

QUICK PAY FOR MAVERICK MEN

by
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Death called the play when two old-time badmen matched their rusty Peacemakers against the spitting tracers of a modern Jap fifth column.

CRAWLING stealthily on all fours through catclaw and cactus, Nevada Jim pulled up suddenly and with a low, colorful oath plucked a chotta spine from the ball of his horny thumb.

“Quit bellyachin’ and move on!” husked old Utah McClatchey from close behind him. “I’m gettin’ tired of havin’ them rundown boots o’ yours shoved in my face!”

A dark silhouette in the pale moonlight, Nevada Jim stuck his injured member into a capacious mouth and licked the pinpoint wound which stung like fire. Then he grinned at his sour-faced old companion. “Don’t get impatient, Utah,” he said. “Good times await us at yonder mine. After we lift ol’ Dan Conover’s gold we won’t have to do this kind of work no more unless we feel like havin’ some fun.”

Utah matched his younger partner’s grin. “You know,” he gave back quietly, “we’re really doin’ Conover a big favor by relievin’ him o’ his dust. Why, from what I heard in Tombstone, the poor jasper’s been worryin’ himself ga’nt for fear somebody was goin’ to rob him. We’ll take a big load off his mind.”

Nevada Jim’s thin, hawk-like face assumed a benign expression. “I believe you’re right, pard,” he said. “I bet he’ll be tickled pink to see us!”

“I reckon,” McClatchey chuckled. “Lots of other folks would, too.”

He was right. Lawmen from Laramie to Paso del Norte would have given time from their lives to nab this pair. Many had seen the two slippery owlhooters, but none of them had been capable of laying hands on them. One reason was because there wasn’t a sheriff west of Omaha who didn’t have a healthy respect for the old Colt Peacemakers they wore, tied-hard, at their thighs. Another reason was that times had changed and the law was more accustomed nowadays to riding along fine highways in high-powered cars, than forking mean cayuses over the rough western badlands in quest of the two old-time outlaws.

Some newspapers in the Southwest frequently referred to the pair as the Hellers from Helldorado and poked fun at the law for being unable to put them where they rightfully belonged. Others called them ribald raiders because they seemed to enjoy themselves so thoroughly when they walked into some unsuspecting cow-country bank and lifted its cash. There were still other papers, and individuals

too, who mentioned slyly when the pair made front page news, that Nevada Jim James and Utah McClatchey sometimes did the country a service by preying upon their own kind. For deputy sheriffs, town marshals and border patrolmen frequently found dead gangsters in unexpected places, with miniature tombstones carved from chaparral or manzanita, placed neatly upon their chests. That was a symbol the Hellers from Helldorado always left behind them.

“We don’t want nobody to git credit for our doin’s but us,” Utah always said. “An’ we shore as heck don’t want to git credit for orneriness that ain’t our’n!”

They enjoyed many a chuckle over those miniature tombstones. And they were valued by the lawmen fortunate enough to get hold of one. They carried a message that was plain as the beak-like nose on Nevada Jim’s predatory face. The miniatures were more than calling cards. They told all and sundry that the Hellers’ hangout was in the old ghost town of Tombstone, Arizona, hard by the fastnesses of the Chiricahua Mountains, the Turkey Creek badlands and the Mexican border. It was an open challenge to the law to come and get them—if it could.

But now the two pards had been forced to abandon their snug retreat in the old Oriental Saloon where Wyatt Earp had once held forth in all of his frock-coated, gun-hung splendor, for Tombstone was coming to life again. Mines were reopening and ore trucks were churning up the thick dust of Allen and Tough-Nut Streets.

“It’s this here dee-fense program that’s turnin’ us into the hills again,” Nevada Jim complained. “It might be a good thing for the country, but it’s goin’ to make it awful tough for us to keep dodgin’ the law.”

Utah McClatchey had squared his flaring old shoulders and snorted: “What this country needs is a few ol’ timers like you an’ me that are plumb handy with hog-laigs.”

“We’re handy enough,” Nevada had agreed. “But we’re also pizen mean an’ ornery. Our law-dodgers say so.”

“They ain’t lyin’,” Utah admitted. “There ain’t no Social See-curety for us an’ we gotta make a livin’ somehow, don’t we?”

NOW, the Hellers were high on the flank of a barren Chiricahua peak, making their way

with cat-like stealth up the tailings of an old mine dump. New streakings of ore marked it in places, for Dan Conover had recently reopened the Bronco Mine.

"Funny Conover ain't got his stamp mill runnin' tonight," Utah complained. "If it was goin', we could've rode our hosses right up to his shack without bein' heard instead of us havin' to crawl on our hands an' knees."

Nevada Jim grinned. The old renegade was always complaining about something. "You got to do a little work for yore *dinero*," he pointed out, "or you wouldn't appreciate it none."

He ceased talking as they reached the edge of the dump, and clamped a hand over his pard's wrist. His bleak, wintry eyes scanned the shelf for sign of life. There was none. A waning moon shed a faint radiance over the long, narrow plateau, and the gaunt shaft house at the mouth of the mine. The stamp mill, cook shack and long bunkhouse were on the other side of the shaft house. A clammy silence held sway over the place.

The only sign of human habitation was a pale, yellow light in one old shanty off to the right of the two renegades. Save for that, every building seemed deserted when the mine should be going full-blast. There was something subtle in the quiet that Nevada Jim didn't like. It made the hair crawl on his thin neck.

They stole forward again toward the lighted shack. There was a front and rear door to it and it boasted three rooms, a kitchen, bunkroom and a front room. Nevada was aware of that because he and Utah had once holed up there when a posse became too annoying.

They saw now that the yellow lamp-light was coming from the front room. They picked their way quietly to the rear porch. Testing each step, Nevada mounted slowly. The door was hung on leather hinges, but by lifting it a little, he managed to ease it open without a sound. He stepped inside.

The little kitchen was dark as the inside of his pockets. He paused, with Utah at his shoulder, to accustom his eyes to the darkness. After a moment he could make out the door leading into the front room. Silently he crossed to it. Left hand reaching out, he jerked it open as his right whipped his long-barreled Colt from its pouch. Like a cat he slipped through the door and took one long stride to the right. Utah, gun in hand, moved to the left. It was their system when entering a bank.

Their guns flipped up to cover the room, then sagged. Both stared open-mouthed at old Dan Conover seated beside a stained table in the center of the room. They blinked to make sure their eyes were not playing them false.

A dirty rag had been drawn tight between Dan's teeth and knotted securely behind his white head. His arms were bound to the back of the chair in which he sat, and his ankles were lashed to the legs of it. Only his blue eyes were active and they were filled with hellfire and brimstone. But when he looked up at the two renegades, Nevada saw his angry expression change. The old mine operator's shoulders shook and his chest started heaving. A sound came from behind the gag that was very much like choked laughter.

He looked at the renegades standing either side of the door. Utah McClatchey resembled a gaunt lobo. Tall, thin as a rail, bowlegged in his ragged Levis, his blue shirt and moth-eaten cowhide vest hanging about his spare torso in loose folds, he looked like a wolf emerging from a hard winter. His scraggy, drooping, iron-gray mustache fell below his narrow chin. The battered range hat atop his bullet head had seen better days, but now the brim was warped and floppy and the crown boasted two bullet holes. He looked older than he was, for he had hit the owlhoot at twelve, and forty years of night riding since weighed heavily upon him.

Nevada Jim flushed a little when he felt Conover's laughing eyes go over him. He was garbed much as his old partner, but there the resemblance ended. His eyes and thin face carried an expression of ironic, devilish humor most of the time. He was perhaps ten years younger than Utah, but heavier. A sparse stubble of roan whiskers, well on the gray side, hid the weather-wrinkles etched about his mouth and flat cheeks. He always enjoyed a good laugh at the other fellow's expense, but this time he realized the joke was on them. And old Dan Conover knew it.

Utah was the first to speak, then explosively: "Shut yore gurglin', yuh dang fool!" he cracked out. "You sound like a b'ilin' teakettle! Untie the critter, Jim, before I get mad an' shoot the gag out o' his mouth. Of all the consarned luck I ever did see, this is the worst. Somebody beat us to our gold, by Gawd!"

Nevada had already pouched his gun and was striding toward Conover when he saw him stiffen suddenly back in his chair as though something had

smashed him in the chest. Then he saw something had, for a red stain spread quickly over the old mining man's white shirt front.

A sound, scarcely louder than the low hiss of a snake, accompanied the bullet. Before he could do more than spin toward the bedroom door from which he thought the mysterious shot had come, a second slug sliced neatly through the crown of his battered range hat.

Then Utah McClatchey's ancient Colt let out a roar that shook the shack. His heavy slug screamed into the bedroom as he yelled: "After 'em, Jim! They're hidin' in the bunkroom! Maybe they got our gold in there!"

He started running, straight-up, for the door, with a reckless disregard for modern guns and gunners. But Nevada had other ideas. In a flying tackle he brought the old renegade down to the floor and rolled with him through the dark doorway just as lead from the hissing guns inside the bedroom sheeted above their prone bodies.

