



*The G-man's automatic answered—
once, twice, three times.*

An Invitation to Bullets

by William Benton Johnston
"Ex-Marine Kennedy"

The former leatherneck resigned officially from the F. B. I., to be free to pursue his dangerous quarry across the border. And he knew that failure meant irrevocable disgrace in Washington.

“MARINE” KENNEDY picked up the morning paper and read one paragraph of Lynn Weatin’s chatter column, which read that a certain famous G-man and former Marine officer was registered at the Hollywood, perhaps there to break into pictures or to bring

orchids to his favorite cinema star and perhaps not; that, any rate, various and sundry people had better check up and see if any of their sins happened to be Federal offenses.

Kennedy grinned at the vagaries of newspaper scribes. If he had been trying to avoid publicity, every paper in Los Angeles

would have been eager to tell of his arrival; as it was, he had had to give Lynn Weatin fifty dollars to run this meager paragraph.

The G-man left his room and went down to the lobby.

“Anything for Kennedy in twelve-o-six?” he asked the clerk.

The man at the mail window said, “Nothing today, sir,” and Kennedy turned to let a quick glance flash over the lobby. A small, dark man seated in a nearby chair lowered his paper with feigned indifference, but the tenseness of his body betrayed him to the trained eyes of the G-man.

Kennedy strolled leisurely across the lobby, aware without a backward glance, that the small, dark man followed him. He stepped into a taxi, and as the cab pulled away, saw that the small man stood for a moment in the doorway and then turned quickly back into the hotel.

“Go around the block and let me out at the employees’ entrance,” Kennedy directed the driver.

A doorman blocked his way, at the rear entrance.

“Employees, only,” he explained. “Go around to—”

Kennedy showed his shield.

“I want to get up to the twelfth floor by the servants’ elevator.”

“Yes, sir,” the doorman said. “Right this way, sir.”

Kennedy fitted the key noiselessly into the lock of his bedroom and slipped inside. The room was disordered by a hasty search. Papers, which he had purposely left accessible, were scattered about. From the living room a voice babbled:

“I’ve been through the Fed’s papers. Get the boys together at Bender’s Garage in ten minutes. Hurry; the G-men are coming.”

Kennedy pushed open the door.

“Hold it, Paul Revere,” he said grimly.

The small, dark man dropped the telephone, yanked at his automatic and leaped

back. Kennedy flipped out his own .38, but had no chance to use it. The little man staggered over a waste basket, lost his balance, took another long, running step backward, crashed through the screen and fell, headlong, out the open window.

By the time Kennedy crossed the room, the man was a dark streak, tumbling grotesquely over and over as he plummeted toward the street below, his scream of death rising in a thin, sirenlike wail of terror.

The sudden tragedy left Kennedy cold and unmoved. He knew that this man was connected with the ruthless gang which had perpetrated so many crimes that each of its members were on the F.B.I. wanted list, yet so elusive that not one of these mobsters could be named.

Kennedy had followed their trail over the entire Southwest and lost it in El Paso. The only definite thing he knew was that the big shot of the gang lived somewhere along the West Coast and that, after a job, the mobsters found sanctuary below the Rio Grande. With these slim leads, he had come to Los Angeles—and discovered nothing. Then the scheme of advertising his presence in Hollywood and a chance that the mob leader might send his henchmen to check up. It had worked; one of the gang had been practically in Kennedy’s hands.

“And the clumsy fool had to fall out a window,” the G-man muttered in disgust “Now I’ve completely exposed my hand, and where am I?”

A sudden thought hit him like a blow. “Get the boys together at Bender’s Garage in ten minutes,” the little man had said.

Kennedy snatched up the telephone directory: Bender’s Garage was at Redon Road and Prospect. The big G-man hurried down to a taxi.

“Redon Road and Prospect,” he snapped, “and ten extra if you break some records.”

THE TAXI came to a screeching stop for the traffic of Redon Road. Across the street, Kennedy saw the sign BENDER'S GARAGE, and as he looked, five men sprang into a green sedan and pulled away from the entrance. Something instantly told the G-man that this was the gang he sought. If his guess was wrong....

