



The Winged Ones

By H. Field Leslie

Blood flows on the Treasure Trail—and Splint Moraine settles with fate!

FROM the dim thread of an ancient trail that wound its way among grim skeletons of tortured desert growths, a pallid cloud of dust rose and hovered and moved slowly on. Stirred by the plodding hoofs of a pony, it lifted up in soft gray puffs to mingle in a choking drift that kept even pace with horse and rider—and with the two dark specks high above in the burnished arch of sky that were two patient buzzards wheeling.

The rider's eyes were bloodshot from the sting of dust and the fierce glare of sunlight that set all that silent world aflame. He kept his gaze grimly fixed upon another dust cloud weaving among distant low pinnacles of jagged rock where Roth and the Mexican, Vasquez, carrying with them a scrap of paper that was the key to a fabulous treasure, rode south ahead of him along that forgotten *Camino Real*.

His name was Splint Moraine, this lone rider on the old King's Road. He was small and thin and wiry. His visage was dark and his eyes were as bright and hard and cruel as any ferret's. His hands, when they moved, were like two brown, restless snakes. He was—or had been until some thirty hours ago—a jackal of the race tracks, a follower of the crowds, a pickpocket. But these thirty hours since he had swung into saddle at Tia Juana in stealthy pursuit of Roth and the Mexican, less than two days of contact with the hot savagery of the desert, had been sufficient to transform him from a slinking pickpocket, intent only upon watching his chance to steal, to a reptile as deadly as any that crawled in all that arid vastness.

Thirst had played its part in that transformation. The only water hole encountered had been dry. Now his canteen was empty. He tried to kick his patient pony

into faster pace, and he cursed aloud the blasting heat, the dust, the fantastic leering skeletons of gray-green vegetation. Soulfully he consigned the whole of Baja California to perdition.

Yet he kept doggedly on, held unchanging the distance between himself and that drifting dust cloud ahead that seemed ever on the point of vanishing from his ken. And as he rode he found a measure of solace in reviewing mentally that chance conversation he had overheard at the bar of the Ultima Chanza between the huge and evil-visaged Roth and the slender Mexican, Vasquez. Unguarded words were they that had set avarice flaming in Splint Moraine's twisted little soul.

"Of a certainty there is treasure there," the Mexican was saying to Roth when Splint came unnoticed to the bar beside them and ordered his fiery brew. "Treasure enough to make any two men rich beyond their wildest hopes—and all to be had for the finding and carrying away!"

The big man toyed with his glass for a moment, considering.

"If I did not know you for a man of your word, Carlos," he rumbled finally, "I should call you a liar and the story a fairy tale. Exactly where is this forgotten shrine?"

The men were conversing in Spanish. Splint understood the tongue and he listened eagerly while the Mexican made answer to the other's question.

"One does not reach it in a day, señor. It lies deep in the wild and lonely Sierra San Pedro Matir, far beyond the tumbled ruins of the ancient Mission San Borja. And that holy edifice was once considered one of the most inaccessible places on the face of the earth. Although I have never been beyond San Borja I think I know well the trail and the location of the shrine, for often have I heard my father describe both when speaking of boyhood pilgrimages, carrying offerings of silver.

Legend has it that the good padres secreted all the offerings of gold and silver and jewels that came to the shrine in some nearby cavern. And there the treasure lies, intact to this day."

"Do none know where the stuff is hidden?"

"But few living, señor. I think perhaps my father knows. Some of our old——"

"Then why has it never been disturbed?" interrupted Roth.

"Because our people of the mountains are simple people and most devout," explained the Mexican. "They have fear."

"And you?" inquired Roth. "Have you no fear?"

"Of a certainty, my friend! Not for worlds would I commit such sacrilege. But I have learned much since I came down from the mountains. Were I to guide a good friend to this ruined shrine and then my back should happen to be conveniently turned——" The man Carlos shrugged expressively. "Could I be held responsible?"

Roth laughed.

"Carlos Vasquez, you are a damned hypocrite and a rascal. We shall start for that treasure in the morning. Now show me the route we must travel."

Upon the back of a manila envelope that Roth took from his pocket and tossed down upon the bar, Vasquez began to make lines. Splint Moraine cursed softly then because the great bulk of the man Roth prevented him from watching the progress of the Mexican's silver pencil.