Nevada Jim found it disconcerting to fight guns that made no sound. He wasn't used to it, but he was accustomed to fighting in the dark and he had no more mercy in him now than a cougar has for a fawn between its jaws.

Pale gun-flame stabbed out of the thick blackness from the vicinity of one of the bunks across the room. Nevada snap-shot from the floor, gun swinging up as he triggered to cover the spot of flame. Instantly he heard the thud of a falling body accompanied by a shrill, high-pitched screaming of words in a tongue that was totally unfamiliar to him. The voice gurgled off into the silence of death.

The whole thing here was more than he could understand. It was bad enough to battle soundless guns, let alone men who spoke a language that only a heathen could comprehend. "But before we get done here, I'll git me all the answers or git salivated tryin'," he avowed to himself. "An' I'll pay back them scuts for gutshootin' a helpless man thataway, too. Hell, all we wanted was his gold an' there ain't been that much *dinero* runnin' around loose since hell froze over!"

BUT for a time it didn't appear that they were going to get anything in this dark room but a dose of lead. There seemed to be at least half a dozen men loose in the darkness.

Nevada Jim remained on the floor. He shot and

rolled over, then shot again at each gun-flash. Lead slapped all about him, but he was used to that. Utah was yelling like a Comanche each time he triggered, and Nevada used his own voice as he emptied one gun and flung it into the face of a shadow looming near him. "Shut up, Utah!" he rapped. "Want every sidewinder here tuh spot you?"

Somebody stepped on his hand just then. He clutched an ankle and yanked. In the same movement he brought forth his second gun and swung the long barrel down on a skull. Bone crunched sickeningly, followed by a deep sigh. "Like breakin' aiggs into a fryin' pan!" he chuckled to himself.

Again he whipped his gun sidewise and took a snap shot at a figure trying to steal through the doorway. That was the end of it, or at least Nevada thought so. But just then both of them heard a sound that brought them swiftly to their feet. It was the coughing roar of an airplane motor coming to life.

"Two of the skunks got out through the door," Utah yelled, "whilst I had my hands full with a couple more. But they ain't got away yet. Come on!"

"I'm way ahead of you!" Nevada shouted as he hurdled the body of the last man he had triggered. His long legs pumped him swiftly into the living room. He took a glance at Dan Conover and went to him. The mine owner was dying. Blood welling from the wound in his chest now stained his entire shirt and pooled on the floor. He was slipping fast, but on sight of the outlaw, he urged him close.

Utah came panting up. "Looks like they punched Dan's ticket sure," he commented, taking a look at Conover's bloodless face. "The dirty lowdown scuts—triggerin' a man that couldn't nowise defend hisself!"

"Get goin' outside!" Nevada bit out. "Wing that sky-buggy afore she gits offen the ground, or we'll have a hell of a time follerin' its trail on hoss-back. Watch yore step, Utah. Them jiggers is plumb bad!"

McClatchey jumped for the door, gray hair flying out like a mane behind his shoulders. Nevada leaped to the side of the old mine owner, and for a rough and ready hellion with no more scruples than a mangy coyote, he was strangely gentle about untying the gag still in Dan Conover's mouth, and bringing him a big slug of whiskey

from a bottle of old Squareface in a corner cupboard. He had sloshed a tin-cup half full, and Dan Conover gulped it down like water.

Nevada looked at the empty cup. "You might of saved me a swig," he said morosely. "That's all there was in the bottle!"

A ghost of a smile crossed Conover's face. He looked pleased at seeing the old-time outlaws. At least the three of them spoke the same language.

Outside, the plane motor was rising into a crescendo of sound that almost drowned the savage barking of Utah McClatchey's Colt. Then a shadow passed across a lighted window. Nevada didn't need to hear Utah's sulphurous curses to know he had failed to halt the plane's flight. McClatchey did not immediately reappear, and for a few minutes Nevada Jim had his hands too full to wonder where the old lobo had gone.

For as soon as the plane roar got out of his ears, he became aware that Conover was speaking his name in a halting, gasping voice. "James. Jim, bend closer. I ain't got long to be here, but while I am, I want to tell you what I can. You're a pesky outlaw, and yuh come here to rob me, but I'd a sight rather have seen you get my gold than them pesky greasers, and furriners that have got it now. I—I didn't know they'd come back to the bunkroom or I'd a-warned yuh."

Nevada Jim sat down on the arm of Conover's chair, and propped his head so the blood coming into his throat wouldn't choke him. But he saw, even as he did so, that Dan Conover had spoken just about his last words. Only a supreme effort brought another mumbling phrase from his lips.

"*El Sierra del Luna, Jim. Tres Cruces, The Mountains of the Moon. Three Crosses.*"

HIS head fell forward on muscles gone suddenly slack. Gently, Nevada Jim let the old man drop forward across the table. He was not a praying man, was Nevada Jim James, but he prayed right then that the Good Lord would let him line his sights on Dan Conover's killer.

Utah McClatchey came stumbling in from outside.

Nevada looked up. "Where you been?"

For a moment, Utah McClatchey didn't answer him. He stared somberly at Dan Conover. When he raised his eyes they were black and hard as obsidian.

"They's twelve fresh graves out alongside the

bunkhouse," he said slowly. "Dan'l will fill the thirteenth. Jim, them twelve graves are kinda shaller. Looks like the hombres who dug 'em got tired in a hurry. Mebbe they didn't give a damn if the coyotes come down from the hills and dug out the corpses, and made a meal off of 'em. Which they done. Every last one of the dozen, Jim, was shot in the back of the head like you'd shoot a steer. From the look of things, they had just about as much chance as a hog of defendin' themselves. Now there ain't nobody accused me of bein' an angel, but I'll be damned right straight tuh Purgatory if I ever shot a man when he warn't lookin' at me!"

He was silent a moment while he punched spent shells from his two Colts, and thumbed in fresh loads, taken from the well-filled belt about his thin waist. Then he spoke again, while Nevada Jim was still digesting the information already given him.

"That flyin' chariot got clean away," Utah went on gloomily, "and the gold with it, I'll bet you that. Away as clean as a whistle, and me already havin' figured out ways and means of spendin' it. I guess we'll jest have to hunt ourselves up a bank to bust, afore we skip to Chihuahua."

"We will like hell!" Suppressed violence filled Nevada's voice. "Dan'l got out enough to tell me where them hombres took the *dinero*."

"He did!" Utah McClatchey came around the table, his eyes lighting.

But the light went out of them in a hurry when Nevada said, "Yeah. *Tres Cruces* in the *Sierra del Luna*, across the border."

"An' you think we're goin' traipsin' into that country?" Utah squalled out the words like a cougar missing a kill. "Why hell on a shovel, I wouldn't go into those del Luna mountains for all the gold in Arizony. Son, you're younger than me, and you ain't seen as much of the world as I have. Leastways you ain't never been in the del Lunas. I have, and I ain't hankerin' to go there ag'in. That's where the *Penitentes* hang out, in *Tres Cruces*. They got three crosses stuck up on a hill, and their idee of fun is to ketch a white man, strip him, cut him tuh doll rags with cactus whips, then hang him tuh one of these here crosses! Nope, Jim, we ain't goin' to *Tres Cruces*. We don't need gold that bad!"

Utah McClatchey was just talking. He was as perverse as a Missouri mule. Nevada knew that nothing short of boothill could keep his old partner

from jaunting to the *Sierra del Luna*. The gold was just a part of it now. There were thirteen white men who had died ignominiously, and somebody was going to pay for that.

Nevada had gone on into the bedroom. There were three dead men on the floor. He eyed them with a pleased expression on his hook-nosed, hatchet-thin face. "I tally four, all told," he called out to Utah. "That pays double for ol' Dan'l, and one of them fellers the coyotes chawed up."

Then he fell silent. Two of the dead men on the floor were Mexicans. They were dressed in dark business suits, smooth-skinned, slick looking fellows. Nevada didn't like the type when they were alive. He liked them no better when they were dead. His hooked nose wrinkled with disgust. Long, blue-barreled automatic pistols were lying near each of the men. They had, funny looking gadgets attached to the muzzles. Nevada guessed they were silencers, but they were the first he had ever seen. It made him like the Mexicans no better, for he personally liked nothing more than the business-like boom of a Colt Peacemaker.

The third man on the floor also wore a dark business suit. The two Mexicans were not big, but this man was smaller yet. He lay there on his back, and lead from one of their guns had smashed into his skull just above the bridge of his nose.

McCLATCHEY was staring at a red corner of something that had evidently fallen from an inside pocket of the foreigner's coat, and now was half-hidden by his body. On impulse, he pushed out one leg and rolled the foreigner's inert body over.

A small red book bound in red leather lay exposed. He stooped down and picked it up, and handed it to Nevada Jim. "Yo're the readin' member of this team," Utah grunted sententiously. "I been too busy dodgin' bullets durin' most-a my life to git any book larnin'."

