started forward from the doors, but stopped as the Duchess inquired:

"You wish to hand me a petition?"

"Not exactly, Your Highness," answered Dave. "It's this way. I represent the Nuroof Company, of Roaring Falls, Pennsylvania, and I've got a strong hunch your palace could do with a new roof. It don't pay to let an old roof go too long, because, even if you haven't got termites, beetles get in and play old nick with the beams. Our terms are very moderate, and—"

"You mean that you are offering to put a new roof on the palace?" queried the Duchess in astonishment. "Why—why, it has never been done!"

"It ought to be done," said Dave.

"Well," said the Duchess, glancing at the scowling throng of old gentlemen

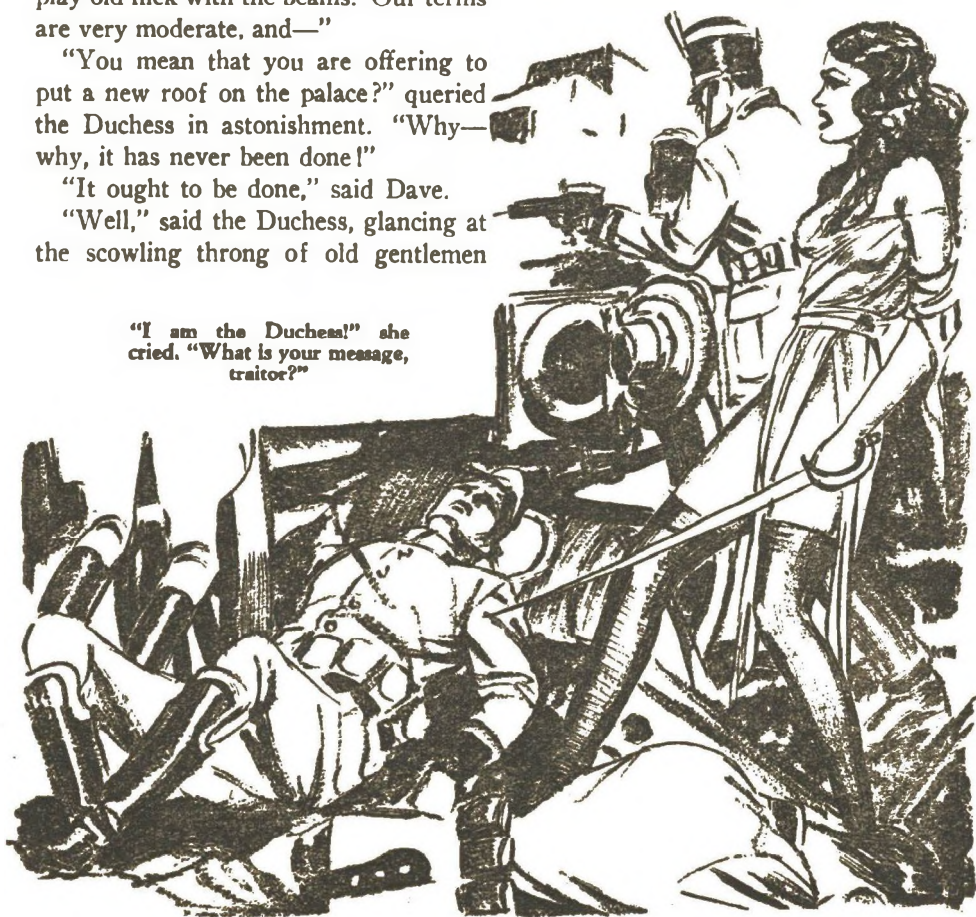
who now surrounded her, "I'd like to tear the nasty thing down myself, and put up a nice, new modern structure. What do you think, Herr Lambert?"

"It has never been done, Highness," growled a white-haired, white-whiskered old mummy.

The Duchess looked at Dave, and he could have sworn her eyes were twinkling. "What do you think of that?" she seemed to be saying. "Here are we, two nice young people, and. . ."

Well, Dave wasn't such a bad-looking six-footer at that. He looked at the curling ends of the Duchess's red-gold hair, and he forgot she was a Duchess. Also forgot all about the girl, Lotta.

"I am the Duchess!" she cried. "What is your message, traitor?"



"Come into this room and tell me about your plan," said the Duchess.

Then suddenly Dave's heart leaped. This was—incredibly it was the veiled lady of the night before! He couldn't recognize her, but he'd have known her voice in a million.

This was Romance!

IT had all been Romance beyond Dave's wildest dreams. It couldn't really be true, that he was pacing the green sward beside the lake inside the palace grounds, in those grounds to which the public was never admitted, with sentries mounted on the battlements. And the moon above, and the little key to the door that the Duchess Cecilie had given him, and—and the Duchess coming to meet him in a very few minutes!

"I shall take you up to the roof, and you shall examine it for yourself by moonlight," Cecilie had said. "I cannot persuade Herr Lambert to move in the matter. He is stubborn and old. This must be our secret."

Gray eyes that had smiled into his own across the table in the little chamber off the audience hall. Then the touch of her fingers as she slipped the key into his hands. This was Romance, pure and undiluted.

Dave moved toward the summer-house beside the lake, which had been indicated as the rendezvous. A figure rose to meet him. A hand flung back the veil. A little light greeted him.

"This is the first time that anybody has ever kept me waiting, Mr. Lurton," said Cecilie in English.

"I'm so sorry," stammered Dave. "I thought I was on time. Now about that roof—"

"There's plenty of time to talk about the roof," said the lady. "Were you

really at that cottage last night by accident?"

"I sure was. I'd lost my way, and—"

"And you'd have lost your life, too, if I hadn't saved you and driven you through the forest as far as I dared. I'm glad I followed Michael. Of course that means the end. I'm modern enough not to stand for anything quite so deliberate as that."

"You're quite right," said Dave. "No girl would stand for it in America."

"I'd like to see America. I may be going there very soon."

"Why, Your Highness—"

"You see, I turned Michael down this morning, and he's mad enough to tear things apart. He's got the army with him, and those horrid old councilors. Oh, I wish I was living in Grandfather Otto's day. He did what he pleased. He made this lake, and had his friends here, and—well, even he had to have a secret tunnel made to escape by, in case his people rose against him. It's so hard being a ruler of a country, Mr. Lurton. And I've got nobody to lean upon—"

The Duchess Cecilie's voice broke in a sob. She leaned upon Dave.

IT didn't seem possible, but that red-gold head was upon Dave's shoulder, and the subtle perfume from it was driving Dave mad. He was trying to collect himself. Where was he? Why, he was sitting on a long, upholstered seat in the summer-house, and his arm was about Cecilie's waist, and his fingers were against the soft satin of her arm, just as if she had been any ordinary woman.

Soft lips brushed his, and then two pairs of lips met and clung with devastating fire. Two hearts were thudding in double tempo, and Cecilie's breath was coming quick and short.

Dave drew her upon his knee, and

saw the shimmer of silken hosiery, and the white glimpse of skin above. Her arms went about his neck. Dave was sinking. He didn't even stop to think that this was Romance.

"It's my red hair," whispered Cecilie. "It's been a torture to me since I was half-grown. I've heard that all women with red hair are made like that."

"I've always wanted a sweetheart with red hair," said Dave, "and I never had one. Not the real red."

"How many have you had?" demanded Cecilie with asperity. "Have you got one now? Are you playing with me?" She half-released herself and looked into his face.

"Course I haven't got one, or I wouldn't be here with you," said Dave. "I've never had more than one or two—well, maybe two or three, or three or—well, anyway I haven't got one now. Only you, darling."

Lips met again. Then, "You know, that was such a horrid old man they made me marry when I was a girl," said Cecilie. "When he died, I resolved I'd never give up my freedom again. Not even for Michael. I wasn't jealous last night, I was pleased to death. But I've never dared to fall in love with anybody about my court, and I don't think seven years without love go with red hair. Do you?"

Dave was sunk now. She was melting, swooning in his arms, her heart was drumming in that mad rhythm that now matched that of his own, he could feel her rounded breasts crushed against the muscles of his chest as she clung to him with a tenseness that drove the breath from his lungs, and one silk sheath had slipped from its moorings and fallen down, showing a glimmer of white flesh. Cecilie's soft laughter

changed to little sobs of happiness, to the silence of four lips like one.

CECILIE sighed and stirred in Dave's arms. How long they had been there, it was impossible to guess. It might have been hours or minutes. Yet there was a moon over the castle that had not been there when Dave entered by the little door in the wall.

"I must go, my dear." She sat up and began arranging her frock, pulled up the fallen stocking. "I don't know what I'm going to tell my maids-in-waiting. I'm not supposed to be alone out of their sight, except when I'm asleep."

"When will I see you again?" asked Dave.

"You're sure you want to?"

"I've got to."

"You like red hair?"

"I adore yours," said Dave, coiling an errant tendril between his fingers.

"Keep the little key. I'll try to come tomorrow, if—"

"If what, my precious one?"

"If I'm still Duchess of Lichtenberg," she said. "Michael has the reputation of striking quickly, and he'll never forgive me for humiliating him last night. And I've only my personal bodyguard to rely upon, a hundred men."

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"Nothing. The army wants a man upon the throne, to lead them in case war should come, for Lichtenberg holds the passes between Austria and Italy. The townsfolk are for Michael, because he has always flattered them and paid court to them, and held out the prospects of a customs union with the Austrians, which the Great Powers have forbidden. No, I can only wait. Let me go now, let me go, and do you slip out through the gate unseen by the sentries upon the walls."

She rose to her feet, turned, and made him a little mocking salutation. Dave could see, in the moonlight, that slight, derisory smile upon her face. She had become the Duchess Cecilie again, no longer the woman who had clung to him like a searing flame, racking him with intolerable desire for her. And yet once more that flame was burning in him. He caught her hands.

"I want you," he said. "I can't let you go."

"Ah, my dear, if only I could come away with you—" she answered.

HARK! What was that? Suddenly, out of the dark beyond the palace, where the rising moon had not yet cast her rays, there sounded the crackling of rifle-firing, and, mingled with it, the shouting of a mob. Yells, dulled by the distance, blending with the sharp staccato crack of guns, and then the tap-tap of machine-guns. Shouts from the sentries on the walls, and men running along the road outside.

One instant Cecilie stared into Dave's face, and then she was running like a hare over the moonlit sward, and Dave was following her. They circled the end of the lake and ran down an avenue shaded with gigantic trees. The great bulk of the palace loomed up in front of them. An iron gate stood open, and in a moment they had passed through, and were within the outer precincts.

The noise was rapidly becoming a bedlam. The firing had now become continuous, and the yells were wilder, and spreading from one place to another, until they seemed to fill the night everywhere. From the walls rifles were crackling in answer, and, even as he ran, Dave saw one of the sentries topple and fall as if killed instantly by a bullet.

But the sound of bullets was con-

tinuous too, like the humming of a swarm of bees overhead, whipping through the branches of the trees like hail. Screams came from within the palace itself, and outside it dark figures were running down the great drive that ran to the main entrance.

More figures came running out of a long, barracks-like building at one side of the palace. They were soldiers, in the blue and white uniform of the Household Guards, carrying their rifles, with their bandoliers slung over their arms. They were swarming around Dave and Cecilie now, all running toward the entrance gates, from which others came running back, staggering men, wounded men, panicky figures that weaved and stumbled and collided with the force that was rushing to the defense.

Dave heard the incoherent shouting.

"They're attacking the gates! Duke Michael! The army's with him!"

Now the gates came into sight. Here, just inside them, a score of bodies lay writhing upon the ground. And now the bullets no longer hummed overhead, but whined spitefully about Dave's ears.

An officer, sword in hand, caught Cecilie by the arm. "Get back, you fool! This is no place for women!" he shouted. "Back to the palace!"

"I am your ruler, Cecilie," was the girl's quiet answer.

YET the words, distinct with authority, rang out clearly enough to be heard around her. In a moment the soldiers were cheering wildly. Yells from without answered them. Now Dave could see what was happening. In the moonlit road, that stretched straight away from the gates toward the town, long columns of troops were moving, and in front of them, as a screen, men were lying down, sheltered by a ditch

along the road, and picking off the men on the walls and those at the gates, who were trying to drag up a piece of ordnance.

The attempt was useless. The gunners were shot down as fast as they could man the weapon. The shouts of the attackers were growing bolder, more triumphant. It did not need a trained eye to see that the fall of the palace was only a matter of minutes—that, so soon as those approaching columns reached the walls, the defenders would be overwhelmed.

"Madam, you must come! You are in danger!" cried the officer with the

sword. He grasped Cecilie by the arm, and next moment went down in a crumpled, motionless heap, with a bullet through his throat.

Dave caught Cecilie in his arms, struggling and fighting, and carried her a dozen yards out of direct fire from the gate. He ran back, snatched the sword of the dead officer, his pistol and the cartridge-belt he wore. But again the girl was at his side.

"Go back! Go back!" he shouted.



They came to the end of the tunnel. "We're safe now," she said.

trying to make his voice heard above the din.

Men were falling all about him. Some, kneeling, were firing back at the rebels who lined the road, others stood stupidly, trying to form ranks, until the bullets caught them. Dave felt a red-hot sting across his upper arm; his leg buckled suddenly as a bullet pierced his calf.

Not more than half the little body of the defenders now survived.

"Shut the gates!" cried Cecilie, again running forward.

The answer came in a deafening roar, a spurt of flame and smoke. The gates and a section of the wall went hurtling down, crushing a half-dozen more of the defenders underneath them.

Cries, shrieks, groans, the crackle of bullets again, and then a strange and sudden silence. The moon passed behind a cloud, and the scene faded out.

Dave, gripping Cecilie by the arm, waited.

A voice was hailing from the road. "Truce! Truce! A parley!"

DAVE knew that voice that shouted out of the dark. It was Duke Michael, invisible, yet certainly reckless, to be standing there, within fifty yards of the rifles of the few defenders.

"I am Duke Michael! Call the Duchess, tell her to cease her futile defense. I have five thousand men behind me! Tell her to come forth and parley with me!"

Cecilie wrested herself out of Dave's grip, ran forward to where the bodies lay piled up beneath the debris of the gates and wall. "I am Cecile, Duchess of Lichtenberg!" she cried. "What is your message to me, traitor?"

"The *Landtag* has deposed you in secret session and elected me ruler of Lichtenberg," came the answer. "You

will surrender to avoid further bloodshed, and place yourself in my custody, in honorable custody!"

"To the first, yes, since I have no other resource," came the girl's ringing tones. "To the second, no. I loathe and despise you for the traitor you are!"

"Seize her!"

A sudden rush, again the crackle of rifles, then of pistols as the two parties closed. On the one side countless hundreds, on the other at most thirty men, fighting desperately behind the tumbled wall.

Dave ran into the thick of it, forgetful of his wounded leg. He emptied his pistol, flung it into the face of a soldier who was making a bayonet pass at him, and slashed with the sword. Dave had never held a sword in his hand before. He was surprised at the fearful ease with which it could cleave a man's face into a dark mask of blood.

Now he was in the midst of a little group of no more than a dozen men, fighting, fighting, being forced back, parrying blows, slashing, hewing his way to where he heard Cecilie crying in the darkness.

Suddenly he found her. She was on her knees, peering into the face of a dead man. As Dave gasped her name, she sprang to her feet, sobbing his name.

"I thought that man was you! He shall never take me. Come! Come! It is death for you, if you fall into Duke Michael's hands. And there is no more can be done!"

Cries of surrender were going up from the tiny band of the surviving defenders.

FOR an instant Dave hesitated, but Cecilie was dragging him by the hand. He yielded to her, and together they raced through the darkness, gained the avenue of trees, ran on. Michael's

men were swarming over the walls by now. Two of them sighted the fugitives, called to them to halt, then fired.

A slug nipped Dave's ear. He thrust Cecilie from him, turned, discovered only then that he was still holding the reeking sword in his hand. As the foremost man leaped forward with a shout, Dave brought the sword slashing down upon his head and felt the edge bite through the bone, saw, with a queer sense of detachment, the man crumple up, leaped at the other, and remembered afterward that he had already fired, and that his bullet had thudded into his falling comrade.

The trigger clicked on an empty cartridge-clip. Dave swung the sword again.

After that he was running with Cecilie through what seemed a nightmare, hearing the shouts die away behind them, until they stood at the edge of the lake. Escape seemed hopeless, for the high, unscalable wall surrounded them, and at any moment Michael's men might come swarming over it.

Dave looked at the girl. "I'm going back," he said, panting. "You don't want to be seen with me. You—"

She caught at his arm again. "The tunnel—the secret tunnel my grandfather, Duke Otto, made," she gasped. "I know the secret!"

She slipped noiselessly into the clear water, raised her hand and beckoned to Dave, who followed her. How deep the lake was, he couldn't tell, but it was much deeper than his height.

Cecilie was swimming toward the end of the artificial excavation. She stopped, trod water, pointed to an opening two feet above the water's level, a circular orifice hardly larger than a man's body.

"Have you been here?" Dave asked her.

"No, but I've seen the plan. Quick, lead the way!"

Dave scrambled into the hole. Behind them the shouts were growing louder.

LIKE a worm he worked his way along the hole, gripping the encrusted sides of what had once been tiles. But a few feet in the walls receded. He groped for them and couldn't find them. He let his feet down into six inches of water. He heard Cecilie breathing hard behind him.

"It runs under the walls, under the road. We're safe now," whispered the girl.

Dave found one wall and groped through impenetrable blackness, guiding himself by touch. Cecilie's hand was on his shoulder.

On and on for what seemed a mile. It looked as if the tunnel would never end. And then suddenly there was a ray of moonlight, the tunnel became earth, Dave flattened himself and crawled out into the night. A moment later they lay gasping side by side.

All about them was forest, but in the distance, about a mile away, they could hear shouting, and a spire of flame was shooting up to the sky.

"Where are we?" whispered Dave.

"Near the city. This is a park, but the real forest begins two miles further on, on the road to Freiburg."

"Is this the road to Freiburg?"

"Yes. We can't go there. They are all for Michael. I know some peasants who would hide us—"

"No," said Dave, "we're going toward Freiburg. I want you to trust me, Cecilie. It's just a hunch I've got, but I think it's going to work. Can you walk six miles?"

"Where are you taking me?"

(Continued on page 106)

RANGER'S



By
**JAMES A.
LAWSON**

The window crashed, the door burst open—just as Raine snarled: "Hell ain't good enough for you!"

THE headlights on Jack Raine's car swept the way ahead. It was supposed to be a road. Teams and trucks and tractors had made it an impossible way of deep holes, sour mud. As rough as the way to hell. And leading to that oil boom canker of Parasite, it amounted to about the same.

The heavy fall of rain, swept by cold wind that came unobstructed across two-hundred miles of plains, lashed at the

car. Raine dodged a mudhole, cursed, leaned suddenly, his nose pressed almost against the windshield.

Ahead, staggering, slipping, a dark, human figure showed. Raine's right hand left the wheel, tentatively touching his shoulder-holstered gun. There was no telling: what tricks might be tried to feel him out; what methods used to get him.

The figure was down, now, in the slop

REWARD

The dead never listen. And Lou Canton would have been listening—except that she loved the wrong man, and helped trap him in a frame that didn't work!



and downpour. Raine put on his brakes, skidded to a stop, leaped out. Rain blobbed by his lights, dimming the glow of them. In that faint glow, he saw the one down in the mud there was—a girl!

She was small. He lifted her easily, carried her toward the car. Surprised as he was, he could not help but notice the soft smallness of her. The warmth of her limbs against his hands went through him; the jerky rise and fall of upthrust, firm, tiny breasts sent fire into his brain.

The girl moaned faintly as he put her into the seat beside him, covered her as best he could with an old coat and started the car again.

LIGHTS, then, came gleaming through the storm, towering into the sky; gas flares in oil camps sent red glowing into the night. Jack Raine's car bounced and slithered into Parasite—a mile-long damnation of tents, sheetiron, unpainted boards. Board walks, even at this late hour, were jammed. Men cursed, fought; women, long limbs exposed, soft stomachs and firm hips swaying, went among these men. Noise, smells—plain hell!

Raine drove on to the edge of the town. Where a few cottonwood trees grew beside a wet-weather streambed, he turned in at a little two-room house. The girl beside him mumbled, but did not open her eyes.

Inside the little place, Raine put the girl down on his bed, lit a gas heater, took off his coat and turned to his find. Plastered with drying mud, her wet clothes sticking to her—Raine damned himself for such thoughts now. He washed the mud from her face. A face that was small, heart-shaped, and with bee-stung lips that even now, pouted to be kissed.

The girl shivered. Raine shook her. Without result. Those wet clothes had to

come off! Pneumonia, at least a terrible cold, would be her lot if they did not.

He swallowed, set his teeth and did what he must do. Her shoes, wet, worn; her stockings. The bedraggled coat to her cheap suit, her waist. Stained with muddy water, her brassiere was next. Raine's breath whistled through his teeth. As though seeking him, begging him for care and protection, those delectable breasts caught, refused to yield his eyes.

As one dazed, he went on with his job, though the very sight of those soft white mounds seemed to sear him. He jerked his hands away.

Sweat poured from him as he gently lifted her, and finished undressing her. He gnawed his lips and a stunned, lethargic feeling possessed him as he wet a towel.

The slender, perfect length of her seemed to relax, when he sponged off the mud. Raine, a hoarse croaking in his throat, hurled the towel into a corner, drew a blanket over the girl's white body. He found a bottle in a cupboard, poured a large drink, tossed it off; poured a smaller one, held it to the girl's red lips as he lifted her head. She gasped, was quiet a moment, opened her eyes. She stared blankly for a moment; her dark eyes saw Raine standing there. A little cry broke from her.

HIS voice low and drawling, was soothing to her, and somehow instantly allayed her fears. "Ma'm, don't be frightened. You ain't in no danger with me." (No, dammit! he thought. That's the hell of it.)

She moved, the blanket slipped back. Her questing little hands brushed her bare thighs, slipped quickly down, then upward. Her indrawn breath was audible

and a high color sped from her shoulders into her face.

"Them wet clothes," Raine said gently, "just had to come off."

She nodded, her large eyes somehow understanding.

"Tell me," Raine said, "how come you was out on the road to Parasite this kind of a night?"

It didn't come out so easily, at first. And then, as if it were a very natural thing, she told him how it was.

"My father died, a year ago," she informed him. "I lived on a little he left, for a while. I'd never been trained to work, you see. The money gave out. I could always sing, dance a bit. I tried to get a job. In Kansas City, I was trying out in a little place. A woman came up to me. She said she was in a big club in this new oilfield boom."

"That woman," Raine said almost harshly. "Was her name Lou Canton?"

"Why—yes. You know her?"

"Go on," he said.

"Well, it seemed a chance to me. I took what few dollars I had remaining, and came on. I—well, I didn't have bus fare out into the field. I had no money for food. I started walking."

"Fifty miles," Raine almost groaned.

"A truck stopped. Picked me up. The driver seemed nice, until it got dark. Then—" she colored, "he stopped. I jumped out and ran. After that—oh! I was so hungry and cold—I tried to keep off the road. I remember lights of a car, falling. That's all."

Raine, a hard, cold way to him, moved into his kitchen. He wasn't much of a bachelor, and there was little enough food in the place. He turned. The girl was in the doorway, a blanket around her shoulders. She came toward the stove, her marvelously-moulded legs showing at each step.

"I feel strong enough. Let me." She took a pan from his hand—a hand more used to a bucking, thundering gun. Her touch did something to him. To her. The pan clattered to the floor, his arms were around her, lifting her off her feet. And there was response in the moist, clinging press of her lips. The concealing blanket slid from her shoulders.

Her breath, then, was hot, firing him as she said into his ear: "Please! Please!"

Choking, he set her down, picked up the blanket. Slim, proud and straight, she stood quiescent while he wrapped it about her.

Suddenly, she laughed. "I know your name, but you don't know mine. It's Grace. Grace Searl."

THEY were gay while they ate what she prepared. Rain made comfortable noises on the roof; the threat of the boom, the noise and the hell of it seemed very far away.

Yet they avoided each other's eyes. Dynamite lay in a single direct glance.

They went to sit before the fire. Jack Raine came directly to the point. "You can't work for that place, Grace. Here's why: Lou Canton is no good. The law wants her, and the devil for whom she works—Al Pawt. Wants them for luring girls like you into these booms, for one thing. Club? Pawt's Roughneck Roost is a dive—with whiskey and gambling downstairs, rooms up above. You see?"

She sat stunned, silent, the hope and happiness gone out of her. Gently, Raine said, "Don't worry. I think I know where there is a job for you. In the morning, we'll see. I'll sleep here on the floor."

When she was in bed, the light out, he lay listening. To each, the presence of the other was a magnet. Yet each fought the impulse to go to the other. Her voice

came to him. "Jack, what sort of work do you do?"

"Uh, sometimes I work in the oilfield. Sometimes I gamble some. I'm sort of a tumbleweed."

"Oh." There was a little note of doubt in that one word.

"**A**UNT Emma" Smith took one look at Grace Searl, heard Jack Raine's story, and took the girl in her arms. "Thank Heaven," the old lady cried, "it was a man like Jack Raine picked you up. He's a wild young devil, but he's to be trusted—as far as a good-looking young girl can ever trust the male tribe."

Jack Raine, then, saw Grace Searl settled as the one clerk in Aunt Emma's little variety store. He turned to go. Aunt Emma who had known him in many other oilfields, went to the door with him.

"I know you," she said. "Right now, you're going over to Pawt's Roughneck Roost. And you ain't fooling me, Jack. I know your game. Don't think Pawt don't suspect it, too. Be careful."

"Careful?" he echoed. "I think the time's come to do away with that. Al Pawt, his bunch of yellow dogs, have got by with worse than murder in half a dozen booms. This's got to be the last!"

A tall, striding figure, Raine cut across the muddy street. The wind seemed to blow straight from the Pole, hitting this part of Texas with savage velocity. Raine, besides the clean-cut look he bore, dressed differently from these men of the fields: He wore cowboy boots under his straight trousers; his jacket was canvas instead of the usual leather; his hat was cowman type.

He pushed between two buildings and came to a large, two-story two-by-four-and-sheetiron dump in the rear of these. This sort of thing was not to be done

away with in an oilfield boom—a drinking-gambling joint like Roughneck Roost. But other things, murder, hijacking, transportation of good women, had to stop.

Getting the proof—that was the trick. And Al Pawt knew a few tricks himself.

This time of morning, but few men were at the home-built bar. Raine strode to a table near an inside stairway in the rear. Having hair off the dog, Lou Canton—and some called her "The Lady That's Known As Lou"—pushed back her chair when Raine came to her.

Her full bosom swelled, she ran her tongue over her lips, and the look on her face was a hot and feverish one. "At Smackover, again at Borger, and in Oklahoma, you wouldn't come to me," she said, a note of passion in her deep-pitched voice. "Have you changed your mind?"

"Save yourself," Raine grunted, a look of near-disgust supplanting the hard expression on his lean face. Dull color flushed the woman's features, hell blazed in her eyes. He might curse her, kick her, kill her, and she would have taken it because she wanted him. But his look of disgust—She resolved to fix Jack Raine's clock for that!

"Where's this rat, Al Pawt?" Raine grunted.

"Kind of speaking out of turn, ain't you?"

RAINE turned slowly, carefully. When Pawt's kind were behind one, it was wise to move that way. Raine's hard eyes were icy augers that bored Pawt's dark, beak-nosed face. The feeling of hate that ran between them was tangible, physical.

"Ain't speaking out of turn when I call you a rat," Raine growled. "Except, I have to apologize to the rat. And there's

no use wasting time. Pawt, last night I picked up a girl. Name of Grace Searl." He turned the hard focus of his orbs on Lou Canton. "You 'hired' her in KayCee; the usual stuff. You didn't pay her way here—so you're safe from U. S. law. But—"



As she leaped, he caught her dress; it ripped from her.

Al Pawt came a step nearer Raine, and when he spoke, his voice was so level as to be deadly. "Raine, I hate your guts. You broke my gambling house in West Texas—that last boom. Crooked, I'd bet blues in big stacks. Now, you root in here. What the hell business you got, telling me about the law?"

"None," Raine gave back. "Except

that one girl ain't never coming in this place."

Pawt swelled visibly. He'd seen a picture of this Grace Searl. One Lou Canton had brought back on her last "recruiting" trip. And just looking at that picture had made Pawt restless, waiting for the girl to arrive.

"I got ideas about you," Pawt snarled. "And one of them is that you're a low-down son . . ."

Pawt's right hand swept back toward his right hip-pocket.

Jack Raine bent at the waist, and it seemed his right hand came up from the floor. Pawt swayed and ran his beak of a nose into Raine's left.

Raine was on him, hammering him back against the wall. Pawt's right hand cleared his pocket. Raine chopped down the side of his stiffened hand hitting Pawt's wrist. The gun Pawt had drawn clattered to the floor.

"You — low — damned — woman-wrecking scum!"

Each word a burst of breath and effort behind a blow. Pawt was held upright against the wall. His head jerked this way and that, his knees sagged. Sheer savagery of the blows Raine swung kept Pawt propped upright.

A man at the bar groaned sickishly; another turned his head. Pawt's face was not a lovely thing to see. And then Raine stepped back and Pawt pitched to his hands and knees. Blood ran from his mouth and nose, dripping, spraying as he shook his head.

He looked up at Raine, choked, found tongue.

"A'right. This time, I lose. But there'll be a next time. And don't think I don't know what you are!"

Raine, disgusted, damning the fact he could not prove what he knew about Al

Pawt, spun, cursed angrily, strode from the place.

Pawt arose and staggered into a chair. Lou Canton pushed a drink toward him. "Listen, fool," she began.

"I'm tired of your tongue," he snarled. "Some of these days, I'll wring that pretty neck of yours."

"I think not," she sneered. "Right now, I'm telling you how to get back at Raine. I hate his guts, damn him!"

"Because he'll have none of you. But, go ahead. What's this plan? And if it'll lead him into getting his knot where we can shoot it off without getting hooked at it . . ."

Pawt listened. "You devil," he said at last. "Women—hell! Men ain't in it when it comes to figuring out the dirt."

Pawt arose, called up the stairs. "Nace. Falk, damn you, come down," he bel-lowed.

A PAIR of puffy-eyed nondescripts clumped down from the den above. Nace, ferret-faced, twitchy; Falk, glassy-eyed, the mark of a conscienceless killer onto him. It was said you couldn't win a big stake in a place run by Pawt—and get away. And more than one man who *had*, had been found out in the oil-fields—dead. Or a year or so after the boom had passed, his body fished out of an oil storage tank.

Bunkhouses, when payday came, were robbed. And men again whispered the name of Pawt. But proof? Murder cannot be proved when death, wild-living, sudden, indifferent law draw a veil over such things.

And Pawt was always in his place. Who knew where Nace and Falk might be those nights when men were robbed, or killed?

They listened to Pawt without sign of emotion, and when he had done, turned and went back upstairs.

Throughout that day, Pawt waited. Toward early dark, Lou Canton returned from an errand of her own. "I found out. He didn't leave her at his place. She's working for Aunt Emma. Emma's out, right now."

An eager way to him, Pawt hurried out.

IN the dim light of the little store, the beauty of Grace Searl caught and held Pawt's breath. He was glad of the dimness in this place.