"We ride south along the old Camino Real, señor," Vasquez explained as he sketched the route. "Here, two days down, is the deserted Mine of the Three Shafts. I make a cross for that. We should find water there—but one must carry a pail and a long rope to reach it. Next we come to the mission hamlet of San Gorgonio. There we may procure both food and lodging if we should wish. Several miles beyond the mission and a little aside

from the trail to Borja is the house of my father. We will send an Indian runner ahead from the hamlet with word of our coming, so that my venerable sire may have mules in readiness for our pilgrimage into the deep mountains, where horses would be useless. This he will be glad to do, for it is now twelve years since he has looked upon my face.”

“Twelve years,” commented Roth. “Think you, Carlos, he will know his rascally son?”

“He will know.” The Mexican placed the tip of a slender forefinger upon a zig-zag scar that lay across his swarthy cheek. “He did that, my gentle father, with his mule whip when I was a boy—and suffered contrition ever after.”

“Humph! Go on with your map!”

“From my father’s house, here,” continued the Mexican, “the trail leads to old San Borja. Another cross for those ancient ruins. From there a dim trail leads off into the mountains in this direction. Follow my pencil carefully, señor. . . .”

Again Splint Moraine, attention strained to fiddle pitch that he might miss no word of that explanation, cursed under his breath because he could not look upon the map at this tantalizing moment.

“A long day’s journey over the roughest trail imaginable brings you to a mighty gorge among the mountains—like this, señor. It is here, midway of the gorge as I remember my father’s words, that the shrine was located. And somewhere within this circle is the treasure we seek.”

“And how are we to find it, once we get there?” demanded Roth.

“By searching carefully, señor. Unless my father knows its hiding place and may be persuaded to speak.”

Roth picked up the envelope with its penciled lines and dots and crosses and restored it to his pocket.

“I’ll keep the map, Carlos, in case

something should befall you and I be left upon my own resources in that God-forsaken country. And now let’s have another drink on it.”

Splint fancied he detected in these last words of Roth’s an undercurrent of sinister meaning, a significance that boded ill for Carlos Vasquez. And as he slipped away and took up his station near the wide doorway where he could keep an eye upon the two men lingering under the brilliant lights at the bar, Splint chuckled grimly to himself.

Certainly the Mexican would never look upon that treasure. And neither would the evil Roth if he, Splint Moraine, could manage to get his fingers on the map and beat them to it. And so, when the two men left the Ultima Chanza together, Splint was upon their heels like a shadow.

Bad luck had been against him. He had found no opportunity that night to lift the map. . . . And so here was Splint Moraine, riding saddle-galled upon the old King’s Road, cursing dust and buzzards and blasting heat, yet holding grimly to the trail. . . .

The afternoon hours wore away and the sun swung low in a bank of purple and crimson haze. Twilight came, and the darkness swiftly. Soon a pinpoint flicker of light far ahead on the trail told Splint that Roth and the Mexican had halted and built their supper fire. Splint dismounted and stretched his stiffened legs. He was devilishly thirsty. That would be the Mine of the Three Shafts where the two men were camped, he reflected.

Water there. But there would be no quenching thirst for him until Roth and Vasquez should be soundly asleep, so that he might safely accomplish his purpose.

In the beginning he had intended only to steal the map and reach the treasure before them. But the drag of each weary mile he had traveled this day had served to convince him of the futility of that plan. It had been all he could do to keep in view the dust cloud that

marked the going of the two riders. They were accustomed to the saddle and traveled fast. Those two must be removed entirely from his path. . . . So, while the great stars grew overhead and the moon came up to soften the harshness of the land with a green and ghostly radiance, he chafed away the hours until midnight.

The distant campfire had long since died. Splint rode on a little way, then dismounted and tied his horse to a cactus and crept forward on stealthy feet. Taking full advantage of every bit of shadow afforded by rock or hummock or fluted giant columns of *cardones*, he drew near the camp unchallenged. An automatic of small caliber was in Splint's pocket. But he was an indifferent shot and dared not chance its use until he should be close enough to be sure his work would be good. He knew full well that one bungled shot would mean for him the end of the treasure trail.

The two men lay in shadow at the base of a low backbone of rock. Foot by slow foot, crawling belly down upon the sand now, Splint wormed his way toward them. In the tenuous shadow cast by a clump of *ocatilla* whips he paused to reconnoiter—and at what he saw a chill of fear struck him immobile. Winking like a dull crimson firefly afloat in the pool of darkness where the men lay, glowed the burn of a cigaret.