"Follow that green sedan," he told the driver in a quick, snap-judgment decision.

In the dense traffic, the driver of the green car had no chance against the veteran at the wheel of the taxi and soon the cab was nosing the back bumper of the sedan.

The two cars roared through Newmark, Whittier and Norwalk. Between Buenapark and Anaheim, they struck a sparsely settled stretch of road. Kennedy, watching closely, saw one of the men on the rear seat of the sedan turn and raise the glass of the back window.

"Pull over to the curb and duck under the cowl—quick!" he yelled at the driver.

The cabman obeyed the command instantly, just as the blunt nose of a Tommy-gun was thrust through the opened rear window of the sedan. The shots came in a wild, staccato burst. Two slugs ripped through the taxi windshield, one snarled off a fender and another plowed along the body with a harsh, tearing sound. Then the gun was silent, and the green sedan sped down the boulevard.

The cab driver cautiously raised his head above the seat and looked at Kennedy reproachfully.

"What the hell?" he demanded, brushing glass splinters off his coat.

"Maybe this will help you figure it out," Kennedy held up his shield.

"Okay, Mister Hoover," the driver exclaimed. He jerked the cab away from the curb and shoved the accelerator to the floor.

They sighted the green sedan again just beyond Santa Ana and Kennedy grunted with satisfaction when it turned south to the open highway.

"They're making for the border," he told the driver, "that sedan is probably a fortress of armor plate, bullet-proof glass and puncture-proof tires; but they've got to stop somewhere for gas. Then we'll get them."

"I'll bet that boiler has a fifty-gallon tank," the driver reminded him, "and don't forget that them five mugs have got machine guns—be sure and don't forget that, mister."

Kennedy grinned and said: "Go on; step on it There's fifty bucks in this for you."

By the time they sped through Paularino, a mist had begun to fall, and when they reached San Juan Capistrano, it had turned into a downpour. The green sedan was faster than the cab, but skillful, daredevil driving made up for that. The difficulty lay in staying close enough to keep the sedan in sight, and yet beyond the range of the guns inside. Once the green car came to an abrupt halt, and as the taxi approached, a Tommy-gun opened up. The cab shot backward in reverse under a hail of steel. Out of range, the cab stopped.

Two of the mobsters leaped out of the sedan and came along the highway, their guns spitting orange flame into the murkiness.

"Stay here," Kennedy ordered through tight lips, and dodged along the shoulders of the road to meet the men. The range was too great for the clumsy weapons they carried and the G-man's bold advance was too much for rats who knew nothing of such courage. Kennedy whipped two shots from his automatic at them; then they turned hurriedly back to the sedan and sped away.

The cab had to stop for gas at San Onofre, but the superior driving of the taxi-man brought the green car into sight again just before it turned from the main highway at Las Flores and sped eastward across the AT&SF tracks.

"They've lost their way," the cab driver yelled at Kennedy. "I was raised down here—this stretch of pavement goes along with the railroad over the range, then ends."

"What, do you mean—ends?"

“Just stops off,” the driver replied laconically, “and a dirt road begins.”

Kennedy was thoughtfully silent for a moment, then asked:

“Any hard-surfaced roads between here and the end of the pavement?”

“Not a one.” Comprehension came suddenly to the driver. “Look,” he exclaimed, “with all this rain, that heavy sedan can’t take a dirt road—”

“Exactly,” Kennedy interrupted. “The gang is bottled up; we’ll grab them this time.”

“Yeah,” the driver agreed dryly, “we’ll grab ’em all right, but the thing that’s worrying me is what the hell we’ll do with ’em after we grab ’em.”

“Leave that to me,” Kennedy told him grimly, “and keep on the tail of that sedan. There’s another fifty in it for you.”

THEY roared toward the mountains; sometimes the green sedan was in sight, sometimes it was not. In the foothills, they shot over a rise, and the driver shouted “Hell!” slammed on his foot brakes, and grabbed the emergency.

A narrow bridge spanned a deep canyon just ahead, and on the bridge, its radiator and front wheels jammed into the railings, was a wrecked truck. The cab tires screamed along the wet pavement, then slipped. The taxi swerved half around, swung back with a sickening lurch and crashed into the truck.