"Miss Searl," he said without preamble, "I'm Al Pawt. You see my face? Jack Raine did that to me. Why? Because I wanted to learn your whereabouts, and protect you. Raine, Miss Searl, is a killer. And the reason he didn't want you to work for me: Lou Canton and Raine are—uh, in love. Like that."

The girl shook her head. "I—what am I to believe?" She cried. "Why tell me this?"

"To protect you. I can show you proof."

Grace Searl drew back. "I don't know," she muttered. "I'll ask Aunt Emma."

"Isn't she a friend of Raine's? I said I'd give you proof. If it isn't so, all right. If it is, go to work with me. I'm opening up a new club, out on the edge of the field. You can go to work tonight."

"I don't know what to do. What he does is his business. But I came here to dance and sing my way toward a career," she muttered. Sudden decision possessed her. "What is this proof?"

"At dark, go to Raine's place. Look in."

Slowly, she nodded.

"And then come to me. I'll take care of you."

She did not catch the double meaning in his voice.

There was a double meaning there. Pawt felt his blood racing in his veins—hot, avid. And a new angle of this trap came to his mind: Not only would he draw Raine into sudden death, he'd cross Lou Canton, and have Grace Searl for himself.

Darkness came suddenly. Jack Raine had driven far that day. Strange business, his. Business that led to a sheriff's posse finding three stolen cars in the broken hills, and a murder suspect in isolated river brakes.

Whistling, Raine stripped to the waist, heated water and poured it into a pan. He stiffened suddenly, then turned. Closing the door behind her. Lou Canton, smiling, came on in.

She took a chair, crossed full limbs and said: "Jack, I got to talk with you."

"Go ahead," he grunted ungraciously. He turned, soaped his hands and face and bent above the washpan.

LOU CANTON came to her feet. Nimble fingers worked at her dress. Spluttering, Raine pawed for a towel, wiped the soap out of his eyes. He grunted abruptly, then. The towel fell to the floor.

In high-heeled shoes, sheer stockings, a tiny strip of silk girdle that revealed more than it hid, Lou came near to him. She flung her arms around his neck.

Her breasts were heavy, swelling as they pressed against him, like torches ready to light his way to hell in an explosive way. She twisted her hips, undulated.

"Jack," she whispered.

He felt disgust, but despite it, he was carried momentarily out of himself. It was beyond his power to resist. His lips met hers, and he could feel her teeth lightly touch his lip.

He grunted, jerked back, thrusting

her away. A glimpse of a small, white face at a window, and understanding was like a lightning bolt against his brain. He opened the door and ran outside.

"Grace. Grace!" he called. Only the wind, whistling in the bare-limbed cottonwoods, gave answer. A mocking return, at that. Raine spun and lunged back inside. Still half unclad, Lou Canton sat and smoked a cigarette.

"Now that she's gone, think how nice I am," she purred.

"It's warmer in hell!" Raine croaked. His hands shot out, gripped around her throat and he lifted her from the chair. "It ain't good enough, or bad enough," he snarled, thrusting her away.

A scream ran past her lips, shrill bursting.

Glass of one window crashed, the door was flung open. Nace stood in the door, and with a gun thrust before it, Falk's face showed through the edging of the broken windowpane.

Raine swayed, resisted the impulse to make a dive for the gun that lay on a bench with his shirt.

"This's nice." Dead-panned, Nace spoke emotionlessly. His gun pointed at a point between Lou Canton and Raine. "Nice. They'll find you, John Law, dead. With a naked dame. They'll be a gun, and it'll look like suicide, with maybe murder. You kill the dame, shoot yourself—see?"

"I see," Raine said on exhaled breath.

Lou Canton shook her head, as though clearing it from a blow.

"Nace!" she cried sharply. "You and Falk are full of hop. It wasn't to be that way. I—I was to scream, and he was to get dead because he attacked me."

"Pawt's seen that dame, and likes her," Falk jeered from the window. "He don't want you around to bother him."

Lou Canton stood straight, whimp-

ered, screamed. "He's doublecrossed me. No! You can't kill me, too. No—"

She hurled herself at the door. Nace's gun ran flame and smoke and lead.

Raine flung himself backward to the floor, rolled to his knees and reached the bench. Bullets from Falk's automatic tore the floor around him. Raine's hand gripped his gun, his finger worked the trigger. Falk's face disappeared from the window.

Lou Canton's momentum carried her squarely against the muzzle of Nace's gun. Desperate, dying reaction caused her arms to fling themselves around his neck. He cursed, fought with her, his gun sounding muffled as he pumped bullets into her bare, white flesh.

She fell away from him. Nace raised his weapon. A wailing cry broke past his lips. Braced, gun ready, Raine waited. The cry of despair Nace gave was drowned by the pistol's throaty roar. Nace reached for the doorframe, missed, fell back outside.

RAINE was on his knees beside Lou Canton. Blood ran from her lips, from terrible wounds in her. "'S all right, Jack," she whispered, never opening her eyes. "I had it coming a long time. That girl, Jack. Pawt will have her by now. In that shack of his, back of the place."

"Listen, Lou." There was sorrow, regret in Raine's voice.

Lou Canton wasn't listening. The dead never do.

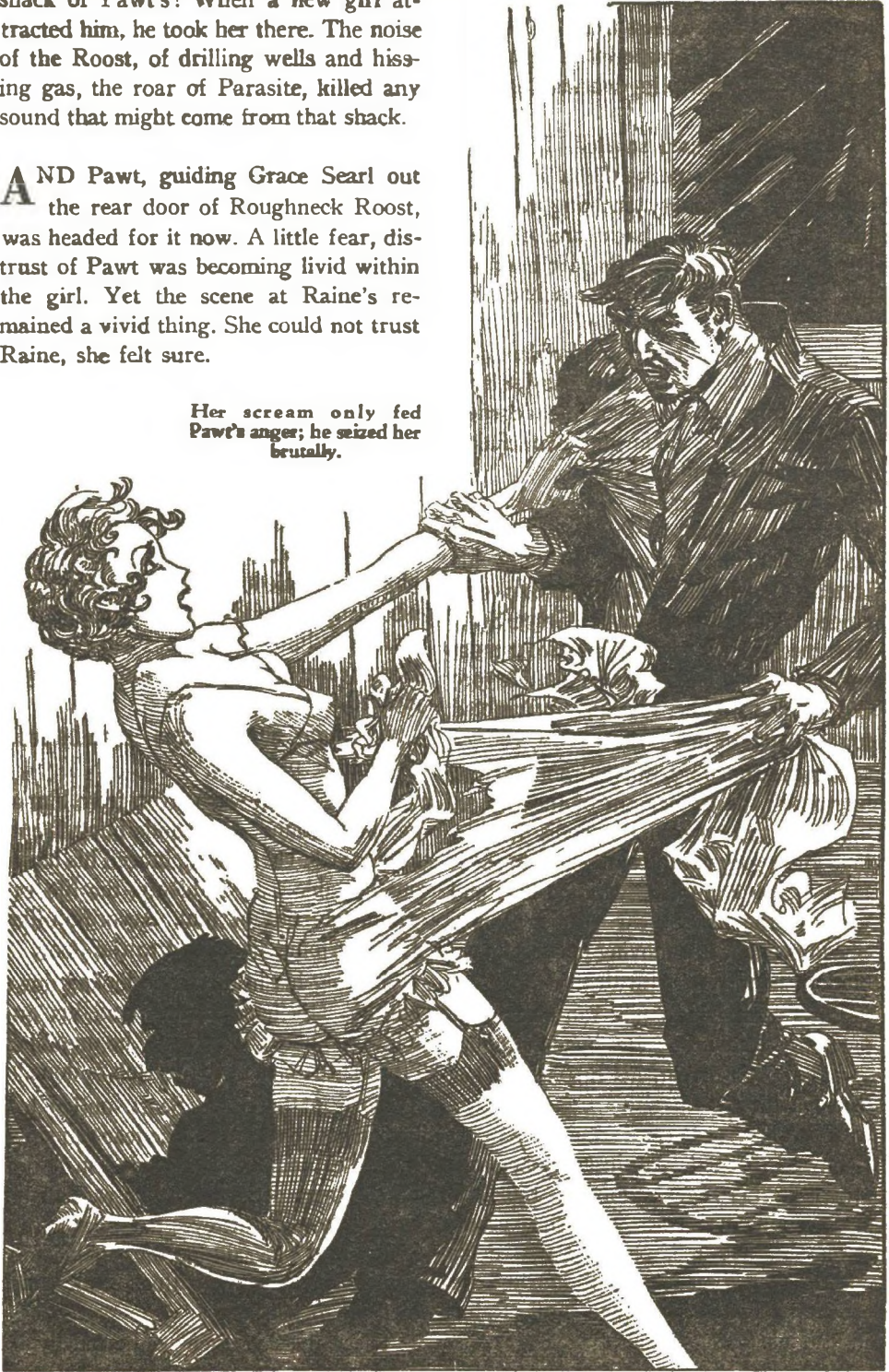
Raine pulled on a coat, ran out, leaping the body of Nace. He ran around the house. Falk lay in a crumpled heap, face-down in the mud. Stuffing shells into his gun, Raine ran on.

He did not go down the street, but cut down a refuse and can littered alley back of the buildings on one side. That

shack of Pawt's! When a new girl attracted him, he took her there. The noise of the Roost, of drilling wells and hissing gas, the roar of Parasite, killed any sound that might come from that shack.

AND Pawt, guiding Grace Searl out the rear door of Roughneck Roost, was headed for it now. A little fear, distrust of Pawt was becoming livid within the girl. Yet the scene at Raine's remained a vivid thing. She could not trust Raine, she felt sure.

*Her scream only fed
Pawt's anger; he seized her
brutally.*



"My car's back here," Pawt explained, leading her toward the shack.

"I'll wait," she muttered affrightedly, pulling back. Something warned her. But warned too late.

"I won't!" Pawt snarled. His right arm encircled her neck and he lifted her, choking off her outcry, shutting away her breath. She kicked backward at him, struggling furiously. His left hand hit her face, stunned her; she sobbed for breath, and things grew dim.

Still dimly, she knew a door slammed, was locked. A yellow, sickly gas-jet light was lit. She lay on a cot in a corner. Save for this, a table and two chairs, there was no furniture in here.

Groaning miserably, she sprang up. His face contorted, Al Pawt came at her, backed her into a corner. Brutally, his hands grasped the front of her coat-suit, ripped coat and waist away. Grace Searl screamed until it seemed her throat must split. She tried to bite his hands. He tore at her, slapped her. His fingers fumbled for the band of her skirt.

His eyes burning, saliva drooling from his mouth, he let her out of the corner. The girl ran toward the door. Laughing, Pawt gripped the skirt and ripped it clear. She stumbled, whimpering, and went to the floor. Fear paralyzed her. She knew he was removing her stockings, binding her hands with them.

Pawt's terrible hands ran over her, pinching, pawing. He made animal sounds in his throat, his lips seared her face, her throat.

"Pawt!"

Pawt stiffened, an insanely-angered glitter in his eyes. "Pawt!" the call came again. The voice was wheezy and strained. "It's me, Nace. Pawt, hell's busted loose. Lou framed Raine, and we crossed them. Killed her, But Raine slipped us. He got Falk."

"Damn you," Pawt raged. "Stay out there. If he comes here, lead him down. To hell with him. Nothing's going to stop me now."

"Pawt, I can't. I'm shot—bad."

"Die, then, damn you," Pawt snarled back. He turned to the girl once more.

THE shack rattled, seemed to rock. The door bulged. It came again, then, as Raine, his trick failing, hurled his weight against the barricade. It gave, and he fell into the shack, landing on the floor on hands and knees.

Pawt hurled himself around, shrieked like the damned and insane, and reached for his gun.

Raine—his urge was to kill Al Pawt with bare hands. Tear him slowly to bits and break his back. Yet this thing, his wish, he could not do. He squatted, waiting, still on one knee. Pawt: frustration, desire had blinded him. His gun cleared, came up.

A single shot roared thunderously within the place.

Pawt's breath was driven from him as he spun around. His hands hung limply at his sides. He swayed, braced his hands on the table . . . Suddenly, the life ran completely out of him. Accordion-like, joint-by-joint, he folded to the floor.

Shaking his head, Raine looked down at him. His hand opened and his gun fell to the floor. "I reckon," he mumbled, "that is the end of it. My job is done."

He went to Grace Searl, untied her, helped her to sit erect. The fear ran slowly out of her; relief crowded in. Fumbling, Raine gathered up the rags of her clothes, keeping his eyes from her.

"I guess," he said, peeling off his coat, "you'll have to wear this. Your suit's torn all to hell."

The canvas garment came hardly be-

low her hips. She bit her lips as he knelt and put her slippers on her feet.

"We can't go back to my place," he mumbled. "I was right when I yelled through the door—only Nace, he got dead, too. I got a friend who owns a little place near here. He ain't home now. We can sneak in there, and then I'll get you some clothes."

They crept down the alley, went up a deserted little side street, came to the place of Raine's friend. He climbed in a window and opened a door for her.

In his short, cow-country jacket, Grace Searl stood near the stove. Her deep eyes sought his face.

"Jack," she half-sobbed. "What will they do to you, for killing him—those others?"

"Nothing. I should've done it long ago."

"What did you mean when you said your job was done, and that was the end of it?"

"Look under that jacket; the left side," he said.

She opened the jacket. Raine ground his teeth and stared at the small, perfect body thus revealed. She seemed not to notice this. She was looking at the little blue and gold badge pinned inside the coat.

"Yeah," Raine sighed. "I'm a sort of

Ranger. Working special out of the Adjutant General's office."

She looked up at him, her red lips parting. She blushed when she looked down at herself—but did *not* button the jacket!

"That woman—Lou. She was wise. And she loved you!"

He shrugged. "Couldn't help herself, I guess."

SHE came a step nearer him. The lines of her breasts made him quiver; the whole feminine beauty of her took his breath. The gently-rounding hips of her, her questing innocence—Raine groaned and closed his eyes.

"Some things, lover," her voice was tremulous, whispery, "you must have to teach me."

She was on tiptoe, arms about his neck. He let his breath go explosively, picked her off the floor, cuddling that warm little body against his own.

This town, this boom, had been a hell-site—yet it promised to be paradise for him now. Her lips sought his, he felt the pound of her heart, the rising of her pulse. Her breath came faster and more eagerly.

"This," she breathed her ecstasy, "is not the end. Your job will never be done."

A Story of the Spanish Revolution

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Next Month!

MIDNIGHT

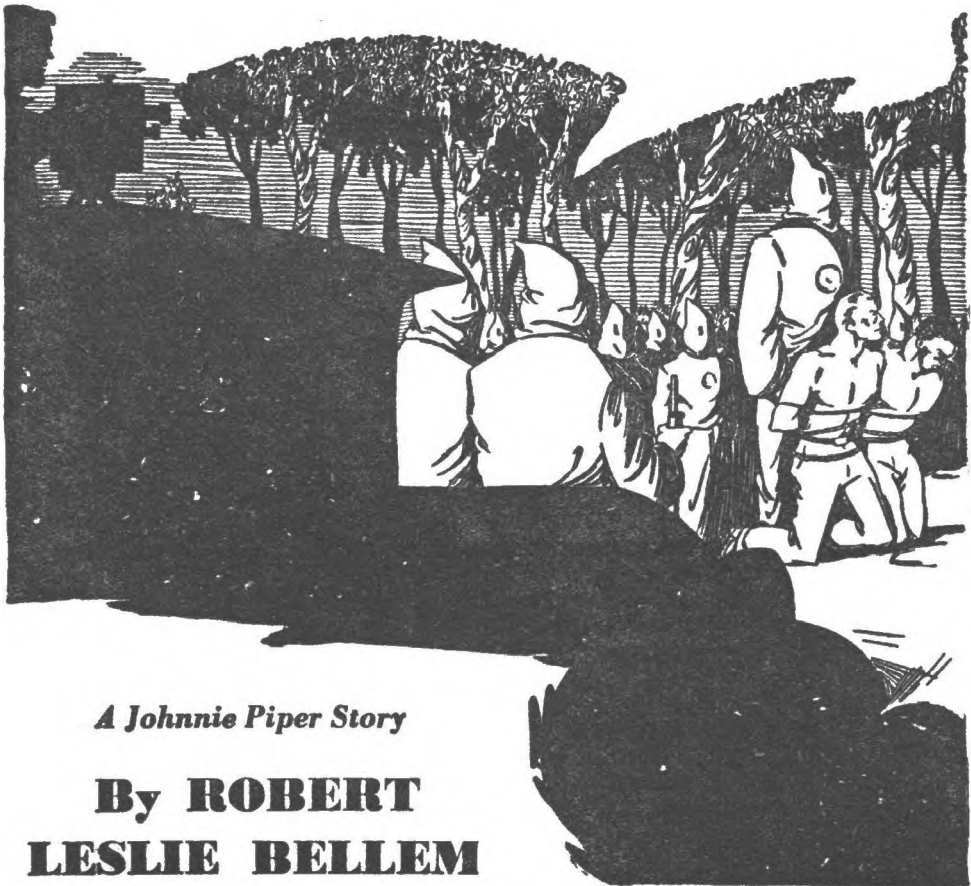
The dread organization wants to inspire terror with movies of their orgies; but Johnnie Piper is more interested in rescuing a helpless girl from their clutches!

IN THE darkness, chip-diamonds of light necklaced the landing-field below. With a swish of wings the Continental Airliner circled twice, glided in, dropped to earth with effortless ease.

Within the ship's cabin sat Johnnie Piper, camera guy for World Newsreel.

The plane's only other passenger was a blonde girl who looked to be in her early twenties.

Ever since the take-off at Newark, Johnnie had been studying her—trying to muster up courage to speak to her. But she seemed distant, austere, more-



A Johnnie Piper Story

**By ROBERT
LESLIE BELLEM**

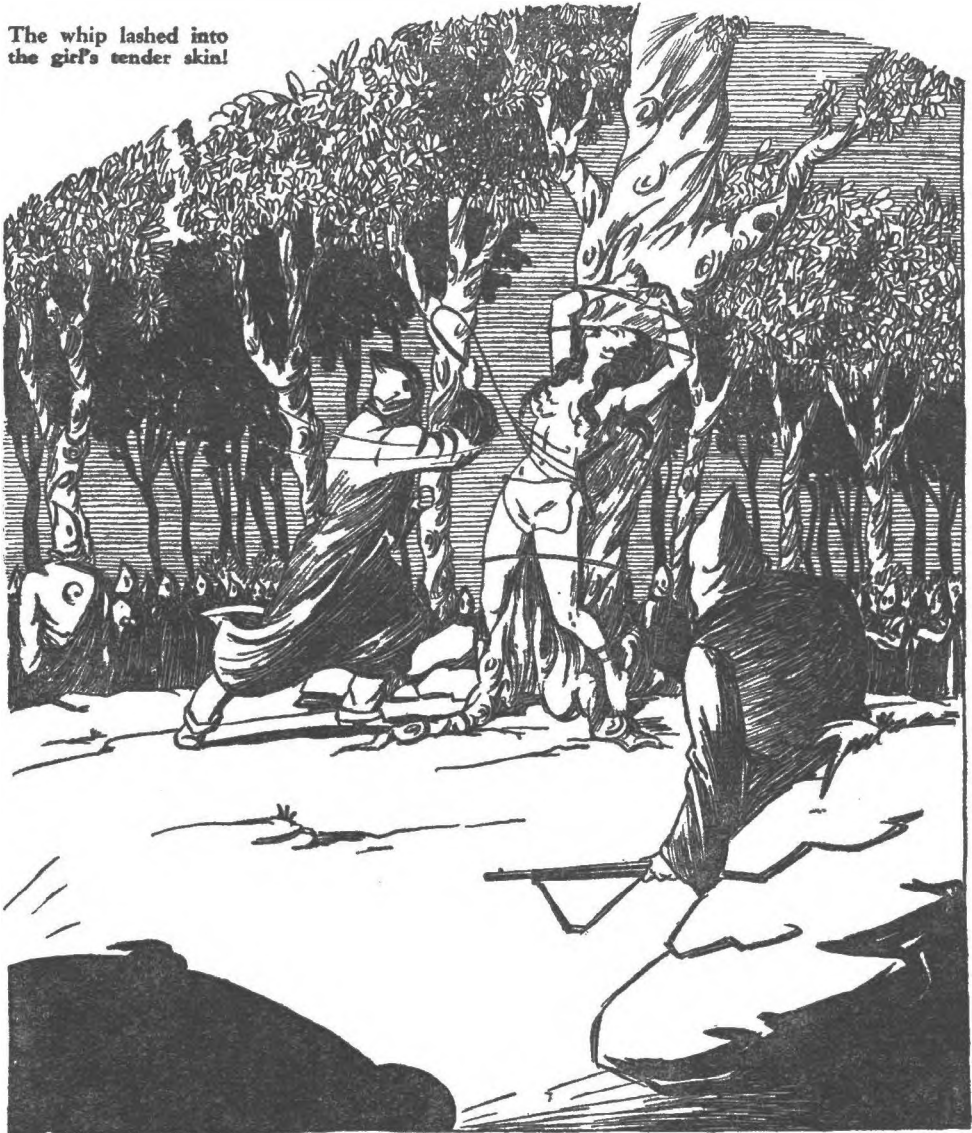
LEGION

over, Johnnie had other things on his mind. Mysterious things—such as the anonymous letter in his inner coat pocket.

Now that the airliner was grounded on the little-used field outside Spandee,

a hundred miles south of Detroit, Johnnie prepared to disembark. He felt a premonitory sensation, almost apprehensive. Then the feeling was erased by his surprise when he perceived that the blonde girl was also leaving the plane.

The whip lashed into the girl's tender skin!



Somehow Johnnie Piper was startled. He'd had the notion that she was going on through to Chicago. It hadn't struck him that she might end her journey when he did.

Covertly he eyed her. She wore a severely-tailored suit. The skirt partially outlined the nubile sleekness of her hips; the coat, despite its tailoring, bulged a little at the straining outward pressure of her firm, domed breasts. Slender chiffon ankles vanished in sensibly flat-heeled oxfords; a mannish hat rode recalcitrant yellow curls. Carrying a light overnight bag, she stepped from the plane; started across the stubbly field.

Johnnie nodded good-night to the ship's stewardess; also set forth across the lumpy terrain. Behind him, the airliner's motors roared; the ship trundled down the runway, swung into the wind, rose gracefully. The night swallowed it.

WITH the airliner's departure, Johnnie once again felt that queer sense of foreboding. He strode toward a small, unlighted building at the field's edge. A lone automobile stood there—a black, battered, powerful-looking touring car.

There was a man at the wheel, sullen-faced, watchful. Johnnie addressed him: "My name's Piper. Are you—"

"Yeah, pardner. Get in. Button your lip."

Frowning, Johnnie started to climb into the tonneau. A feminine hail halted him.

"Just a minute!"

Johnnie turned; saw the girl from the airliner. She flashed him a semi-smile. "I—I wonder if you'd mind giving me a lift as far as Spandee? This seems to be the only hire-car around, and I—"

Johnnie started to shake a vehement negative. He had good reason. He knew

the black touring car was about to ferry him into something that might prove damned dangerous—no place for a girl.

His thoughts raced back to New York that same morning. Johnnie's boss had summoned him. "Piper, I've got an assignment for you. Our Detroit-district sound-truck has been swiped—cameras, control-panels, mikes, the whole works. Along with the truck its sound technician, Barney Strake, has disappeared."

"You mean—kidnaped?"

"That's the size of it. A while ago I got this message. Look it over; keep it."

Johnnie had read the anonymous letter:

World Newsreel—

Much newspaper publicity has been given the recent activities of our organization. But our full purpose cannot be served until the public is thoroughly awakened to us. We want people to know we are 80,000 strong and still growing; want them to understand we are not fooling when we say we intend taking over the government. We shall attain our purpose **NO MATTER HOW MANY LIVES WE DESTROY IN THE PROCESS!**

To impress ourselves upon the public consciousness, we have decided to permit your World Newsreel to photograph one of our night meetings with sound—including the flogging, and perhaps death, of certain persons who have dared oppose us.

We have already borrowed one of your sound-trucks, abducted its driver, one Barney Strake. We find, unfortunately, that Strake is only a sound technician; knows nothing about cameras.

So we must ask you to send us a cameraman by tonight. Let him come by Continental Airline, disembark at the emergency field at Spandee. Wire ahead to the Acmar Garage, Spandee, giving your man's name. He will then be met at the landing-field by an automobile.

The slightest disobedience will result in most unpleasant reprisal upon Strake, your sound technician, whom we shall hold as hostage. Be warned.

THE MIDNIGHT LEGION.

Johnnie had put the letter down. His boss said, "It's going to be your job, Piper. We expect you to see that Strake is released without harm; we want you to come back with some extra special footage. This Midnight Legion is a potent outfit—a damned sight more dangerous than the Klan ever was. They've got Uncle Sam worried; so watch your step."

"Okay, boss. I'll be plenty cagey," Johnnie had said. But now, in the darkness bordering the Spandee flying-field, he wondered just how cagey he ought to be.

HE looked at the blonde girl who'd asked for a lift. Should he refuse outright—or should he give his reasons?

The decision was unexpectedly taken out of his hands. The sullen-eyed driver said: "Okay, cutie. Sure we'll give you a ride. Hop in here alongside me. The gent will ride in back."

Johnnie half-uttered a protest. He didn't like the way the man's glance licked over the girl's attractive curves, rested on the firm promontories of her breasts. He didn't relish the thought of her riding beside a member of the Midnight Legion—the most lawless outfit of masked, terrorizing government-flouters that ever scorched a countryside. Whip-wielders, murderers, a pack of wolves whose cowardice was hidden under the bravado of numerical superiority. . .

But before Johnnie could utter a word, the girl climbed in beside the driver. The camera guy, muttering, settled himself watchfully in the tonneau. Maybe the man up front would actually drive the girl to Spandee first, before conducting Johnnie to the Midnight Legion meeting. The touring car lurched forward, headed into the night.

Behind it, the landing-field's lights faded. Farther back, Spandee was a blur of yellow against the dark sky. The blonde girl seemed suddenly to sense something wrong. She stirred, spoke: "Aren't we headed in the wrong direction, driver?"

"Yeah. But keep quiet, baby—and maybe you won't get hurt."

She drew a sharp breath. "Stop this car! Let me out!" She reached forward, snapped off the ignition-switch, yanked the emergency brake. The car skidded to a halt on the dirt road.

The driver rasped. "You damn' little slut—!" and reached for the girl. She eluded him, opened the door. He caught at her again, thick fingers fastening upon the front of her coat. She jerked away. Cloth tore. She leaped from the car, started to run. Her unbrassiered breasts jounced, creamily exposed through the rent in her silken blouse.

The driver plunged after her. But before he had taken seven steps, Johnnie catapulted out of the tonneau. The camera guy snarled: "The hell!" and dived at the driver's legs.

Johnnie's hard shoulder took his adversary at the knees. The man went down, rolling. Piper scrambled at him, fists flashing; bashed his knuckles into peeled-back, snarling lips. The driver spat out shards of broken teeth, a string of blaspheming oaths. He twisted away from Johnnie, managed to regain his feet. He lashed out a savage kick at the camera guy's middle.

Johnnie squirmed aside; the kick took him in the ribs. A searing pain lanced through his lungs. He coughed back his agony, forced himself upright, plummeted straight at the man before him.

THUD of fist against flesh. Crunching impact of body against straining

body. A blow took Johnnie high on the cheek. He felt blood inside his mouth, warm, saline. He hammered piston-punches to the driver's face, midriff; his enemy gave ground with savage reluctance. Imminent victory throbbed in the camera guy's veins, sent him lunging once more at the cursing driver.

A flailing punch caught Piper low; doubled him over. His knees buckled. Then dimly he saw the blonde girl leaping in; saw her claw at the sullen-faced man in an attempt to pull him backward off-balance, give Johnnie a breathing-spell. The driver half-turned toward her; his palm smacked against her cheek. She reeled. Fingers ripped at her coat, her blouse. Her shoulders showed white, nude, lovely against the background of dark night. She cried out as a hand struck her again.

Johnnie forced himself upright. "You damned rat!" he barked. The driver whirled, met his attack. A balled fist smashed against the camera guy's jaw.

The explosive impact of knuckles sent an avalanche of hurt to Johnnie Piper's numbed senses. He staggered, tried to keep from falling. He saw the driver yank out an automatic, reverse it, club its butt at him. Johnnie tried to duck; failed. He went sprawling in the dirt, a semi-insensate heap.

As if from a great distance he heard the driver snarling at the girl: "Baby, I figure to have some fun with you and then maybe let you go. Now I'm gonna let some friends of mine in on it!"

She screamed. Johnnie tried to move, to stir. He couldn't. His muscles were paralyzed. Dimly he knew that the girl was being roped, trussed, tossed into the touring car's tonneau. Then he felt himself being bound, lifted, carried to the machine. He was limply dumped to the rear floor of the automobile. He sprawled

against the blonde girl's form. Up forward, the driver slid in behind the wheel, gunned his motor. The machine spurted ahead.

ITS movement rolled Johnnie Piper's head against the yellow-haired girl's bare skin. Soft warm flesh was silken-smooth against his cheek; her woman-fragrance in his nostrils. The thrill of that intimate, unavoidable contact was like wine in the camera guy's veins; like an antidote for his agony. Slowly, full consciousness returned to him.

The girl was panting; her heart hammering wildly within her bosom. Her ripped coat, torn blouse, afforded no concealment for the loveliness of her snowy breasts. Her eyes were wide with fear.

Abruptly she noticed that Johnnie was no longer unconscious. Her lips came closer to his ear. "Your hands—can you get them to the waist-band of my skirt . . . ?" she whispered.

The query startled him. "What—?"


"Please—quickly! A badge pinned there—"

He managed to get his bound hands to her slender waist; fumbled until he discovered something small, metallic, pinned inside her cloth belt. Awkwardly he unfastened it. "Now what?"

"Toss it away—"

He tried to get in position to throw the metallic object over the side of the careening car. But even as he made the attempt, the machine's brakes squealed harshly. There came the rattle of pebbles beneath the tonneau; a tire-destroying cessation of movement. And then the touring car was surrounded by black-cloaked, hood-masked figures.

Johnnie clenched the badge in his



Johnnie pushed open the door. The guard was gripping the girl cruelly, pulling her closer in a brutal embrace.

closed fist. What the hell did it mean? What was it all about?

He heard the driver's voice up forward. "Yeah. The dame got off the same plane he did. I smelled a fish, brought her along. She got gay. The guy poked his beezers in, too. So I slugged 'em both—and here they are."

Harsh hands laid hold of Johnnie and the girl, yanked them from the car. Johnnie felt himself propelled forward;

stumbled into the single room of a clapboard shack lighted by a flickering kerosene lantern. The yellow-haired girl was thrust in after him; the door slammed.

Johnnie stared about him. Guarding the door on the inside, he beheld a black-garbed, hooded figure with drawn automatic. Over on the far side, a group of people huddled. There was a quaking black man, a bruised white, a brunette woman whose eyes held terror, and—

Barney Strake, World Newsreel sound technician.

Strake spotted Johnnie. "You—Piper!"

Johnnie forced a grin. "Yeah. I came to take pictures. But I put my foot in it somehow."