Nevada opened the little book, and an odd pulse of excitement beat through his rawboned frame. It was not what he read in the book that made his pulses leap. It was what he couldn't read.

The writing on some of the pages looked like hen-tracks. On other pages were written names in good, clear English, with numbers that might be addresses beside each name. Nevada read off a few to Utah, and showed him the hen-track writing.

"It don't make sense," McClatchey grunted. "Jim, them danged hen-tracks cain't be writin' in

no civilized tongue."

Nevada grinned wryly. "That there talk we heard when we wuz shootin' it out with these gents don't make sense neither," he grunted. He stuck the thin, leather-bound book in his hip pocket and forgot it.

At least he forgot it temporarily, for as they moved through the bunkroom door into the main room, a dry voice said. "Get your hands up!"

THE voice was dry, cold, and authoritative, and Nevada Jim James knew even as he got his first glimpse of the man who had uttered the words that he was looking at a lawman. There wasn't a sign of a badge about him. He didn't need any. His hard, piercing blue eyes and the flat automatic in his hand was authority enough.

The stranger was not a big man, but he was well put together. He reminded Nevada of a sleek greyhound. He had the same cool, competent look about him, from the natty black boots he wore to the open-necked white shirt turned outside the collar of his coat. The clothes made him look like a dude, but the hard, straight line of his mouth and square chin was enough to change anybody's mind. He was standing just inside the front door, and for the first time in his life Nevada got the impression of a single gun covering two men at the same time.

"Get those hands up," the man repeated. "I'd hate to have to kill you like you killed Conover!" His voice scorched them like a whip.

Utah McClatchey said explosively, "Take 'er easy, young feller! Don't you start accusin' us of murder. We've done our share of killin', but killin' and murder are bosses of a different color."

A chill smile that Nevada Jim James didn't like touched the stranger's face. "You can tell that to Judge Evans in Tombstone," he clipped. His direct gaze studied the pards a little more closely. "Seems like I recognize you boys," he added coolly. "Aren't you those famous Hellers from Helldorado who've got all the sheriffs chasin' their tails?"

Nevada Jim had his hands shoulder high, palm outward. He had obeyed orders to the letter, because the stranger acted just cool enough to kill him if he didn't. But he had kept walking forward. Now only some eight feet separated him from the lawman.

"Stop right there," the cold-eyed man said.

Nevada Jim stopped obligingly. "Utah did the same, though Nevada could see that his old pard

was just about ready to spring sidewise behind the table and make his desperate gamble for freedom. He shook his head ever so slightly at McClatchey. If his guess was right they were up against no ordinary lawman.

He had started to grin when the stranger ordered them to halt. It was a crooked, ironic grin that would have irritated anybody. The lawman was no exception.

"What's funny?" he snapped.

"Nothin'," Nevada drawled. "Nothin' at all. I was just wonderin' if mebbe you'd like to have one of our tombstones fer a souvenir? Where you're takin' us, we won't be havin' much use for 'em."

The stranger looked interested. It was apparent to Nevada that the fellow was a little surprised at the ease with which he had made his capture. He could imagine the hell-fire and brimstone stories the Tucson sheriff had told him regarding their toughness. Being presented with one of their famous calling cards would be quite a feather in his cap. Watching the man, Nevada could visualize those thoughts passing through his mind.

"I always carry a couple in my pocket," he went on. "If you'll let me drap one hand and undo my gun belt, I'll haul one out for you."

The stranger nodded. "Make it slow and easy, amigo," he said crisply. "If you don't I'll let you have it right where it'll hurt worst."

Nevada Jim looked at the lawman, and that saintly, almost righteous expression crossed his deeply tanned visage. "You know I think you would at that," he said thoughtfully.

Slowly he dropped his right hand to the hammered silver buckle of his wide double gun belt from which both his heavy guns were suspended, butt forward in their molded holsters. Nevada unlatched his belts and let them fall at his feet. Still moving carefully, he started his fingers into the pocket of his Levis.

"I hope for your sake that you haven't got a sneak-gun in there," the man said.

"I haven't," Nevada answered. His hatchet face was completely innocent as he brought his hand from his pocket. He opened his fingers. A harmless looking replica of a tombstone a scant two and one half inches high, by an inch and a quarter wide and thick, lay in his palm. The wood was polished until it shone like satin.

Involuntarily the stranger started to step forward, and as his foot lifted, Nevada Jim's loose

wrist nipped like the popper on the end of a bull-whip. The Heller's calling card left his hand like a bullet.

Even as it struck the lawman between the eyes, Nevada was hurling himself sidewise and down. The automatic coughed twice, gouging splinters from the floor where he had been standing. Then the whole room shook as the stranger caved at the knees, and fell forward on top of his smoking gun.

With the speed of a tophand bulldogging a steer, Utah jerked piggin' strings from his pocket, and leaped astride the unconscious man's back. In ten seconds the lawman was trussed hand and foot.

Nevada was just finishing buckling on his gun belt when the stranger opened his blue eyes. There was a lump the size of an egg right between them. Clearly his head ached fiendishly, but there was still something almost like admiration in his gaze as he stared up at the two, tall outlaws.

Nevada scratched his neck with a corner of the little tombstone, and grinned ironically at the lawman, wrinkles closing his pale eyes to the merest slits. He looked as ornery as everybody claimed him to be.

"You're pretty smart," the lawman said. "I suppose that tombstone's loaded with lead."

Nevada grinned. "Quicksilver," he said, "it's heavier."

"You took a chance," the lawman said conversationally. "If you'd missed, friend, I'd have killed you on the spot for trying to resist arrest."

"If you'd practiced flippin' that thing as much as I have," Nevada drawled, "you wouldn't worry about missin'. Mister, I can knock flies off a wall at twenty feet!"

Utah McClatchey thrust his ugly, leathery face forward. "Quit yore braggin', Jim," he snapped. "Listen to me, fella," he addressed the man on the floor at their feet, "we wanta know who you are, and after we find that out, I'm aimin' to put you straight on a few things you ought to know about this murder bizness. We—"

That was as far as he got, for Nevada Jim, moving like a cat, had stepped to the open front door. Moonlight lit the plateau with a clear radiance. And out there some four hundred yards away were a half dozen horsemen, black dots in the moonlight. Through narrowed eyes Nevada studied them. His ears, tuned to hear the scamper of a pack-rat across a floor, had caught the drum-beat of those horses' hoofs a moment before.

Now he swung back to Utah's side, answering the old outlaw's enquiring stare. "Jess Cloud, an' a posse," he said calmly. "Comin' hell-bent for election."

Utah grunted his disdain of all sheriffs. He addressed the hog-tied lawman. "You tell that old pot-bellied Siwash to drop in on us down *Tres Cruces* way if he wants tuh see us soon. Sorry we ain't got more time tuh make yore acquaintance, young feller," he ended. "Right sorry. If you weren't on the wrong side of the fence I bet we could make a fair tuh middlin' owlhooter outta you!"

Nevada reached in his pocket. His hand came out with another of those small tombstones. "Hyar's that souvenir I promised yuh," he drawled. He stooped and laid it directly in the center of the helpless lawman's chest.

Then his catlike walk carried him back to the front door again. He raked one gun from leather, leveled it and fired six times as fast as he could cock and trigger. As rapidly as it had appeared, the gun slipped back into its holster, and his other Colt came free. Again six shots sped out into the night, rolling like the rat-a-tat-tat of a snare drum.

Grinning evilly, Nevada watched the effect of his shots on Sheriff Cloud's posse. They were still well beyond effective short-gun range, but it didn't matter. The shots sent them scattering for cover like a covey of quail taking wing.

He swung back into the room. "Folks is gittin' soft, Utah," he complained. "Danged if I don't think you could scatter 'em nowadays if you said 'boo'!"

SOME could be scattered that easily, and some couldn't. The Hellers found that out almost a week later. They were deep in the *Sierra del Lunas* now, that high, virtually unexplored range of mountains cutting deep into Chihuahua. Tumbled peaks rose all about them, gashing the pale blue of the Mexican sky. Cauldron-like heat filled the deep blue canyons, and icy winds played about the sparse pines on the rimrock crests. It was a country shunned even by the Mexicans themselves, for some of the weird tales that came out of those hills were sometimes more truth than fiction. At least there were few who had the courage to prove any of them false.

Most of the stories concerned the *Penitente* brotherhood, and the cruel religious rites they

practiced on themselves as well as on any unbelievers unfortunate enough to fall into their hands. Utah McClatchey had not been exaggerating when he had said all the gold in Arizona was not worth a visit to *Tres Cruces*.

A grimmer errand was bringing them here now, one compounded of pride, and the realization that a hangnouse was all that waited them back in the States.

They were angling along a slanting trail now that clung like a thread on a wall to the side of a barren peak that towered to a needle-point crest a good five thousand feet above them. Directly ahead, though, was the thing that interested Nevada Jim James.