Kennedy leaped out just as a fat, excited and perspiring Italian, so incoherent that his gestures were no longer eloquent, bore down on them from across the bridge.

“They—they,” he panted, “stoppa me. They taka my truck. They start it once again and step out. It smash into bridge big. They point at me weeth a—weeth a—”

“Tommy-gun,” the cab driver supplied wearily. “Hell, they shot at us with ’em. Come on; let’s get this bridge cleared.”

They worked swiftly, yet a full half hour passed before the truck and cab were

separated and the truck pushed off the bridge and to one side.

The driver stepped into the battered cab and touched the starter. The motor hummed smoothly.

“Let’s go,” Kennedy rapped. “Step on it”

They swerved over the tortuous road and finally crested the grade. Below lay the flatlands. Railroad and highway wound down the mountain, then, black and shiny in the rain, ran straight across the desert like dark, parallel lines on a map of drab, gray paper. Five miles ahead lay the one-frame building and water tank of Palermos Station; beyond that, the emptiness of the desert.

In all that vast panorama, Kennedy’s eyes found only one moving object: a short freight train that rushed westward along the rails, halfway between Palermos and the mountains, its smoke, in the damp atmosphere, hanging back across the cars like a heavy, white banner.

The cab skidded around the last hairpin curve and straightened out, hitting sixty, seventy, eighty—and Palermos grew larger with startling rapidity. Kennedy saw that a gravel road left the pavement and circled the depot.

“Have a look,” he shouted to the driver. “They may be hiding behind that station.”

The cab hit the gravel and swung around Palermos, but there was no sign of activity there. The weather-beaten depot, the water tank and the side track with its wooden loading platform, all lay lifeless in the rain.

“They’ve gone on,” Kennedy said tersely. “We’ve got them bottled up now.”

The G-man made his plans of attack as the cab sped on. His eyes were cold, yet lighted with a flare of exaltation. The enemy was trapped, cornered, out-manuevered. The fact that he faced five-to-one odds of a superior armed force meant less than nothing. There would be a hellish storm of lead—but then Marines had an appetite for bullets. He remembered when his handful of Marines had

driven a whole army of blacks across Haiti, only stopping when their ammunition was exhausted. Then, when the natives had turned on their pursuers, the G-man recalled with a tight grin, how he and his men had rooted them with bayonets—and nerve.

“Pavement ends over that grade just ahead,” the driver called tersely.

“Stop, get out and let me have the wheel,” Kennedy ordered. “I’ll go in as close as the choppers will allow, then duck under the cowl and crash them; that will put me in close for the shooting.”

“You do the shooting, and I’ll do the driving,” the cab man said without turning his head. “I’ll earn my dough.”

“Good boy,” Kennedy shouted.

THE G-man crouched against the door, one hand on the handle, the other gripping his automatic. The cab zoomed over the slight rise and the driver’s gasp of dismay came in a sharp, whistling intake of breath. Before them was a hundred yards of concrete; beyond that, the desert—nothing more. The green sedan was nowhere in sight, nor were there any tire marks in the soft mud at the end of the pavement.

The driver braked his cab and stared stupidly.

“That heavy boiler couldn’t go ten feet from the pavement in this mud,” he muttered. “And not a road or trail off the highway anywhere except at Palermos. Listen, a big sedan can’t just disappear into thin air.”

“The hell it can’t; this one did,” Kennedy snapped angrily. “Let’s get back to Palermos and to a telephone. It won’t do any good to sit here and stare at a desert.”

Back at Palermos, Kennedy, with the cab driver close at his heels, went into the station and flung open the office door. On the floor lay a huddled figure. The G-man stooped to make a hasty examination of the inert form.

“It’s the station agent,” the driver whispered hoarsely. “Is he—is he—”

“Yes,” Kennedy replied grimly, “he’s dead.” He rose and looked about the room, his eyes cold and hard. “This somehow ties up with the mob in the green sedan—they’re instinctive killers.”

Suddenly the metallic clicking of a telegraph instrument filled the room with a constantly repeated set of signals.