The masked, black-hooded guard raised his voice; his eyes glowed with feral light through slits in the cloth that concealed his face. "Quiet down, you two mugs! No talking in here!"

AT the other side of the room, there sounded a muffled feminine sob. It came from the frightened-looking brunette woman who crouched among the other prisoners. She was young, lush; her breasts had a voluptuous fullness beneath her cheap frock and her hips were wide, feminine.

She edged toward the hooded guardian of the door, "Mister—"

"Pipe down, frail."

"No. Listen. You've got to listen to me! I—I haven't done anything! The Midnight Legion hasn't got any reason for bringing me here. I—I d-don't want to be wh-whipped. . . ."

"No? Ain't that just too bad!"

"Listen. I—I'll do anything you say if you'll let me g-get away. Anything . . ." Suddenly the brunette's hands went to the neck of her cheap dress, loosened it. She pulled it open almost to her waist; her soft-fleshed breasts spilled into view. The hooded guard started.

He said: "Hey! What the—?"

"Listen. I'm nice, aren't I? Don't you like me . . . ?"

"Lay off, sister. I—"

"Be a sport, mister. I'll . . . be nice to you."

The guard's eyes flashed behind his slitted mask. He grabbed the brunette

woman's wrists. "Come on, sweetheart!" He pulled her out of the room, slammed the door after them. From outside, Johnnie Piper could hear moans. . . .

JOHNNIE looked at Barney Strake. "Spill it. What's this all about?"

Strake shrugged. "I don't know what they've got against that black-haired dame. But they told her they were going to give her a hundred lashes tonight. These others—" he gestured toward the shivering negro and the bruised white man, "—are scheduled to be shot, from what I understand."

Johnnie said: "And you—?"

"Hell, they snatched me while I was driving my sound-truck out of Detroit. You know the rest. You and I are supposed to take sound-pictures of the skin-dig tonight." Strake turned to the girl who had come in with Johnnie. "What about this dame?"

Tersely the camera guy explained what had happened. Then he remembered the metallic object he had unpinned from the blonde girl's waist. It was still tightly clenched in his fist. Now he looked at it. His eyes widened. "A Federal agent's badge!"

The blonde girl came close to him. "Y-yes. Listen. I—I'm Norma Millward. My brother was an F-B-I operative—a G-man. The Midnight Legion m-murdered him. That's his badge. I—I have a friend in the World Newsreel office in New York. I learned that you were coming here to make pictures of the Legion. I followed you . . ."

"But why, in God's name?" Johnnie demanded.

"I wanted to get information about the Legion; wanted to learn the names of the leaders, so they could be arrested, punished. I—"

WITH swift interruption, the room's door opened. The hooded guard entered, dragging the burnette woman with him. He shoved her into a corner. She sank down, trembling, shame-faced. Johnnie Piper realized what had happened. The masked man had accepted her offer . . . and then double-crossed her, refused to allow her to escape. A surge of rage welled up in the camera guy's throat.

And then the hooded man stepped toward Johnnie. "Listen, punk. I heard what this blonde dame just told you, see? I was listening outside the door." He whirled on Norma Millward. "So your brother was a Fed, huh? And you thought you could pull a fast one on us. Well, sister, that's just too bad. You'll get what's coming to you tonight!"

Johnnie's jaw thrust out. "If you lay a hand on her—"

"Shut up, lug. You're here to make movies, see? One haywire move out of you or your partner, and you'll both be crow-bait!"

As the guard spoke, there came a thunderous knocking on the door; a harsh command from outside. "Okay, in there. Everybody out! We're all set!"

The guard opened the door. A knot of similarly-hooded Midnight Legionnaires surged in, automatics drawn. Johnnie Piper and Barney Strake were herded off to one side; the other prisoners were whisked away.

JOHNNIE'S eyes widened as he saw the scene before him. The night's blackness was made bright by countless flaring torches and a circle of glaring headlights from more than a hundred parked automobiles. Within the arena formed by the parked cars, there must have been at least a thousand men of the sinister Midnight Legion — black-cloaked, hooded, masked, silent.

The camera guy and Strake were conducted to a car in the center of the circle. It was the World Newsreel sound-truck. A camera was already tripod-mounted on its roof. A masked leader spoke: "Okay, you guys. Get your equipment ready. *But don't start making pictures until we give the word—understand?*"

Johnnie nodded, climbed to the roof of the sound-truck, fiddled with the camera's lens. Below, Strake vanished within the truck, slipped the earphones over his head, commenced adjusting his microphone and his control-panels.

Johnnie watched what next took place; saw the welter of Midnight Legion minions form into orderly groups, each with a masked and hooded sub-leader at the fore. Then one man, in a black robe that differed from the others, stepped to the center of the circle. "Roll-call first, as usual!" his voice thundered out. Then he turned to Johnnie. "No pictures of this part of the ceremony, remember!"

Johnnie nodded. Then, suddenly, his heart leaped as an idea came to him. He dived down from the truck's roof grabbed for Barney, whispered a swift command.

Strake nodded understanding. "Got you!"

Once more the camera guy went to the roof of the truck, stood by his camera. Below, the Legion leader was calling out: "Group One. Captain Meade."

"Present. Group accounted for."

"Group Two. Captain Hastings."

"Present. Group accounted for."

"Group Three. Captain Moffat."

"Present. Group accounted for."

The roll-call went on—until ten groups had been told off. Then the hooded leader whirled toward Johnnie. "All right, you. Start your camera."

Johnnie nodded; pressed the switch that started his movie machine. He fo-

cused on the center of the improvised arena; saw four hooded figures come forward, dragging a struggling woman.

FOR a minute Johnnie's fists balled. Could it be Norma Millward . . . ? Then he saw that the woman was the burnette who had been in the little shack; the one who had attempted to bribe her way to freedom at the price of her body. . .

Red rage filled the camera guy as he watched. He knew he was impotent to aid the black-haired girl, powerless to avert the horror that confronted her. He was but one against a thousand; he wouldn't stand a chance. He saw her captors strip the dress from her body, leaving her clad in nothing but cheap rayon step-ins. He saw her being trussed to a tree-trunk, her arms stretched above her head so that her full breasts were drawn taut. And then—

Swish—thwack! A vicious nine-thonged lash whistled downward, bit into her bared flesh. She cringed, screamed. A raw red welt appeared against the whiteness of her skin. *Swish—thwack!* Again the whip descended, left a writhing red snake of raised flesh on her squirming torso. Once again the sound of the lash . . . and again . . . and again. . .

Abruptly the tortured woman slumped against her bonds, unconscious. Blood seeped from her lacerated hips, her pallid shoulders. A nausea of anger gripped at Johnnie Piper as he saw her being unfettered, dragged away. "Damn them . . . !" he grated savagely, helplessly.

Then another victim was yanked to the scene. It was the shivering negro who had been imprisoned within the shack a while before. The hooded leader spoke. "We've got nothing against this

man. But we're going to shoot him—just to make a good movie!"

COLD horror seeped into Johnnie's veins as he sighted his camera, saw the shrieking black man mowed down by a barrage of shots from a dozen automatics. Cold-blooded murder . . . without cause, without reason! A saturnalia of sadism . . . an orgy of death-lust . . . "God!" Johnnie whispered.

They were dragging the bruised white man to the center, now. The last of the prisoners scheduled to furnish tonight's reasonless, savage entertainment. They were holding a mock trial, condemning the man, sentencing him—

From somewhere in the rear, Johnnie Piper heard a woman's muffled scream. He turned, stared beyond the circle of automobile headlights. His marrow froze.

Norma Millward was being carried into that shack beyond the meeting-place. She was struggling in the arms of a masked, robed shape . . .

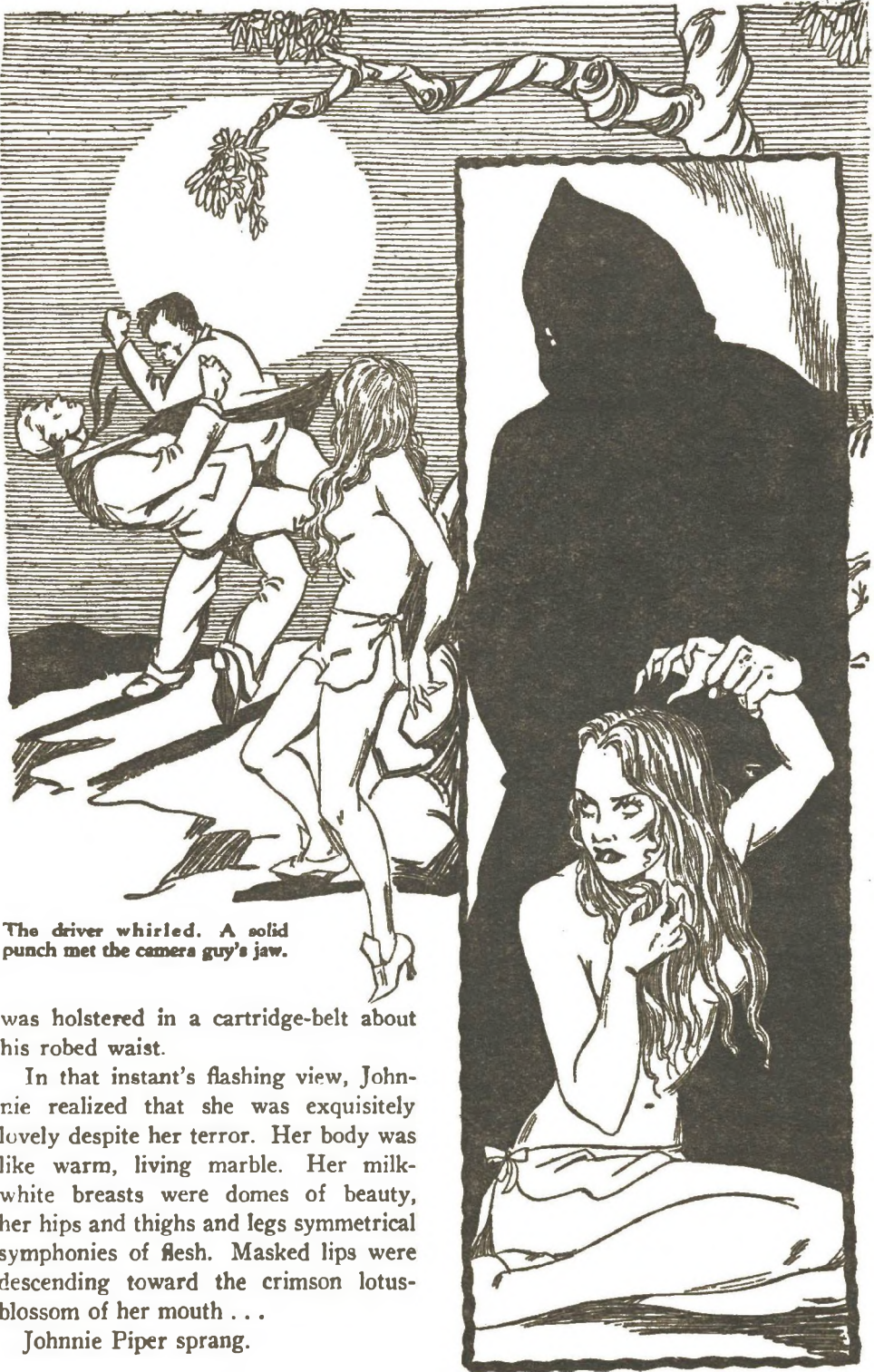
Johnnie leaped to the ground, grabbed Barney. "Get up on the roof. Pretend you're handling the camera!"

Strake said: "Where are you going—?"

But the camera guy didn't wait to answer. He hurled himself through the darkness—toward the shack into which Norma had been taken.

He gained the ramshackle building; hesitated before the partially-open door. He stared inside. "The hell—!" he whispered.

The girl's clothing had been torn away. She was nude except for her silken step-ins, her chiffon hose. A robed and masked Midnight Legionnaire was forcing her backward against a rough deal table. His hands were pawing at her shoulders, lower. . . His automatic



The driver whirled. A solid punch met the camera guy's jaw.

was holstered in a cartridge-belt about his robed waist.

In that instant's flashing view, Johnnie realized that she was exquisitely lovely despite her terror. Her body was like warm, living marble. Her milk-white breasts were domes of beauty, her hips and thighs and legs symmetrical symphonies of flesh. Masked lips were descending toward the crimson lotus-blossom of her mouth . . .

Johnnie Piper sprang.

LIKE an avenging avalanche he struck the hooded man, bowled him over. The Legionnaire grunted, squirmed, smashed a knee upward toward the camera guy's groin. But Johnnie twisted sidewise, avoided the crippling foul. Then he got his fingers about his enemy's throat. He squeezed—viciously, venomously.

The masked man choked, gasped, strangled under the constricting pressure of Johnnie's fingers. The camera guy felt his adversary's gullet collapsing, crumpling. Abruptly the robed figure went limp, still.

Johnnie slammed himself to his feet.

He stooped, yanked away his senseless victim's black robe and hood and mask. Swiftly he donned the disguise; fastened cartridge-belt and holstered automatic about his own middle. Then he turned, grabbed the golden-haired girl. "Come on!"

Together they sped from the shack, started for the sound-truck where Strake could be seen, still on the roof, handling the camera. And then—

"God!" the blonde girl whimpered. "Look!"

Johnnie stared ahead; saw a group of hooded figures advancing. There seemed no way of avoiding them.

It was Norma who frantically supplied the answer. "Quick—over here in the shadows. Make love to me . . . !"

Johnnie understood; dragged her from the narrow path, into a clump of bushes. He threw her to the ground; sank down beside her.

Somehow, even though it was play-acting, the touch of her sweet charms was trider to the fire in Johnnie's soul. He cradled her in his arms, mashed her against him so that her firm breasts were

pancaked against his chest. And it seemed that she was responding . . . Her arms were about his neck, her lips parted for his kiss. . . .

A few feet away, Johnnie heard the approaching group of Midnight Legion thugs; heard a voice: "Damn him, why don't he bring her out like he was told?"

Then another voice: "Yeah. He—Hey, fellas! Look!"

JOHNIE felt the impact of eyes upon his back. He twisted his masked face, glared up at the hooded group. "Beat it, you guys! Can't you see I'm busy? I'll bring this dame to you, soon enough. . . ."

Laughter. Sardonic, vulgar amusement. Then: "... Okay, fella. Make it snappy." The group wandered back toward the circle of parked cars . . .

Johnnie waited a long harrowing instant. Then he was on his feet. "We fooled them! Come on, kiddo. It's now or never!"

He dragged her forward; reached the edge of the headlight-illuminated, improvised arena. He raised his voice. "Strake! Barney! Get at the wheel!"

The sound-technician heard. He hurled himself from the roof of the sound-truck, raced around the safe side, slammed himself under the steering-wheel. The sound-truck lurched forward.

A shout went up from the milling members of the Midnight Legion as they realized something had gone wrong. Guns were drawn. The night was suddenly hideous with the puncturing staccato of shots—

Crouching, Johnnie drew the automatic from the holster at his side. He took aim, squeezed the trigger, sent scalding lead into the closely-bunched legion of lawlessness. Hooded figures went

sprawling. And then Barney had the World Newsreel truck out of the circle; slowed it down as Johnnie plummeted into its path. And as the truck flashed by, Johnnie grabbed for the rear end, yanked the door open. He gathered Norma in his arms, flung her inside the truck, catapulted after her. Strake jammed down on his throttle. The machine roared forward.

Overhead, something smashed on the roof and went flying to the ground. "The camera!" Norma Millward whispered.

Johnnie grunted, stared out the rear window of the careening sound-truck. He saw the movie-camera lying shattered and broken on the earth; saw a mass of *Midnight Legion* gunmen racing in pursuit. Grimly, swiftly, he reloaded the clip of the automatic in his fist; punched another stream of hot lead back toward the masked mob. Three or four went down; the others hesitated. And then Barney screeched the sound-truck around a bend in the rutted road, came to the highway—and juiced the last drop of speed from his motor.

The *Midnight Legion* faded in the distance.

Within the truck, Johnnie's arm stole about Norma's slender waist. He pulled her close to him. His hand brushed against something warm, rounded, pliant. . . "It's all over, kiddo," he whispered. "They'll never catch us now!"

BACK in New York, Johnnie faced his boss. He said: "Yeah. We lost the

camera. Lost every inch of film we'd taken of the affair. But—"

"But, hell! You've missed the biggest newsreel scoop of the century! I ought to can you!"

Johnnie grinned a patient grin. "Wait a minute, boss. There's something else. You know we take movies on one film, record sound on another strip inside the truck.

"So what?"

"So this, boss. From the very start, when they started calling a roll of captains in that meeting, I tipped Barney to turn his mike on full blast, set his sound-apparatus in motion. So we recorded every bit of that roll-call; got the names of every last one of those ten so-called group-captains. Now we can turn the sound-strip over to Uncle Sam—and with a little detective work, the leaders of the *Midnight Legion* will be behind bars before the month's out!"

The World Newsreel chief widened his eyes. "You—you mean you got the whole thing in sound? Well, I'll be damned! Johnnie, I'm going to give you and Barney Strake a raise! You've earned it!"

Johnnie said: "Yeah. But what I'd sooner have is a vacation. I brought a certain girl back to New York with me—and I want to spend a lot of time with her." He turned and walked out, whistling. Norma Millward, very lovely in a tailored costume, was waiting for him downstairs . . .

Stewart Gates contributes

"MISTRESS OF THE CROCODILES"

to the January issue of this magazine!

VIPER PIT

The Princess Nadee was leader of the bandits. And she hated Americans! Cooper couldn't expect mercy when she captured him: the viper pit was kindness compared to the torture to come!

By ALAN ANDERSON

When he saw she had been captured, Harley leaped into the midst of the Mongols without thinking.





HARLEY COOPER was disgusted.

"The farther we get into the desert, the more I'm convinced that I'm the prize sap of the universe. I've sunk my last cent into this expedition, but for two pins I'd turn back."

"You think too much," said Liu, the tall northern Chinese, whose knowledge of the country and the language made him the logical leader of the caravan.

"What else is there to do? For days I've sat on this damned camel getting my guts shook up. I tell you, Liu, this is the most fantastic thing I've ever heard of."

"Many facts are fantastic. Once the religion of this country was Shamanism. Could not a remnant of that cult remain? And would not they guard jealously the possessions of their greatest warrior?"

"It sounds logical. Why are these camels belly-aching so much?"

"They dislike the fast pace. But fear not, Tserin gave them opium at the last stop. Their spirits will improve."

"But if what we're looking for is true, why hasn't it been discovered?"

"Outer Mongolia measures two thousand by twelve hundred miles. There is no transport save camels and ponies. It would take a thousand men years to explore this wilderness."

"But planes?"

"Venture not far into the interior. A good landing place often turns out to be a thin crust above soft earth."

"When do we get there?"

"In five days, or rather nights."

"Nights?"

"At noon we make camp. We will resume the journey at midnight. The danger of a bandit raid grows."

"We have submachine guns and pistols."

"A battle would be most unwise, Mr.

Cooper," said Liu in the perfect English learned in American schools.

HARLEY'S camel became sulky again and he was forced to devote his energies to keeping it moving. The beast grumbled a bit, then went on, scuffing up a cloud of dust which stuck to Harley's sweaty face. The camels were shedding their long, silky hair. It got into everything. It was hell.

Harley cursed Outer Mongolia and the Gobi desert. The route they traveled, thanks to centuries of caravans, was a deep gully that wound deviously through the barrenness. Nothing could be seen save the slopes of the camel-made gully which rose some thirty feet on either side.

But faced with the danger of a bandit raid, Tserin, the Mongol leader, had posted a rider on the desert proper who was accompanying them like a military flanker. Everyone was tense. But Harley was too hot, too filthy with dust and too upset by the lumbering gait of the camel to care about anything.

Later the posting of the flanker proved a blessing. He sang out a warning and pointed to the direction of the danger—ahead.

Instantly the caravan came to a stop and the plan agreed upon and practised went smoothly into operation. Harley and Liu dismounted, got the submachine guns, and began retreating down the trail as fast as their legs would carry them. Tserin placed some of the luggage on the unladen camels. The flanker joined his companions. The caravan moved on. No one seemed missing.

Harley and Liu scampered up the slope of the trail and hid behind a dense growth of thorny sagebrush. The bandits, mounted on the shaggy Mongolian ponies, had circled the caravan.

The search would prove profitless. There would be nothing to reveal the presence of an American and a Peiping Chinese. Harley had the money. The map was well hidden. A clever man, Liu.

The bandits, the search fruitless, remounted and began advancing down the trail toward Harley Cooper and Liu. The American got out his binoculars.

Then he sucked in his breath!

THE bandit leader was a woman. She wore blue Russian breeches and a cossack blouse a deep wine color. Her hair was black, her eyes blacker, and the oval creaminess of her face as beautiful as the reigning New York musical comedy favorite. She was the most beautiful woman Harley Cooper had ever seen. He saw that she was twenty-five or so, tall, slender, yet feminine.

As he watched, she raised her hand and the cavalcade moved to a canter. She rode with superb grace. Now the wind whipped back her blouse to mould the conical beauty of well-set, solid breasts which now joggled with exciting rhythm.

Behind her rode a mad-looking white man. The rest, some thirty in number, were cruel-visaged Mongols. They thundered by to leave a cloud of dust to mark their passing. Harley followed them with the glasses. He noted the girl's wide shoulders; also the Luger at her waist and the rifle booted to her saddle.

Harley and Liu returned to the caravan to find the men milling uneasily and looking in the direction of the vanished bandits. Harley felt a pang of fear. He'd never seen Mongols upset before. Tserin was talking to Liu.

"It was the Princess Nadee," Liu told Harley, "who heads the most feared bandits in all Mongolia. When they raid a village, the men are killed, the woman

outraged, then killed too. But above all, Princess Nadee hates Americans."

"Why?" asked Harley, the hair at the nape of his neck stiffening.

"She is white Russian. In Harbin she saw her sisters forced into brothels. Only she remained a maiden. America, she thought would aid a forsaken white race. It did not."

"Who's the man?"

"Her brother. He is a madman."

"Is she?"

"No. Only poisoned with hate. And cruelty."

"I wouldn't mind meeting up with her in a hotel lobby," said Harley. "But here—well, I hope that's the last we see of her."

It was a hope destined to be unfulfilled. Harley Cooper was to see Princess Nadee again.

AT noon they left the trail and went a safe distance into the desert where they made camp near an outcropping of porous rock.

They carried, not tents, but the native *yurt* which is a good-sized, igloo-shaped dwelling, composed of a collapsible wooden framework over which pieces of felt cloth are stretched and tied. They had three *yurts*, sufficient for their party of twenty-one.

While the men went about putting up the *yurts*, Harley and Liu sneaked some distance away and buried the submachine guns and the binoculars.

This had been Tserin's suggestion. The men were loyal, he avowed, but guns and glasses were such treasures to the Mongols as to excite murder.

They returned to eat mutton from the common kettle. Then they stretched out for sleep with the camp doubly guarded. The sun was hot but night would bring the cold air from the Altai mountains—

their objective. Harley dozed off. When he woke up, it was dark and much colder. He covered himself and went back to sleep.

He was awakened by a tumult so loud that he was on his feet before he was fully conscious. Shouts! Cries. Triumphant yelling. The thunder of hoofbeats. Now and then, shots. Then Harley smelled burning cloth and light filtered through the covering of his *yurt*.

He snatched out the pistol in his belt and ran outside. A burning *yurt* lighted the scene yellowly. Churning horses. Screams of terror. Horsemen wielding blood-stained blades. On the ground, corpses. Corpses everywhere. The desert dust was blood-soaked. He felt sick. Never had he seen such slaughter; such mutilated bodies.

A Colt .45 slug carries a terrific impact. His first shot knocked a rider from his mount. The second smashed through a pony's head. The horse did a somersault to fall on its rider. There came the sickening crunch of splintering bones. He fired the clip with devastating results. The light was failing. Kneeling, he slipped a fresh clip into the magazine.

Then something crashed down on his head. He pitched forward on his face. But before he went out, he heard a woman's amused laughter.

WITH the first move of consciousness, he was jerked to his feet by two bandits. A fire had been built. The bandits were dragging the corpses into the desert. Princess Nadee was mounted and nibbled daintily on a chicken leg. Her brother, a sardonic smile on his face, stood beside her.

Then Harley Cooper experienced horror that left him weak and shaking with rage.

Before him lay the bodies of Liu and

Tserin. Liu's ears and nose had been cut off. Tserin's corpse was legless and strips of skin had been peeled from his naked belly. The agony of the torture still lingered on their lifeless faces.

"Ho! Handsome one!" called Nadee in fine spirits. "Only you survive. And only until I can devise a suitable death." Her eyes blazed and her lovely mouth twisted. "American dog!"

She spoke passable English: many Russians did, he remembered. No use to reply. He just glared at her.

"A white American," she mused very softly. "Very white. Golden hair; blue eyes." Viciously she threw the half-eaten chicken leg full in his face. "Where is the map to the temple of the Shamanist monks?"

"I don't know!" said Harley sick with dread. So she knew their objective; the purpose of their mission.

"Long have I known that Liu had a map and was awaiting a man to finance the journey. Ah, handsome one, the radio man in Peiping is Russian and we have a set. Thus do we know the movements of caravans. And only six months ago we captured a Shamanist monk who told of the girdle."

"Then it is true!" said Harley.

"Yes. Three hundred monks guard it, although they are monks in name only, for women abound there. To Genghis Khan the girdle was sacred. A jewel was set in it for every thousand deaths he wrought. I tell you this, O handsome one, that you can tell the great Khan when you get to hell that a woman now owns the girdle."

"I'll stoke up the fires for you," Harley promised.

"Enough! I weary of this. Tomorrow will be time for your torture. Until then, I'll have the guards toast that handsome white body of yours over a slow fire."

SHE laughed at that. But her brother who'd been wandering about, came to her side, grinned evilly, and spoke in his native tongue. Nadee slapped her thigh and smiled.

"You have been intimate with many beautiful women, I suppose, O handsome one. Have you ever felt the cold caresses of snakes? Yonder is your bed. Many snakes live there. Vipers, pit vipers. They're cold, poor dears. They'd relish the heat of your body, I think.

She snapped a command in Mongol and the men stripped the clothes from Harley's body. He stood there shivering in brief shorts. The girth of his torso, the flatness of his hips, and the compact muscularity of his body impressed the Mongols.

Another command and the men dragged him toward the rocks. There was a small indentation in the sand surrounded by boulders. He was shoved roughly, stumbled, fell, and rolled over on his back. He started to get up. Then he froze to terrified rigidity.

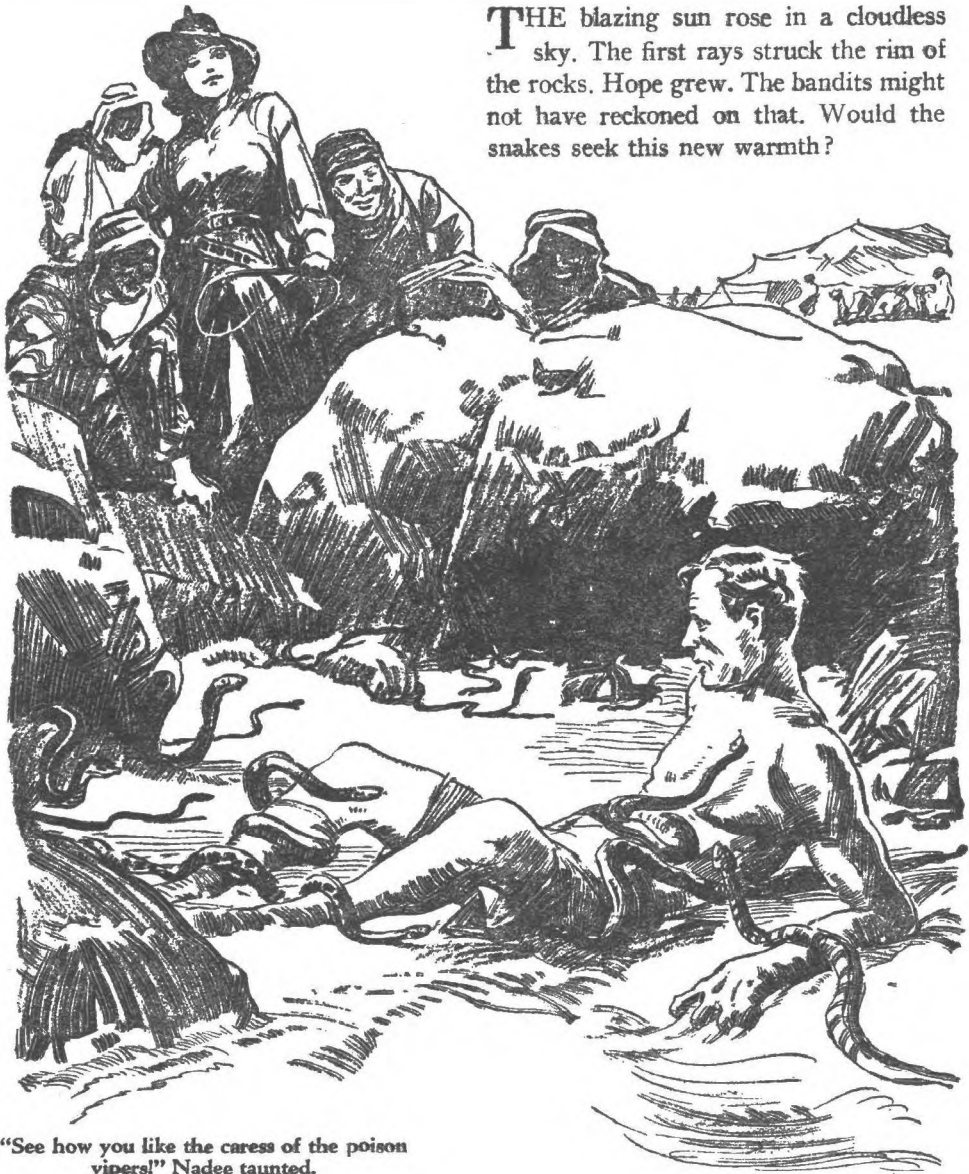
Snakes! By ones and twos they slithered from beneath the rocks. Vipers! Pit vipers! About the size of an American copperhead. Harley was numb with horror. He shivered. His forehead beaded with sweat. Reptilian coldness grazed his ribs. He choked down the cry of terror on his lips.

A snake crawled to the heat of his stomach and curled contentedly. Another, with terrifying slowness, wound about his arm. Snakes, more snakes. They covered him, a blanket of loathsome claminess. He gritted his teeth. He did not move. He lay very still.

"They are poisonous, handsome one! Move not. In the morning we will again discuss the map."

Laughing, they departed. Harley was alone in the darkness. He was chilled to

THE blazing sun rose in a cloudless sky. The first rays struck the rim of the rocks. Hope grew. The bandits might not have reckoned on that. Would the snakes seek this new warmth?



"See how you like the caress of the poison vipers!" Nadee taunted.

the marrow of the bone. Rage grew in his brain. He'd never dreamed hate could be so intense. He prayed for vengeance.

It was two hours before the dawn—to Harley, two centuries. The snakes quieted somewhat, but one or two were always in motion. His brain choked with rage.