He could see that for once in his life Utah hadn't been exaggerating things. The plateau with *Tres Cruces* atop it sprang out from the flank of another high peak, like a vast, flying buttress. It towered a good two thousand feet above the trail they were on now, a vertical, somber cliff that was enough to take a man's breath away with sheer awe. He could even see the trail they would have to climb. It looked hardly fit for a mountain goat to use, let alone horses and a pack mule.

The pack-mule was Nevada Jim's idea. They had stolen it and miner's gear from an old prospector on the border. It had been necessary to knock him over the head to get the outfit, but Nevada, with a curse for his own soft-heartedness, had left a handful of greenbacks to pillow the old gent until he woke up. Of course they had stolen the greenbacks, but that didn't matter. Nevada still figured he was going soft.

They had needed the mule, however. "If we mosey into that country lookin' and actin' like a couple of crazy ol' desert rats," he had pointed out to Utah, "we may get further than if we sashay down thar with blood in our eye."

So now the pack mule plodded along between them, as they rode single-file up the slanting, mountain trail. Utah was leading the way because he had been here before. Nevada brought up the rear, a loose, slouching figure who had let roan whiskers grow for a week on his usually clean-shaven cheeks. He looked mean and ugly enough without whiskers. Now he looked worse. Heat, and a stinging dust storm they'd ridden through out on the desert had reddened the whites of his eyes until he had all the appearance of a man recovering from a week-long drunk.

Utah McClatchey, hipped around in his kak, had been studying his younger pard.

Now he chuckled. "You look so bad," he said, "that even the *Penitentes* wouldn't have nothin' to do with you!"

"You're not so handsome yoreself," Nevada grinned back, and then he caught an expression in Utah's eyes that made him twist around in his own saddle to scan their back-trail. McClatchey had seen something. Nevada saw what it was as he got turned.

THE man behind them was a good two miles away, but in the clear atmosphere he was easily visible from flop-brimmed sombrero to sandals. A donkey trudged along behind the ragged peon, his pack-saddle piled so high with a load of crooked chaparral limbs that he looked like an animated wood-pile.

McClatchey grunted, his words floating back to Nevada. "Guess that hombre's nothin' to git our wind up about. Looks like a' old charcoal burner to me."

From their position on the trail, the flop-hatted Mexican could not see them. Nevada Jim studied the man behind them speculatively, then he looked at his partner.

"If it wasn't for me, you'd a been in boothill years ago," he pointed out. "You're always willin' to take chances when it ain't necessary. Now that gent back there looks a leetle too harmless. He cain't see us, so what you say we duck off the trail into that nest of boulders and chaparral up thar ahead and wait for him to come past. It won't do any harm to let him climb that mesa trail ahead of us. We got plenty of time."

"Ceptin' I was plannin' on cookin' up a mess of bacon and beans a little farther on," Utah grumbled. "My belly's gallin' me right now."

Nevada reached into one of the saddlebags behind his saddle and pulled out a strip of jerky. He gnawed a chunk off it with his strong white teeth, and tossed the rest forward to McClatchey. "I'd shore hate to have you die hungry!" he remarked.

THEY were still gnawing on the leathery jerky a half hour later when the rattle of hoofs on stone brought them from their reclining positions against a big boulder, some fifty feet below the edge of the trail.

Nevada led the way to peepholes they'd already

prepared in a copse of chaparral. He had barely settled himself when a chill that felt like icy water running down his back, prickled the length of his spine. He felt Utah stiffen beside him.

"Leapin' blue blazes," he whispered, "weren't you the hombre who claimed you could scatter these modern lawdogs with a boo?"

Nevada Jim James was the one who had claimed that all right, and now to himself, he admitted his mistake. Some lawmen had little stomach for facing the half ounce slugs good old-fashioned Peacemakers packed, but the young, hard-faced, blue-eyed man who had faced them at the Bronco was evidently not one of that kind. For that was who trod the trail above them. Nevada felt certain that he was not mistaken.

A man couldn't help but recognize those eyes which were as direct and straight as the barrel of a forty-five. The stranger was right above them now. Except for those eyes, he would pass for a Mexican anywhere. His disguise was perfect, and whoever had dyed his skin a chocolate brown, had known how to do it.

"Phew!" Utah McClatchey wiped his brow when the stranger passed on out of sight. "I swear that hombre was lookin' straight at us. Jim, that young cuss is sure enough one tough jiggero. You suppose he's come down here trailin' us?"

For once in his life Nevada Jim didn't know what to think. "That cuss ain't no ordinary lawman, Utah," he pointed out, "on account of they stay on their own side of the Line. Course he could of slipped across. That could account for his disguise."

"He must figger he's one skookum hombre if he thinks he can take us single-handed," Utah grunted.

Nevada made no answer. He was just easing from the chaparral to go and get their mounts and mule tethered behind the nest of boulders where they had hidden, when a sound alien to these peaks sent his long body diving back to cover.

It was the roar of an airplane motor, an ear-shattering sound the echoed back from the iron peaks like the thunder of a mammoth blast. He had barely time to settle himself, when both of them saw the low-winged, silver monoplane sail out from the edge of the plateau, and start climbing into the clear blue sky.

Utah watched it with an expression of disgust twisting his seamed face. "Looks like a danged overgrown trout, 'ceptin' it's got wings, and a trout

ain't. Why in hell we hidin' here in the brush?" he demanded acidly. "If any of 'em in that airyplane are lookin' this way they'll see our cayuses. Dang it, yuh got to crawl in a hole and pull it in after yuh to keep one of them critters from spottin' you!"

Nevada crawled from the chaparral, and brushed twigs from his shirt and pants after watching the airplane all but disappear into the blue above them. Shading his eyes, he saw it level off finally, and streak away, a silver flash in the afternoon sunlight, toward the Arizona border. He reached for his bandanna, and his hand touched the thin, leather book he had been carrying since finding it beneath the body of the dead foreigner in Dan Conover's bunkroom. Thoughtfully he pulled the book from his pocket and stared at it.

"What you lookin' at that danged thing for?" Utah queried irascibly. "Figger to find the answers to why that that plane's headin' back to Arizony?"

Nevada put the little red book back in his pocket sheepishly. "I was just thinkin'," he explained as they went for their horses, "that mebbe that sky-buggy is headin' back to Dan'l's to look for this thing. They shore as heck ain't pyrootin' off in that direction for nothing."

"You got more imagination than good sense, Jim," Utah grumbled. "But dang it all, I suppose yore guess is good as mine. There's only one thing I'll lay you odds on," his creaky voice turned grimly serious for a moment, "and that is that us two hellers from Helldorado have got to do all the plain and fancy hellin' we're going to afore that flyin' chariot gits back here. They saw our hosses, that's a lead-pipe cinch, and they didn't see us, which is goin' to make 'em mighty suspicious. We're goin' to have a fine time now convincin' anybody that we're just a couple of harmless ol' prospectors!"

THE charcoal burner was a good half mile ahead of them by the time they gained the trail again, but the shadows were thickening so rapidly now along this flank of the mountain that they did not think the disguised lawman would notice them.

But in that surmise they were wrong. They had barely lined out single file again when a harsh curse from McClatchey in the lead made Nevada lift in his stirrups and crane his neck to see what had brought on the exclamation.

The answer was simple. The woodcutter had halted his burro. He was leaning negligently against

the animal's rump looking back at them. Then he waved.

Utah cursed again, heartily. "I'll lay you my last centavo," he growled back to Nevada, "that that hombre knew we were hidin' in the brush here all the time. An' if he ain't standin' there laughin' at us, I'll eat that straw sombrero he's wearin'. Jim, we been out-smarted by that hombre! If he knew we were down here in the brush, why in Hades didn't he cut loose at us with that fancy smoke-pole he's packin'?"

Nevada Jim shook his head, and his thin, hatchet-face turned sour. "There ain't but one answer tuh that," he grunted as disgustedly as Utah.

McClatchey's black eyes widened. "You mean he ain't here lookin' for us?"

Nevada nodded. "You guessed it the fust time," he answered dryly.

"Then what in blue blazes *is* he here fer?" Utah demanded.

"If we knew that," Nevada drawled, "and a few other things, mebbe we wouldn't have to foller the gent to *Tres Cruces!*"

Dusk was touching the plateau on which the *Penitente* town, Three Crosses, had been built, by the time the Hellers reached the top of the precipice trail. The charcoal burner had crossed the rim a good ten minutes before them.

"Let's you and me be smarter'n that gent," Utah remarked with one of his ugly grins, that showed his broken, tobacco-stained teeth, "and take a look for ourselves afore we stick our necks in a noose."

Nevada nodded. Keen excitement stirred through him as he dismounted. Adventure such as this was meat and drink to the pards, and beneath that feeling coursing through him was another, deeper feeling that he could not analyze. He felt like a man on the threshold of some great discovery, for certainly there were forces at work here that neither of them could understand.

He was right behind Utah as the old outlaw dropped to his stomach and inched the remaining way to the rim, but he was as unprepared as his partner for the sight that met them.