“Call letters of a station—this station, where only one man could take the message or send one, and he’s dead, and there’s no telephone,” the G-man reasoned bitterly.

“I wonder where the engine crew is,” the cab driver said.

“Engine crew?”

“I just remembered—the railroad keeps a pusher here, a heavy duty engine to help long freights over the divide.”

Kennedy stared at the man, his eyes narrowed to mere slits.

“And I suppose they also keep two or three empty freight cars at this loading platform, huh?”

“They usually do,” the driver admitted.

“I’m beginning to see what happened to that sedan,” the G-man said slowly. “Let’s have a look outside.”

The excited driver followed him to the wooden loading platform. Across it were fresh tire prints, made plainly visible by mud from the gravel road.

“Holy crickets,” the driver cried, “they loaded the sedan into a freight car and—”

“That’s it,” Kennedy agreed, “when the mob found that the pavement ended, they figured that the wrecked truck would hold us at the bridge for a while; so they drove back here, captured the train crew and made them hitch the engine to the empties on this side track. They attached the caboos for a blind and headed back toward the coast. The station agent probably put up a fight or tried to use his telegraph, and they let him have it”

“What is the next station to the west?” the G-man asked abruptly.

“Meldron,” the driver replied, “it’s over

the mountains.”

“Let’s go,” Kennedy snapped.

When they pulled into Meldron, there was an excited crowd milling about the depot.

“Half an hour ago,” a bystander explained, “the switch engine from Palermos pulled in here, took the siding and a green sedan rolled out of one of the cars, shot across the loading platform, down the ramp and up to the highway. The engine crew say that a bunch of men drove into Palermos, threw guns on them an—”

“I know,” Kennedy interrupted. “Has anyone telephoned ahead to stop the car?”

“Tried to, but these fellows must have stopped soon as they were out of sight and cut the wires. They won’t get away, though, because two deputy sheriffs were here and they lit out after ’em. They’ll catch ’em sure as shooting.”

“Hope they don’t,” Kennedy said grimly. “If they do, it will be sure as shooting, all right.”

He leaped back into the cab.

“We’ve got to get beyond the cut in those wires and get a message through to block the road,” he told the cab driver.

A mile out of Meldron, Kennedy saw the dangling ends of severed telegraph wires.

“Stop at the next station,” he ordered.

“Twenty miles on,” the driver replied.

His foot bore down and the needle climbed higher and higher. The cab screamed around a sharp curve and almost crashed into a crumpled heap of wreckage in the center of the road.

KENNEDY leaped out and ran to the overturned car. He saw that windshield and body were bullet-riddled, and his first glance told him that one of the men inside was dead. The other opened his eyes and stared at the G-man.

“We came around the curve,” he gasped. “They had stopped and we were right on them when the machine-guns opened up. They—I

heard one of ’em say—‘wet Thursday—or wets meet Thursday at way son Lind’s.’ I couldn’t—”

The man coughed and crimson foam bubbled from his lips. Suddenly he shuddered and his head fell limply to his chest. Kennedy examined him quickly and shook his head.

“Both dead—we shove off,” he told the cab driver.

Five miles farther on, the driver yelled: “Look!” and jammed on his brakes. Ahead, parked on the highway shoulder, was the green sedan.

As the cab drew nearer, it became obvious that the mob car was deserted, but across the road from it lay the still and huddled figure of a man.

Kennedy pushed open the cab door and had a look.

“The mob stopped this poor guy by pretending tire or motor trouble, then blasted him and took his car. Now,” he added disgustedly, “we don’t need a telephone; we don’t even know the make or type of car they’re driving. But we do surmise that they’re headed for the border. So turn her nose south—and full speed ahead.”

The driver followed instruction recklessly, but it was a long time before they roared through San Diego, down past National City and to the border station above Tia Juana.

The border patrol could offer no clue: cars and pedestrians had passed during the afternoon—all passports had been in order.

“That’s that,” Kennedy said looking across toward the Mexican towns of Tia Juana and Agua Caliente. “This is where my authority ends.”

He gave the taxi driver an order on the Department of Justice for damages to the cab and for expenses of the trip, shook hands warmly with the man and bid him good-by.