They did. One by one they crawled to the pool of sunlight.

Trembling, Harley stood up. His muscles were numb and his joints ached. Anxiously he peered out. The camp slept. Even the solitary sentry dozed at his post. The battle had exhausted everyone.

Harley crawled to where the sub-machine guns had been hidden. The

corpses of the ill-fated caravan were strewn about. With shaking hands, he dug up a gun and unwrapped it. Carefully he blew away the stray grains of sand. Then he formed a small fortress of human bodies. He was ready.

The camp was late in awakening. Finally Nadee's brother came from a *yurt*. The sentry became alert. The brother walked over to the rocks looked wildly about, then blew a shrill whistle. Bandits poured from *yurts* rubbing the sleep from their eyes.

Harley was grim. His heart pounded. One man against a small army! Would they, as he prayed, group for instructions? Would the brother think he'd escaped through the desert?

He did. The brother lined up the men in a semblance of military order.

Harley was calm now, purposeful. He relaxed, took a deep breath and aimed the gun. He took careful aim. Kill his men! Torture his aides! Throw him to vipers! He'd even scores, and then some.

Slowly his index finger squeezed the trigger!

The gun burst into song: a blasting, flame-spitting weapon of wholesale destruction. The camels and horses jerked awake and began milling. The men were too stunned to move. Hard-hitting slugs tore into heads and chests. Men fell like tenpins. He traversed from right to left—fast. Two men escaped the barrage and began to run toward the horses. He cut them down with a short burst. The men were witless then, too terrified to fire a shot in return. But the brother had whipped out his pistol. A slug thudded into a corpse beside Harley. The gun thundered.

The brother's head was torn from his body. He aimed at the men on the ground; pumped a short burst into every

body. The gun silenced. He'd evened scores. He felt sick.

THEN Nadee ran from her *yurt*. She had on breeches and boots but white silk pajamas covered her upper body. She had the Luger in her hand. Harley cut loose a burst. A geyser of sand shot up in front of her. She neither cringed nor moved. Nerve there. She was boiling mad. She started to shoot. Harley ducked. Unwisely she shot the clip. He heard the fateful click of the firing pin. He looked up.

She'd thrown away the pistol and was running toward the horses. Harley was up and after her. She had a good lead but the boots were not made for running. Harley was unencumbered. He gained. His shoulders went down.

Then he tackled her around the knees—hard. Both fell and skidded across the sand. She was fighting before she hit the ground. A biting, clawing, kicking tigress of fury. He tried to hold her and couldn't. After a short tussle, he grabbed the neck of the pajama coat. It ripped from her body. Very white, conical breasts danced in the hot sunlight. Then he got her around the waist and lifted her from the ground.

Her breasts mashed against him with a warm, quivering softness. His arms tingled at the contact with her supple waist. She struggled. He flexed his arms and the breath left her body.

"Hell-cat!" he grinned. Then holding her with one arm, his free hand grabbed her hair. He yanked her head back. He kissed her then, hard. A brutal, savage kiss that fired his blood. Her lips mashed against his teeth—wet, cool lips. He kissed her until blood flecked her mouth.

Then he let her down. She fell to one knee. Her breasts swayed beautifully with her wild panting. The sun struck

her back to reveal its unblemished, milky, sleekness.

"Pig! Swine!" she hissed. "No one kisses Nadee."

"I did," he said with a grin. "Listen! forget this idea of bumping off the white race."

She glared at him; her high cheek bones a dull red. God, she was beautiful! He'd never dreamed breasts could be so full and yet firm. She folded her arms to conceal them.

"I am at your mercy!" she spat at him. "Do what you will."

"I wouldn't force love on any woman," he told her.

He meant it, yet regretted it. It would be glorious to test the suppleness of her flesh again: taste the sweetness of those warm lips. But he was a man of his word.

"What will you do with me?"

"Unless you talk sense," he threatened her, "I'm going to strip you tonight and see how you like sleeping with snakes."

She paled at that, but her black eyes were still defiant.

"Without me you cannot reach the temple," she warned him. "Without me you cannot reach the mountains."

"All right. I'll split fifty-fifty with you."

She thought a moment.

"I will need money to reform my forces," she mused.

"You must promise not to kill me or injure me."

"Yes, I promise. The map?"

"Will be my life insurance," he told her. "You guide me to the foothills. I'll pick up the landmark there."

WITH that, he turned and went to the nearest yurt. He sank wearily to a cot. The oven-like heat was blissful after the death chill of the viper pit. He slept.

He awakened after dark. There was a fire within the yurt. Nadee sat beside it. The Luger was in her hand. Harley sat up.

"You promised!" he warned.

"I but protect myself."

"From what?"

"Vipers seeking the warmth of the fire."

Harley froze. About the fire curled three vipers. As he looked, one stuck its head over the edge of the cot. It was crawling up!

Cursing softly, he reached up and broke off a piece of the yurts framework. Armed, he slew the snakes.

"Nice girl," he said to her with a sneer.

She shrugged. "I would not have broken my promise."

Harley put on a heavy Mongol costume.

"I have packed the camels I want," she told him. "You must attend to yours."

"What about your brother?"

"He is best gone from this miserable world."

"Where is he, I mean?"

"In the grave I dug."

"Oh! I expected you to leave him to the vultures."

She colored slightly, started to speak, then clamped her lips into a straight, unyielding line.

Harley went out and chose the three fastest camels. One especially he wanted. The precious map must be kept hidden. Nadee! He was heavy-hearted. She was beyond salvation. It was a pity. He could have loved the woman she might have been.

THE days and nights that followed brought no change in their relationship. Nadee did her share of the duties and by day they took turns sleeping in

the *yurt*. Sometimes Harley would, during his period on guard, sneak to the door of the *yurt* and watch her sleeping there. The thin black pajamas only accentuated the creamy whiteness of her flesh. She was gorgeous. Her half parted lips invited kisses. It was with difficulty that he stayed away from her.

When they reached the foothills, Harley picked up landmarks and, advancing in a circuitous route, they reached within striking distance of their destination on the morning of the sixth day.

They found a bottle-necked ravine where Harley piled stones forming a corral for the camels. The map he left where Liu had cunningly concealed it—in the shaggy tail of a camel. Harley, having consulted it while she slept, knew it by heart.

"It's three ridges east," he told her.

They got the guns and provisions and walked the rest of the way. The slopes of the rather steep ridges were covered with loose rocks and walking was difficult. But by taking care, they reached the summit of the ridge supposedly overlooking the temple.

Excitedly, they peered down. Harley's heart dropped to the soles of his boots. Nothing there except rocks. Then he saw, at the head of the ravine, a triangular garden!

"Those stones," said Nadee in excitement, "are not the floor of the ravine. They are spread over the roof of the temple!"

He saw that that was true. The temple had been cunningly concealed. Here and there in the roof were holes to permit smoke to escape from the fires within.

They began the dangerous descent. Here the slope was steeper and the stones more inclined to slip. But they moved with caution and were careful to take cover behind rocks. An hour before dusk

they reached the garden and stretched out behind the encircling hedge. To grow a garden in that wilderness was a real achievement.

They had two submachine guns, two pistols and food. What to do next was the problem. A man and a woman against three hundred! They knew nothing of the plan of the temple or where the girdle was hid.

Harley appraised the temple. It was a low, flat-roofed structure and vines at the garden entrance almost obscured the pillars there. He guessed that the other end was equally well hidden.

With success now a possibility but with no plan of action, Nadee and Harley became tensely silent. Shadows lengthened. Night fell. From within the temple came the yellow light of flares. Bright moonlight bathed the garden with a ghostly luridness. One by one the apertures in the roof began to emit smoke. It grew chilly.

Then from within the temple came a low chant of many voices, a chant increasing in shrillness and volume until Harley's blood chilled. Beside him, Nadee stirred uneasily.

"They must be at devotions," she whispered.

"I'm going to have a look," Harley told her and before she could agree or protest, he slipped into the deep shadows cast by the ridge.

STONES were strewn outside the temple wall. He picked his way carefully but saw no windows. Nothing but a bleak expanse of stone walls. The front of the temple looked out on a wide valley. Here, too, the door was concealed by vines. The search profitless, he crept back.

When he reached the place where he'd left Nadee, he gave a startled look, then

snatched for his pistol. Then he sighed in relief.

Nadee stood there. But she had shed her mannish attire and stood with a heavy woolen cape about her shoulders. On the ground, bound and gagged, lay a Mongolian girl. Nadee's garments covered her.

"I knocked her out when she came to the garden," said Nadee. "Any luck?"

"No. You're shivering.

"It is the costume," she said and, with

a deft motion, threw back the cloak. Harley felt dizzy. About her ripe hips clung a tight black girdle from which hung a piece of cloth in front. Her long legs were amazingly white in the moonlight; legs slender, yet with firm thighs and



He leaped hard, tackled the fleeing girl about the legs. . . .

supple calves. Her breasts were bare and their projection made her stomach seem unusually flat. With a shiver she gathered the cape about her.

"You . . . you're not going in?" Harley stammered.

"Of course I am."

"No! No!" he protested and reached out a hand to stop her.

She shrugged, vaulted lightly over the stone wall, and entered the temple as if she'd lived there all her life. For a second Harley was frantic. Then he cursed himself for a fool.

What a sap. The roof! The openings to dispel smoke would reveal every room. He and Nadee had been too preoccupied to think of that.

He climbed. The stones made progress difficult. He skinned his knee and cut a gash in his hand. But he made the first opening all right. There, Mongol girls were seated about the fire clad only in loin cloths. He went on. The next room was empty.

He crossed the roof. When he peered into the smoke filled opening, he cursed softly and drew his pistol. Nadee had been captured! The cape was gone. Rope shackled her hands behind her back. Five Mongols stood leering at her and, as he watched, one reached out a grimy hand and smoothed the suppleness of her thigh. Then another slid a hand down her waist.

Harley acted without thinking. He leaped through the opening!

He struck the fire, fell sideways, but with a quick roll was on his feet. The pistol was out. He cracked the skull of the first man to rush him. The second he kicked in the groin. Nadee tripped a man. The other two rushed Harley with drawn knives. He ducked, caught one a hard blow in the belly and avoided the other. The man wheeled and charged. The pis-

tol butt fell; as did the man. There was a side room there. He grabbed Nadee, dragged her in and shot the bolt. The reviving monks began hammering on the door.

"This ends us, I guess," he told her. "I did it because I happen to be crazy as hell about you. I'd roast in hell rather than have another man touch you." He paused for breath, then asked: "Did you find the room?"

"Yes. It is across the corridor."

The hardness had left her eyes now. They were soft and not unhappy.

THEN came shots from the front of the temple! A volley of shots. Within the temple came shouts and orders and the patter of running feet. More shots broke the silence of the night. With trembling fingers, Harley untied Nadee. Together they stole to the door. Inch by inch Harley edged it open.

Monks were running toward the front of the temple. Some had ancient rifles, some sticks, and some carried no arms. All through the place was confusion.

Hand in hand they sneaked into the corridor. The new peril was their safeguard. The monks paid them no heed. They crossed the corridor, hid a second behind a pillar then quickly entered the room there.

Harley locked the door. He turned.

On the table there lay the girdle of Genghis Khan!

They stared at it spellbound. It was perhaps eight inches wide and completely incrustated with precious stones. The jewels refracted the light a million pin points of scintillating flame. Blues, reds, glittering whites. Before them lay millions. Riches beyond the dreams of man.

"Put it on!" Nadee ordered.

In a daze Harley raised his coat and buckled the girdle about his waist. They

went to the door. The corridor was deserted now but filled with the tumult of fierce fighting. Harley ran to the garden and got out the machine guns. Nadee joined him.

"There is a chance," Nadee told him, "if you leave now. Sneak along the wall of the temple and flee into the desert."

"Why not over the ridge?"

"The temple is surrounded by my men. Every day while you slept I radioed directions. Every night we were trailed. Awhile ago you fought for me, Harley Cooper. Then I ceased to be a barbarian. I love you. This will be my proof. I will stay here and block pursuit. The girdle you must keep."

"They'll kill you for this," he told her.

"I do not fear death. But go! Time is short."

"No," he told her very quietly, "life without you would be empty. I'll stay."

"You're a fool, Harley Cooper. A gorgeous fool. Kiss me!"

He did so and her lips were soft and moist. His hands touched the bareness of her body and she trembled against him. He wanted awfully much to live. To live and taste the sweetness of her love. Reluctantly he released her.

"If we are lost," she told him, "kill me yourself."

"I'll do that," he promised. "You are mine. No other man will ever have you."

Together they watched the bandits slowly forcing the monks through the temple. The fighting was centered in the middle of the temple now.

Harley's eyes roved about the moonlit ridges. There were men there. Could they sneak past? But no! He recalled the dangerous descent over the loose rocks. The only line of retreat would be up the ridge in line with the temple and there a great mass of rock jutted out. No getting by there.

Then suddenly he laughed! With appalling simplicity the whole matter was solved. He turned to Nadee.

"We'll escape. But it will mean wholesale slaughter. Well, I'm no killer. But I want to live. Be ready for anything!"

He raised the gun and deliberately aimed at the great mass of rock on the ridge!

HE saw the slugs shatter rocks at the base of the rock. He held the fire there. Then Nadee opened the other gun. They stood pouring lead into the base of the rock.

Then came a low rumble of moving rock! Very slowly the rock shifted on its base, tilted, then, with a great crash, the whole mass broke from its moorings and began thundering toward the temple.

The earth trembled as the avalanche gained power and movement. Fascinated, they watched. Then with a great roar the landslide thundered to the roof of the temple!

Then came the cracking of breaking beams. With a deafening crash the whole temple collapsed throwing up a great cloud of dust and ashes. Then came the deepening silence as the end of the landslide rattled to a halt.

They climbed warily over the ruins of the temple. In the valley beyond were camels. They advanced with caution. There were no sentries. Every man had taken part in the battle to win the temple!

They sorted out the camels, mounted, and rode into the desert with the pack animals trailing behind. Nadee had put on a coat but presently the sun arose and the coat became hot. She threw it away. She had on nothing but the brief costume she had taken from the Mongolian girl.

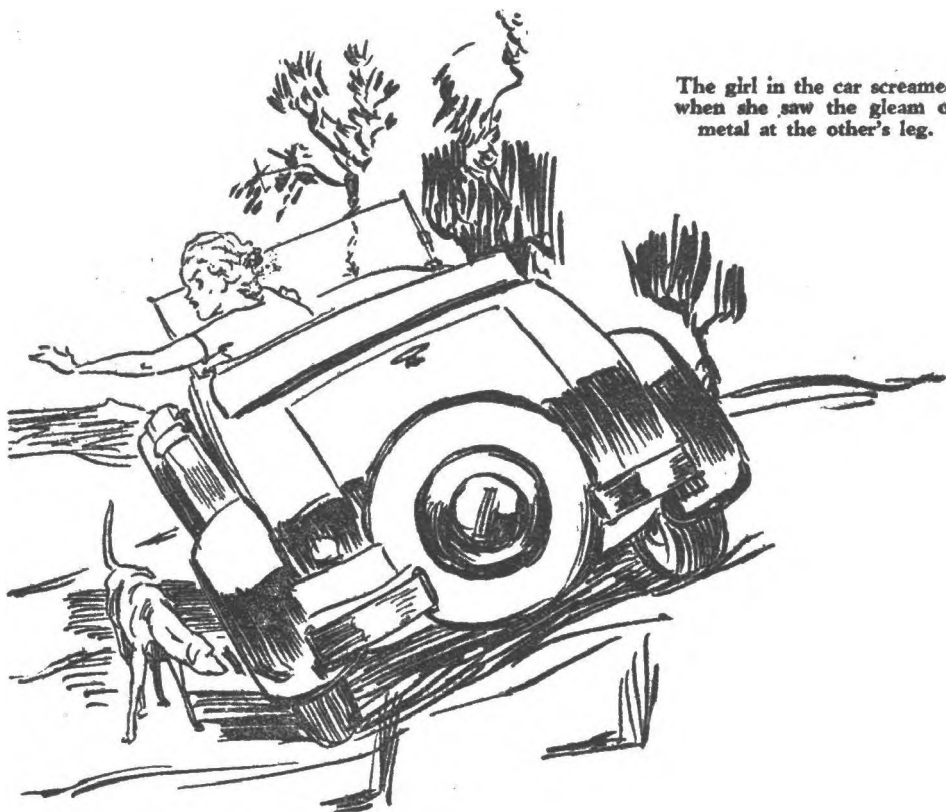
(Continued on page 106)

By
**JOSE
VACA**



La Cabeza Humana

She wants a man killed and offers money to the Sabinas Kid. When he spurns her gold, she tries other lures. . . .



The girl in the car screamed when she saw the gleam of metal at the other's leg.

THE glittering roadster looked strangely out of place in its squalid surroundings. It crouched like a hound on leash in the narrow ribbon of dust that served as a road leading to the dilapidated *adobe* hut. An inquiring goat nosed about the front bumper, a bawling kid at its heels. A mangy dog lay in the deepening shadow, tongue lolling.

Behind the wheel of the roadster sat a *gringa*, an American woman, lips compressed with anger and impatience. From time to time she shifted uneasily, peered into the gloom and patted a foot on the floor. It was hot. The night wind had not as yet dropped down from the *sierras*.

Again the woman shifted, muttered

angrily beneath her breath, and glared at the hovel. Her dress had crawled up, her hose were rolled for coolness. Her knees and bare legs gleamed pearly grey in the twilight. She snapped the cigarette into the *mesquite*, pressed down on the horn button. Startled, the goat bleated, trotted away, followed by the still bawling kid.

Another woman appeared in the doorway of the hut. The lamp behind limned the soft turns and contours of a mature figure. Her skirt was vivid and voluminous, her blouse snowy white, sleeveless and lowcut. About her shoulders was a multicolored *rebosa*.

The woman in the car called, "Come here!" imperiously.

The Mexican girl hesitated haughtily.

Then, as she walked down the dusty path to the car every line of her figure showed scorn and distaste.

"You said he'd be here in a few minutes," challenged the *gringa*, "and I've waited half an hour already! If he isn't coming, tell me!"

"Every night," said Chiquita laughingly, "he come to see *me*. Perhaps he know tonight *you* will be here and does not come! The ways of men—*¿quién sabe?*" She shrugged, laughed.

Elsa Moran, the *gringa*, retorted angrily but the words died on her lips.

FROM the shadows came the sound of a trotting horse, the sound of a man's voice raised in song.

*De la sierra morena y cielito
Lindo voy viajando!*

Chiquita frowned, tossed her head impatiently at the *gringa's* smile of triumph and stood with arms akimbo waiting the approach of the rider. A huge black horse materialized out of the gloom stepping daintily as if keeping time to the rider's song.

The song ceased, a man's laughter welled and bubbled followed by his mellifluous voice. "*Corazones míos! Chiquita, my oh so sweetheart and Señorita Moran!*"

Now he was beside the car, a great *sombrero* sweeping the dust, the white of his teeth startling in the duskiness of his face. Chiquita loosed a torrent of Spanish, but his eyes and ears were for the American woman. In spite of herself she smiled at him.

"Well, Pancho, you have kept me waiting! What excuse have you to offer? Do you bring me any news?"

Pancho laughed again, his bold eyes devouring the pearly grey flesh so close

to him. Elsa flushed, pulled her skirt down a very little.

"This Sabinas Kid," she persisted. "You have located him for me? You have arranged for me to meet him?"

The Mexican looked about cautiously. "My *amigo* Jose Maria Gardinia Gueda, the Sabinas Kid, is very near! This very evening I have seen him! I have told him that the beautiful *gringa*, *Señorita* Moran is oh so anxious to see him!"

"Did you tell him I wanted to give him a chance to make some real money?"

"*Pouf!* What is money to that man? Something to spend! A little wine, a little love! I have told him how beautiful you are, *senorita*, how like the dove, like the rose itself!" He kissed his fingertips, rolled his eyes and tossed the kiss into the air.

Beside him Chiquita snorted in disdain, whirled and trudged up the path again. The *Señorita* Moran flushed and laughed, pleased.

"And what did he say?"

Pancho leaned closer. "Because the government would like very much to find this *amigo* of mine, this Sabinas Kid, he must be careful. But he is anxious to see you, so he will risk it all! Tonight at the *fiesta* in town he will find us!"

Elsa Moran frowned. "But I can't go to the *fiesta* with you, Pancho! I'm not dressed! I'm—"

Pancho shrugged. "That is what he say, *señorita*. That he will meet us tonight at the *fiesta*." He leaned closer, talked low for long moments. The woman sat wrapped in thought. Eventually she nodded slowly.

THIRTY minutes later Elsa Moran saw strange things. Still waiting, she was aroused from her lethargy by a

sudden squall of Spanish from inside the house. Pancho appeared at the door laughing, clad in typical *charro* costume, skintight trousers belling at the bottom, short jacket resplendent with silver ornaments. Across his back was a glittering guitar.

"*Adios, Chiquita mio!*" His voice was full of laughter. Suddenly Chiquita hove into view, crouched as tensely as any tigress, her hands extended like claws, talons.

"No!" she shrieked. "You have promise to take me and you go with thees *gringa peeg!*"

She was on him, tearing, clawing, hitting. Still laughing Pancho held her at arm's length until the spasm expired. Then gently he sat her down and murmured in Spanish. The lowcut blouse had fallen away revealing the upper slopes of palpitant mounds, mounds that rose and fell stridently in the woman's anger.

Suddenly she stooped, raised her skirt and snatched at a garter. Metal gleamed and flashed in an arc. In the car Elsa Moran screamed, turned her head. She heard the sudden thud of a blow, heard the laughter rise again. Presently someone was opening the car.

"We will go, eh, *señorita!* These woman, they are what you say, the hell!"

As they pulled out of the dusty yard Elsa saw a huddled heap in the doorway. She looked askance at the smiling man beside her, but already the guitar was in his lap and his soft voice was singing.

*Hay Hay ayay
Canta y no llores.*

Back at the *adobe* hut Chiquita picked herself up, cursed softly. Her black eyes were vehement with jealousy. Swiftly she ran through the gloom to

the neighboring house where lived good Mamacita Gonzales. Mamacita had a telephone!

At the edge of the plaza Elsa Moran stopped the roadster. From the stone stand in the middle of the square came the soft music of a Mexican band. The crowd had gathered in that direction.

Pancho spoke. "My *amigo*, the Sabinas Kid, will be sure to be here, *señorita*. Wait for me, and I will go across to the *cantina* and ask." She nodded, lit a cigarette, and settled back in the seat. The Mexican, guitar held by the throat, walked across the street and entered the *cantina*.

Hardly had he disappeared when two dark figures skulked out of a noisome alley and crept close to the door.

INSTINCT, intuition, made Elsa tense. The two newcomers did not enter. Instead they peered furtively into the saloon, held a whispered consultation, and stepped back into the shadows. Somehow Elsa knew these men were enemies of Pancho! Should she warn him?

Still undecided she saw the lithe figure appear in the doorway, laughing over his shoulder at someone in the barroom. The guitar was slung carelessly beneath his arm. There on the sidewalk he paused, struck a match, held it to his cigarette.

Elsa glimpsed movement in the shadows and screamed. Pancho crouched in a split instant, flung up the guitar at the same moment that a gun blazed from the darkness. He seemed to stagger for a moment then as if by magic he had a gun in his own swarthy hand, a gun that spoke once—twice—in answer to his opponents.

A figure sprawled out of the shadows and lay at Pancho's feet. Another figure

cursed and ran up the darkened street. The sound of Pancho's laughter mingled with the roar of his gun. The fleeing man sprawled in the dust fifty yards away.

Then Pancho was beside her. There was no laugh on his face now, no indolence in his eyes. They were coals of fire peering up and down the street. His mouth was thin-lipped, twisted in a snarl. He waved the gun at the girl behind the wheel.

"Quick," he snarled, "back the way we came!"

She wheeled the car, headed into the darkness of a side street. As they roared away beyond pursuit, her heart throbbed but she kept the car going at high speed. Finally the man laughed again.

"Did they—did they hit you?" she faltered.

"Hit me? Not me, *corazon!* This guitar is very special box. It has a steel lining!" He threw back his head and laughed.

"Why—?" she began.

He reached over and turned the key in the switch. His eyes were mocking. "*Señorita*, for three days you have been looking for the Sabinas Kid. You come to me because you hear I can find him for you! I have promised you would see the most notorious *bandido* in Mexico tonight. Pancho, *corazon*, is a man of his word. Those fools back at the *cantina* were merely trying to collect the five thousand *pesos* offered for the Sabinas Kid. Look!"

He extended the revolver, butt foremost. That butt was gold plated, ornamented with flowers and painstaking scrollwork. A shield, left in the center, was inscribed,

To my friend, Jose Maria Gardinia Guedea,
The Sabinas Kid.

She gasped. "Then why have you led me on for these three days, pretending to get in touch with the Kid?"

Again laughter. "*Señorita*, I am a cautious man. For three days I have been investigating you, to see what you would want with the Sabinas Kid. Last night at your *hacienda* when you talked to Jim Carson, your uncle, I listened outside the window. You are very clever, you *gringos!* You want a man killed, so you come looking for me, who has killed many men! Your uncle has heard that the Sabinas Kid will do anything for a beautiful face! So he sends you to pull his chestnuts from the fire! I am sorry, *señorita*, but I do not like *Senor* Carson and the way he treats his Indians. I am afraid he will have to do his own murder!"

There was a long silence. The girl was too surprised to speak at once. This man knew all the facts already! It was true, Jim Carson, her uncle, the owner of thousands of acres of productive land, *did* want a man killed, and he had sent Elsa to contact the Sabinas Kid because she was young and beautiful.

"My uncle," she faltered, "will pay you much money in good American dollars. A thousand—perhaps more."

He shrugged. "Tell your uncle, *señorita*, that I do not kill for money. Money means nothing to me. Tell him to give back the land he has stolen from the Indians and I will do his bidding. Otherwise—drive me back to Chiquita, *señorita.*"

THE car shot forward, but the huge motor ran no swifter than the American woman's mind. As she pressed in on clutch and brake from time to time, the dress continued to climb higher into her lap. She was conscious of the hot eyes of her companion sweeping across

He held her at arm's length
until her spasm subsided.



bare white flesh, up to her firm, feminine breasts so plainly accented by the silken sweater she wore. Once before the *adobe* cottage, her mind was made up. She stopped the car, turned toward him, and drew one silken leg beneath her. The Mexican gasped as she lay a hand on his arm. Her eyes were taunting, her lips curled but challenging.

"These stories one hears about Mexican badmen," she sneered, "are all alike! Lies! Tell the truth, *amigo*, you are afraid!"

The Sabinas Kid laughed harshly. "Afraid! I'm afraid of no man that walks the earth!"

"But a woman," she jeered. "You're afraid of a woman! You're afraid of me!"

For a moment he looked at her with hot eyes, then before she could move, swept her into his arms. She tensed against his caresses for a moment, then surrendered as his lips found hers, as his hands cradled the soft flame that was her body. Presently he drew away. This time he did not laugh.

"Do this thing—for me," she whispered and her eyes were a promise.

"Tell your uncle, Jim Carson, that I will be at his *hacienda* within two days."

He opened the car door, stalked toward the darkened house. The woman smiled to herself and roared away into the blackness. Within the house the Sabinas Kid flung his guitar to a cot, lit an oil lamp, and gazed about. He called, "Chiquita, Chiquita," but no one answered.

Out in the clump of *mesquite*, Chiquita crouched, glaring down the road the car had taken. She was cursing venomously beneath her breath, her fingers fondling the hilt of a small dagger in her garter. As the red tail light disappeared, she gazed toward the *adobe* hut

and her curses were just as vehement. She crouched there in the bushes until the man extinguished the lamp. She heard the jingle of his spurs as he walked toward the shed in the rear, heard the creak of saddle leather and the soft footfall of the huge black horse as man and rider disappeared into the blackness.

AT THE Carson *hacienda* later that night, the girl, Elsa, reported to her uncle. Jim Carson, lean and saturnine, sat behind a huge library table, his little pig eyes half closed as he heard the girl's story. Smoke poured in twin streamers from her nostrils, her lips curled as she told how easy the Mexican badman had been.

Leaning against the mantel in the shadow, Tony Peters listened in silence, his eyes continually undressing the woman who sat so carelessly in the chair. As she glanced at Tony, her own eyes widened, closed quickly, as if the two had some secret in common which they were keeping from Carson.

Carson grinned evilly and slapped the table with his open palm. The glass in front of him jumped. "So," he exclaimed, "now we shall see! The Sabinas Kid will do anything for money or a beautiful woman. Elsa, it is up to you! We will see what this fake socialist, this so called leader of the peons, has to say when the Sabinas Kid sticks six inches of knife in him. With Morenas, the *Agrarian*, out of my way, I can buy the rest of that land for a song!"

Elsa wrapped her foot, crossed her legs in a flurry of chiffon that caused Tony Peters to lick his thin lips, to grin widely in a manner that exposed three gleaming gold teeth in the front of his mouth.

"And what happens after the Kid kills

Morenes? What is to prevent him from blackmailing you the rest of your life?"

Carson laughed crazily. "Am I a fool? The Sabinas Kid will kill Morenes, then he will be paid. Look—" He pointed at the leering Tony Peters. Peters tapped his left armpit suggestively. Carson cackled. "Tony Peters, the brave American, will collect the government reward for killing the Sabinas Kid! Blackmail? Bah!"

Later that night Elsa Moran lay flat on her back in her own room, blowing smoke rings in the still air, her brain active and scheming. She wore a diaphanous negligee that clung about her rounded limbs like wet tissue paper. There was a scratching at her door. Again. Slowly she arose, tiptoed across the room to the door. The bolt clicked. Tony Peters slid through the opening, his three gold teeth gleaming in the dim light.

Without his speaking, his arms encircled her slim body, drew her closer and closer.

PRESENTLY, breathing hard, she drew away. "Oh, Tony, it won't be long now! We'll be so happy together, just you and I. Are you afraid?"

The man grinned down at her. "Afraid of what? How can we miss? We'll go through with it, let the old goat buy the new land after Morenes is dead, then—"

The woman shivered deliciously. "Then it's Jim Carson, too! We'll have it all, Tony, just you and I! Thousands of acres for us and us alone! We'll be rich, Tony,—if you're not afraid to do it!"

"Afraid!" His voice was a sneer. "I'll do it, never fear. Wait until the greaser bumps Morenes, and I'll do the rest!" He kissed her again, savagely, triumphantly, picked her up and bore her

clinging, half clad body across the room, crushed and yielding in his possessive arms.

JUAN GARCIA also was aroused that night by a scratching on his door. With much grunting and groaning he opened the wooden door, drew back in astonishment as he recognized his caller.

"*Madre de Dios,*" he ejaculated and pulled the newcomer into the room. "Maria, Maria, get up! The Sabinas Kid has come to visit his old friend!"

Far into the night the two men talked. The Sabinas Kid had many questions to ask, much to speak of. Later Juan Garcia trotted into the night to find *El Diablo*, the huge black horse, to hide him safely in the hills.

Hardly had he gone, when the Sabinas Kid slid from the house like a black ghost. The *hacienda* was silent, sleeping. No one heard the footsteps of the barefooted man who climbed to the roof of the rambling porch, pried off a screen, and slipped into the silent house.