Shimmering like lace in the last rays of sunlight striking the plateau, was a high steel-wire fence surrounding *Tres Cruces*. A single gate at the end of the trail in front of them was the only means that Nevada Jim could see of entering the town. And that was guarded by two Mexican sentries standing by their rifles on either side of it. The Mexicans

appeared to be wearing some kind of military uniform.

Utah McClatchey, always the more vocal of the outlaw duo, was already voicing his surprise in a low, excited monotone. "Hang me for a hoss thief," he exclaimed vociferously, "I never counted on seein' a sight like this. Why that town's done up tighter'n a dogie in a loadin' chute!"

Nevada had been thinking fast. Now he voiced his thoughts as he watched the pseudo woodcutter approach the wire barrier, hat brim flopping down to partially hide his face. "You can knock boards off a loadin' chute, Utah," he answered, "an' I got a pair of wire-cutters in my war-bag that'll slice a hunk outta that fence like you'd open a can of sardines. Tonight—"

The words stuck in Nevada's throat. For a moment both of them were too stupefied to speak. They lay there with their mouths open. One of the sentries had moved a little nearer the gate he guarded, and as he stepped forward, his movement startled a mother hen and brood of chickens busily scratching in the dust near his feet. Eyes bugging, they saw the startled hen rush against the steel fence, saw its feathers appear to puff out all over its body, and then it fell, a limp, shapeless think against the dust.

"So yuh want tuh ram a pair of wire-cutters ag'in that fence, eh?" Utah's eyes were still bulging with surprise. "Jim, I dunno much about electricity, but I heard somewhere that metal sorta takes it from here tuh there. If you stick pinchers again that wire yo're goin' to look wuss than that thar chicken. Leastways they can throw it in the stew pot!"

Nevada had no answer for that. His faded, blood-shot eyes were watching the charcoal burner never waver in his march on the guarded gate, and his busy brain was full of calculations.

He spoke swiftly out of the corner of his mouth to McClatchey. "That wood-hoppin' hombre is a heap sight smarter than we are, Utah. He must figger he knows a way to get them entries to open up that gate for him, or he'd be layin' back here like us, lookin' things over. Watch him close. If we're ever going to get inside *Tres Cruces*, it'll have to be the same way!"

"I see now," Utah responded, "why we ain't met none of them *Penitentes* out huntin' or snoopin' around. Jim, I'll give you odds them jiggeros are prisoners in their own town! We—"

Nevada's hard fingers bit into the old outlaw's arm and stopped him. His eyes were watching the pseudo wood-chopper's every move and gesture, for some signal that might make those gates swing open. The signal came as he studied the strange lawman. The man's right arm shot skyward in some kind of stiff-arm salute.

The sentries answered it smartly. Then one of them pressed a button on a panel board alongside the small, adobe sentry house a few feet inside the fence. At his move, the gates swung open.

The charcoal burner, leading his donkey, passed through. Nevada watched the gates swing silently shut again, and then his eyes were shuttling to the sentry house. Six men in those same black uniforms came marching from the house. Nevada heard an order barked in some nasal-sounding, unintelligible tongue, by a small, mustached man who seemed to be the leader of the platoon of Mexican soldiers. Instantly they surrounded the wood-chopper and his burro.

NEVADA felt Utah's arm jerk. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the lifting sheen of metal, and only his quick move saved trouble for them right then. His fingers clamped McClatchey's wrist.

"Let go, dammit," Utah snapped. "That danged wood-cutter's a white man, and I ain't goin' to see him handled rough by no furriner and a bunch o' greasers. I may be an outlaw, but—"

"You'll be a dead outlaw if you unlimber that smoke wagon!" Nevada cut him short.

The sound of a shot snapped his attention back to the tableau within the electrified gates of *Tres Cruces*. He hadn't seen the gun appear, but now there was a long-barreled, ugly-looking automatic in the hand of the small leader of the sentry-house platoon. Laughter, that sounded more like the hiss of a desert sidewinder, was coming from the man's throat. He stood there looking down at the inoffensive burro. The little animal was dead.

"That dirty, low-down skunk!" Utah was muttering. "Jim, get yore hands off me. Jest give me one shot. Only one. That jack needs company!"

It was more than the pseudo lawman could stand, too. Perhaps, Nevada realized with sudden insight, that had been the little foreigner's reason for shooting the burro. The man probably knew that any red-blooded American couldn't stand the sight of seeing animals mistreated needlessly. And he

was right.

THE ragged charcoal burner, who had been standing humbly beside his burro, suddenly became a raging whirlwind of a man. Nevada nodded admiringly as he saw the lawman knock two Mex heads together, drop them like discarded sacks, and make his spring at the little foreigner with the gun. Before the man could so much as lift the weapon, a pistoning fist plowed straight into his face. Blood spurted from the man's nose like geysering water as he stumbled backward. But the fight was too one-sided to last. Sheer weight of numbers carried the nameless lawman to the ground.

"I'm goin' in there!" Utah raged. "Jim, whar's yore sportin' blood? We cain't let them kill that gent, even if he would like tuh see us behind bars."

"They won't kill him," Nevada said grimly. "They want somethin' from him. Notice the way they're going through his clothes?"

For a few minutes they watched in silence as the strange lawman was thoroughly searched. Then four of the Mexicans picked up the unconscious American. "Good gosh a-mighty," Utah groaned. "They're takin' the pore devil to the Castle of No Return!"

"The Castle of No Return? I don't savvy, amigo?"

Utah relaxed like a spent runner and gestured at the town. Nevada followed his pointing arm. For the first time since they had reached the rim he was really getting a chance to look over *Tres Cruces*. "The town covered, perhaps, a square mile of the wide plateau. Crooked alleys wandered between the houses. There seemed to be only one straight street in the whole village, and that ran from the gate in front of them straight toward twin hillocks around which *Tres Cruces* was built like the spokes around the hub of a wheel. The hills were low, rising barely a hundred feet above the tile roofs of the town's adobes. Three great, ironwood crosses stood on one of the hills, stark against the dusk. A grim reminder to the *Penitentes* that their creed demanded crucifixion.

Nevada turned his pale eyes to the other hillock. Sprawled across the summit of it was a great stone and adobe building, that made the huts squatting in the village below it .took meaner by contrast.

"The Castle of No Return," Utah McCatchy was saying, "on account of plenty hombres who git

inside never come out again. Even the *Penitentes* ain't got much use for the place!"

Nevada was listening to his partner with only half of his attention. His eyes were on the two tall stone towers rising from either end of the great hacienda. Wires were strung between them. He could just make them out through the gathering dark.

"I've heard it said," McClatchey was going on, "that parts of the castle was built clean back in Aztec times. The *Penitentes* have added to it since. The boss *Penitente* hangs out thar and some of the things I've heard it said they do thar would curl yore hair. They go clean back tuh Bible times for a lot of their notions."

"And right up to date for the rest of 'em," Nevada cut in. "Those wires strung between them towers are one of these here aerials, which means they got a rad-io in one of the towers. And I'll betcha on a outfit that size they can send out stuff as well as git it in. Fella, yore *Penitentes* didn't put up that rad-io. It's the work of them damned furriners."

Utah nodded. "Yo're right there, Jim. Makes my toes itch to tromp them sidewinders. An' now," he added gloomily, as they watched the platoon of soldiers carrying the pseudo woodcutter's figure up the hill toward the castle, "we got to figger out a way to get inside that gate, grab that hombre they've done pulverized, git our gold which is bound to be in that danged castle, and the hombres responsible for killin' ol' Dan Conover, and then get them and us back out to the Border."

Nevada chuckled. "Let's just concentrate on getting inside that fence," he said dryly.

He had hardly spoken the words when a far-off drone, like a bumble bee buzzing, came to them. Utah jerked. "Leapin' blue blazes," he exclaimed hoarsely, "it's that danged airypplane comin' back." Then his canny old eyes surveyed the darkening plateau, and he relaxed a little. "They won't see us here, at that," he chuckled comfortably. "It's gittin' too dark."

"Yeah?" Nevada drawled sarcastically. As he spoke, a brilliant light flooded the plateau, for flood lamps, half-buried in the sandy topsoil of the mesa came suddenly alight.

The radiance was blinding for a moment. Utah blinked like an old owl. "An' now," he growled, "we stand out like a wart on a sore thumb! Jim, we cain't stay here, and there ain't no danged sense in

goin' back. What in hell are we goin' to do?"

Nevada Jim looked at his old partner. There was a flaring, ugly gleam suddenly in his pale eyes. "When you can't go back, feller, you got to go forward. Climb yore cayuse, and don't forget that toy soldier salute." He fixed Utah with his eyes, and said sternly: "Don't open that ugly trap of yores, and don't look surprised at anything I say." He pulled the little red notebook from his hip pocket again. "Mebbe this here souvenir will be a sort of passport through the gate."

Utah blinked at the book. "That thing will more'n likely be a passport tuh hell," he said gloomily.

MOUNTED, and riding again, as though they were just reaching the end of the steep, precipitous trail, Nevada led the way toward the sentry-gate. Through eyes that appeared not to notice such things, he watched the sentries jerk to attention, grips tightening on their rifles, and then they relaxed as Nevada Jim shot his arm skyward in that stiff-arm salute.