After the battered cab had gone, the G-man suddenly remembered the words of the dying man, and he asked a border-patrol officer if the words could possibly have any

significance.

The officer thought a moment; then his eyes lighted with sudden understanding, and he said: "Why, yes—you didn't hear the words right. The man was trying to tell you of a Chinese merchant, Wey Sun Lin, in Ensenada."

Without the least hesitancy, Kennedy immediately wrote a letter of resignation to his chief, mailed it in a heavy manila envelope together with his shield. Then he applied for a passport. ...

An hour later, he was heading west along the border toward the Mexican port of Ensenada. He felt his muscles tighten with an old-time thrill. He was a Marine on foreign soil again—and trouble in the wind! The mob might have evaded Kennedy, the Federal agent; but Kennedy, the Marine, was still on the trail—and the whole wide world was within his jurisdiction.

THE G-MAN found Wey Sun Lin's place of business in the squalor and dark, narrow streets of "Old Town," far removed from the modern section of Ensenada. The building was adobe, with a long wooden shed in the rear. The front room was a combination bar, cafe and grocery. The former Marine went inside and ordered a bowl of hot rice wine.

Slowly sipping the saki, his eyes photographed every detail of the place. In the back of the room, dirty curtains hung over an opening, which was obviously a passage to the wooden shed. As Kennedy watched, men moved surreptitiously in and out through the opening.

The G-man finished his wine, stretched lazily and strolled to the back of the room. He pushed aside the soiled curtains and found before him a heavy, iron-studded door. He put out his hand to push it open, and immediately a tall Chinese stepped out of the alcove shadows.

"Solly—plivate," the Oriental said, softly.

"I thought maybe there was a fan-tan game going on," Kennedy explained. "I've got a few dollars to lose."

"Stlictly plivate," the Chinese repeated. "Velly solly."

Kennedy turned away, crossed the room and went out into the streets. He strolled leisurely around Wey Sun Lin's establishment, then went back to his hotel....

That night he stood in the dark shadows across the street from Wey Sun Lin's building and watched the motley crowd which moved furtively in and out the place. Suddenly his pulse leaped, for five men, well dressed and with snap-brim hats pulled low, went through the entrance—the men who had been in the green sedan.

So the dying man's words did connect with the gang: "Wets meet Thursday at Wey Sun Lin's." That would be tomorrow night. Kennedy knew that, in the parlance of smugglers, "wets" meant Chinese waiting to be carried illegally across the border. So that was it. The pieces of the puzzle fitted together in his mind, and a thin, frosty smile touched his lips.

He walked along the street parallel to the shed of Wey Sun Lin's, and where the shadows were blackest, the government agent suddenly darted across to the wall. The street was deserted, and along the building, it was pitch dark. Slowly with his ear pressed to the planks, the G-man moved along the wall

Presently he heard the faint murmur of conversation. He crouched closer to the wall, trying to make out the polyglot words spoken inside the shed. Intent upon this, his first intimation of danger was the cold, hard barrel of a revolver pressed gently, but firmly, against his spine.

His muscles tightened to wheel, but three Chinese words spoken in a soft, sibilant whisper stopped him.

"So what?" he demanded.

There was no reply, but expert, unhurried hands traveled over his body, removing the

.45 from his hip and the .38 from his shoulder sling.

"Move quietly to the street, turn to the left. Walk slowly along, and no harm shall come to you."

Kennedy obeyed. At the end of the block there was a frame building, dark and apparently deserted.

"Open the door and go inside," the voice whispered.

The G-man heard the door close behind him. A match flared, touched the wick of an oil lamp, and the room with its closely drawn shades was lighted with a yellow glow. Kennedy's captor stood before him, a small Chinese, dapper in well-cut clothing and holding a heavy revolver alertly.

"Perhaps," he suggested suavely, "you would care to tell me why you were snooping around Wey Sun Lin's."

KENNEDY regarded the man speculatively. He was not a guard at Wey Sun Lin's, or he would have taken his prisoner inside that place for examination. Kennedy looked into the steady, jade-green eyes and decided to tell the truth. The Chinese listened without a vestige of change on his impassive features.