Jim Carson in his bed, his mouth open, his toothless gums exposed, never knew that a pair of shrewd eyes watched him as he slept for long moments. Nor did Tony Peters ever know that a black shadow skulked into his room to find it empty, the bed disarranged but cold.

Presently, like a cat, that black shadow slid soundlessly into another room. The moon beat through an open window to illuminate the rumpled bed with silver. Sleeping there all radiant and flushed, sweetly rounded breasts rising and falling rhythmically—Elsa Moran. Leaving the room on tip-toes, was a man. The man's half open mouth disclosed three gleaming gold teeth.

THE next morning Don Jaime Carson snorted at Juan Garcia. "A blind beg-

gar! What does he want with me? Give him alms and tell him to *vamos!*"

Juan bowed, fumbled at his belt and produced a square of cardboard. "The blind man, *señor*, say to give you this. Me, I cannot read but he say—"

Carson looked at the printed card. It bore the legend, "Jose Maria Gardinia Guedea." He laughed shrilly.

The peons who labored so hard for Don Jaime, the *gringo*, thought he had a sudden softening of the heart. It became *hacienda* gossip—Jim Carson bringing the dirty, pockmarked blind beggar into his own house and feeding him!

The Sabinas Kid, who was the blind beggar, listened in polite silence as Jim Carson explained. Presently the American was silent. The Mexican spoke. "This Antonio Morenes is a very big man politically, *señor*. There is much danger in his killing. True, as you say he deserves to die. He is a schemer, a bad man who deludes the poor Indians into following him, then appropriates their land!"

"That is just the reason I want him dead," roared Carson righteously. "I can't stand to see the poor *peons* abused! I'm like a father to my workers. I'm—" The Sabinas Kid grinned like a wolf, gestured impatiently.

"Two thousand American dollars is a lot of pesos. I am a poor man. Give me time to think." Carson grinned, left the room on some pretext. He was shrewd. Spread out on the table was a great array of gold coin. Hardly had the door closed behind him when another opened and Elsa Moran entered.

For a moment the Sabinas Kid smiled at her, his eyes sweeping from her breasts to her trim silken ankles.

"You are going to do this thing—," she breathed, "—for me?"

"For you, *corason!*" Suddenly she was in his arms. As she closed her eyes awaiting his caress, he grinned again wolfishly—and thrust her aside. Surprised, she tensed.

"Not here," he chided gently. "Tonight when all is asleep!"

"And you'll do as my uncle asks?"

He nodded. "Tomorrow there is the bullfight. Antonio Morenes will be very drunk. Tomorrow he dies, I swear it."

That night Tony Peters of the gold teeth did not go to Elsa Moran. Instead she lay awake far into the night and waited, clad in her most alluring negligee, a negligee of spiderweb that showed lush breasts through its gossamer, full flaring hips and tapering thighs. Once during the night she thought she heard singing. Blood throbbed in her veins and she waited expectantly. But nothing happened. Stretched out at full length on the moonlit bed, she lay wide eyed and expectant. Again, later, she thought she heard mocking laughter from the window, but she was never certain.

ANTONIO ESCOBAR VALDEZ Guzman Morenes was in the height of his glory. To be in the height of his glory it was necessary that Morenes be very drunk. He was. He sat in the *autoridad's* box, the judges' place, in the crowded bullring and surveyed his children with drunken satisfaction. Antonio Morenes, the friend of the Indian! As they saluted him with many *bravos* and *vivas*, he waved a fat hand airily. On a pudgy finger gleamed an immense diamond.

Already three bulls had charged into the ring and met death. Now the *pica-dors*, safe on the padded horses, worried another *toro*, a huge black fellow who

"Let me see if my clothes fit you," he said and laughed. Hopelessly, she donned them.



snorted, charged, whirled and pawed the earth in rage.

Not far away in a *sombra*, Señor Jaime Carson, the *gringo*, and his niece watched the spectacle. Long ago they had spotted the sly, well dressed Mexican who sat in the first row directly behind Señor Morenes. Don Jaime had licked his lips and spoken softly to his niece. "This Sabinas Kid is smart! He will put a knife in Morenes and make his getaway in the excitement! In this crowd they will never get him!"

Beside Elsa Moran, Tony Peters grinned and flashed his three gold teeth. After the death of the third bull, Jim Carson asked him, "All is ready?"

Peters nodded, squeezed Elsa's knee and got to his feet. With a flirt of his hand he pushed his way through the crowd and left the arena. Carson grinned at his niece. "You are sure he will go there?"

The woman nodded. "That is his hideout. He'll return there to change his clothes."

"And Tony will take care of him," laughed Jim Carson. The girl shuddered.

NOW the *toreadors* worried the black bull. A pause, a snorting charge at the pink cape that flaunted him. A swift movement on the part of the *toreador* and the bull thundered by to bring up short and wheel again toward the cape. *Toreador* after *toreador* ran gracefully into the arena to taunt the bull, to escape those needlepoint horns by miraculous distances. The crowd cheered. Hats were tossed into the ring. Don Antonio Morenes huzza-ed vociferously, waved his pudgy hand. The diamond gleamed and flickered.

Banderillas, in the knowing hands of experts, planted in the lump of muscle at the base of the bull's neck. Eight

darts, beribboned, decorated with flow-ers quivered in that lump of muscle. A great roar went up from the crowd as the *matador* himself stepped into the ring, the long curved sword in one hand, the small red *muleta* in the other.

Quiet, while the bull pawed the earth and watched his new tormentor. The *matador* poised the sword, flipped the *muleta*. With a roar of rage the bull charged. Just then a puff of wind, the *muleta* swayed higher. The bull's horn followed just as the *matador* lunged with the sword. The sword hit bone, bent nearly double then flashed through the air like a released steel spring. The crowd screamed as the great horn caught the *matador* near the thigh, tossed him high in the air.

Toreadors rushed from the protecting screen to take the bull off the fallen *matador*. The beast whirled, puzzled, stood over the fallen man who was trying to crawl to safety. The crowd screamed. No one was more excited than Antonio Morenes, the friend of the Indian. He dropped the flask from which he had been about to take a drink, waved his pudgy hands, hysterically screaming at the top of his voice. He clambered atop the protecting balustrade shaking with excitement and *tequilla*.

For a moment he wavered, lost his balance, shot through the air to hit the top of the inner barrier. His pudgy body flipped grotesquely, did a perfect somersault, and dropped six feet into the sand of the bullring proper.

At the sound of the new screams the bull whirled, disregarded the capes of the *toreadors*, forgot the fallen *matador* crawling painfully across the bloody sand. He trumpeted once, lowered his head and charged with lightning speed at the pudgy figure of Don Antonio Morenes!

Don Antonio ran, not for the screens but directly toward the wall. Blind with fear he crashed into it, bounced back like a rubber ball, and collapsed. On came the maddened bull.

SUDDENLY a slender figure dropped into the ring before the fallen Morenes. Metal gleamed in the newcomer's hand. A great *sombrero* was waved before the charging animal. The bull wheeled toward this new tormentor, who dodged nimbly.

As the bull went by with lowered head, the Sabinas Kid literally dove for its thick neck. One arm was wrapped firmly about it, the other, which held the short knife, stabbed again and again at the spinal cord.

Against the wall the bull slowed. His tongue protruded, his eyes were dumbly appealing. Great spurts of blood came from his mouth. Slowly he tottered and sank to his knees while the air was suddenly filled with shouts, with hats, with *serapes*, while the populace went wild with joy at the hero who had saved the life of Antonio Morenes.

Somehow in the excitement the Sabinas Kid managed to disappear completely. In his box in the *sombra* Jim Carson cursed. Beside him the girl still tensed and thrilled at the sight she had seen.

"The double crosser," raged Jim Carson. "I pay him to kill a man and instead he saves his life! The liar! The cheat! Well, to hell with him! Tony Peters is waiting for him now. Maybe he'll learn he can't doublecross Jim Carson!"

JUST as dusk painted the squalid *adobe* hut with black shadows, two people heard the footsteps of *El Diablo*, black horse of the Sabinas Kid. Chi-

quita and Tony Peters crouched in the squalid structure that served as a stable.

"That is him," whispered Chiquita. "I must meet him. Soon he will come to bed down *El Diablo*. Shoot him, *señor*, and be sure the first shot is perfect. Do not give him time to get close, but shoot when he approaches on the path! *And shoot straight!*"

El Diablo was restless. He nickered and pawed the earth impatiently as his rider swung off before the *adobe* hut. He sniffed the air, pawed again, and whinnied. The eyes of the Sabinas Kid were wary as he observed these signs. He entered the house just as Chiquita came in from the rear. She greeted him cheerfully, even put arms about his neck and pressed him close.

For long moments he held her off, gazed down at her suspiciously. Then he gestured toward the huge pot that bubbled and boiled atop the crude stove.

"Hungry, my own?" she laughed. "Tonight we have *cabeza de cabrita*, kid's head!"

She went about her work nervously, all too conscious of his questioning eyes. In the front of the house *El Diablo* still snorted and stamped and whinnied.

The Sabinas Kid said, "Come here, *corazon!*"

Fearfully she came, guilt heavy in her eyes. He smiled—wolfishly—and caressed her brown skin.

"You grow fat, *corazon!* Soon you will be able to wear the clothes of the Sabinas Kid!"

She giggled then half screamed as his fingers tore the clothes from her body in ragged strips. Her hands covered her breasts protectively as she cowered before him.

"Do not be afraid," he smiled. "Let us see if my clothes fit you." From a

(Continued on page 108)

Diana Daw

TED AND DIANA HAVE RELEASED A NUMBER OF FEMALE SLAVES FOUND ON AN ISLAND OFF THE COAST OF INDIA. TED, RECOVERING FROM A WOUND, IS BE-SEIGED BY THE LOVE-MAD FEMALES

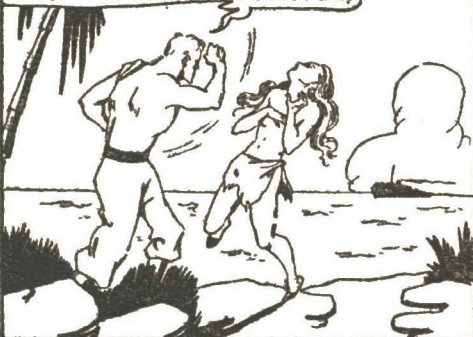
By
CLAYTON
Maxwell

THE JEALOUS WOMEN SEIZE DIANA AND LOCK HER IN A HIDDEN CAVE ON THE ISLAND. THEN THEY ADVISE TED THAT SHE SAILED AWAY ON A RAFT.

IT'S MORNING --- AND I'M HUNGRY ALREADY. THOSE HELL-CATS MEAN TO LET ME STARVE TO DEATH!



TED SPIES A BRITISH CRUISER APPROACHING. KEEP AWAY FROM ME --- I'M NOT GOING TO LOVE YOU IN INDIA OR ANYWHERE. I LOVE DIANA AND I'M GOING TO HAVE THAT SHIP SEARCH THE WHOLE SEA FOR HER!



HOORAY! YOU'RE JUST IN TIME!



ALL THESE WOMEN? YOU'RE CAUGHT WITH THE GOODS --- HUMAN GOODS. WE'VE BEEN HUNTING FOR A BAND OF SLAVE DEALERS FOR SOME TIME. YOU'RE UNDER ARREST!

BUT OFFICED, I --- I ---



TED DOESN'T CARE FOR ME --- OR ANY OF US! HE SPURNS US! THEY'VE ARRESTED HIM AS A SLAVE DEALER --- WE'LL SWEAR HE'S THE HEAD OF THE SLAVE RING!



THE SEARCHERS DID NOT FIND THE SECRET CAVE WHERE DIANA IS IMPRISONED

WE'VE SEARCHED THE ISLAND, SIR. THERE IS NO ONE ELSE ABOUT!

WELL, THE WOMEN TELL US HE'S THE LEADER. THIS MAY BREAK UP THE GANG. HE'LL GET A STIFF SENTENCE IN INDIA!



DAYS PASS. DIANA IS WEAK WITHOUT FOOD ... BUT IS ABLE TO OBTAIN WATER FROM A SMALL SPRING IN THE WALL OF THE CAVE



I GUESS A RIVAL GANG OF SLAVERS HAS MADE OFF WITH OUR WOMEN. ONLY THIS CARRION LEFT. YOU COULDN'T GIVE A SPECIMEN LIKE HER AWAY. THROW HER TO THE SHARKS.



OH, KEMEL --- GIVE HER TO ME --- INSTEAD OF PAY. I DISCERN RARE BEAUTY IF SHE WERE PATTERNED A BIT. AT LEAST --- ONE COULD SELL HER IN CALCUTTA --- WITH A BIT MORE FLESH ON HER BONES!

FOR OUR NEWEST MEMBER --- YOU ARE A BIT AMBITIOUS. BUT SHE IS WORTHLESS --- TAKE HER --- HA --- HA --- AND WHEN YOU FAIL TO SELL HER, YOU WILL LEARN THAT YOU ARE NO JUDGE OF WHITE MEAT!



I WILL SOON HAVE YOU WELL, MY BEAUTY. I AM ALI --- YOU WILL BRING ME RICHES!



UNDER ALI'S CARE, DIANA HAS RECOVERED --- THEY'VE GONE FOR A NEW LOAD OF SLAVES. LEFT ME TO WATCH THE ISLAND. I'M REALLY JACK LLOYD --- A BRITISH SECRET SERVICE MAN --- ON THE TRAIL OF SLAVERS. WILL YOU HELP ME CATCH THE GANG?



ANOTHER ADVENTURE OF DIANA IN THE JAN. ISSUE OF SPICY ADVENTURE STORIES

TALE of the Perfect Women

Women without physical flaw! Women who have been taught that nothing is so important as pleasing men! Bill Lane goes into Mongolia to see if it's so!



By GUY RUSSELL

BILL LANE sat in Yumen's one and only 'Foreign' Bar, drinking raw, made-in-Japan, imitation whisky from a dirty glass, and tried to like the place. There wasn't much to like; either about Yumen, the Foreign Bar, or Bill's fellow customers. But he decided that he'd better like it. He was spending the first of what threatened to

be a long succession of solitary nights in Yumen.

And Yumen was a hell of a place to be spending even one night. The powers-that-were of the Urco Company who paid Bill Lane's modest salary had been somewhat upset over a recent evening in southern Changsha, when Bill had incurred the severe displeasure of one



of Changsha's most important citizens.

In the space of an hour or so, Bill Lane had drowned a dozen of that citizen's best hired men, disclosed a very embarrassing secret of the citizen's, and then thrown the citizen himself into a cold, muddy river. All to rescue one appealing bit of blonde femininity for whom Lane had some better, more personal use.

So Urco sent Lane to Yumen, their last, northern outpost in desolate, Sin-

kang Province of North China, right on the edge of the Gobi. Supposedly for Bill's own good. To get him out of the vengeful reach of the old Chinese who got the involuntary bath, and who had managed to swim ashore. But, when Lane saw Yumen, he realized that his immediate superiors had also had a little punishment in mind.

Craddock, the lean, sour Yankee whom

Bill Lane was relieving in Yumen, settled back in his chair at the other side of Lane's table, and groaned.

"Here comes the floor show! Thank God this's the last time I'll ever have to watch that damned yellow slut squirm her belly muscles!"

LANE looked at the 'floor show', one voluptuous, black-eyed half-caste girl with a wisp of beaded cloth across swelling, ivory breasts and another about full-blown hips. When she began to dance, he couldn't have wrenched his eyes away if he'd tried. And he had no desire at all to try. But he wondered a little at Craddock's distaste.

Bill Lane, himself, had seen worse looking girls in better places than the Foreign Bar. And she could dance! She moved in slow, suggestive writhings to the beat of the queer, tinny music, and movement rippled across her dimpled, creamy stomach like tiny snakes.

"Wow!" Lane breathed. "Talk about ball-bearings! Has she got 'em in all the best places!"

The dancer saw Lane staring and she shot an approving glance over his huge, blond bulk. But some innate feminine instinct insisted that he make the first move. So she concentrated on Craddock.

She came toward their table, eyes smiling a frank invitation. The cadence of the music speeded up and she abandoned herself completely to mad, sensual posturings. A faint patina of perspiration gleamed over her lush, velvet body in the smoky light, and Lane's blood began to hammer.

Beside Craddock, she danced so close that a firm breast almost brushed his shoulder. At her nearness, Craddock leaped to his feet, cursing. He caught

the girl by a wrist and spun her roughly away. She stumbled and fell on the slippery floor.

"Hey, what the hell!" Lane growled, surprised and a little angry. "That wasn't necessary, was it? After all, you don't have to man-handle the girl, just because she likes you, do you?"

"No," Craddock muttered. "I'm sorry." He followed the dancer and helped her to her feet. Mumbling an apology, he pressed a coin in her palm. She smiled, but straight at Bill Lane.

Craddock said, "Let's get out of here. Do you mind?"

"No," Lane said, "I think maybe it's a good idea." There was a nasty murmur at the other tables about the room. "We'll probably save the bouncer a job if we do."

Craddock turned toward the door but Lane followed the little dancer. He touched her elbow with one big hand and whispered in her ear. She nodded and smiled. Lane went after Craddock, grinning. It had been a long time since Hankau and Jean Jerrold.

OUTSIDE, he said, "Craddock, not that it's any of my business, but what made you get up on your ear like that? Do you know our little girl-friend?"

"I was in Yumen when she came, a few months ago, if that's what you mean. I've seen her dancing in there, a hundred times, I suppose."

"That wasn't exactly what I meant. I just made a date for myself and I was wondering if maybe there wasn't some reason why she's poison to you. Something that might be a good thing for me to know, too."

"No," Craddock said, slowly, "it's nothing like that. The girl is all right,

as far as I know. It's . . . something else."

"Well, I wasn't being inquisitive. I was just surprised at the way you blew up, all of a sudden."

"Made rather an ass of myself, I guess. But . . . well, you'll think I'm insane if I tell you what made me do it."

"You don't have to tell me anything, you know," Lane said puzzled. "As I said, I was just curious for reasons of my own."

"I know. But . . . I haven't had a chance to talk about this, and I'd like to."

"Well, if you want to get something off your chest, go ahead. I'm a good listener."

"You know, don't you," Craddock started, "that I just got back from an inspection trip up North. Was gone about a month."

"Yeah, you told me. Got snatched by some bandits, out in the Gobi, didn't you?"

"Not bandits. Priests."

"Priests! !"

"Priests, monks, filthy yellow devils—whatever you want to call them."

"How'd you happen to get mixed up with them?"

"Fifty miles north, at Shidun, we've a storage tank. That's where I was supposed to go. But I heard that there was some good hunting in the Sutusin-tag, just above Shidun."

"They're in Mongolia, aren't they?"

"They are. No one knows that better than I do, now. Mongolia comes down in a little point, almost to Shidun. I crossed the border to get into the mountains. And . . . followed a trail right up to the gate of a damned monastery."

"Brothers didn't like trespassers, eh?"

"No, they treated me very well, except. . . ." Craddock paused.

When he continued, there was a queer, sleepy monotony in his tone. Lane glanced at him sharply, in the half-light of the street, but the other's eyes were wide and staring.

"Lane," he said, "did you ever see a perfect woman?"

"Perfect!" Bill Lane said, startled. "No, I've seen a lot of women, of all shapes and sizes, but I never saw one I'd call perfect. Anything but that."

"I mean a woman without a physical flaw. A woman whose body you could watch and touch and twist and turn from long, red-gold hair to slender, tiny feet without ever finding a mistake or a blemish? A woman who had been taught from birth that there was nothing of any importance in her life except pleasing a man—any man—in any and every way she could. And who had been taught by experts."

"Hey!" Lane exclaimed. "You didn't take to hitting the little pipe with your friends up there, did you? If I had dreams like that, I'd spend all my time asleep."

"I didn't expect you to believe me. Especially you. You've never been *fou* about a woman, have you, Lane? You're too hard-headed. I know. So was I. . . . once."

"Wait a minute," Bill Lane objected. "I didn't say I didn't believe you. I don't know, yet, whether I do or not, because I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Those monks," Craddock said, slowly, ". . . who kept me practically a prisoner for a month . . . breed such women!"

"Breed them!"

The girl behind him, Bill faced the rain of arrows.



CRADDOCK nodded. "I don't know any other word for it. They breed and raise them like cattle."

"But . . . ? The monks were Chinks, weren't they?"

"Mongols—squatly, powerful Mongols. But the women weren't. I think they were mostly Georgians—what people call Circassian—because they all had that heavy, reddish gold hair and pure, pale skins."

"Some of them must have been half-breeds! If the monks were Mongols."

"The priests never touched them. At least, not often. The priest—and the girl—are killed immediately if there is even a faint suspicion of anything like that."

"Then what the hell? I don't get it."

"If you decided to stop drinking, and then were sent to prison for a year where you couldn't get anything at all

to drink, would you deserve any credit for stopping? These priests are sworn to chastity and"

"And so they raise their own temptations. I see. But wait a minute! How old were the women?"

"Young! All of them girls, hardly more than children."

"Then I don't see, again. Where do they get the girls?"

"I said they breed them. The male? Damned fools like me!"

"You? And you were there a month?" Lane grinned. "No wonder you didn't fall for the little girl in that dive."

"It wasn't that. After those girls up north all women will always be repulsive to me. Words aren't much good, I know. Lane, those priests have been woman-breeders for God knows how many generations. For that many generations, every boy, and every girl-child who showed the least, tiniest, unlovely defect has been killed. No sculptor ever dreamed of such models."

Bill Lane said, "I guess I've only one more question. What made you leave?"

"I was luckier than anyone will ever be again," Craddock said. Then, bitterly, "At least, that's what I thought for a few hours. Now, I know that I'll never be able to forget them, awake or asleep."

"I still don't know why you left."

"I got away, when I heard that I was to be killed."

"That was tough," Lane admitted. "But you did get away, didn't you?"

Craddock stared at him. "Yes," he said, "I got away. But don't think that you could. You'd better stay a long way away from the Sutusin-tag."

Suddenly, his voice rose to a hoarse scream. "Stay away from them! Stay away from them, do you hear!"

"Easy," Lane soothed. "I've no de-

signs on your red-headed babes. When I set up as a gigolo, I want to do it on my own time."

"Sorry," Craddock mumbled. "I guess I am a little mad."

CRADDOCK left for the south the next day. It was almost a full twenty-four hours before Bill Lane was able to leave to look over the tank at Shidun.



North from Shidun, he took with him young Yin Fu, his Chinese clerk, who knew every dialect in Sinkiang Province. Yin had much to say about the "bad men" who infested the nearby foot-hills but Lane laughed him into silence.

The second day out, in the edge of those hills, it wasn't so easy. So Lane swung the boy toward his tough little Chinese pony and grimly ordered him to mount. Yin looked fearfully at his boss's huge fists and rode dumbly on.

Lane had gone as far as Craddock's meagre instructions would take him and Yin had no assistance to offer. He turned a deaf ear to all questioning, and



Lane began to be afraid that his trip had been for nothing. Until, late in the afternoon and high in the hills, he found that it hadn't.

They turned a sharp corner in the narrow trail, around a jagged rock outcropping, and rode into the midst of a dozen broad-shouldered, cruel-faced men. They waited in a small open space, long, vicious arrows set to the strings of great horn bows. Bill Lane could only hope that these were the people he'd come looking for.

Round, flat, droopy-mustached faces didn't make them look much like any monks Bill had ever seen. Things looked bad, if they weren't. Maybe, even if they were.

They took the rifle from the crook of Lane's arm and tied his hands behind his back. Firmly, but not as roughly as they might have. Yin did not fare so well. They yanked his wrists together and bound them so tightly that Lane could see the dark blood swelling the boy's hands. When they started Yin up the trail with a lusty kick, Lane spoke.

"Yin," he called, "tell them that, if they harm you, they won't be able to talk to me. And ask 'em where they're taking us."

Yin chattered, hesitantly, and one of the men rumbled an answer. Yin said, "Excellence, they say that they care not whether they speak with you or not. They say that we go to a place they call 'the lesser home of he-who-cannot-die' and for me to be still before they pluck out my tongue and bind it over my teeth."

Lane grinned. "Nice guys. Better keep still, Yin. They look as if they'd enjoy doing it."

But he noticed that Yin received no more kicks. They climbed, on foot in single file, higher and higher up the steep path. Two of the brothers led the ponies along behind. The shafts of the setting sun were level across the boulders when their stocky, yellow leader came out into the opening of a narrow, rock-strewn valley.

At the other end, Lane saw grim, towering, stone walls set tightly against the sheer face of the gully on either side. A wide doorway opened blackly and a few narrow openings were evidently windows.

Lane thought, "If that's the place

Craddock was talking about, I guess I should have asked him how he got out."

Fifty yards from the walls, a moving shadow crossed Lane's path. He looked up. A huge vulture was wheeling slowly about something hanging high above. Shock pulled with tiny fingers the hair at the base of his skull as he saw what that 'something' was.

TWO naked bodies, chained face to face and knee to knee, hung head downward from a great iron hook set into the stone. A man and a woman. The man was one of the broad, yellow-skinned priests, but the girl's body gleamed white in the glancing sun and her hair streamed down in a rich, ruddy cloud.

The vulture swooped down, insolently careless of the men below, and tore at the girl's face. Bill Lane jerked still in mid-step as he saw her body twist in an unmistakable, convulsive movement. She was alive!

The man behind shoved at his back and Lane forced his eyes away. There didn't seem to be much Bill Lane could do for her but swear bloody and ten-fold vengeance. And he did that. There was still a .45 in his arm-pit, with seven smashing blows of death in each of two clips. He prayed that his captors might not have heard of shoulder holsters.

Through the doorway, they led him along a hall and then down interminable stone steps. At the door of a tiny, cell-like room, they untied his hands and pushed him in. One came back, almost immediately with a bowl of tasteless, gruel-like food. Later, he heard Yin begging at great length of his most reliable Chinese god. He knew that the boy must be somewhere near.

They returned for him, hours later. They brought Yin along, back of the

stairs. Lane thought that there were more steps, this time, and that they must be near the roof of the dank honey-combed structure.

Finally, they brought him, the frightened Chinese boy with him, into a great, high-ceilinged room. A score of the monks stood about a throne in the center. The brothers wore drab, dirt-colored robes but he on the throne was garbed in bright yellow.

Lane stared at him. He was old, so dried and wrinkled with age that the American shuddered to think how old he must be. Little bright eyes, like bits of wet stone, stared back at Lane. A voice came through yellow parchment lips in a high, cracking chant.

Lane shook his head and pointed to Yin. "What's on the old devil's mind?" he asked the boy.

"He asks from whence we come," Yin quavered.

"Tell him. Shidun."

"He says he knows that. His men watched us come."

"If he knew, why the hell did he ask?" Lane grunted.

"He says that he wished to test the truth of our words. He asks where the tall, dark man has gone."

"Say that the dark man is dead. You're a pretty good liar, Yin. Say that he died of an arrow wound and was buried before we left. And ask him what the devil he thinks he's going to do with us."

The mummy spoke at some length. Then its high voice raised in a sharp command. Two of the brethren shoved Lane into a low chair at the base of the throne.

YIN, at Lane's feet, chattered rapidly. "He says, Excellence, that he has great need of you. You are large and

strong and your eyes are clear. The snows have come and gone three times since a girl-child has been born within the walls and that his white-bodied female devils will soon grow old and gaunt. Then his children will no longer gain the Inner Mystery through the rack-ing tortures of fierce battle with desire. I do not know what he means, Excellence."

Bill Lane grinned. "I do. That is, I hope I do. And I hope that his 'female devils' aren't *too* old and gaunt."

One, at least, wasn't. Lane's breath was caught in his throat in pure wonder at the girl who stepped through parted hangings at the foot of the throne. From high-piled hair the color of raw, red gold, down her whole sensuous body she was pure, flawless loveliness. Her single, clinging, silken garment was cut and slashed in a dozen artful, shameless places until the gleaming marble beneath it was a hundred times the sinuous, seductive thing it would have been, even nude.

She danced—slowly—to the muted throbbing of a drum. Danced a thousand age-old, nameless hungers into Lane's throbbing head. Her eyes never left him through the hours that she danced before him. He knew that it could be only minutes . . . no man could live longer without breathing.

When she slipped back through the hangings, he followed after her, all will of his own gone before that curving white-hot body which was graven on his brain forever. An ugly yellow priest caught him by the arm. Lane swore at him but the words couldn't come through the dry furnace of his mouth.

The man grinned evilly and nodded. At a word from the throne, he led Bill Lane through the hangings and down a

(Continued on page 124)

CROWN of THORNS



Despite all the girl's pleading, he went on investigating the Penitentes, their evil rites, floggings, crucifixions. . . .

AS he stepped from the comparative shade of the railroad coach to the uncovered station platform at *Las Palmas*, Tod Hunter felt the broiling mid-day sun beating down on his shoulders and head in recurrent waves of unbearable heat.

He pushed his panama back on his head, mopped a handkerchief over his perspiring face, and headed for the tiny,

clapboard station that bore the almost unreadable legend:

LAS PALMAS
N. M.

Sante Fe 135 m.—390 m. Phoenix, Ariz.

There wasn't a human being in sight. A drooping, raw-boned horse—dirty,

By ARTHUR WALLACE



sickly grey like everything else under the hot, hellish sun—stood immobile in the shafts of a light, dusty carriage.

The sound of the station door creaking on its hinges as Tod pushed it open, was harshly alien. He stepped inside. A swarthy half-breed was stretched out on the lone bench, his straw sombrero covering the upper part of his face.

There was no evidence of a station agent nor anyone resembling a station agent. Only the sleeping half-breed. Tod patted his sweat-soaked handkerchief to his brow. Now how the hell was he supposed to get up to Colonel Edgren's place? Walk? The very thought of footing it under that blanket of heat made him weak.

He was about to awaken the half-breed when the man rubbed his eyes, spat. He mumbled something under his breath, then squinted at Tod.

"You go *La Casa del Toro, señor?*"

La Casa del Toro—The House of the Bull—was Colonel Edgren's cattle ranch. "Si," Tod replied.

The half-breed eyed the big suitcase, gave it a wide berth as he shuffled out of the station. Tod, picking up the bag, followed.

It was almost a surprise to see the decrepit horse lift its head when the half-breed stepped into the carriage. Tod slid his bag into the back seat.

The carriage got under way. Tod breathed sparingly.

"Is it hot like this all the time?" he questioned.

The half-breed took a full minute to reply. "Si," he said.

Tod gritted his teeth. One more "Si" and he'd go slightly nuts. Rather than run the risk of insanity, he lapsed into silence until the horse, threatening at any moment to give up its equine ghost, had pulled the carriage to the crest of a small hill. Straight ahead, almost incongruous on this barren, grey landscape, stood a huge white house, its gilt weather vane sucking in the most brilliant rays of the sun.

TEN minutes later, as Colonel Edgren, big and rangy, led him into a shade-cooled conservatory, Tod commented on

the half-breed's loquaciousness in reverse.

The wealthy ranch owner laughed. "Pedro? No, he isn't very talkative, especially when he's angry?"

Tod accepted the long, cool drink a house boy brought on a tray. He soothed his parched throat with a long swallow.