Lounging carelessly in his saddle, Nevada leaned forward, and his hand brought the red-leather book from his pocket. One sentry dropped his rifle at sight of it. The other paled, like a man about ready to faint.

"Found this down in the canyon," Nevada said in Spanish masking his surprise at the sensation the notebook caused, "after that old charcoal burner passed by. We were doin' a little prospectin', and by the time we picked up this here book, he was too far ahead to catch. Looked like he was comin' up here, so we figured to bring it to him."

"Si, si senior," one of the sentries stuttered. "Andale, Ramon," he addressed the other sentry, "press the button. Let these senores enter."

Nevada watched the wire portals swing wide. In the air above, the drone of the silver monoplane had increased to a roar. The plane would soon be landing, and before that happened, they had to find some hiding place.

He pushed his mount through the gate with Utah close at his heels, heard it clank shut behind them. And as it did, Nevada Jim James saw that they had made a mistake.

A sneering grin parted the lips of the Mexican by the control board.

"You are veree smart, senores," he said in English, "but you make one leetle mistake. Thees is

not the first time you have visited *Tres Cruces*. For if you have not been here before, how would two desert rats like you hombres know the Commandante's own salute?"

Utah McClatchey started to bluster out something, and then both of them saw it was too late to talk.

The Mex sentries were jerking up their rifles, but they didn't know they were facing the Hellers from Helldorado, men who could spot a man to the draw and beat him to the shoot.

Nevada's gun seemed to leap into his hand of its own accord, but fast as he was, old Utah's Peacemaker was the first to roar. His shot caught the sentry who had never learned to shoot first and talk afterward right in the teeth. Nevada dropped the other with a bullet through the forehead, before his rifle could speak.

"That'll teach them hombres not to shoot jackasses and gringos," Utah chuckled as he pouched his smoking gun.

"And us to quit being so smart about salutin'," Nevada said grimly. "Take a look," he gestured with his Colt, at the closed gate behind them, then at twisting alleys out in front of them. The very thing was happening that they had hoped to avoid. Alleys were filling with people—Mexicans in those black uniforms, *Penitentes* in ragged cotton drawers and dirty blouses. The shots had brought them out.

Utah cursed. "We got about as much chance now of hidin' out till we see what's goin' on here as we have of climbin' golden stairs tuh Heaven."

Nevada Jim's eyes were sparkling suddenly. He laughed harshly, and gestured at the Castle of No Return. "One of them towers," he called, "would make a mucho fine fort. *Andale*, amigo."

He struck spurs to his mount, and dropped the reins along the big animal's neck. Hunched low in the saddle, with a flaming gun in each hand, he pounded away up the straight street toward the castle. Utah came racing along right behind him, whooping each time he let go a shot at a head poking from a hut.

"Like old times," he yelled. "I recollect oncet when we shot up Tombstone when we were pups!"

Darkness aided them in their flight once they were past the spread of floodlights marking out the landing field. Above the roar of their guns, Nevada heard the plane coming in. He grinned. Somebody was going to be a mighty sore jasper when he

reached town and saw what had happened to a pair of his tin soldiers.

Lead was beginning to shower about them now, and from somewhere behind them came the sudden ominous rat-a-tatt-tatt-ing of a machine gun. But that single burst of fire was all that came from the gun. Nevada jerked around in his saddle to see why. It was dark, and he was riding fast, but he caught an impression of white shapes, and black, too, writhing in the dust of the street. The machine gun had taken a toll of *Penitentes* and their own men!

THE castle loomed ahead of their racing mounts. One of the great stone towers, that were a good forty feet high from base to top, faced them. Nevada saw a domed, iron-banded oak door swing open. Another of the black-clad men leaped into view. Light from behind outlined him. He had a stubby-barreled machine gun in his hands.

Utah's lead knocked him back into the tower. "Peacemaker's is still best when you use 'em fust," he chuckled.

Side by side they left their mounts. Nevada risked a glance back down the hill as he passed through the tower door. A confused mass of yelling, raving mankind was filling the street from side to side. He slammed the door, noting the solidness of it with satisfaction, as he dropped a heavy bar in the iron slots that locked it.

He was conscious suddenly of a strange hum filtering down from above. Utah was already heading for a flight of stairs leading up to a hole in the heavily beamed ceiling.

"Come runnin', Jim," he yelled across his shoulder. "We might just as well raise as much hell as possible. We ain't ever goin' to get outta this danged town alive now!"

Nevada, for once in his life, was prone to agree with one of Utah's gloomy prophesies. Three steps at a time, he followed McClatchey, but before he reached the second floor he heard a crash and the humming noise stopped. Nevada saw why as he reached the second tower room. Utah had found himself an iron bar somewhere, and his powerful old arms were laying it here and there into every mechanical device that filled this room.

The old Heller grinned at Nevada, gesturing at the tangled mass of machinery and wires that he was demolishing with each swing of his bar. "Reminds me of a nest o' rattlesnakes, Jim, an' I

always tromp 'em."

Nevada stared at the wreckage, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Feller, there ain't no tellin' what we'll run into before we're through here. Let's keep movin', until we locate that gringo lawdog."

Utah eyed the destruction he'd wrought. "Nobody's goin' to fix this outfit very soon," he said with satisfaction. "I jest hope there's more of these contraptions in the room above this'n."

Nevada's Peacemaker punctuated his partner's words with a roar, echoed almost instantly by the sharper explosion of an automatic. Utah turned just in time to see a figure that seemed to be all arms and legs come tumbling down from another tower room above them.

Nevada leaped forward. He kicked an ugly looking automatic from the man's fingers. "This hombre," he explained casually to McClatchey, "tried to pull a sneak on us."

"You only hit him in the laig," Utah remarked. "Yo're slippin', Jim,"

"Hell!" Nevada exclaimed, "all I could see was his foot and gun hand. I had to sort of aim around the corner."

Some sort of battering ram had been brought to bear on the heavy door downstairs. The sound of the ram against the solid oak sounded like the boom of an ancient Aztec drum.

The man on the floor heard it, too. He showed his gold-filled teeth and snarled at Nevada Jim's ugly, beard-stubbed face above him. "You will pay for this, mister!" He spoke English with a clipped, Oriental accent.

Nevada bent over him, smiling evilly. "I'm shore glad you can talk English," he drawled. "On account there's somethin' we wanta know."

"I will tell you nothing!" the man snapped. "When The Commandante captures you, you will pay for this with your life."

"My life ain't wuth a tinker's damn, right now," Nevada grinned. "So I got nothin' to lose, amigo, by taking you with me when I go." He twirled one of his big Colts on a finger, and looked speculatively at the little Oriental. "All you got to do is tell me where they took the gringo dressed up like a Mex woodchopper, and I'll leave you here for yore pards to find when they git this far."

The saffron-faced man stared fascinatedly at the big gun in Nevada's hands. It looked very much to him as though the lanky, ugly American would just as leave shoot him as look at him. He decided that

life was very sweet.

"The man you speak of is in the other tower," he said sullenly, "in The Commandante's office."

A crash from the room above punctuated the man's statement. Nevada saw him wince. "That's my pard," he explained dryly. "His life ain't wuth a tinker's damn either, but he's havin' a bell of a lot of fun while it lasts!"

He left the wounded foreigner, whose leg was broken, and took the stairs to the third story.

"This is wuss'n rattlesnakes," Utah greeted him.

Nevada's gray eyes encompassed this highest tower room. Control boards with dials on them covered most of the available wall space. Here, he realized was the real pulse of this strange old castle the Aztecs had built. Here was proof, if they needed it, that they had stumbled onto something a lot bigger than themselves. It made him feel humble suddenly, and then he jerked himself back to the realities of the moment.

"That law-dog is in the other tower," he said to Utah. "Mebbyso we can climb across the roof from here tuh there."

McClatchey wiped his brow. "We can try!" he grunted.

Nevada Jim had already moved to one of the modern windows that had been set into the walls of this control room. Pushing it open, he stepped through. The roof covering this section of the castle, was flat, with a built-up parapet, pueblo style.

Utah followed him, but as he slipped from the window a howl from the flagstoned plaza told that they had been discovered. Instantly, lead started chipping stone from the parapet at their side as they dropped to their knees.

"A man ain't got no privacy around this place, Jim," Utah grumbled.

Nevada grinned as he led the way along the flat roof on all fours. Utah was enjoying himself, or he wouldn't complain so much. They had been in some tight spots during their lives, but nothing such as this where every loophole of escape appeared closed.

Voices lifted from the courtyard again, as the *Penitentes* and foreigners there saw Nevada Jim's lathy figure lift and smash open a window of the Commandante's office with the butt of his six-gun. Like a jack-in-a-box he popped through the opening before the guns below could fire. McClatchey dove after him, struck the floor on

hands and knees.

"This is more sport than dodgin' posses," he drawled. "How's the law-dog?" he added as he scrambled to his feet and with the old gleam of destruction in his eye, started behind the biggest, shiniest desk he had ever seen. There was a row of buttons along one edge of the desk. Utah reached out a hand for them.