"Here in Old Town Ensenada one does not believe the first stories of strangers," he said amiably when Kennedy had finished, "yet I believe you implicitly." He returned the G-man's automatics. "I believe that we have a great deal in common; that we can work together with mutual benefits, if you can agree to continue to be a special agent incognito and forget about your obligations to the immigration division."

"Explain that," Kennedy said bluntly.

"My name is John Lung. I am here in the interests of a certain San Francisco tong, which furnished money to assist my countrymen in illegal entry to the United States. Here at Wey Sun Lin's, Chinese, waiting to cross the border, contact the men

who are to act as their escorts. A certain gang has been handling men for us by boat, landing them on the California coast. One half of the fee is paid when my countrymen go aboard ship, the other when they are landed upon American soil. This fee is high, and one half represents a considerable sum. Of late, with this mob that I have mentioned, many mysterious disasters have occurred. The ship leaves Ensenada, but does not arrive at its destination."

"Lost at sea?" Kennedy asked.

The other man shrugged.

"It is easy," he said wearily, "for small craft such as ply this trade to sail under one name, paint out the lettering while at sea and change to the registered name of the boat."

"But the men aboard, the Chinese?"

John Lung shrugged again.

"These men who handle the passage—these five Americans—were in Wey Sun Lin's tonight, weren't they?" Kennedy hazarded.

John Lung's slitted eyelids drooped almost shut.

"Yes," he admitted.

"And your countrymen meet these five men tomorrow night to begin their dangerous journey?" the G-man continued.

There was a faint flicker on Lung's inscrutable face.

"You are well informed," he said. "Yes, my countrymen leave Wey Sun Lin's back door tomorrow night at eight and—"

There was a slight noise outside, and the little Oriental snuffed out the lamp with one quick movement of his hand.

"Quiet, be perfectly still," he whispered. "This house of mine has been watched all day; we should not have come here."

He crept across the room, and Kennedy heard him quietly open the front door. For a moment he was silhouetted against the faint light from outside, and in that moment there came to Kennedy's alert ears the soft plop of a silenced pistol. John Lung staggered, sighed deeply and crumpled down in the doorway.

Kennedy crawled across the floor and ran his hand over Lung's chest; the hand came away sticky with blood. He touched the man's pulse. There was a weak flutter—then stillness.

Lying prone, the G-man knew that he offered no target for the hidden gunman, so he pulled himself across the lifeless Chinese and out to the porch. But the slight sounds of his passage were heard.

There was a sudden stab of flame through the darkness, and another muffled cough of the silenced pistol. The G-man's reaction was almost instantaneous, and even as a slug brushed his shoulder, the automatic in his hand covered the flare of the other weapon and sent an answering fire—once, twice, three times.

A scream of mortal agony rose to blend with the shots and smash the furtive stillness of the night Kennedy sprinted forward, risked striking a match and looked down at the pain-twisted face of the fallen man. He was one of the mobsters from the green sedan.

Cries of alarm sounded, and there was the noise of running feet along the narrow alleys of Old Town. Kennedy dropped the match and ran westward toward the modern city. At the next intersection he paused a moment to listen to the uproar behind him, then walked quietly and unhurriedly to his hotel.

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, at eight o'clock, a quiet procession came out of Wey Sun's shed: two white men and nine Chinese. The whites led the way, and the Orientals followed single file. Not a word was spoken as they passed along the unlighted streets and took the narrow, mesquite-bordered trail to Point Banda. And all the time that the group moved silently along, Marine Kennedy, his face and hands stained a deep brown, and wearing the traditional loose trousers, blouse and skull cap, followed them like a shadowy phantom.

Somewhere along the trail, the rearmost

Chinese became suddenly aware of a tall figure at his side. The Oriental tried to cry out; but the handle of a heavy knife smashed against his temple, and he crumpled to the ground. Without a backward glance at the fallen man, Kennedy bolstered his knife and fell into line.

The G-man joined in the huddle that gathered around the two white men when the party reached the beach. In the cove before them, a ship's boat waited.

A challenge in Spanish was answered in English.

"Okay," one of the white men said tersely, "signal the *Yucatan*."