"So that's what it was. I wondered."

"Yes. Pedro's our station man. He meets the trains when we have guests coming. My daughter entertained quite a crowd from the Coast last week. Pedro hasn't recovered from it yet."

Tod's brow wrinkled. "Your daughter? Mr. Bellows didn't say anything about your having a daughter." He stopped short. Something happened to his eyes. They remained fixed on the entrance to the conservatory. The pupils dilated. His mouth remained open.

There, standing in the doorway, one hand on a curving hip, was a girl as gorgeously impossible as the view from the station had been unreal. Long, ebony hair fell about her shoulders, framing a face that was almost fictional in its beauty. Dark eyes and voluptuously carmine lips vied for Tod's attention.

She was wearing a simple white linen dress, but its very simplicity served as a clarion for her maturely slim figure. The bodice fell caressingly over soft, full breasts as though even the inert material appreciated its favored position. Her waist was narrow and hips were a not-too-pronounced lyre.

Tod got to his feet. "My daughter, Aline," Colonel Edgren boomed. "Aline, this is Mr. Hunter."

She smiled and extended her hand in greeting. Tod took her long, tapering fingers, half-expecting them to dissolve in his palm. But they were real. Cool and real. Her voice was a reality, too. Smooth and low-pitched.

"I've been waiting to see you . . . anxiously." She withdrew her hand, slid into a chair. "Please sit down."

Tod sat. He could not help noting the rhythm of her breasts as she settled herself. His heart thumped against his ribs and the roof of his mouth went dry. The ecru warmth of her sun-tanned throat where the low V of her neckline bared it was something Tod could almost feel. She leaned forward. The bodice fell away. There was a definite color line where the brown of her throat became the milky white of her lush breasts.

"You're not at all what I expected," she said with ingratiating candor.

Colonel Edgren chuckled. "Aline expected someone with long hair and a ferocious temper."

"Dad!" reprovingly.

"What did you expect?" Tod asked.

A flush crept over her cheeks. "Well—I—I rather expected you'd be—well—oh, I don't know! I just didn't think you'd be like—like you are!"

Colonel Edgren leaned over and kissed his daughter's forehead. "Now that you've got your writer, kidlets, you can show him around the place." He addressed Tod. "Bellows said you'd want to be left severely alone while you were working. I fixed up a little bungalow on the hill. You won't have to come down to the house unless you feel the urge. I'm sure you'll be comfortable there. I've got to run along now. We're shipping steers tomorrow and there's plenty to do. You'll have dinner with us tonight, of course. Pedro will drive you to the cottage after dinner."

ALONE with Aline, Tod lost some of his usual composure. It was a mystery how anything so lush and lovely could remain that way in this dry, searing climate. He feasted his eyes on her

for long moments, drank in her dark, sensual beauty.

Her eyelids fluttered and her cheeks pinked. She stood up, shaking out her dress. Her breasts quivered under the bodice.

"Would you like to see the corrals? Or maybe you want to wash up or change?"

Tod drew a deep breath. "Your dad said to show me around the place. I insist on it."

The sun was an orange disk in the western sky when Aline led Tod back to the ranch house. "I don't suppose you'll ever be coming down to see us, will you?" she said.

Tod came as close to her as he dared. His eyes ran over the swell of her firm breasts. "I'm wondering whether I'll ever be able to stay away and work! If I had known your dad had a daughter like you, I—"

"You wouldn't have come to New Mexico!" challengingly.

"I would have taken a *plane*!"

A tall, broad-set man came through the wide-flung French doors. He hesitated, doffed his fawn felt sombrero. His eyes flickered under dark, shaggy brows.

"Hello, Del," Aline greeted. "Del, this is Tod Hunter. Mr. Hunter. Mr. Saunders. Del is dad's ranch manager."

Tod shook the proffered hand. Its grip was firm and hard. His eyes met the ranch manager's. For a moment he thought he detected a suspicious glint in their steel-grey depths.

"Pleased to know you, Mr. Hunter," Del Saunders said. Then, to Aline: "That dogie died."

"Oh!" One hand came to her throat. Her forearm pressed against a rounded breast. "A new-born calf I was nursing," she explained to Tod. Moisture glazed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Tod said. He felt a little silly.

LATER, long after dinner, when he and Aline stood beside the carriage that was to take him to the cottage, he wanted to ask about Del Saunders. Whether or not there was anything between them. It bothered him. The way Saunders looked at her—possessively.

"I'll ride up with you," Aline said.

Tod thrilled. He helped her into the carriage. For a fleeting blissful moment his knuckles brushed against the warm hill of a breast. Hot waves rolled up his arm.

It was a good three miles to the cottage on the hill. Tod followed Aline inside. Pedro, still sullen and uncommunicative, remained in the carriage.

"Think you'll like it?" Aline queried. "I fixed it up."

Tod glowed. "It's perfect, except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"It's so far from the ranch house."

She changed the subject abruptly. "I forgot to ask you. What are you going to write? Fiction?"

"No, I'm after facts this time. I want to do a series of articles on the *Penitentes*. I—"

Aline's body went rigid. Her eyes bulged. The color drained from her cheeks. Impulsively she stepped forward and gripped Tod's shoulders.

"No!" she gasped. "You mustn't!"

His hands dropped gently on her hips. Looking down he could see her globular breasts almost touching his chest.

She drew away quickly as hoofbeats sounded outside the cottage, but not before Del Saunders on a big roan had seen the tableau through the open door.

"Don't mention it to anyone until I

talk with you," she whispered. "Please, for my sake."

SAUNDERS stepped into the cottage. "Sorry to interrupt," he mumbled. His lips were thin-drawn. "You know your dad doesn't like you traipsing around after dark, Aline."

"I—I thought I'd ride up with Mr. Hunter, Del. Just—just to get him acquainted with the cottage." She forced a smile. Her eyes flashed a warning message to Tod. "Good-night."

Del Saunders lingered. "I'll send a spig girl up tonight, Hunter. She'll do your cooking and cleaning. The coyotes are liable to bother you the first few nights but you'll get used to them." He flicked a short whip against his breeches leg. "You won't have no call to come down to the house"—an ominously significant pause—"unless you want to. Good-night."

Tod stood at the door until the carriage melted into the darkness. Even longer, when there was nothing but the star-studded night. He wondered why Aline had reacted so peculiarly at his mention of the *Penitentes*, that strange cult of religious fanatics whose pagan ceremonies were shrouded in deep, dark mystery.

Was the cult, whose worship reputedly consisted of whip-lashing and torture, as dangerous to outside meddlers as it was alleged to be? Was it possible that here, within a stone's throw of modern civilization, ghost-figures practiced horrors that no stranger, without fear of disaster, might look upon?

Tod had heard stories of how the *Flagellantes* of the strange sect scourged themselves by rolling in cactus until their naked bodies were torn and bloody. How, at the esoteric conclusion of their mad ceremony, one of their number sub-

mitted to crucifixion. How his flesh was lashed with bull whips as he hung on the cross. How, when the last breath of life had left his tortured, gore-smeared frame, he was cut down and carried off to secret burial in the black hills.

But was it all true? Aline's startling reaction to his mention of the *Penitentes*

lent credence to the stories told. His blood tingled with excitement.

"You may be in for a hot time, Hunter," he said aloud.

Before the sound of his own voice died away, Tod was conscious of an answering wail. It hung on the same high-pitched note almost indefinitely,



The whip whistled through the air,
lashed across the helpless girl.

slipping into the nothingness beyond hearing in a pitiless tremolo. It was a cry replete with unsoothed anguish; a toneless threnody of inhuman sorrow.

He stepped out into the night. Again the wail seemed to creep out of the darkness beyond the hills, curling and twisting like a thing alive.

Coyotes! Of course! Tod chided himself for permitting a chill to run up his spine. Hadn't Saunders mentioned the coyotes? He turned back to the cottage, stopping short as a new sound broke through the ghastly wailing like an obligato to the main theme.

Swish! Swish! Swish!

Tod held his breath. He marked the steady rhythm of it.

Swish! Swish! Swish! Swish!

He knew then that he was listening, not to the cry of a coyote, but to a human plaint torn from the lips of those who were being scourged with whips! He was hearing, for the first time, the ghastly litany of the *Penitentes*!

Forgotten was Aline's dire warning. Tod raced into the cottage, opened his bag and dug out his small camera with its automatic flash attachment.

A BRIGHT quarter-moon made his progress over the rough terrain not so hazardous. He climbed the hill, drawing nearer and nearer to the sounds of torture. *Swish! Thud! Swish! Thud!* He could almost feel the barbarous leather strands biting into his own back.

At the crest of the hill he stopped to draw his breath. The sight that met his eyes drove his blood back to his madly pumping heart. There, in the valley below, slowly ascending the very hill on which he stood, was a thin, wavering line of men and women, heads bowed and bodies slumped as though in bondage.

Leading the procession was a man

whose upper torso was naked and bloody. The cross bar of a huge wooden crucifix was hooked over his left shoulder, the upright dragging behind him.

Tod dropped to one knee. His scalp was crawling and the muscles of his face twitched. It was almost as though some invisible hand had drawn back the curtain of time to let him look upon the hideous, uncivilized barbarism of the Dark Ages. This was no vista of the twentieth century—those whips, hissing through the air and tearing unmercifully into human flesh.

On they came through the thin, silvery moonlight, the procession of penitence, naked backs wet with life blood, wailing with the horrible pain of their self-inflicted wounds. Even the women had bared their breasts to the stinging bite of the lash. Some wore about their necks garlands of barbed cactus. With each slow, measured step they took, the hard, dry spines raked their skin, drawing blood that trickled into the valley of their breasts and formed a crimson network over their stomachs.

As the leader, bearing his cross, approached, Tod drew back, crouching behind a dwarfed, scrubby *pinon* tree. When they reached the hill-top the cross was placed on the ground. He who had been carrying it stood for a moment immobile, his arms outstretched. It was then that Tod became witness to the horrible state of the man's upper torso.

His back and shoulders were raw. The flesh of his upper arms hung in bloody shreds. His face was ghastly pale, the eyes hidden behind a black mask. Not a sound escaped his writhing lips as he approached the cross and stretched himself out on it. The wailing of the others increased in volume. They swayed back and forth, lifting

masked faces to the star-lit canopy of the sky.

One of their number stepped forward, a heavy mallet in his hand. At once Tod realized what was about to happen. *They were going to nail the whipped man to the cross!*

IN the timeless moment before the first mallet blow sounded dully, Tod suffered the tortures of hell. He knew he should have tried to stop this infamous, cabalistic ritual. But he knew, too, the folly of revealing himself to these unreasoning fanatics.

Suddenly, before he realized it, the work of nailing the penitent was done. The wailing became a *largo pathétique* as the rough-hewn rood was raised with its human burden.

Tod's stomach turned. His fingers were ice as he brought the camera up and focused it on the unbelievable scene. The pinioned man's head dropped to his lacerated chest. Women clustered at the base of the cross, tearing at their breasts and giving voice to chilling cries.

To make use of the flash would be to court danger. There was enough light from the moon. Tod clicked the camera shutter. He took six shots. All of the *Penitentes* were down on their knees in a circle about their human sacrifice. Blood dropped on their bowed heads from the martyr's pierced hands and feet.

Nauseous and cold with the horror of it all, Tod backed slowly down the hill. He was within sight of the cottage when he turned to look again on the fearful scene. It was a shadowed silhouette against the sky, a motionless tableau that, from a distance, seemed unreal. No longer was the night pregnant with human wailing. All was quiet; deathly quiet.

Suddenly, and without warning, a deep, throbbing voice broke the silence. Tod spun around. A tall, masked figure, shrouded in a black cloak, faced him.

"*La camera, senior,*" he said, pointing to the camera in Tod's hand.

Tod knew what he meant. How had they known he was crouching behind that scrubby tree? Were they mystics as well as fanatics? Tod's mind raced. How to get by this masked giant with his precious exposed films. He backed away.

"You can't have it!"

"*La camera, senior,*" the low voice repeated. "*Prontamente!*"

TOD came off his feet in a lunge, his right fist balled. There was a taunting, guttural laugh from the depths of the giant's cowl. Hard knuckles crashed against Tod's jaw. He lost his grip on the camera case but he managed, somehow, to keep his balance. He ducked under a hurtling fist, closing with his mysterious antagonist.

Down they went to the dry floor of the mesa, Tod struggling to reach the other's throat. The shroud-like cape was an effective barrier. Time and again Tod's head snapped back as a granite fist crashed into his face. His lips were puffed and bleeding. He could taste the warm, salty blood. His head was beginning to spin and thunder roared in his ears.

The end came quickly. A powerful knee shot up and buried itself in his stomach. Red and orange lights flashed before Tod's eyes. Every nerve in his body screamed with a hell of pain. The very intensity of it acted as a numbing analgesic. He felt the force of a blow on his head. The twinkling lights disappeared. There was only darkness.

TOD was in the cottage, stretched out on a bed, when he regained consciousness. He blinked wonderingly at the pretty, dark-skinned girl who hovered over him applying wet compresses to his throbbing head.

The girl smiled. "*El Señor* feel better?"

It seemed a little incongruous for a man who had just been out cold to be thinking about feminine charm, but despite his condition Tod did not fail to notice how the girl's ripe, young breasts bellied out the bodice of her faded cotton dress. She was either Spanish or Mexican or a little of each. She had the full, voluptuous lips of women born in the hot countries; the dark, flashing eyes.

Tod sat up. Del Saunders was leaning against the door jamb. "Didn't take you long to get messed up, did it, Hunter?"

Tod grinned foolishly. "What happened?"

"That's what I was wondering. I brought Carlota up to take care of the place. We didn't find you in the cabin. You were laying out on the mesa about a hundred yards up the hill, cold as a cucumber. What hit you?"

"Hit me?" Tod remembered Aline's warning. "Why—er—nothing hit me. I—I guess I stumbled and fell. Maybe a rock—"

Saunders pointed to the candid camera on the bureau. It was a twisted shambles as though someone had smashed it with a hammer.

"That yours?"

Tod nodded. "Er—yes. I—I wanted to get some pictures of the moon coming up over—"

The ranch manager approached the bed. His voice dropped. "Don't be a fool, Hunter. I know what you were

after. You're not the first man who tried to photograph a *Penitentes* ceremony. They don't like strangers around. You'd be smarter to leave them alone. There are graves in the hills waiting for meddlers. Take my advice." He pulled down the brim of his sombrero. "I'll be seeing you."

Carlota followed him out the door. She returned when the echo of his horse's hoofbeats could no longer be heard.

"*Tiene el señor hambre? Quiere a beber?*" she queried.

Tod shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry or thirsty." He swung his feet off the bed, unlaced his shoes. Carlota watched him, seemingly fascinated. She backed to the door when he fumbled with his belt.

"*Buenas noches, señor,*" she murmured.

TOD looked up. The light from the front room silhouetted her curved figure beneath the thin, cotton dress. She was a big girl, but beautifully proportioned. Her breasts were plump and mature, her hips arched with Junoesque fullness.

"Good night, Carlota," Tod said. "Where do you sleep?"

She pointed to a pallet near the front door, slipped quietly out of the bedroom. Tod undressed, blew the lamp light out, and slid beneath the covers. The door between the bedroom and the front room was open. He watched as Carlota, in full view, reached for the hem of her frock and lifted it over her head. Tod's pulses pounded as her lush, brown body was bared. Nothing broke the dusky sweep of undulating curves. She raised her arms, tightening the globes of her splendid bosom. The lyred softness of her hips and the ivory warmth

pony, galloped to the door. Worry lines creased her brow as she entered the cottage.

"You didn't listen to—" She stopped



The black-cowled figure had a giant's strength.

of her flesh-perfect thighs gleamed in the flickering light of an oil lamp.

For a fleeting moment she faced the bedroom door, eyes glistening. Then the light went out and darkness enveloped her glorious nudity.

It was a long time before Tod fell asleep.

HE awoke with the sun streaming in the window. No sooner had he finished the tasty breakfast Carlota set before him, then Aline, astride a piebald



short, noticing Carlota. Her eyes flashed a message to Tod. "How about looking my calves over? They're in the south corral, not far from here. We can walk."

When they were beyond earshot of the cottage, Aline spoke. Her voice was strained. "Why didn't you listen to me? I told you not to think of bothering with the *Penitentes*. Del said they attacked you."

They had crossed a knoll and the cottage was no longer visible. As far as the eye could see there was only rolling mesa, dry and sun-scorched.

"The report is greatly exaggerated," Tod retorted, smiling. "Only *one* of them attacked me, and he didn't, really. I attacked him."

"Tod!" Her hands gripped his arms. "You must promise me not even to think of trying to get information about them! Please promise me."

Her ripe, red lips were only an inch from his mouth. He could almost taste their sweetness. Her breasts rose and fell tumultuously beneath a closely knitted sweater.

"Does it mean that much to you, Aline?" he questioned.

She hesitated, dropped her eyes. Tod slipped his arms about her waist, drew her close. His heart pounded against her soft, yielding breast. He felt as though he had known this girl for years rather than hours.

"Yes, it does," Aline said softly, throwing her head back, luring him with her moist, parted lips.

Their mouths joined and their bodies blended in a fervent embrace. Tod moved one hand up over her hip, along the curve of her waist, following the sweetness of her back to the shoulder. His lips slid down to the hollow of her throat.

Neither of them saw a rider come up over a brown hill, rein in, shield his eyes

from the glaring sun. Neither of them knew that Del Saunders had seen them locked in each other's arms, drinking the sweet nectar of love. They were alone with their ecstasy, the thrilling nearness of each other. When, after long moments, they drew apart, the rider had disappeared from the horizon.

Aline's breath was hot against Tod's cheek as she pulled her lips away slowly. Words were without meaning now. The brightness of her eyes and rise and fall of her swollen breasts spoke volumes.

"I love you," she whispered.

Tod embraced her again. He kissed the smoothness of her cheeks, her throat, until she quivered with the ardor of the caress, until her bosom rose majestically, proudly, happily.

"Father wants to see you, Tod," she said at length. "You can spend the day at the house. My pony will carry both of us."

COLONEL EDGREN was waiting on the porch of the ranch house. He led Tod to the conservatory. "You'll have to give up this mad plan of investigating the *Penitentes*, Hunter," he said, his lips set in a hard, thin line. "I won't be responsible for what happens. Del tells me you tried to photograph their ceremony last night. It's a wonder you're alive today. They won't hesitate to string you up next time."

Tod marveled at the respect given to the weird pagan sect. It was almost beyond belief that nobody seemed to question their right to conduct bestial ceremonies.

"I don't get the whole set-up," he replied. "Who's at the head of this fantastic outfit?"

"Nobody knows. Religious fanatics are secretive. Twice a year they elect a *cristo* for their cross ceremony. The

titular head is the *Hermano Mayor*, but his identity is shrouded in mystery. Most of the half-breeds in this section are members of the society. One never knows whether he is addressing a cultist or not. However, I must ask you to give up your notion of delving into their secrets. Have I your word, Hunter?"

Tod looked across at Aline. Her eyes pleaded and the hand that rested on her breast trembled.

"Yes, you have my word, colonel."

Aline's face brightened. "I'm so glad," she said. "I was terribly afraid something might happen."

She waited until her father had excused himself, then came into Tod's arms, giving him her warm lips and holding her hands tight against his cheeks.

IT was after ten that night when Tod, having refused Colonel Edgren's offer of an escort, mounted Alpine's piebald and started up the mountain toward his cottage. A mile from the ranch house he heard the thud of approaching hooves. He reined in, waited for the rider to come out of the dark night.

It was Del Saunders, astride a big roan. He leaned over and rested his hand on the pommel of the piebald's Mexican saddle.

"Another thing, Hunter," he said, each word measured. "It might not be wise to pay too much attention to Miss Edgren."

Tod laughed. "Possibly not wise, Saunders, but pleasant."

The ranch manager's white teeth flashed. "You'd do best to keep away from her!"

"And better if I didn't. Thanks for the tip but I prefer to take my chances." He snapped the reins. "Good-night, Saunders."

He expected the ranch manager to follow, but looking back he saw horse and

rider moving swiftly towards the ranch house.

Tod dismounted at the door of the cottage, tied the piebald to a post, loosened the saddle girths. His hand was on the knob of the door when he heard a muted feminine scream from the interior of the cottage. He swung the door open.

Carlota was crouched on the floor, a crooked arm protecting her fear-twisted face. Straddling her, a short thick whip in his right hand, was a leering, dark-skinned halfbreed. The whip hissed through the air, lashing across the girl's bare thighs. Either the braided leather or the halfbreed's clawing fingers had torn away her dress bodice, half baring the creamy brown plumpness of her breasts.

The breed wheeled as the door slammed back. He dropped the whip, snatching a long-bladed knife from his belt. Tod knew better than to rush in blindly. He waited for the snarling killer's initial lunge. It came with lightning speed, the knife blade flashing in an overhead arc. Tod ducked. Lethal steel clenched in murderous fingers, whizzed over his shoulder, a hair's breadth from his neck. It was the chance Tod wanted. He caught the halfbreed's arm, slid from under it and twisted it with all the strength at his command. The knife slid from inert, muscle-tortured fingers, quivered as its point stuck in the wooden floor.

But the half-breed was far from through. He wrenched loose and struck out, landing his fist on the point of Tod's jaw. The blow stunned Tod and before he could clear his head the half-breed was on him, bearing him down.

Dazed and weak, Tod struggled to keep the killer's strong brown fingers
(Continued on page 120)



AWN came swiftly over Britain's Central African Protectorate. Kurt Kermit, American explorer, arose and

added fresh mimosa-wood to the fire.

Headed back to Nairobi after a fruitless *trek* to Mt. Agoro in search of rumored emerald-deposits, the American was still many days' distance from the end of his journey. To his left lay the rush-grown banks of the Nile, where he had moored his dugout; to his right, the jungle's lush verdure marched in a solid green phalanx toward the far foothill plateaus marking the highlands of Kenya.

Abruptly, as he stirred coffee in a pot, Kermit stiffened. With the intuitive sixth sense that comes to those who spend much time in the world's far



places, he felt the approach of trouble. In the trees, overhead, the chatter of Colobus monkeys took on a different note.

Then Kermit heard a crashing of undergrowth. Could it be a lion? His

**By JEROME
SEVERS
PERRY**

BANTU



Deep in the heart of Africa a white girl's life is at stake. Kurt Kermit risks his life to save her and finds romance waiting!

for a loin-cloth engirdling her hips, her bared breasts danced with every stride. "Inkosi—inkosi! White man—save me—!" she shrieked in Swahili.

Kermit flung himself toward her. Then he saw the girl's pursuer—

The man was fierce, black, savage: a *Shenzi*. One of the untamed jungle aborigines that infested this district of the Protectorate. A huge, broad-shouldered, lithe-muscled beast of a man.

He burst out of the jungle, as if spewed forth. In his hand was a blow-



hand reached for his automatic. His eyes suddenly widened.

From a dim game-trail leading to the water's edge, a flying figure suddenly appeared. It was a girl—a dark-hued Nandi, from her features. Nude, save

JUSTICE

gun of bamboo. He raised it to his thick lips—

Kermit's automatic snaked out; he squeezed the trigger. But even as he fired, the *Shenzi* puffed out his cheeks. A tiny, dart went lancing to its target. The Nandi girl staggered, swayed, screamed.

But the American's slug had smashed a blood-smeared hole in the *Shenzi's* skull. The man dropped like a felled log, lay still.

And now Kermit caught the native girl before she could fall. "What's wrong?" he barked in the dialect she had employed.

"Trouble—much trouble—in the compound of the *b'wana m'kuba*—one hour away . . . !" she gasped. Already her eyes were beginning to glaze.

KURT KERMIT'S face grew grave. *B'wana m'kuba* was the native term for the District Commissioner, British Resident in charge of this territory! That sounded bad. Kermit knew the Commissioner's name: Sir Landon Royce; but had never met the official.

"What sort of trouble? Speak quickly!"

The girl's lids fluttered. "Trouble . . . *b'wana m'kuba's* daughter in danger . . . yellow-haired girl faces death. . . !"

Kermit stiffened. "What is the white girl's danger? Speak?"

The *B'wana* Royce's daughter . . . Allene . . . in enemy . . . hands! Me . . . her maid . . .

"Me find magic glass; see your camp-fire last night. Me run to you for help . . . *Shenzi* follow trail, kill me. . . ." The native girl's eyes closed.

Kermit pressed a hand over her breast for a trace of heart-beat. There was none. The *Shenzi's* poisoned dart had finished her.

Lowering her body, Kurt Kermit went back to his camp; commenced packing.

He had no knowledge of the direction in which the District Commissioner's compound lay; but he was jungle-wise. He found the game-trail along which the black girl had come; picked up the marks of her passage.

An hour passed and the American found himself looking upon a gently-rising valley, carpeted by lush grass and centered with a crystal-clear lake. To one side of the lake rose the extinct crater of an ancient volcano, a crust of hard lava at its base. On the nearer lake-shore lay a Bantu village.

The village was a sprawled cluster of grass-and-mud huts. Beyond lay a clearing-compound containing a *dak*-bungalow and a corrugated-tin mission building. The *dak*-bungalow would be Commissioner Royce's residency, no doubt; and toward it, Kermit directed his steps.

As he passed through the single entrance in the thorn-bush enclosure surrounding the compound, he frowned. There was something decidedly queer about the compound and the native village nearby. No life stirred in any quarter. No chickens scratched in the mud; no pigs rooted in the filth. There were no children tumbling under the growing heat of the morning sun; no women shrieking and gossiping. And where the devil was the *askiri*—the British-trained native sentry—who should be patrolling in front of the District Commissioner's bungalow?

Kermit had the sensation of striding through a mirage—a place uninhabited save by ghosts. A shadow fell across his feet from overhead, and he looked up. He saw a flock of wheeling, dipping

vultures. His frown deepened. Vultures meant carrion—dead flesh.

AND then, suddenly, he heard a woman's shrill, penetrating wail of absolute terror.

It seemed to come from within the *dak-bungalow*. Whipping out his automatic, Kermit raced forward; gained the verandah. "Hello the house!" he roared.

Silence fell. Then, after a long moment, just as the American was about to shove his way through the bungalow's front door, it opened. He stared—

Stared into the dark, glowing eyes of a woman. A girl. A white girl.

She was brunette; and her sole garment was a loosely-draped kimono which fell open at the throat, disclosing more than a generous hint of rising, unbrassiered white breasts. A faint breeze stirred at the kimono's lower hem, revealing for an instant her bare legs and a hint of creamy thigh.

The American caught his breath sharply. The girl was lovely; beautiful. But there was a hardness about her; a dangerous glitter that warned him to beware peril ahead. Her face was a smooth oval; her lips were full, sensuous, crimson.

She looked at the automatic gripped in his right fist. An enigmatic smile came to her red mouth. "Well?" she challenged in a throaty contralto.

He swept off his pith helmet; bowed.

"Your pardon, miss. I'm looking for the District Commissioner—Sir Landon Royce. My name's Kurt Kermit. American."

Her smile widened into one of welcome. "How do you do, Mr. Kermit. My father is in his study. Will you wait a moment, please?"

Kermit started. Then this girl was

the Commissioner's daughter, Allene! But—but she wasn't blonde. Moreover, she didn't seem to be in any danger.

And what of the shrill feminine scream which Kermit had heard issuing from the bungalow a moment before? Why was the compound, the native village itself, so utterly devoid of life?

In the shade from a clump of umbrella-shaped *mimosas* at the front of the bungalow, Kermit waited as the brunette girl disappeared inside the house. Shortly she reappeared. "Will you come in, Mr. Kermit? My father will receive you in his study."

The American followed her through a cool corridor. He couldn't help noticing the smooth, rippling play of her thigh-muscles, through the thin silk of her kimono; couldn't help seeing the liquid sway of her hips as she walked. There was something of tigress about her, as well as of seductive femininity.

THEN he was in a comfortable, bamboo-furnished study. He saw two men looking at him. One—the elder of the pair—was seated at a desk. He wore a trimmed grey goatee, and his eyes were set close together. Beyond him, standing, was a younger man in cleric's garb.

The man at the desk spoke. "Mr. Kurt Kermit? I am Sir Landon Royce. My daughter Allene, here, tells me that you wished to speak to me. May I also present the Reverend Darx—curate of our mission here at Kagga Kajo."

Kermit nodded. They were a strange trio: Royce, his daughter and the dominie. The latter, despite his black habit, didn't seem in the least like a man of God. He had the jaw, the face, of a plug-ugly; and his fists were ham-like, battle-scarred.

And there was something peculiar

about Sir Landon Royce's accent. It didn't seem entirely British. There was an almost imperceptible trace of guttural slur to his words.

But of course that was all imagination, Kermit told himself. Maybe the sun had got him for a touch of fever.

He smiled. "I suppose I'm wasting your time, Sir Landon, just as I've probably wasted my own by coming here. You see, I'd had news you were in trouble; and I came to offer whatever assistance I might."

The goateed man looked startled. "Trouble? Here? What on earth gave you that idea, sir?"

"It was a native girl. She burst upon my encampment a while ago; told me your daughter, Allene, was a prisoner in the hands of enemies."

The grey-haired Commissioner scowled. "Utter, arrant nonsense, my friend! There's been no trouble here. The native woman must have been mad."

She told me your daughter was blonde, Sir Landon."

"Poppycock! You can see for yourself—Allene is brunette."

The dark-haired girl smiled lazily.

Kermit smiled back at her. "I've been taken in, of course. You can't blame me for investigating. Especially when I found your compound deserted—and heard a scream from inside this house."

"A scream? Oh—the parrot! Damned nuisance, that silly bird. And as to the compound being deserted—our natives are off on a meat-hunt. Er—by the way, Mr. Kermit. You must be tired after your forced march. Suppose you make use of my guest-room for a little siesta? I'll have my daughter bring you something to drink. Show him to his room, Allene."

Kurt Kermit nodded. "Thanks lots."

He followed the brunette girl back down the corridor. She opened the door of a room, conducted him inside. He saw a bed with clean white linens; a washstand with its pitcher full of inviting, clean water. "This looks like Paradise to a man who's been on the *trek* for the past two months, Miss Royce."

She shot him a quizzical glance from behind long, fringing lashes. "Make good use of it. One never knows how long it will be before another such chance comes along." She turned, went out of the room.