"The law-dog is all right," the blue-eyed stranger answered, "but he won't be if you press those buttons. One of them will electrocute me. The rest will just make this seat uncomfortably hot!" He was strapped in a big metal chair in front of the desk.

Nevada had already started to unbuckle the straps holding him. "Feller," he drawled. "I'm goin' to feel like lettin' you set here if you don't tell us what you know about this place, pronto!"

"My name," the steely-eyed man answered, "is Dick Tarrant. I am an Inspector for the United States, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Utah looked up from behind the desk. "I mighta knowed it," he growled. "Yo're one of these here watchdogs of de-mock-crazy, I've heerd so much about."

Tarrant nodded, smiling through lips that had been beaten almost to a pulp. "Yes," he said, "and you boys may not know it, but you're better watchdogs than I am!"

"How so, amigo?" Nevada Jim asked quietly.

"This is the headquarters of a Fifth Columnist organization whose aim may sound fantastic to you, but I assure you it isn't. Their plan is to foment unrest here in Mexico, and in the U. S. with the idea of making an undercover attempt to invade and capture the Western States!"

"Phew—" Nevada Jim James sounded like a teakettle about to boil over. "I'd a-guessed most anything but that."

Tarrant stopped him with a quick gesture. "I want to finish," he explained swiftly, "while there's time. The only name anyone knows the leader of this organization by is The Commandante. It is known, however, that he is one of the most dangerous men alive. A genius at organizing coups such as they are planning here. He has participated in the downfall of other great nations lately. We had lost track of him until I come across you boys out at Dan Conover's mine in the Chiricahuas, and you gave me the lead I needed by mentioning *Tres Cruces*. Incidentally, I went there that night to

supervise the loading of the gold Dan had in his possession, and your friend the Tucson sheriff and his deputies were coming to guard it on the return journey to Tombstone.”

“But these here danged Fifth Columnists beat us to the punch and stole it!” McClatchey raved from behind the desk, where he was busily engaged. “Why the lowdown, ornery pups!”

Dick Tarrant’s blue eyes sparkled mischievously. “But you were planning on stealing it yourselves,” he pointed out.

“Hell,” Nevada cut in, “that’s different!”

“That money,” Tarrant rapped, “plus one other thing, means more than you boys may realize.” His face looked strained suddenly. “The theft, and the presence of The Commandante, means they are just about set to start their uprising. One of us has got to escape and carry word to loyal Mexican troops and their air force of the plot, or God knows what will happen.”

“We got about as much chance of doin’ that,” Utah groaned mournfully, “as we have to crawlin’ backwards through a knothole.”

AND as though to prove the prophesy of his words, a voice winged up to them from the base of the tower. A voice filled with imperious authority. “This is The Commandante speaking! If you two American outlaws will deliver the Government man you have with you into my hands, unharmed, I will guarantee the two of you safe passage to the border.”

McClatchey was leaping for the window, old gun upraised, even as Tarrant caught him by the arm. “Don’t do that,” he said hoarsely. “The Commandante will be surrounded by at least a half dozen men who look exactly like him. You’d never get the right man. It’s been tried before!”

“The thing to do,” he went on earnestly, “is give me up. You’ll be able to carry word to the Tucson sheriff. He’ll know how to set the wheels in action.”

Nevada Jim grinned. “Yeah,” he drawled, “he shore will. He’ll slap us behind bars so fast it’d make your head swim. Mebbe you’re forgettin’ we’re wanted in every danged State this side o’ the Rockies. Not to mention,” he added dryly, “that this here Commandante would have us shot in the back soon as he got his hands on you. Nope, gents, we got to think of something else.” He fell silent as he stepped to one of the tall windows that let light

into the tower.

Looking down, Nevada studied the teeming courtyard below. In the darkness, men were eddying about the plaza like ships in a whirlpool. A handful of the black-clad Mexican guardsmen, some armed with rifles, and others with those wicked, small, machine guns moved about the crowd of white-clad *Penitentes*. They were keeping the crowd back from seven men who stood in a group near the base of the tower. Nevada had to admit this Commandante was a clever jasper. Through the gloom, those seven Oriental faces peering upward looked exactly alike. Each of the men was wearing a black uniform with gold buttons, and a gold belt he’d heard called a Sam Browne. One of those seven was all set to tear hell out of the greatest nation in the world!

“They ain’t goin’ to git away with it!” Nevada said fiercely. Then he fell silent again, studying the eddying throng with a keen attentiveness.

The *Penitentes*, he knew, were a queer bunch of hombres. They would cut themselves to ribbons with a cactus whip, crucify their own people, practice all sorts of torture rites in parts of this grim old castle. A proud, mysterious sect, they would do all this to themselves, but to a man they would rise and kill an outsider who mistreated one of their strange clan.

The Commandante, and the *Penitentes* he had duped into siding his cause of treachery and anarchy were few. Nevada could see that much from the number of uniformed men who were patrolling the courtyard. And, suddenly, it came to him why that patrol was in action. A picture crossed his mind. He remembered the sight of dead *Penitentes* sprawling in the street behind them when he and Utah fled to the Castle. A nervous guardsman had used a machine-gun to try and cut them down, and had succeeded in killing some of his own people. That was why the *Penitentes* were being watched now. The Commandante was afraid of the strange sect! Afraid they might rise and drive his Fifth Columnists from *Tres Cruces*.

On the thought, he turned. “We’re goin’ back the way we came, Utah,” Nevada said quietly. “The three of us.”

“She’s nothin’ but a death walk,” Utah grumbled.

“Since when you been afraid to gamble with yore worthless life?” Nevada demanded.

“What do you plan?” Tarrant cut in.

Nevada's thin face lit with excitement as he explained his deductions. He finished: "If we can show that Commandante up for the stuffed shirt that he is by pullin' another sneak on him mebbe the *Penitentes* will rear right up on their hind laigs and smash the whole danged bunch. And while they're doin' it," he added with a grin, "we'll slip out and they'll never miss us!"

Tarrant had caught some of Nevada's excitement. "It's worth trying," he said eagerly. Quickly he stepped to a gun case in a corner and selected one of those ugly sub-machine guns. "Lead off," he said grimly.

Utah was not so optimistic as they moved toward the window through which they had entered this tower room. "If they took our hosses, we're goners," he pointed out. "And I ain't so sure but what I'd rather land in this furriner's hands than in the grip of them *Penitentes*."

But for all his grumbling, he was agile as a fox and as quick as he slipped through the open window to the roof. Nevada pushed Tarrant after his partner. But he was cut off himself, for they had been seen.

A MACHINE gun started its hellish song, spraying the roof with screaming lead. It did not come for long. Mustaches whipped back on his leathery jowls, Utah lifted cautiously. He shoved his old Peacemaker over the parapet, braving death for his partner. The Colt spoke once and the machine gun down there cut out abruptly.

Utah dropped back, beckoning. Nevada gathered his muscles. He went through the window in a flat dive, as lead from another machine gun screamed upward.

Yells, and more yells from down below almost drowned the sound of the second Thompson. Something was happening down there, Nevada knew, as he crawled swiftly along after Utah and Tarrant, but he dared not risk lifting his head to see if his hunch concerning the *Penitentes* reaction to their defiance of the Commandante was working as he hoped.

The answer to that would come later. One danger was past, and then another, for Nevada had more than half expected death to come searching for them from the tower they had first entered, but the old oak door had evidently withstood all attempts to batter it down.

Utah McClatchey was the first to dive through

the window they had left open in the tower. Swiftly Tarrant followed, and then Nevada.

The F.B.I. man's blue eyes widened at sight of the destruction Utah had wrought here. "This was the radio room!" he exclaimed. "We've been trying for a long time to trace the source of the powerful, short-wave station that's been bombarding the States with propaganda. They won't be using it again very soon, though," he added grimly. "Thanks to you."

"So I done a good job, eh?" Utah drawled. He glanced at his hard-bitten partner. "You see," he said, "I tole you this place was wuss than a den of sidewinders."

"You've done a wonderful piece of work for your country," Tarrant said, deep warmth in his voice.

"If this here mutual admiration society is ready tuh disband now," Nevada Jim said with an exaggerated drawl, "I'd suggest we git downstairs and make a run for it before everybody figgers out that's what we're aimin' to do." Briefly, he looked to his two guns as he led the way down the stairs to the second floor.

The wounded radio man was still lying where they had left him. "So it's you again!" he spat out the words.

Nevada looked at him, smiling, though his pale eyes were like ice. "Yeah, it's us," he said pleasantly. "And I'm shore as hell sorry you got a broken laig. If you didn't have, I'd work you over proper. Any gent tryin' to wreck a country like our'n is lower than scum on stagnant water!"

He passed on down, the stairs, the other two following. A glance showed him the thick, stout oak had withstood all assaults. Quietly as possible, he lifted the bar from its notches. Tarrant, right behind him, reached for the wall switch to turn out the lights. Nevada caught his wrist. "*Nada*," he said softly. "You want to tell the bunch waitin' for us that we're comin' out?"