One of the two was awake! Splint flattened like a lizard hiding. He had not reckoned on the pair keeping a night watch. With infinite caution, daring scarcely to breathe, he retreated until distance made it safe for him to get to his feet. He quickly found his horse and rode back up the trail until gaunt pinnacles of naked stone beside the way gave him hiding. Here he rolled himself in his blanket against the chill of the desert night. He slept fitfully, nursing thirst until the dawn, for he had no means of knowing that Vasquez, a light sleeper, had merely chanced to awaken

and was enjoying a midnight cigaret before drifting off to slumber again.

Splint dared build no morning fire. He ate his unsavory breakfast cold. And after he had waited until he was reasonably certain that the two men had broken camp and gone, he swung out into the trail.

Splint reached the mine shortly, and the smoking embers of a breakfast fire. The gray timbers of all three shaft houses were fallen into wreckage, leaving the black pits open to receive moisture in the season of rains. He found the shaft where Roth and the Mexican had drawn water. He blessed that chance remark of Vasquez's concerning the need of a rope and pail. He had brought both. Eagerly he sunk his pail into the dark depths and drew it brimming. The water was brackish and carried the odor of stagnation, but Splint drank it in great gulps. After his thirst had been appeased he filled his canteen, watered his horse and pressed on.

Twice during that forenoon Splint Moraine caught a view of the two mounted men, tiny figures crawling far ahead. The character of the country changed as he progressed, growing rough and broken. He entered at last a great gorge walled on either side with scoured cliffs. At mid-afternoon he came suddenly out upon a wider space and saw ahead the green of irrigated fields and orchards and the great bulk of a bell-towered mission.

For a while he debated whether to linger here where he had halted or to go boldly into the little hamlet as any honest traveler along the King's Road might go. He finally decided to tarry a while before showing himself. For he guessed that Roth and Vasquez having reached the mission so early in the afternoon, would probably not stay there the night but would replenish supplies and go on. He retraced his way into the throat of the gorge, withdrew behind a litter of boulders at one side of the trail. There he

made himself comfortable until the sun was close to setting.

Splint rode into the one street of the little town in time to see his quarry riding out the other end. He bought *tortillas* and coffee, idled a while over the lunch, then followed through the dusk.

Throughout that day Roth and the Mexican had set a pace that taxed all Splint Moraine's resources to maintain. He hoped they would make camp early, for he was saddle sore and weary. He was taunted, too, by the growing fear that he would not be able to carry out his evil designs, that he would be cheated out of the treasure that lay at the end of the rapidly shortening trail. That disturbing thought roused him to desperation. Again tonight he would attempt to get the map, would try to finish those two who stood between him and uncounted riches. He shut his thin lips grimly. If he had half a chance, the deed would be done!

Roth and Vasquez did make camp soon. When their fire had died to a dull red glow of embers, Splint stalked the pair again, crept upon them with all the silence of a snake slipping from cover to cover. He reached a screen of boulders that lay a scant dozen feet away from the recumbent men. He listened keenly. Deep and steady breathing told him that both Roth and the Mexican were sleeping soundly. So sure of their treasure, now, thought Splint, that they were not troubling to keep guard. He left the boulders, breathing a fervent hope that the horses hobbled at no great distance away would not wind him and snort an alarm.

On he crept. The distance between himself and the sleeping men narrowed to a body's length. And then the sharp streaking flash of Splint's automatic cut into the night.

That first bullet caught the Mexican, Vasquez, fair and true in the temple. Beyond a convulsive flexing of muscles he never moved. But Roth, at that first crashing report,

flung his blankets aside and was half erect, cursing, before Splint could swing the muzzle of his pistol on the shadowy bulk of the man's big body. In a blind panic of fear Splint fired until the magazine of his weapon was empty. Roth lunged forward, choking horribly under that deadly stream of bullets, striving to get his great hands upon the thing that had struck so viciously in the night. He fell with the life twitching out of his ponderous frame at Splint's very feet.

When Splint realized that both the men were dead, realized the ease with which the deed had been accomplished, his panic left him and he smiled a grim, cold smile. With swiftly moving hands he explored Roth's pockets and found the map. Kicking the embers of the dying fire into life, he fed the flame with handy sticks until it gave him light enough to study the route laid out by the dead Mexican's pencil.

Splint was absorbed in this task when his ears caught the faint tinkle of a mule bell coming down the trail from the direction in which the treasure seekers had been headed. Swiftly, he considered what to do. If he should leave the fire and flee in the darkness the traveler would discover the bodies and raise a hue and cry that would hound him far beyond hope of ever reaching the treasure. Better to hide the bodies. Then whoever might be approaching would suspect nothing.