The Mexican boatman lighted a small fire, let the blaze flare up, then stamped out the flames. Immediately the red and green lights of a vessel showed far out in the bay; showed for a single moment—then darkness again.

In five minutes, the Mexican boatman had the eight Chinese, the two mobsters and Marine Kennedy in the boat, and the Baja coast was receding into the darkness. As the boat drew alongside the *Yucatan*, lights flashed on and off again and Kennedy saw two men at the rail.

"One down last night and four here," he muttered exultantly under his breath, "That accounts for all of them."

"Over the stern, one at a time," a harsh voice ordered.

Rough hands searched Kennedy and each of the Orientals as they came aboard, and the G-men breathed a sigh of relief when they did not find the heavy knife strapped to the calf of his right leg. He was herded along with the Chinese, into the cabin, and the door was immediately shut and locked. The Mexican boatmen cast off and palled toward the distant shore, and anchor chain rattled and the engines of the *S. S. Yucatan* came to life.

Inside the locked cabin, the excited Chinese huddled together in a frightened group, while Kennedy groped through the darkness and inspected the prisonlike place.

The strong door was securely locked, and every porthole was covered with heavy shutters and fastened from the outside. It was suffocating and hot in the close; airless quarters, where the odor of sweating, unwashed Orientals turned the G-man's stomach. When he could stand it no longer, he took the razor-sharp knife from its bolster and cut through one of the floor planks, taking out a section two inches wide and twice as long. Lying flat on his stomach, he pressed his face against this small opening and gulped in the air from the shallow hold of the schooner. The foulness of bilge water and burning gas fumes was in that air, but it was sweet and fresh to the lungs of the G-man after the stench of the cabin.

Lying there on the cabin floor, the G-man chuckled softly.

"A man learns a lot in the Marine Corps," he thought. Once old Sergeant Wiley and his Devil Dogs got hopelessly lost in the Philippine jungles, and, harassed on all sides by natives, it had seemed a desperate situation. But the shrewd old sergeant took a long chance, surrendered to the Filipinos and let them march his men to their village. Then, with one bold stroke, he had overpowered the guards, recaptured the lost Springfields, routed the Filipinos and made the chief a prisoner, later forcing a native guide to escort them and their captives out of the maze of swamps.

Kennedy was now using that same old trick. He had lacked the authority to bring this gang out of Mexico, but was letting them bring him out.

AN HOUR passed; then door hinges creaked, there was a muffled phlop of something thrown into the cabin and a crash of the door being slammed shut again. The huddled Chinese cried out in piteous alarm, and Kennedy, turning away from the hole in the floor, caught a whiff of an unmistakable odor.

"Gas," he muttered and crushed his nose

back to the hole, cupping his hands tightly around his face.

The next half hour was a hideous nightmare. Cool air came up from the hold to the G-man's lungs, but all about him were the wails, struggles and groans of dying men. They staggered over his prostrate body, beating the walls with their fists, coughing out their wretched lives—and all the while, the smooth engines of the *Yucatan* beat steadily on.

Finally the men struggled no more, coughed no more, and the silence of death descended on the cabin. After an age of waiting, the door opened and a man dashed down into the cabin and rushed out again.

"All over," Kennedy heard him shout. "Open the ports."

Shutters were flung open, and cool sea air swirled in, driving out the deadly gas fumes. But still the G-man lay with his face thrust against the small hole in the floor.

It was another hour before the engines of the schooner abruptly stopped. With all lights extinguished, she lay for a while, rocking on the long, even swells. Then the mobsters came down to the cabin and began their gruesome task of lugging inert bodies to the deck. Kennedy felt rough hands lift him, drag him up the short hatchway and dump him to the deck floor. Weights were wired to his body; then he was lifted over the rail, his fingers surreptitiously and frantically untwisting the wire even as he was dropped to the water. He hit with a resounding splash and went swirling down through the green depths.

Panic tried to overthrow his reason, but with desperate calm, the G-man held himself steady and continued to work at the wires. Down and down he went. Then, the last strand was untwisted, and he shot up.