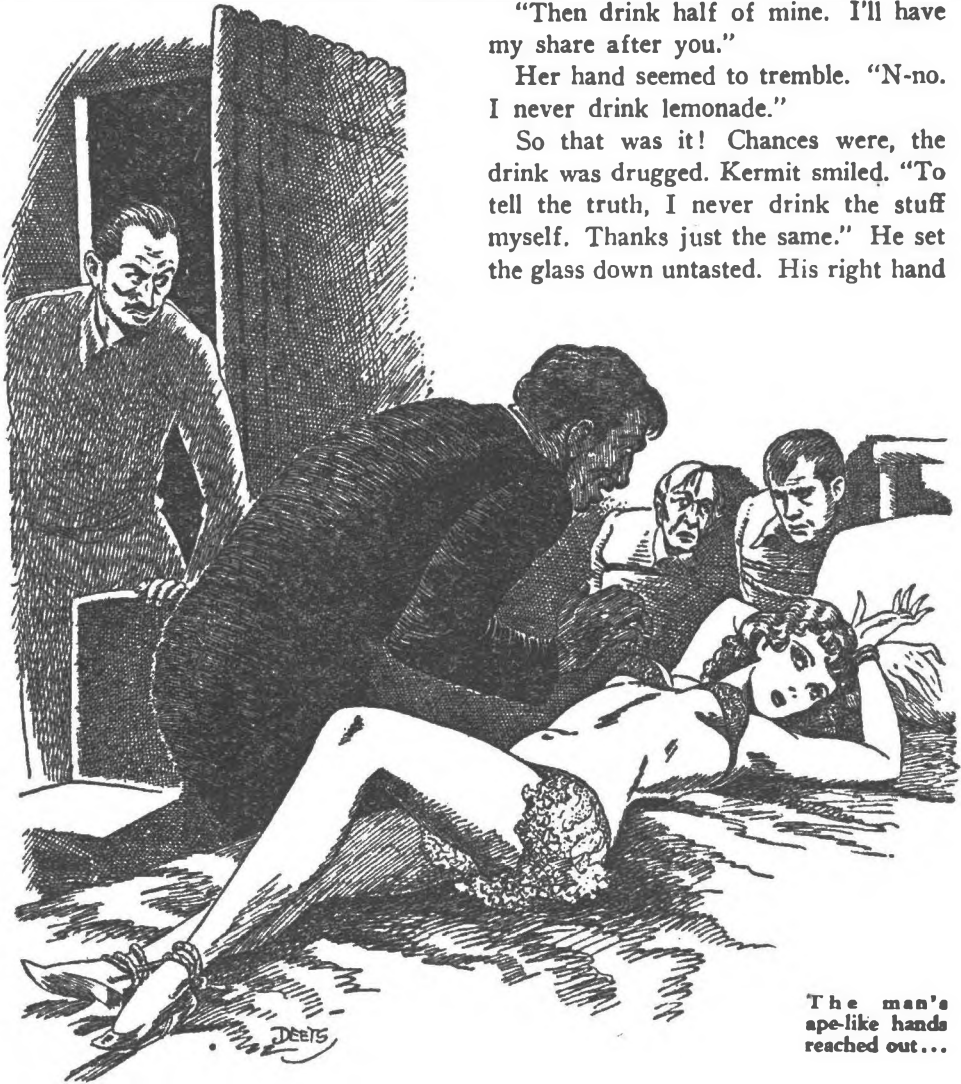
HE closed the door; sat on the edge of the bed. His eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. He knew he had stepped into something screwy; and he must watch his step.

In the first place, he was now convinced that the goateed man was *not* Sir Landon Royce, the District Commissioner. The man's faintly-foreign accent betrayed that much. Neither was that other chap, Darx, a real minister. No missionary ever had such a thuggish face. Moreover, the brunette girl was an impostor too. Because that dying native woman had said that Allene Royce was blonde . . . and Kermit knew the Nandi girl hadn't been insane; her words carried the ring of truth.

The American rested a hand on his automatic. Everything added up to one incontrovertible answer: knavery. The man who called himself Sir Landon Royce was a liar many times over.

It was an obvious lie that the natives of the village had all departed on a quest for fresh meat. On such a hunt, only the men take the trail. They don't take along their women, their children, their chickens and their hogs.

And that scream—which the fake Commissioner had claimed to be the



The man's
ape-like hands
reached out...

shriek of a parrot—had indubitably come from human lips.

Kermit's thoughts were interrupted by a knock upon the door. "Come in," he called pleasantly.

Into the room stepped the brunette girl. She bore a tall glass filled with a pinkish liquid. "Red lemonade to quench your thirst, Mr. Kermit," she smiled.

His brows rose. "None for you? Aren't you joining me?"

"N-no—" she seemed startled.

"Then drink half of mine. I'll have my share after you."

Her hand seemed to tremble. "N-no. I never drink lemonade."

So that was it! Chances were, the drink was drugged. Kermit smiled. "To tell the truth, I never drink the stuff myself. Thanks just the same." He set the glass down untasted. His right hand

remained comfortably close to the butt of his holstered Colt.

The girl looked at him queerly. Then she sat on the edge of his bed and smiled up at him. "I envy you this room. It's got the most comfortable bed in the house. Father insists on keeping it for a guest-chamber—the silly!" She threw herself backward, yawned luxuriously. Her arms stretched out over her head, drawing her breasts into taut twin pouts beneath her kimono. The garment

pulled open a little, revealing the white valley between those intriguing mounds of flesh.

Kermit stared down into her languorous eyes, but he was wary; on guard. Even so, the sight of her partially-revealed feminine charms sent unwanted tingles through his being. It had been a long time since he had seen any white woman; a much longer time since his eyes had roved over one as gloriously-lovely as this brunette girl.

HE decided to find out just how far she'd go. But first he took one precaution. He unstrapped his cartridge-belt with its holstered weapon; slung it over the foot-post of the bed. If she made a move for it, he could forestall her. . . .

Grinning, he perched beside her on the bed's edge. "You're very lovely."

She stirred, and contrived to allow her kimono to come open a little more. Her breasts were half revealed now—curved and tempting. The sight stirred a surge of longing within Kermit's veins. Tentatively, he reached out and touched her bare arm.

She smiled lazily. It was a smile of coquetry, of challenge. She made no protest as his fingers strayed upward along her arm, reached the soft curves of her shoulder. . . .

"I . . . like you to do . . . that. . . !" she whispered audaciously.

For answer he grew bolder, drew her with the circle of his embrace.

Abruptly her arms were about his neck, drawing him down toward her. "Kiss me!" she gasped.

Dimly in the back of his mind he remembered that there was danger before him. But after all, his automatic was beyond her reach; and besides, a rising, throbbing beat was beginning to

pound like a jungle-drum through the American's being. In the unexpected grip of that urge, he forgot all thoughts of peril—

He glued his lips to her mouth.

She clung to him, her entire body a living, writhing flame that ignited answering conflagrations of sensation in Kermit's veins. He could feel the pulsing softness of her breasts urgent against his chest; the sultry heat of her breath against his cheek. Her ardor was feminine—yet demanding. . . .

Caught up in the typhoon of excitement which her charms engendered, Kermit failed to hear his room's door being softly opened. His intuition was dulled and numbed by the flames that seethed in his body. . . .

Then, suddenly, he heard a sound behind him; a stealthy footstep. Simultaneously, he beheld a queer glitter in the brunette girl's eyes as she darted a glance over his shoulder. His senses suddenly recalled to alertness, he sprang back—

The girl tried to stay him; tried to lock her arms about his neck and hamper his movements. He raised a palm, slapped it viciously across her pale face. Then he pivoted. "Damn—!"

The fake missionary, Darx, was almost on him—and the man held an up-raised hardwood cudgel!

There was murder in the fellow's evil eyes; hatred on his contorted thug-gish features. His bludgeon swished down in a savage, vicious arc—straight at Kermit's skull.

The American ducked; threw up an arm to parry the murderous smash. A stabbing agony lanced upward toward his shoulder as the club caught his fore-arm. And then, feet spread wide and fists balled, Kermit waded in.

He fainted with his damaged left;

drove a raging right upper-cut to the man's teeth. Darx staggered backward, spat a bloody froth of curses. Again his cudgel smashed downward. Kermit leaped aside, avoided the blow. Then once more he bashed his hard knuckles against his assailant's jaw, putting every ounce of his splendid, muscular strength behind the trajectory of his fist.

Darx went down.

The American plunged at his fallen enemy; leaned over him. It was a suicidal move. Even as he stooped, he heard footfalls behind him—

He tried to whirl. Too late! He saw that the goateed man had entered the room; was smashing at him with a clubbed Webley automatic. Kermit tried to side-step, to parry this new attack; but his movement failed. The up-raised weapon thudded down on his unprotected skull. A blinding hell of pain coursed into his brain, stabbed him with white-hot fires. He felt darkness closing in upon him, smothering him.

Kurt Kermit tried to fight off the seeping unconsciousness that claimed him; but the task was hopeless. Again came the murderous impact of gun-butt against his skull. He closed his eyes, slumped to the floor in sudden, complete obliteration. . . .

WHEN Kermit regained his senses, he was trussed hand and foot; and his pain-bleared gaze revealed to him that he was in a small room, windowless and containing but one closed door.

His thoughts reeling dizzily, he struggled to sit upright on the floor. He propped his shoulders against the wall; looked about him once more. Then he stiffened in astonishment.

He was not alone!

There were two fellow-prisoners in the room with him—a man and a girl.

The man was elderly, bald; a deep cut ran across his head from crown to temple. He was tightly bound.

Beyond the wounded man lay a girl; and when Kermit saw her, an electric tingle raced through him. She was young, lovely, gloriously blonde. She, too, was fettered. Her long yellow hair streamed down over her bared shoulders and half nude, firm little breasts. Her frock had been partially ripped from her slender body, leaving her clad in nothing but its tatters and wisp-sheer panties of tissue-thin chiffon. Her legs were milk-white and softly-contoured and enchantingly feminine. Her small, delectable breasts were rounded cones of perfection. But there were perceptible bruises on her shoulders, everywhere on the exposed girl-flesh. . . .

Kermit found his voice. "What—what's the meaning of all this?" he demanded weakly. "Who are you people? What's been going on?"

The elderly man stirred feebly against his fetters; strove ineffectually to free himself. "I—I am Sir Landon Royce, Resident Commissioner for this district," he answered in a dim voice. "And this is—my daughter—Allene—"

Kermit nodded grimly. "A goateed man claimed to be Sir Landon; a brunette girl, his daughter. And that other chap said he was the mission minister!"

The real Sir Landon groaned. "They are murderers—all three of them! They arrived here at the compound last night. They killed our mission curate, threw his body to the vultures. . . ."

Kermit's eyes narrowed. That would account for the carrion birds he had seen wheeling overhead when first he had come to the deserted settlement.

The British official groaned again. "They—they have been trying to wrest

(Continued on page 112)

She was a white girl and had no business being friendly with the coffee-colored native, even if he were a Shaihk. But she was headstrong, and only bitter experience could teach her the error of her ways

WITH contempt, Barry Wheeler eyed the *burnoose*-clad native who sought to bar his path. "Out of my way, oh offspring of many stinking camels!" he said quietly; and the very quiet of his voice was more stinging than an ordinary man's shout.

Far overhead the stars shone down upon the silent Tigris Valley; and in the nearby diggings, Iranian natives chanted a song that struck premonition into Wheeler's stout heart. It was a dangerous song the diggers were chanting; and it presaged trouble.

For many days Wheeler had sensed the approaching storm; had intuitively recognized the growing discontent of the native laborers. Which was why he was now on his way to the tent of Maureen Cornell.

Nor did he propose to allow this insolent native body-servant to stop him. His gaze bored into the man's sullen, dark eyes. "Again I say to you, out of my path!" he said with steel-hard firmness.

The native did not move, save to shift one hand downward toward the bare-bladed *fissa* at the belt of his dirty white *burnoose*. "It is the order of the white Mistress that none shall come to her tent save by her own command, *Sidi*



By ELLERY
WATSON CALDER

TIGRIS TREASURE

Barry pivoted, and drove
the *flissa* straight into the
eunuch's heart.



Wheeler. Therefore you will not approach her."

The man's tone was insulting, sneering. Wheeler knew that he must act, and act swiftly, else he would lose face with the native laborers.

He stepped two paces forward. "For the last time, out of my way!"

The native half-drew his keen, glittering *flissa*—a knife fully capable of gut-

ting a man from naval to spine. But long before the blade could come upward, Wheeler struck.

He struck with his balled right fist; for it would have indicated cowardice to draw gun against a man armed only with cold steel. So he lashed out with his fist; and his knuckles bashed home upon the native's jaw. The man went sprawling backward; fell flat; stirred once, then lay still.

WHEELER stepped calmly over the fellow's supine form; but his outer calmness was not matched by the savage hammering of his heart. He knew that many eyes had witnessed his striking the man; and either of two things might happen. The hidden, watching natives would either draw back in respect; or a knife would come viciously arching through the air to bury itself hilt-deep in Wheeler's back.

Yet he gave no outward sign that he was even aware of the presence of other natives in the lurking shadows. Instead, he strode forcefully toward the tent of Maureen Cornell. There was a lantern burning within. Barry raised his strong voice. "Miss Cornell!"

The tent-flap was flung open. Maureen stared out into the darkness; saw Wheeler standing there. "You!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. Me."

She was a lovely creature, Barry caught himself thinking. A lovely, wild creature of untamed beauty and arrogant hardness. Her hair was the black of a raven's pinions, and her body was a symphony of sheer enchantment. Her jodhpurs outlined the straight slenderness of her legs, the sweeping arches of her hips. And her silk blouse, open at the throat, clung intimately to the swelling globes of her nubile breasts.

But in her eyes and in the curl of her crimson lips, Wheeler read nothing but arrogance and hauteur. She was like a splendid, untamed animal; an animal too long without restraint. She needed curbing, breaking. Else one day she would come a cropper against something more powerful than her own pride; and after that it would be too late, perhaps, to save the innate sweetness of her . . .

Again he spoke to her, quietly. "I'd like to have a little chat with you, Miss Cornell."

Her eyes narrowed, blazed. "I gave instructions to my servant that nobody should come here to disturb me. You dared disobey my command, Mr. Wheeler?"

"I not only disobeyed it; I popped your native on the button and put him to sleep for a while."

"You—you dared to—"

"Yes. I hit him. And I came here in disobedience of your orders. There's something I've got to say, Miss Cornell. And you might just as well get set to listen."

"I'll listen to nothing from you, Mr. Meddlesome! You'll oblige me by going back to the digging where you belong. If you must know, I have a visitor."

FOR the first time, Wheeler stared past her into her lantern-lighted tent. He saw a hawk-nosed, dark-eyed, swarthy man standing within the canvas shelter; a man clad impeccably in Occidental garb, but whose carriage and features and general bearing betrayed that he was of the Levant. There was cunning in his sharp, dark eyes; cruelty in the thin set of his lips above the sparse, curly black beard.

Even as Wheeler stared, the swarthy man walked out. "Good evening to you, Mr. Wheeler," he spoke in a nasal voice

that was somehow mocking and sinister; that somehow bore a veiled, vague threat.

"Sidi Wheeler to you, Akbar ib'n Bakr!" Wheeler answered quietly.

Akbar ib'n Bakr bowed sardonically. Now, instead of English, he reverted to his native Iranian tongue. "As you wish, Sidi Wheeler. One must respect the superiority of the white man, even in one's own land, eh?"

"One must, at all times!" Wheeler agreed evenly.

"Then, in proper humility of course, may I wish you farewell, Sidi Wheeler? Since you desire conversation with Miss Cornell, I perceive that my presence is awkward. Therefore I take my departure." He turned to Maureen Cornell, took her slender fingers, pressed them to his lips. "Sweet dreams, my dear," he whispered. And he strode off into the night.

Maureen followed him with her eyes; then she whirled on Barry. "How dare you treat that man in such fashion!" she blazed. "Don't you realize he's *Shaihk* of this district—a power in the land? Or are you too stupid?"

Wheeler smiled grimly. "I realize his power. And I also realize that he's a double-crossing snake. And I noticed that he called you 'his dear.' Which, if you ask me, is taking plenty of liberty with a white woman—considering his coffee color."

Her cheeks flushed with anger. "I'll thank you to keep your nose out of my affairs, Mr. Wheeler! Do you think I am incapable of handling my own business?"

"I think you're a spoiled, pampered little vixen that needs a damned good spanking!" Barry answered quietly. And he stepped into her tent.

She followed him, trembling with

anger. "I did not invite you in here!"

"But I came without invitation. Sit down, Miss Cornell. I want to talk with you."

"You have nothing to say that would interest me!" she flung at him. She took a cigarette, lighted it, inhaled with suppressed fury.

WHEELER caught himself studying the curve of her swelling breasts. . . . He smiled wryly. "Listen," he said. "Since your father was taken to the hospital at El Hadjr, you've run things with a pretty high hand. It's time to put on the brakes."

"I know what I'm doing!" she flared.

"Do you? I wonder if you realize that it's of no use to force these Iranian diggers to work in night shifts? By torchlight, they accomplish practically nothing. Moreover, the stuff we're getting out of those tombs isn't worth the effort. Isn't worth the money it costs to excavate."

"That's my affair!" the brunette girl snapped. "I've been on previous archaeological expeditions with my father. I know the value of tomb-relics. And if I wish to work the natives at night, I'll do it."

Barry stood up. "If you'll listen, you'll hear the diggers chanting. Do you know what they're singing?"

"No. Nor do I care!"

"Well, they're singing an ancient song against the infidels—the Christians. That means trouble brewing. And we shouldn't be risking trouble for the sake of the worthless junk we're getting out of the tomb."

She laughed. "So the stuff is worthless, is it? Well, Mr. Know-it-all, let me tell you that Akbar ib'n Bakr was just here telling me that the material is very valuable—and that you offered to steal

some of it, sell it to him, for a sufficiently large bribe!"

Wheeler reddened. Before he quite realized what he was doing, he had seized her and crushed her in his arms. He held her so close that her breasts were mashed flat upon his muscular chest; and deliberately he tilted her chin, planted a burning kiss upon her amazed lips.

Then he released her. "That's for believing such nonsense!" he panted. And he walked out of the tent.

AS he strode toward his own quarters, he wondered why he had acted that way. He hadn't intended to. Yet something about her—some aura of feminine challenge—had reached out and drawn him to her as a magnet attracts steel. And he was still quivering with the memory of her warm, moist lips upon his mouth; the remembrance of her soft breasts crushed to his chest. God! It would be grand to take a girl like that and tame her . . . bring her to the full understanding of humility!

Determinedly he put Maureen Cornell out of his mind; turned his thoughts to Akbar ib'n Bakr. The man was dangerous. True, he was *Shaihk* of the district—the tribal chief. But he was more than that. He wielded an ominous force over the native diggers; held them in the palm of his brown hand. He could make things plenty tough of he wanted to!

Akbar ib'n Bakr wanted something from the Cornell archaeological expedition. That much was certain. But what was it he wanted? It couldn't be any of the practically worthless junk that was being taken from the tombs, Barry knew. Then what did Akbar ib'n Bakr want?

Barry thought of what Maureen Cornell had just said. So Akbar ib'n Bakr had claimed Barry had come to him with an offer to steal some of the tomb-stuff,

eh? And the truth was just the other way around. Akbar ib'n Bakr had come to Barry, offered a bribe—which Wheeler had refused, of course. But the native chieftain's slimy lie had done its work. Maureen no longer trusted him!

SCOWLING, Wheeler walked into his tent. And then he brought up short in stiffened astonishment.

There was someone in his tent. A girl. A native girl! And except for a jeweled loin-cloth, she was nude!

Barry recognized her. She was of Akbar ib'n Bakr's household—a concubine in the *Shaihk's hareem*. But what the hell was she doing here?

He stared at her. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded roughly.

She came to him. "It means that I have long loved thee, oh *Sidi* Wheeler. I would savor the strength of thy sinews and the hardness of thy body!" She flaunted her tawny body; swayed and undulated her hips with a challenging invitation impossible to misunderstand.

"Get out!" Barry Wheeler grated.

"Not until I have tasted thy kisses!" she retorted boldly. And she suddenly clung to him, pressed her semi-nude body close to his own.

He could not deny the thrill that coursed through him at the contact. But he sensed something wrong in her presence here. He took her by the shoulders and roughly sent her spinning out of the tent. "And do not return!" he spat at her.

Then, puzzled, he sat down upon the edge of his cot. But scarcely had he done so when he leaped up again. Someone had come smashing into the tent, unbidden and without knocking. Barry sprang to his feet—and saw Akbar ib'n Bakr standing there with glittering eyes and snarling lips.

"Let me taste thy kisses," she murmured, and, despite himself, he thrilled to her beauty.



"Infidel dog!" the swarthy man grated. "Thou hast one of my wives in this tent with thee! Produce her, ere I slit thy gullet!"

"So that's it!" Wheeler murmured. . . . It was an Iranian version of the ancient badger game! Akbar ib'n Bakr had planned to surprise him here with the girl; blackmail him. . . .

"Your scheme didn't click, oh Akbar ib'n Bakr!" Wheeler grunted. "Your

concubine is not here. I kicked her out. And now, let's get down to cases."

The *Shaihk's* eyes narrowed. "Just what do you mean?"

"I MEAN I'm wise to you!" Wheeler said in a soft voice that masked the steel beneath. "First you offered me a bribe if I would steal some of the junk from the digging."

"Aie. I made you an offer."

"And I know why you made that offer!" Wheeler went on. "Had I agreed, you would have turned evidence of my crookedness over to the Iranian government; had me jailed."

"You seem very wise, my white friend!" Akbar ib'n Bakr sneered.

"You bet I'm wise. And when that scheme didn't work, you tried to queer me with Miss Cornell. You seem damned anxious to get me out of the way, Akbar ib'n Bakr!"

"Perhaps your presence here is offensive to me."

"Yeah. I think it is. Because as long as I'm here, you're a little afraid to make a play for Maureen Cornell. With me out of the way, you think you can put her in your *hareem*! Well—I'm warning you; don't try it. While Miss Cornell's father is ill in the hospital at El Hadjr, I'm sticking around, see? I'm keeping an eye on his daughter. And the moment you start trouble, I'll break you in half!"

THE swarthy man's answer was a gesture so unexpected that it caught Wheeler off-guard. With a snake-like motion of his right hand, Akbar ib'n Bakr pulled a whistle from his pocket, blew three piercing blasts on the thing before Wheeler could spring at him.

With a curse, Barry leaped for the *Shaihk's* throat. He snatched at the whistle; sent a savage fist into the man's midriff. Akbar ib'n Bakr staggered backward, his swarthy face a greenish, sickened hue. Then he recovered; smiled. "The damage has already been done, my friend!" he said. And he raced out of the tent.

Barry Wheeler went lunging after him. Outside, a sudden pandemonium had arisen. From the diggings came a

sound of native shouts, curses, yells. Flames began to lick at the tents of a few loyal natives. A scattered volley of shots punctuated the night. From somewhere in the distance, a woman screamed.

"God!" Berry panted. "That's Maureen Cornell!" And he launched himself toward her distant tent.

But a knot of native Mosul diggers blocked him; sprang at him with drawn *flissas*. He ducked them, eluded their concerted rush. His balled fists licked out; and one of the Mosuls went kicking in the dirt. Barry struck again. Another native went down. But now the remaining attackers were closing in. Wheeler felt fists and knees and feet battering him, smashing him off-balance.

He went to his knees under the showering hail of vicious, raging blows. His flesh awaited the sharp slicing of a *flissa*—but it did not come. Instead, something heavy and metallic and hard bludgeoned down on his skull. Blinding brilliance blazed before his agonized, pain-shattered eyeballs. He felt himself toppling, reeling, slipping into a black infinity of unconsciousness.

Then, half senseless, he felt himself being dragged along the ground; felt his wrists and his ankles being roped together with sharp, cruel lengths of camel-hide cord. Dully he knew that he was being boosted upon the saddle of a fleet *mehari*—a racing-camel. Then, for a long while, he knew nothing.

WHEN he next awakened, he was untrussed, unfettered; and he saw that he was in some sort of small room—unfurnished save for the pallet of stinking camel-blankets upon which he lay. His body ached savagely from the battering he had taken, and his head was a inferno of pain.

Through the room's single, small window, he saw a faint grey light; but whether it was dawn or dusk he could not tell; nor could he know how long he had lain unconscious.

But as full consciousness returned to him, he was filled with sudden icy knives of bitter fear. For—not for himself, but for Maureen Cornell! There could be no doubt of it: she had fallen into the hands of Akbar ib'n Bakr. And the fate she would suffer at his bestial hands was not a pleasant thing to contemplate!

Grimly, Barry Wheeler realized the truth. Akbar ib'n Bakr had desired the girl from the very first. And when her father had fallen ill, he had seen an opportunity to take her.

The ground had been well prepared for his move; the seeds had long been planted by the stubbornness of Maureen. Despite Barry's warnings, she had insisted upon working the natives in day and night shifts. They had grown restive under such driving. It had been easy for Akbar ib'n Bakr to go among them and stir their discontent to a flaming rebelliousness.

All of these things were clear, now, to Wheeler; and he clenched his impotent fists as he thought of Maureen in the arms of that swarthy, bearded chieftain. He knew what would be her fate. She would first be stripped of her clothing while the *Shaiikh* watched with avid eyes, drinking in her virginal charms. Then she would be bathed, perfumed, painted and roughed and kohled. And after that, Akbar ib'n Bakr would take her to his *hareem*. . . .

BARRY stifled the groan that arose to his lips as he envisioned Maureen struggling, fighting vainly against the swarthy man's revolting advances. In imagination he could see Akbar ib'n

Bakr's brown hands upon her—ruthless, ravaging . . . And then . . .

Well, after that, she wouldn't have much to live for. Either she'd kill herself at first opportunity, or she'd remain in the *hareem*, a love-slave for as long a time as her beauty lasted. Then Akbar ib'n Bakr would tire of her, as all Levantines tire of white women after a certain time. She would probably be sold to some wandering, nomad desert chieftain; would undergo fresh degradations. . . . Until in the end she would wind up on the waterfront at Cairo, in some foul dive frequented by lice-ridden, disease-ravaged native sailors. . . .

Not a pretty picture! Not by a damned sight! Well, it was her own headstrong fault, Barry Wheeler tried to tell himself. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not drive thoughts of the girl out of his aching mind. What if it had all been her own fault? She was a white girl, wasn't she?

He told himself that he should have spanked hell out of her when he was in her tent; should have whipped some of the pride out of her, some of the arrogance. Instead, he had only grabbed her and kissed her! A fat lot of good that had done!

He still remembered that kiss; still recalled the sweet firmness of her young breasts upon his chest. And at the thought, red rage descended before his eyes. Now all that sweetness, that fragrant loveliness, would belong to the sinister Akbar ib'n Bakr . . . !

"Damn it to hell!" Barry Wheeler rasped out. "I've got to get her out of here some way—!"

EVEN as he spoke, it seemed that his problem was answered. He heard a key rasping in the lock of his prison-room; saw the single, narrow door swing

open. Someone stepped into his tiny cubicle. He stared—

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "You!"

It was a girl—a tawny-skinned, voluptuous Iranian girl. A girl who wore nothing save a jeweled girdle; whose breasts stood forth firm and resilient, whose hips arched magnificently, whose thighs were lush columns of tan marble. It was Akbar ib'n Bakr's concubine—the one who had come to Barry's tent that night!

"You!" he repeated in a harsh, strained whisper. "What the hell are you doing here? And where am I?"

"Thou art in the house of Akbar ib'n Bakr, *Sidi Wheeler*," the girl answered in a low, vibrant voice. "Thou hast been here since last night, when thou wert captured. And now it is dawn, and the night has passed. And I have come to thee. . . ."

Dawn! The night was over! Barry stiffened. That could mean only one thing. Whatever was going to happen to Maureen had already happened by this time.

The girl came closer. "Thou wouldst like to know why I have come to thee?"

"Yes. Why are you here?"

"Because, last night when I was in thy tent, I conceived a passion for thee! Even though I had been sent to thee by my master, Akbar ib'n Bakr, to trap thee, I conceived a sudden longing for thee. So that my words to thee were indeed true! I would taste the hardness of thy sinews and the sweetness of thy caresses, oh *Sidi Wheeler*!"

He narrowed his eyes; a sudden plan leaped full-blown into his seething, racing mind. "And if I do that which thou desirest, wilt thou effect my release from this place?" he whispered tensely.

"Aie. That I will, oh my lover!"

GRIMLY he swept her lithe figure into his arms; crushed her almost-nude body upon him. His mouth sought her lips with a burning kiss; and he stroked her sleek flesh with sensation-arousing fingers. And she undulated against him with a savage, barbaric fervor that bespoke much knowledge of the arts and artifices of love—for was she not an inmate of Akbar ib'n Bakr's *hareem*, where such things are taught.

At last the Iranian girl lay wearily in his arms, looking into his flaming eyes.

"Thou are a splendid lover, oh *Sidi Wheeler*!" she murmured. "And now . . . it is time for me to fulfil my bargain. Come; I will lead you from this place and show a way of escape."

He followed her as she guided him from his prison-chamber and led him toward a narrow, concealed staircase.

"This leads upward to the women's quarter, the *hareem*," she whispered. "Thou must walk warily, for the women are asleep; and the eunuchs also. But if thou wert heard, thou wouldst be slain!"

He nodded silently; followed her up the narrow steps. And at last she came to a door which she pushed open; and he found himself in a cool, spacious room. In the center he saw a splashing fountain which was also a sort of bathing-pool, apparently where the *hareem*-inmates disported and swam in the hot afternoons. Beyond the pool he saw a high window.

TOWARD this window the girl pointed a tawny, slender finger. "Thou wilt escape by that means, oh *Sidi Wheeler*. And now must I take leave of thee, for it would mean my life were I found here with thee—even as it would mean thine if thou were discovered in this place where no strange man must ever come."



From his costume she thought he was the Shaikh returning and she moaned.

Again he nodded. "And you?" he whispered.

"I go to my own room." Suddenly she smiled. "Be sure you do not follow me, or go into the room of any other woman here. For it is the sport of the eunuchs to spy upon the women through

the lattice doors of the rooms; and to watch whenever our master, Akbar ib'n Bakr, visits one of his wives. Therefore, do thou not visit any of the women, or thou might be seen and killed!"

"Right!" Barry grunted. And he watched as the girl passed through a door into a small chamber beyond the room of the fountain-pool.

There were many other doors, he noticed, now that he was alone. Each must lead into the sleeping-quarters of *hareem*-women. And in one of those chambers he knew he would find Mau-

reen. But which one?

He started to cross softly toward the nearest door. And then, even as he approached it, the portal swung outward. A man stepped into view—

It was Akbar ib'n Bakr himself!

He was clad only in breech-clout of

white silk; he was carrying his burnoose upon his arm. And from the chamber he had just quitted there came a sound of muffled feminine sobs. . . .

Barry went white. He knew the meaning of the sobs. In that chamber was Maureen!

And at that instant, Akbar ib'n Bakr spotted Barry.

THE *Shaihk* started to cry out in astonished rage; but before a sound could issue from his lips, Wheeler was upon him. If one whisper escaped the swarthy man, all was lost. Any noise would bring eunuchs, guards, on the run—and that would mean the end!

Barry leaped at his enemy; wrapped steely fingers about the man's throat. Akbar ib'n Bakr's cry died, in his teeth. In silence he struggled to pry Wheeler's fingers away from his windpipe. But the American clung grimly; tightened his grip.

Akbar ib'n Bakr dropped his burnoose; flailed his arms. In the silent, deathly struggle, both men neared the brink of the fountain-pool. Abruptly, Barry's eyes blazed. He tripped his antagonist. The *Shaihk* went down with Wheeler astride him. And then—

Deliberately, calmly, Barry Wheeler thrust Akbar ib'n Bakr's head under the water and held it there. Bubbles, foam, froth, came from the man's inundated lips and nostrils. For a long while he struggled. And then . . . he went limp as water filled his lungs and brought him to death at last.