Spurred to action by the growing music of the bell, the murderer dragged the bodies of Roth and the Mexican out of sight behind the nearby boulders. He was smoking calmly beside the fire when the traveler came within its radiance. He was an old man, this wayfarer, with skin like wrinkled leather and hair as white as mountain snow. He wore a tall sombrero of straw and a dingy scrape. He was mounted on a scrawny mule. And Splint discerned two or three more of the beasts, without riders, in the shadowy dark behind the old Mexican.

The old man greeted Splint courteously.

"I beg the warmth of your fire, señor, for an old man. The night is chill."

Splint grunted inhospitably. He had no desire for this man to linger. The weary ancient might elect to stay the night! He must get rid of the unwelcome caller as quickly as might be possible.

"You have far to go, old man?" he queried as the venerable Mexican dismounted and spread his bony hands to the blaze.

"Not far, señor. I go to meet my son. A runner from the mission brought me word of his coming, with another man, and also a request that I have mules in readiness for a journey into the mountains. I bring the mules now, for I could not wait his arrival. When I saw your fire in the distance I thought it might be the place of his camping, and my heart beat faster, señor. I have not looked upon the face of my son for twelve long years."

Surprise flashed across the dark face of Splint Moraine—surprise that quickly gave way to glint of cunning in his hard eyes. Here was luck indeed. Old Vasquez himself a possible guide to the treasure!

"I, too, am headed into the mountains," said Splint. "I seek the old shrine beyond San Borja."

The old Mexican regarded him curiously across the flickering fire.

"It is in ruins, señor. No man goes there now!"

Splint said nothing for a moment. He occupied the interval of silence by refilling the magazine of his automatic. When he had finished he laid the weapon across his knee so that its muzzle pointed at the lank midriff of the old man.

"I seek not alone the shrine," declared Splint coldly. "I seek also the hidden treasure there. The offerings! Gold, silver, jewels . . . ! I have a map, old one, but you shall guide me there and save me time and trouble."

A look of fear leaped into the old man's eyes.

"No! No!" he protested. "Señor, there is no treasure!"

"That is a lie," said Splint coldly.

His beady eyes narrowed upon the old man's countenance.

"A lie. And you know well the hiding place of that treasure. You shall reveal it to me!"

"No, señor. There is no treasure," repeated the old Mexican. "Long since has the chest been despoiled by some vandal, and the place is accursed. It is now but the abode of the Winged Ones! No man ventures there. The wrath of the Winged Ones—"

"Hell take your Winged Ones," interrupted Splint. "I fear nothing! You shall guide me to that treasure."

"Señor, there is no—"

"Enough! That lie will not save you from going with me."

"But I cannot go, señor. I am on my way to meet my son. It is twelve years—"

"Look you, old one!" snarled Splint.

He seized a brand from the fire and got to his feet and took the old man by his skinny arm.

"Come with me!"

Splint led the old man, who protested feebly, to the rocks where he had dragged the bodies of his victims. He whirled the brand into fire and thrust it close to illumine the face of the dead Mexican—the face of Vasquez with the bullet hole in his temple and the livid scar across his cheek.

"*Amor di Dios!*" cried the old man. "It is my son!"

He would have fallen to his knees, praying, but Splint rammed the muzzle of the automatic into his ribs and jerked him roughly upright.

"Your son, yes," he spat out viciously. "And you will go with great speed to join him in hell if you refuse to do as I wish. An hour

ago he lived. An hour ago I shot him. And there is another bullet waiting for you if you prove obstinate. You will lead me to the treasure, now?"

The old Mexican gazed fixedly for a long moment into the crafty eyes of his son's murderer. Finally he said softly:

"It shall be as you command, señor."

Splint grunted his satisfaction and led the old man back to the fire. With the strong cord he had used to draw water at the Mine of the Three Shafts, he bound the unresisting Mexican securely.

"I tie you, old one, so that you may not play me false while I sleep," said Splint as he tightened the last knot. "We start at dawn."

At the first hint of morning light Splint Moraine was awake and had the old man free. Beyond a suggestion that his captor abandon his horse for a mount on one of the mules, the old Mexican held silence unbroken.

Before the falling of dark they came to the tumbled ruins of the old Mission San Borja. Here they spent the night, corralling the mules within the still standing remnants of adobe walls, and themselves spreading blankets in the ruined nave. Again Splint carefully tied the old man as a measure of safety.