"You think of everything," Tarrant answered.

"I think we're headin' straight for hell in a basket," Nevada Jim said casually.

"A gent's gotta die sometime," Utah growled. "But I'm aimin' tuh take that Commandante with me."

Tarrant's penetrating gaze turned on the old Heller. "We'll all try to do that," he said, and couched the Thompson under his arm.

Nevada nodded. He cast one last glance at his

guns, at the strained faces of his two companions. "Let's go," he said quietly.

HELL was in the air when Nevada flung the Hoak door wide and catfooted through it. A machine gun's wicked rattle was filling the night, but the bullets were not for them. For a moment Nevada had to blink to adjust his eyes to the darkness, and the surprise that met them. For horsemen were tearing into the plaza!

Wild horsemen, young *Penitentes*, howling like demons from hell, as they stormed the Commandante's black-uniformed guards. Men who had been waiting out in the hills behind the plateau, their smoldering hatred of the foreign interlopers gathering until now they had no fear of modern guns. Utah McClatchey, Nevada realized instantly, had given them their chance to come in by destroying the power plant on the second floor of the tower behind them. For even from here, looking down the hill over the town, he could see where a great gap had been torn in the once-electrified fence. A gap through which those wild young horsemen were still streaming.

But they were dying almost as fast as they came! The machine guns were taking a terrible toll. Nevada made a leap for a riderless horse as it raced past, caught the bridle reins, and swung to leather. Tarrant and Utah were also mounted in minutes. They came together at the base of the tower.

Above the roar of battle filling the castle courtyard, Utah howled: "Ain't nobody payin' attention to us. We can ride right out!"

Nevada Jim James laughed ringingly. "You danged old coot," he yelled, "you know we ain't goin' to do that."

"I know we oughter," Utah growled, "but these *Penitentes* are fightin' our fight, and I guess we better help 'em."

Tarrant seemed to be in complete sympathy with them, though he was wasting no time on words. His Thompson was already cracking out a steady stream of death at the Commandante's black-shirted gunners.

Old Utah's Colt boomed as they struck spurs to their mounts, racing them around the inner edge of the plaza to get behind the machine-gunners. Nevada's guns were echoing his partner's, and this was one time he had no compunctions about shooting men in the back. Men who were dying before they had time to know what hit them.

They were half around the square, where broad steps led up to a wide, arcaded verandah looking out over the plaza, when Nevada caught the glimpse of a golden Sam Browne lighted by muzzle flame coming from there.

Utah saw it, too. "They're up thar!" he shouted. "That danged Commandante and all them hombres who look like him. Pard, what we waitin' fer?"

Nevada met McClatchey's challenge by whirling his mount up steps worn smooth by countless generations of sandaled feet. A saffron-hued face, high-lighted by the muzzle blast of an automatic, loomed before him as his mount hit the tiles of the verandah. He felt lead sear his arm, as his Colt spoke. Red film covered that face immediately. Another man leaped toward the bridle reins. Nevada reared his mount. Iron-shod hoofs pawed out. The man met death screaming, his skull smashed by those striking hoofs.

It was a wicked way to kill, but he had no mercy for any of them. Men bent on destroying a nation by violence deserved this or worse. Lead creased his ribs from the shadows to the left. Nevada wing-shot the man, dropping him in a huddled heap to mingle with the shadows.

Only one of the seven who had taken refuge here on the porch was escaping. Nevada saw him leap down the steps, and race toward those waves of horsemen, and white-clad *Penitente* men out there in the plaza. Utah was beside him as they whirled their mounts down the stairs after him, and then lie reined in as Tarrant drew up alongside them. The Government man's face was bloody from a bullet crease, but he was smiling grimly, as the three of them watched a veritable wave of those yelling horsemen and white-clad townsmen seem to engulf the man.

"And that finishes things!" Utah howled. "I allus say yuh should git all the peas in a pod—and we shore got 'em this time!"

TWO hours later, with bloody *Tres Cruces* far behind them, Tarrant reined in, glancing at Nevada Jim's blood-soaked shirt. "We ought to be far enough away now to take time out to bandage your wounds," he said quietly. "It's a sorry man, I am," he went on, "that I can't take you back to Arizona with me to collect the reward the Government has offered for the capture or death of the man known as The Commandante. Boys," emotion had crept into his voice, "the United States

owes you a debt it will never be able to pay.”

“Hell,” Utah cut in, “the U.S. don’t owe us nothin’, Dick. We’d be a coupla danged pore Americans if we had to get paid for doin’ our country a good turn!”

“There’s some sheriffs and a governor or two who will hear of what you’ve done,” Tarrant said earnestly, “I can promise that much.”

Nevada Jim turned his ironic gaze on McClatchey. “Nobody’s goin’ tuh pardon a coupla old owlhooters like us, Dick,” he drawled. “We been hellin’ around too long, thumbin’ our noses at sheriffs and posses, to ever have any peace across the Line. You can collect that thar ree-ward yuh mentioned, though, in our names, if you want to do us a favor, and give it to ol’ Dan Conover’s widder. She’ll need it now a lot wuss than us. Hyar, I’ll give yuh an order, tuh make it legal, if you got a pencil.”

But Dick Tarrant seemed not to have heard him. His blue eyes were bulging from his head, as he stared at the little red leather notebook Nevada had pulled from his hip pocket. Then a yell that echoed across the canyon down which they were traveling sped from the F.B.I. man’s lips. He grabbed the notebook from Nevada Jim’s hands and leafed rapidly through it. “Good gosh, Jim,” he said hoarsely at last, “is there anything *else* you can do for your country? Next to liquidating the Commandante, this book will do more to break the hold of the Fifth Columnists on the U.S. than anything else. We’ve been trying since the start of the war in Europe to lay our hands on this book, which we knew existed. It contains the key to the secret Fifth Column code, the locations of other radio stations in the U.S., and the names and addresses of their State and District leaders.”

“Seems like that ought to be enough fer one book!” Utah drawled. “We found it underneath one of them danged furriners we shot at Dan’s. Which brings up the p’int, Jim,” he looked at Nevada, “that we didn’t lay hands on nobody who could prove tuh this here lawdog that we weren’t the ones who salivated Conover.”

Laughter shook Dick Tarrant’s shoulders. “Was that what you came all the way here to disprove,” he demanded. “Why, boys, you were cleared of that charge within an hour after you pulled out! The bullet that killed Conover was from an automatic, not one of those old cannons you boys still carry.”

Utah’s mouth fell open. “Gosh-a-mighty, then

we made this hull danged trip tuh *Tres Cruces* fer nothin’ but Dan’l’s gold!”

“Which we didn’t get none of,” Nevada put in dryly. “Fact is, we didn’t get nothin’ outta this jaunt, Utah, ‘cept a couple of bullet-scraped ribs, and a pair of hosses not as good as the ones we had to leave behind. And on top of that, I got a thirst that it’s goin’ to take leastways a keg of beer to drown!”

Tarrant was reaching for a money belt, hidden beneath his shirt. “Boys,” he said earnestly, “I haven’t got much, but it’s yours—”

“Naw,” Utah waved grandly. “We ain’t got no right tuh honest money. We’re gittin’ jist what we deserve for bein’ ornery owlhooters. No glory. No *dinero*. No nothin’. Feller, you get that hoss of yores movin’ while we stick here awhile just to make sure no trouble comes traipsin’ along the back-trail.”

“But—” Tarrant started to argue.

Utah’s old mustache bristled fiercely. His spurred heel kicked out, caught Tarrant’s mount in the rump. Squealing, the animal buck-jumped down the trail, and for the first time since they had escaped from *Tres Cruces*, Nevada saw his old partner straighten fully in his kak.

His eyes were gleaming as he reached inside the front of his shirt. “I jest had to get rid of that lawdog, Jim,” he drawled, “afore this stuff fell out all over the trail.”

“Wh—” Nevada started to say, and then he halted, and a grin started on his lips. For Utah was pulling packets of green, American money from inside his shirt. “I dunno jest how much I got here, pard,” he said apologetically, “but a drawer of that thar Commandante’s desk was full of this stuff, and I helped myself, figgering turn about wuz fair play. He stole the gold we wuz goin’ tuh lift, so I figger it was all hunky dory for us tuh lift some of his *dinero*. They’s enough here tuh pay for a good beer bust when we hit the nearest town whar the Rurales ain’t too nosey.”

Nevada caught a packet of the money as his partner passed it to him, and even in the darkness he could read the thousand-dollar mark on the top bill. “Yeah,” he said dryly. “I guess there is. ‘Course, knowin’ you had this wouldn’t have influenced that thar noble gesture about not acceptin’ the reward for salivatin’ the Commandante, would it?”

Utah McClatchey’s parched old face looked

hurt, as only a man who had ridden the owlhoot trails for forty years could look. “Why Jim,” he said gently, “that thar kid lawdog figgers you and me for heroes. You know we couldn’t spoil his delusions!”