VERY quietly, Wheeler lowered the *Shaihk's* corpse beneath the surface of the pool. Then he ran toward the door from which Akbar ib'n Bakr had just come; and he snatched up his dead enemy's *burnoose* from the floor as he

ran. He slipped into its white folds. . . .

He reached his goal; reached the door of the little chamber where he knew Maureen must be. He entered the tiny, perfumed room; closed the portal behind him. He stared—

Maureen cowered upon a pile of cushions. A jeweled girdle and golden breast-plates were her only garments. Her eyes were wet with tears; and her lovely white body shook with the agony of her sobs.

She saw Barry entering; and from the white *burnoose* she must have thought him to be Akbar ib'n Bakr returning to her. "No—no!" she moaned piteously.

And then she saw his face.

"Y—you—!" she gasped.

He leaned over her. "Yes. Here I am. And now we're getting out of here—damned fast! Come on—*wait!*" he added in a tense, sudden whisper. And he shoved her down again among the perfumed cushions.

"Wh-what—?" she quavered.

"There's someone on the other side of the door!" he told her in a grim undertone. "A eunuch, probably. We're being watched right now!"

"Oh—God—we'll be caught together and killed—!" she moaned. Her face was white.

"No. If they'd realized my identity they'd be in here by now! They can see only my back; they probably think I'm Akbar ib'n Bakr himself. Now listen. We've got just one chance to get out of this. Are you game?"

She closed her eyes. "N-nothing matters . . . now. . . ."

HE gathered her into his arms, kissed her lips, held her close to him. And what at first had started out to be play-acting, suddenly became reality to Barry Wheeler. Racing, dancing thrills coursed through him as he held Maureen in his

arms, inhaled the fragrance of her dark hair, felt the sweet nubility of her feminine body against his own.

Then, harshly, he raised his voice in the Iranian tongue. "By Allah," he rasped, "I wonder if any of my slaves are watching us, little white flower? If I thought so, I would have such spies torn limb from limb!"

From outside the door, he heard scuttling footfalls; then silence. . . .

Perhaps the coast was clear now; but he could not be sure. It might be better to wait a short moment . . . and the waiting, with Maureen in his arms, would be very pleasant. . . .

He felt her lips against his mouth; felt her arms go about his neck. He stared down into her eyes.

"Sweetheart!" he breathed. . . .

LONG moments later he went cautiously to the door; peered outside. He saw nobody in that outer room. "Come!" he whispered. And he drew Maureen with him out of her little room. Together they sped toward the window that would give them passageway to safety—

And at the last instant, a eunuch came leaping from a far corner—came leaping with drawn *flissa*! ..

Maureen moaned in terror. Barry pivoted, dived at the onrushing slave's knees. His shoulders bashed into his enemy. The man went rolling. Wheeler

snatched at the *flissa*—and sent it plunging into the eunuch's heart.

Then, with the dripping blade clenched in his fist, he grabbed once more at Maureen's arm. "Now!" he grated. And he smashed himself at the window, went hurtling through its shattered glass. It was only three feet to the earth outside; he landed on his feet. Maureen came scrambling after him; he caught her in his arms. Beyond the palace lay the camel-stables; one great, ungainly *mehari* stood haltered in the tiny *kraal*.

Barry leaped for the beast, grabbed its bridle; forced it to kneel. "Climb!" he panted to the girl at his side.

She scrambled upon the *mehari's* back. Wheeler followed her. He kicked the camel's ribs. The fleet beast lumbered upright, broke into a ground-eating stride . . . toward safety.

And then, as they left pursuit behind them, Barry slipped a strong arm about the lithe, slender waist of the girl who rode in front of him. He held her, steadied her; and he chuckled grimly in her ear. "So there was a treasure for me here in the Tigris Valley, after all!"

She turned in his arms. "T-treasure—?"

"Yes. You. I'm going to marry you."

"M-marry me? In spite of that night . . . in the *hareem*?" . . .

He chuckled again. "That, my dear, was exactly what you needed to tame you!" he said.

**"Murderer's Grog" and "Dead Man's Pearls" and
"Flower Boat"—all in next month's issue!**

VIPER PIT

[Continued from page 51]

Harley rode beside her, his eyes popping. Her legs were lovely and long and the jolting of the camel imparted to her breasts a pleasant, rhythmic movement. He liked the slenderness of her waist and his arm itched to encompass it. Her nude beauty made breathing very difficult and his heart was going like a riveting hammer.

"Aren't we far enough away?" he suggested.

She looked at him and smiled. Then she wet her lips and a twinkle came to her eyes.

"You do not like the looks of me?" she asked.

"Aw, honey, I could look at you forever. It's just. . ."

"Vultures have prying eyes," she said. "I would like the privacy of a yurt."

Harley slid to the ground and began running back to the pack camels. Nadee's eyes were warm now. Her lips smiling. She watched him anxiously.

Harley Cooper didn't know it. But he was about to break the Mongolian record for yurt erecting.

FOR THE HONOR OF THE DUCHESS

[Continued from page 15]

"I'll tell you when we get there. Do you trust me? Darling—Oh, darling!"

He clasped her in his arms, and their lips met. Then they went on, mile after mile, forgetting their soaked clothes, Dave all but oblivious of his aching leg. Hand in hand, mile after mile. . . .

"You—you're not taking me here?" whispered Cecilie, as they passed the cottage of Lotta's grandfather.

"Just two miles more."

Mile after mile. Two miles! There it stood, blocking the trail, Dave's abandoned car. But the swamp had dried a little. That one rear wheel. . . .

Some beech-bark in the rut, a mighty heave, and the car came up. Dave opened the door.

"Get in, darling," he said. "She's

mine, and there's gas enough to get us across the border."

THE landlord of the little inn stood in his nightshirt, his good wife behind him, similarly attired, both glaring at the intruders who had aroused them from their sleep at four in the morning.

"What country's this?" asked Dave in German.

"What country? Croatia, fool! What do you want? No German dog can wake me up at this hour of the night, when I am in bed with my wife! Olga, run for the gun!"

Cecilie stepped forward and placed two gold pieces in the landlord's hand. He held them up, to see their color in the light of the moon. He bit them.

He handed them to his wife, and cunning smiles appeared on the round Slavonic faces.



"Get in, darling," he said, "there's gas enough to take us across the border."

"Oh, an elopement, eh?"

"That's clever of you to guess," answered Cecile. "We want rooms. We're going to sleep most of tomorrow. If anybody inquires whether you have guests, you'll answer no. There will be more gold pieces."

The landlord bowed almost to the floor. "Excellencies, I understand. This way. This way."

"I'll throw our clothes outside. In the morning you'll wash and iron them."

Chuckles and grins. But there was only one big room with a feather-bed wide enough for a family. Cecile and Dave alone together, looking at each other.

Cecile put out the lamp. There was the soft frou-frou of wet garments sliding to the floor.

Dave gathered up a heap of her clothes and threw them outside, returned and locked the door behind him, settled into a huge chair.

"You don't despise me?" came a muffled voice from the bed.

"Despise you, darling?"

"I can't help—having—red hair." She was out of the bed and she snuggled against him. "I'm glad I'm no longer Duchess of Lichtenberg, but I do wish

you could have re-roofed the palace, darling."

Dave mumbled indistinctly as he laid his face against her soft shoulder. He didn't even care about the roofing contract any more. For this was Romance at last.

LA CABEZA HUMANA

[Continued from page 63]

leatherbound chest he tossed a pair of trousers, a dark colored shirt. Without a word she donned them, hopelessly. She knew what was coming.

Once dressed he surveyed her sardonically. He drew off his sombrero, clapped it on her head. "Tonight," he smiled, "I will be the housewife and you will be the Sabinas Kid! You will bed down good *El Diablo, corazon!*"

Her face was white, her lips trembling. But she did not cry out. She knew the dice had gone against her. Somehow this devil, this Sabinas Kid knew the truth. She walked slowly to the front of the house, took *El Diablo's* halter and walked toward the stable.

Seizing a murderous *machete* from the wall, the Sabinas Kid leaped through the solitary window and skulked toward the stable in the shadows.

IN the stable Tony Peters tensed as he heard the *clop-clop* of the horse's hooves. Carefully he aimed the heavy revolver. Suddenly a woman screamed. He thought it was Chiquita telling him to fire. He pressed the trigger. *El Diablo* reared and snorted as the slender figure leading him collapsed in the path.

Suddenly something hit Tony Peters on the head and he too, collapsed. The *machete* rose and fell.

Moments later the Sabinas Kid stepped from the stable, something grotesque and gruesome dangling in his left hand. He walked to the house, spurning the body of his faithless woman with his foot. At the stove he leaned over the boiling pot, then grinned as he dropped the gruesome object within.

For two long hours he fed the flame of the stove, replenished the water from time to time in the pot.

Later that evening Jim Carson started back in amazement as the figure of a blind beggar stepped unannounced through the doors that led to the *patio*.

"You!" he gasped, unable to believe his eyes.

The Sabinas Kid bowed sardonically, grinned at Elsa Moran who stood against the wall.

"Of course, *señor*. I come for the rest of my money. That was our bargain, half before, half after."

Carson recovered his aplomb. "You double-crosser! I pay you to kill Morenes and you save his life! Then you come for more money!"

The Sabinas Kid laughed, raised his brow. "Why, *señor*! I want much to earn my fee. You do not pay me to let the bull kill this bad politician! No, you pay *me* to kill him. I have to save his

As if by magic a gun was in his swarthy hand.



life if I am to earn my money, eh? Listen, the bells."

Silence. From the west, the direction of the town, came the faint tolling of bells. The Sabinas Kid shrugged.

"They are tolling for the death of

Señor Morenes, Meester Carson. *Señor* Morenes who was killed in his bedroom by an unknown assailant. The exploiter of the *peons* will do no more harm, you may rest assured."

"How do I know you speak the truth!"

The Sabinas Kid laid something on the table. It glittered and gleamed, sparkled and flashed like a great eye. Carson looked and grinned. It was the enormous diamond that had once adorned the pudgy finger of Morenes. Without a word the American went to his safe, opened it and took out a bag of gold coin.

From across the room Elsa Moran faltered, "And Tony, Tony Peters? You did not see him? Where—"

The Sabinas Kid took the money bag, picked up the ring and thrust it back into his pocket.

"Tony? Tony?" he said reflectively. "Ah yes, to be sure! *Señorita*, Tony Peters say to give you this to remember him by."

From the shadows near the window he extracted a large package, fully a foot square. He placed it on the table and went again to the window.

"*Adios, señor*, and you, *señorita*. The Sabinas Kid rides far tonight. I have done well in ridding my country of a crooked politician. And you, *Señor* Carson, I will be back in a few weeks. See that you do not fall into the ways of this Morenes, who was a greedy pig! *Adios.*"

He was gone.

WHITEFACED, Elsa Moran opened the package on the library table. Suddenly she screamed and Jim Carson, still nervous at the Mexican's warning, caught her slumping body. His horrified eyes were held by the gruesome object on the table.

It was a man's skull, white and gleaming, seeming to grin up at him, to taunt him. In the front of the lipless mouth gleamed three gold teeth.

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BANTU JUSTICE

[Continued from page 93]

information from me, regarding a certain diamond-deposit in this vicinity. The goateed man's name is Fleishmann—a German bushwhacker whom I suspect of being a secret agent sent here to the British Protectorate to stir up trouble among the natives. Darx is his assistant—and escaped convict. The brunette girl is a common waterfront woman."

KERMIT took up the story: "Then, this morning, Fleishmann was all set to torture information out of you when I showed up? That would account for the scream I heard. It was your daughter?"

"Y-yes. I screamed—" the yellow-haired girl whimpered. In her blue eyes was the mirrored remembrance of terror.

The American's jaw jutted. "My arrival scared Fleishmann and his friends. They wanted to fool me—trap me. I was wise to them . . . but they licked me, after all!" Then his eyes glittered vengefully. "By God, I'm not through yet! I'll get loose somehow; and then I'll—"

"You'll do nothing, my inquisitive Yankee friend!" a voice snarled from the room's doorway. The door was punched open. The goateed Fleishmann strode in, followed by the fake curate, and the brunette girl.

The Nazi agent leaned over Sir Landon Royce; kicked at him sadistically. "Are you ready to tell me the location of that diamond deposit?"

"No! That deposit is British prop-

erty!" the official shot back in a sudden show of valor.

A sneer crossed Fleishmann's bearded, oily lips. "Very well. Unless you tell, you shall have the extreme pleasure of watching some very unpleasant things happening to your daughter!"

Allene Royce wailed in fear. Fleishmann lifted her, flung her upon the bed. Then he turned to Darx. "Go ahead, my good companion. Do with her as you wish. . . !"

Kurt Kermit felt red rage boiling up in his heart. He saw the thug-faced Darx go to the golden-haired girl, lean over her. The man's ape-like hands reached out; commenced to fondle the shrinking form of the terror-stricken, helpless girl. Loathsome fingers bit into her cringing flesh. . . .

Then, as Darx's breath came faster, his intentions became plainer, Sir Landon Royce cried out. "No—no! Not that! I'll tell the location of the diamond-deposit—!"

Allene darted a pleading glance at her father. "Daddy—you mustn't tell! If you do, they'll have the information they want; and then they'll kill us all! As long as you don't tell, they must keep us alive. . . !"

Kermit's heart pounded in his heaving chest. The girl's bravery was greater than her dread of the shame and humiliation she was about to undergo. She was willing to allow Darx to . . . defile her . . . rather than risk the death of her father. . . !

"You damned fiends!" Kermit roared out. He struggled against the ropes



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that trussed him, while insane hate seethed in his soul.

As he twisted at his fetters, hope leaped into his veins. A knot had slipped a little! Again he renewed his efforts. But meanwhile, the thug-faced Darx was pawing at Allene, brutal fingers pinching her bare shoulders . . . stroking her shrinking flesh. . . . His lips were lowering esuriently, evilly, toward her blood-red mouth. . . .

AND then, suddenly, there came a sound from the outer compound: a wailing, keening uproar from a hundred native throats. The goateed Fleishmann swore harshly. "Those *verdammte* natives—they have come back! We must frighten them away again!"

Like a flash, the Nazi and his two evil companions dashed from the room. Outside, dusk was falling with African swiftness. And the outer uproar was growing louder.

With their captors gone, Kermit and Sir Landon and the golden-haired Allene were once more alone, unguarded, in their prison-chamber. The American knew he must work fast if he were to do anything to save the English girl from humiliating degradation. . . . Again he started struggling against his gyves. He exerted every pound of his strength against the knots. Sweat poured into his eyes. . . .

A knot slipped again. He fought at it; twisted his wrists savagely until the ropes cut into his flesh and blood dripped from his fingers. Then came a surge of elation. His own blood dampening the knots, had made them and his wrists slippery! The rope was loosening!

With one more savage tug, he had his hands released!

Now he leaned over, worried the

bonds about his ankles. At last his legs were free. He stood up; beat his palms together to restore the circulation. Then, like a wild man, he leaped at the bed.

It was the work of only an instant to free the golden-haired English girl. He lifted her in his arms, set her on her unsteady feet. For a moment she clung weakly to him, so that her yellow hair was in his face and her lovely breasts close to his chest. A thrill shot through Kermit's veins at the intimate contact. But there was work to be done!

He turned, unfettered Sir Landon, helped him upright. "What now. . . ?" the British official whispered weakly.

"Escape!" Kermit rasped back. He made for the window, opened it. In an instant he was outside; was aiding Allene and her father into the night.

Even as they gained the compound, a new sound came to Kermit's ears: a concerted shriek of terror from beyond the compound. The American stared across the clearing; and his eyes widened in understanding.

Just across the lake, on the face of that extinct, lava-encrusted volcano, there was a shimmering white square of ghoulish light. Moving shape stalked across that luminous square—

"Movies! A portable cinema outfit!" the American whispered. "So that's how Fleishmann scared the natives away, so that he could have a free hand!"

"Y-yes. . . !" the British commissioner whispered.

"Then come on! That swine and his friends are over there by the base of the volcano, somewhere. That's where they're operating that movie-projector! We'll catch them before they know what's happening!"

As he spoke, Kermit broke into a loping run around the lake's edge. Behind him, he could hear Royce and his daughter desperately following. Weaponless, with only his two hands with which to fight, Kermit had no thought of personal peril. He knew only one thing: that he must capture and destroy Fleishmann and that evil Darx, who had dared lay bestial fingers upon Allene Royce's fair flesh. . . .

THEY were at the base of the extinct volcano now. Kermit saw whence the motion-picture was being projected. The square of light emanated from a brilliant glow of illumination at the mouth of a dark, ominous cave—

The American explorer smashed him-

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self vengefully at that black orifice in the side of the crater. Fists balled, eyes narrowed to gleaming slits of fury, he plummeted into the cavern. He spied the portable movie-projector with its sputtering carbide light; saw Fleish-

The bludgeon swished down viciously.



mann, Darx and the brunette woman leaning over the machine—

"Now, you rats!" he roared in a mighty, thunderous voice. And he hurled himself at his enemies.

His attack was unexpected. Before the bearded Fleishmann could realize what was happening, a hammer-hard fist sent him slumping into unconsciousness. And as the Nazi agent fell, his skull

struck against a projecting nodule of black, unyielding lava. There came a dull, sickening sound as the German's head was split wide open. . . .

And then the brunette girl hurled herself at Kurt Kermit—scratching, clawing, shrieking waterfront oaths. He

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tried to fend her off. Somehow, the carbine-lighted movie projector was overturned. A brilliant white flash of light spewed upward. Flames licked hungrily at the wooden table upon which the cinema machine rested. The cavern was suddenly a flickering inferno of flame-shadows.

Kermit leaped away from the hungry fires that almost scorched his face. Then, ominously, he heard a growling, savage roar from the mouth of the cave. He wheeled—and saw a knot of grim-faced natives belching into the chamber!

"The *juju* is broken! Slay the white magicians!" came a concerted Swahili shout.

The American's heart sank. These black Bantus, freed of their fear of Fleishmann's movies, were closing in to attack! And in their unintelligent frenzy, they might seek the lives of innocent as well as guilty!

His heart in his throat, Kermit sprang to Allene Royce's side. His arms swept about her protectingly. He saw her father facing the approaching natives; addressing them in the native tongue. Then, suddenly, he saw Darx and the brunette girl make a leap for the cave-opening in a desperate attempt to escape.

But even as the fake missionary made his move, the blacks were upon him. Assegais flashed in the flame-light; and the thug-faced man went down shrieking, his breast impaled by a dozen spears. And now the yelling natives had pinioned the brunette girl; were bearing her out of the cavern. . . .

In the distance, her screams rang out. . . .

"God!" Kurt Kermit whispered. "Do you suppose they'll—"

Sir Landon Royce nodded. "They'll have their way with her; then they will

kill her. It is what she deserves; I shall not stop them!

But we ourselves—are they like to come back and attack us?"

"No, my American friend. Those are friendly natives; and what they have just done, was done to aid me and my daughter. We are safe, now. Thanks to you—and to jungle justice!"

KERMIT was still holding Allene Royce in his strong arms. Suddenly he described a glint in the wall of the cavern. He stared. It was a lava nodule projecting from the side of the cave: the same lava-nodule upon which Fleishmann's skull had been split. In that impact, the nodule had cracked open a little; and in its black depths gleamed something that reflected the fire-light—

"Diamonds!" the American whispered.

Sir Landon nodded. "This is the diamond-deposit whose location Fleishmann wanted. And now that you know of it, Mr. Kermit, I would like to invite you to stay here with my daughter and with me; help us work the claim in the name of the British Government, on a share basis. . . ."

Against the American's stalwart form, the golden-haired Allene Royce cuddled close. She looked up into his eyes, and her breasts were thrillingly close to his encircling arm. "Please—stay—" she whispered.

A smile crossed Kermit's lips as he read the half-promise in her steady gaze. "Yes," he whispered softly, as he drew her closer. "I'll stay—always—with you!"

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CROWN OF THORNS

[Continued from page 85]

away from his throat. Once those broad, flat thumbs reached his windpipe it would be all over. He strained his muscles to throw the half-breed off but it was hopeless. Too many hours at the typewriter back in the airless canyons of the city were taking their toll.

This was the end. No story, no Aline . . . nothing. Bleached bones on the rolling mesa. Buzzards riding high as they left his carcass picked clean. The end . . . of everything. He felt those deadly thumbs pressing . . . pressing. He gasped for air, struggling pitifully in the half-breed's death grip.

SUDDENLY the killer's head snapped back. His powerful fingers relaxed. for a moment his body stiffened. Then, like a half-empty sack of wheat, he rolled over on his face. Tod sat up, sucking in great breaths of air. He saw Carlota leaning forward. He saw the handle of the half-breed's knife protruding from between his shoulder-blades. He understood.

"*Gracias, Carlota,*" he said simply.

The girl dropped to her knees and threw her arms about Tod's neck. Her hot lips mashed down on his mouth and the soft globes of her breasts flattened against his chest. It was a gesture of gratitude, given in the only way the girl knew.

The intensity of the caress left Tod gasping. If there had not been Aline he might have responded to Carlota's advance. Her bosom was round and full and her body was alive with animal magnetism. He could still feel the moistness of her soft lips.

He came to his feet. "Bathe your wounds, Carlota, and go to bed," he said gently, conscious of the disappointment in her eyes.

She nodded, crestfallen. "*Si, senor; mil gracias.*"

Tod, still weak and trembling from his narrow escape, watched from his bedroom as Carlota dragged the dead half-breed out of the cottage. He undressed and got into bed. Again Carlota stripped

Women! Delayed?

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off her single garment in full view. Tod's blood pounded at his temples. He turned over to wipe out the exciting vision of her full-blown nudity.

It must have been hours later when he awoke to an undercurrent of sound resembling the tramping of heavy-shod feet. He sat up in bed. The darkness was absolute, but woven through it were the invisible tendrils of an alien presence.

"Who's there?" Tod gasped.

A blinding light flashed in his face. Something hard crashed down on his head. The light went out. Everything was pitch black.

A STINGING pain brought Tod to consciousness. Again the stinging pain across his shoulders. He opened his eyes. He was lying flat on his stomach, one cheek grinding into the dirt. *Swish! Thud!* As though a hot iron was being dragged across his back. *Swish! Thud!*

All at once the truth dawned on him. *He was being whipped!* The Penitentes, in revenge for the desecration of their ceremony, had chosen him as a human offering.

He rolled over on his back. *Swish! Thud!* Braided leather bit into his chest. Cruel, oil-soaked knots tore away strips of flesh.

Tod tried to rise but the flailing whip beat him down. His wrists and ankles were tight-bound. Now he heard the same ungodly wailing that had marked their mad ritual on the hill-top. Men's voices low and throbbing, women's voices high-pitched and hysterical.

Would they carry it to the bitter, ghastly end? Nail him to the wooden cross and leave him to die? The thought turned his heart to ice. He cried out for mercy. The stinging whip lashed across

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his mouth. Blood salted his tongue. Again and again the black leather snake rose and fell until his body was a mass of agonizing welts. Then, when the end seemed near; when it was more than human flesh could stand, the torture stopped.

Through glazed eyes, Tod saw the same tall, black-shrouded giant who had taken his camera from him, step forward. He issued a guttural order. Willing hands lifted Tod and carried him a short distance. Did it mean he was free? *Free?*

He felt something being fitted to his head; something that scratched his ears and temple. Then his arms and legs were stretched out. His knuckles grated against rough wood. *He was on the cross! They were going to nail him to it! Crucify him!*

Screaming madly, he tried to struggle loose. It was a pitifully useless effort. Iron fingers together with his bonds, held him tight. For one horrible moment he felt the prick of a spike point in his right palm, saw the heavy mallet upraised in the hand of the black-shrouded one. He closed his eyes.

The mallet never descended. Hell broke loose. Men shouted and women shrieked. A shot rang out . . . another . . . another! A heavy body fell across Tod's legs. People scattered like leaves before a gust of wind, seeking the protective darkness of the valley.

"Tod! Tod!"

It was Aline's voice, and in a moment Aline's cool fingers were soothing his feverish cheeks.

"Tod, darling! Are you all right?"

He smiled wanly, forced himself to sit up. The body of the black-shrouded one rolled off his legs. He reached out and ripped the mask from the man's face.

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28x40-25	\$2.19	30x40-25	\$2.48
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28x40-96	\$2.19	30x40-96	\$2.48
28x40-97	\$2.19	30x40-97	\$2.48
28x40-98	\$2.19	30x40-98	\$2.48
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30x40-23	\$2.48	30x40-23	\$2.48
30x40-24	\$2.48	30x40-24	\$2.48
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30x40-22	\$2.48	30x40-22	\$2.48
30x40-23	\$2.48	30x40-23	\$2.48
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30x40-63	\$2.48	30x40-63	\$2.48
30x40-			

It was Del Saunders, his features cruelly twisted in death. Del Saunders, the *Hermano Mayor* of the *Order of Penitentes*!

LATER, at the ranch house, Aline explained how Carlota had run the three miles from the cottage to tell her that the *Penitentes* had taken Tod.

Colonel Edgren cautiously fingered a wreath of dry spikes. "You had a narrow escape, Hunter," he said. "This crown of thorns meant that you were doomed to die."

Tod smiled at Aline. "And what do orange blossoms mean?"

She came into his arms, kissing his swollen lips tenderly.

TALE OF THE PERFECT WOMEN

[Continued from page 73]

narrow, twisting stairway. Other draperies barred their way and he pushed Lane through.

The dancer stood beside a wide, low couch in a dim alcove, tearing at the silken stuff about her waist with frantic fingers. As Bill Lane shoved aside the velvet draperies, the knot came loose and her costume slid down alabaster thighs in a rippling shower. Lane leaped toward her and she raised her arms to him. He crushed firm, lifting breasts against his shirt. He found her mouth.

Her body moving against him, slowly and inexorably, she pulled him toward her. . . .

LATER, much later, sanity returned. Lane lay on his side and looked about him. He found himself in a long corridor of such alcoves. From each of them, bright eyes watched him, tiny tongues caught between white teeth and panting lips. Their owners lay, in mute appeal, in such an array of inviting postures that Lane blinked to assure himself that he was awake.

Involuntarily, he tried to rise. But he sank back, grinning. "Sorry, ladies," he sighed. "Maybe some other time."

At the sound of his voice, his former guide came through the curtains and motioned him up. He climbed wearily to his feet and shook himself. The dancer caught at his hand and he bent to kiss a pearl-veined wrist.

"Don't worry, baby," he promised. "I'll be back."

He followed the Mongol out. Now, his mind had cleared and cooled and he knew what had to be done. The yellow man, careless now, took him down to his cell alone. As the man reached to lift down the bar across the door, Lane hooked his right fist sharply up. His knuckles met bone, just below the man's ear, with a solid crack. The man crumpled without a sound.

Lane leaped across his inert body to the door of Yin's cubicle. He yanked the bar away and dragged the boy, sputtering with fright, out into the corridor.

They had no warning, other than the bow-string's twang, too late, of the arrow that struck through Yin's throat. Lane jerked the heavy automatic from under his arm and fired. A screaming gurgle rose above the gun's booming roar.

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"One down!" Lane muttered grimly. "One for you, Yin. But I guess you don't care a hell of a lot, now. Sorry, kid."

Smoking pistol in hand, he ran to the stairway. Before his second step, he dove back to pull blouse and trousers from the dead boy's body. Yin Fu would have no more use for them and Bill Lane hoped he might.

For some reason, they weren't looking for him on the narrow stairway to the women's sleeping quarters. He burst, unhindered, into the alcove he had so recently left. He pulled the red-haired girl, half-nude and half-awake, to her feet.

"Here!" he ordered, "get into these! Quick!"

The girl gasped in uncomprehending bewilderment. So Lane pushed her back to the couch and, lifting white legs high, slid Yin's trousers down over them. He jammed her into the blouse and pulled her out of the room behind him.

He thought he could find his way back through the maze of stair-and hallways but there were going to be graver obstacles than loss of direction. Almost immediately, they all but collided with two of them. On the twisting steps, there wasn't room to pull the big bows. Lane's gun roared twice before the priests could close with him, and the way was clear into the main corridor.

Into, but not through it! At the far end, a smoky torch was coming toward them. Lane couldn't tell how many men were with it. He had to waste a bullet, but a snap shot sent the flare smouldering to the floor. Arrows whistled past them in a deadly swarm. Bill Lane shoved the red-headed girl behind his broad back, and crept slowly through the black dark.

HE stumbled once and the sound brought more hissing arrows. One tore through his coat and nicked the muscles of his upper arm. In sudden rage, he emptied the remainder of his clip down the hall. It brought a bedlam of screams, with an undercurrent of fright.

On the chance that his volley had scattered the yellow men, he re-loaded and made a break for the door. He clawed it open and swung the girl out, just ahead of another dozen arrows, thudding into the great door.

The ponies were tied a few steps away. Bill threw the girl aboard the nearest one and sent it scuttling down the valley with a mighty slap. He waited a moment to see the door come open. It yawned wide, spewing a stream of bowmen, but the heavy automatic could drill through three men at that range. Jammed in the narrow gateway, the slaughter was too much for the monkish pursuers and the survivors crawled back to safety.

Bill Lane leaped into the other saddle and pounded after the girl.

TWO weeks later, Lane laughed at her, across the rich carpet of a hotel room in Shanghai. From her easy chair, she wrinkled lovely puzzled brows at

him. In diaphanous Parisian negligee, she was even more maddening, Bill was discovering. She kindled a roaring flame in his blood that raged higher every time he looked at her.

"It's like this, Red," he told her. "I quit my job with Urco—it wasn't much of a job, anyway—to bring you down here. And after buying you all those mosquito-bar nightshirts like that one—not that it isn't worth the money to see you under 'em—I've got just enough dough to get you and me to Hollywood."

He tinkled the ice in a tall drink and chuckled again. "I know you don't understand a damn' word I say. But that doesn't matter. All I have to do, between here and the States, is teach you to write a name which you can sign to a contract, in front of witnesses. Then you'll be the great La Something-or-other, who no spiks Eengleesh, and I'll be your manager. And, Red, will we be sitting pretty!"

She crossed the room to touch him with soft, caressing fingers. "Man-nger-r?" she parroted doubtfully. Then, smiling, she moved her hips in a slow, inviting undulation. "Manger-r?"

Lane roared. "Baby," he chuckled. "your English may be lousy but you can sure get an idea. That will certainly be part of the contract!"

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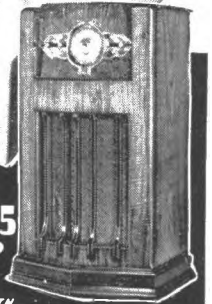


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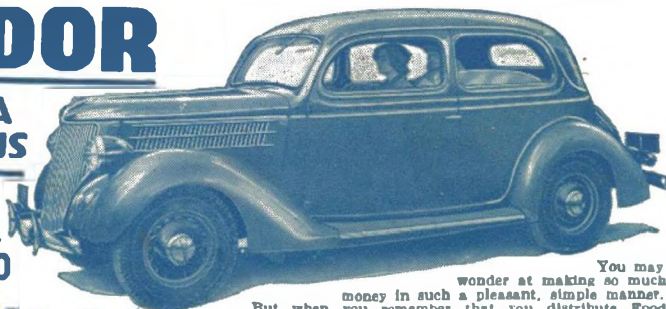
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