In the gray chill of early dawn the old Mexican indicated to Splint the trail they must take away from the ruined mission into the somber mountains. And Splint assured himself by a glance at the map that the old man was guiding him aright.

Hour after weary hour the dim trail wormed its way into the heart of the mighty splintered hills. It led them now toiling up the boulder-studded bottom of some rough-hewed canyon, now whipsawing their way up along the bold face of some sheer precipice by a way that was no more than a path for a mountain goat.

Time after time Splint caught glimpses of tawny cougars slinking away to vanish in

some high cavern among the rocks. In that forbidding world of jagged peaks and dark gorges the very silence of his patient guide began to work upon Splint Moraine's nerves. A vague and indefinable foreboding of evil hovering, of death lurking in the mysteries ahead, began to lay hold upon his overwrought imagination. But thought of fabulous treasure almost within his grasp was an anchor to hold him fast to the grim realities of the journey.

Dusk was not far distant when they came into the shadow of a mighty gorge flanked on either hand by towering cliffs and bleak mountains upthrust to the darkening sky. Midway of the gorge the old Mexican called a halt. Pointing to worn steps cut in the wall of the cliff, steps leading up to a great niche where fallen timbers were tangled like the bones of long dead men, he said:

"The shrine, señor."

"Never mind the shrine. Show me the place of the treasure!" commanded Splint.

Without more words the old man led the way along the bottom of the gorge for what seemed to Splint Moraine an interminable distance. At last he paused and directed Splint's attention to a dusky orifice high up on the face of a cracked and wind-cut cliff.

"A deep cavern is there, señor. Within is the Chest of the Offerings."

Splint Moraine's blood was hammering in his veins.

"How do you reach it? Show me the way!"

With the point of a bony forefinger the old man picked out for Splint the faint cracks and seams and inequalities of stone that would give him hold for hands and feet. Eager to be at the treasure, Splint began to climb.

It required the exercise of all Splint Moraine's wiry agility to make his way up that bold face of cliff until he at last stood upon the lip of stone at the mouth of the

cavern. Looking down, he saw the face of the old man upturned, watching him with a curious intentness.

Splint had a fleeting moment of apprehension. He remembered vividly those tawny cougars he had glimpsed along the trail. He wondered if this cave might be the den of such beasts. But the lure of treasure was strong. It overrode his momentary fears and drew him on into the shadows that filled the cavern.

Once inside that vault of stone, Splint struck a match to dispel the dusky shadows and looked eagerly about him. Ah! The old Mexican had not played him false! The chest, a massive receptacle of hewed wood bound and studded with hand-wrought iron of quaint design, stood upon a low shelf of rock at the far end of the cavern. The chest was old, very old, and holes of boring insects large as a finger were in profusion all along its front. This much Splint saw before the match burned out.

He did not pause to light another. He leaped swiftly forward and threw back the ponderous lid of the chest. With an inarticulate cry of triumph he plunged both arms deep in its interior, groping hands tearing feverishly at a substance, that had the feel of tough and ancient parchment. . . .

AT the base of the great cliff, face upturned and eyes burning with a strange smoldering fire upon the opening where the murderer of his son had disappeared, stood the old man, watching . . . listening. . . . And a smile of

calm satisfaction stole over his wrinkled face as there came to his ears from the depths of the cavern a muffled shriek—the cry of a man in deadly agony.

With a swift agility that belied his hoary years the old man herded the mules a little way down the gorge. He halted where he had full view of the cavern's mouth. And quickly the murderer appeared there, screaming and desperately fighting, beating at the air about his face.

He threshed wildly about upon the high lip of stone. Suddenly he lost his balance, pitched over the edge, and came whirling down the cliff face to meet the stony floor of the gorge with bone-breaking impact.

Behind him, all about him, settling to attack until their numbers hid face and hands and grotesquely floundering body, streamed an angry horde of *moscardones*—those great vicious black and yellow hornets of Baja California.

After half an hour had passed and the swarm of *moscardones* had returned to their ruined home in the long-empty Chest of the Offerings, the old man came in the twilight and stood looking down upon the blotched and swollen face of the broken thing that had been Splint Moraine.

“Carlos, thou art avenged!” he whispered softly.

Then he spurned with his boot the body of the murderer.

“And thou, *animale!* Didst like those caresses of the Winged Ones?”