With lungs almost bursting, he came to the surface and grinned when he saw that he was alee the vessel's hull. The *Yucatan* was a low schooner, and, under cover of the next splashing body, Kennedy swam to the prow

and clung to the raised anchor. Another splash, and he clambered up the anchor and onto the deck. The cabin and darkness protected him from view of the crew working aft at their gruesome task.

Kennedy moved across the flat deck and took shelter under a tarpaulin covering rope and tackle piled just forward the cabin. There was a final splash, the ship's engines began to beat again. The *Yucatan* moved, steadily gathered speed as it sped on northward.

For a while Kennedy lay under the tarpaulin and shivered in the cold night air, then began exploring the heap of tackle piled around him. Presently his groping fingers touched something that made him grunt in quick surprise. Hurriedly he pushed aside coiled ropes and miscellaneous gear to discover a heavy machine gun mounted on a tripod. Expertly his fingers ran over the gun and found it in working order, the big drum filled with cartridges.

THE HOURS OF NIGHT ran slowly on their course, and gray dawn touched the sea before the engines of the *Yucatan* slowed. Kennedy peered out from his place of hiding and saw the California coast ahead, mountains rising high and dark in the coming light. Along the shore was a dilapidated wooden wharf, and standing on the rotting planks were four men in back of whom was parked a powerful, low-swung sedan.

Kennedy, as the schooner drew nearer, recognized one of the men.

"Manny Kescott," he whispered softly. "Three years the F.B.I. has watched you squeeze out of jams with your crooked political backing and pardon-and-parole rackets, but this time you've slipped. Shrewd, elusive Manny Kescott—now I know the head of this mysterious gang."

The *Yucatan* warped gently into dock; lines were thrown and made fast.

"Got the dough?" Manny Kescott shouted.

"Yeah," the thug at the wheel replied.

"And the China boys?"

"Gone to join their illustrious ancestors."

"Then they must have descended from fish," dryly observed another mobster in the stern.

A roar of laughter greeted this sally, and the men lowered and crossed the *Yucatan's* short gangplank.

Manny Kescott waved them toward the car.

"Leave the old schooner here to rot," he ordered, "and let's get up to L. A. and cut the swag."

"What about the old rapid-firer in the prow?" one thug asked.

"Leave that, too," Manny told him impatiently. "We've got—"

Kennedy whipped the tarpaulin off the machine gun and swung its blunt nose to cover the group.

"Hold it!" he snapped. "Get your hands up, every one of you—quick!"

For a moment the mob stood frozen in their tracks, then one of the hoods swung the chopper cradled in the crook of his arm. Without the least hesitation, Kennedy sent a hail of steel-jacketed lead ripping and tearing through his body. Another torpedo yanked at his automatic, and Kennedy shifted the spitting gun to drop him, kicking grotesquely, to the wharf.

"Next!" the G-man yelled.

But the others did not move. Kennedy smiled thinly.

"Drop your rods to the wharf," he ordered briskly.

Sullenly they obeyed.

"About face," came the next order, and when they had turned: "Forward march, twenty steps—count 'em off."

Carefully the men made the twenty steps and stopped.

KENNEDY abandoned his machine gun, leaped ashore and picked up one of the fallen choppers.

“Now—back twenty steps,” he barked. “No—don’t turn around, back up—and make it slow.”

The line of mobsters moved slowly back to the wharf.

“Pick up that guy, Manny,” Kennedy said sharply, and when the fat gangster hesitated, sent a short burst of steel snatching at his ankles. Manny Kescott, his face ashen with fear and his eyes like those of a trapped rat, lifted the wounded mobster and slung the bloody form across the shoulders of his expensive suit.

“You in the gray coat,” Kennedy barked like a drill sergeant, “lift that other punk.”

The man in the gray coat obeyed with alacrity.

“Now,” Kennedy ordered, “fall in and make it snappy. You first, Manny; you next, Gray-coat. The others file in behind them. Up the path to the highway—march!”

“But the car—we can ride. . . .” Manny Kescott wailed.

“Forget it,” Kennedy told him. “Get going, punks.”

The hot morning sun came over the Sierra Santa Ana range to a queer sight. The line of scared, sweating gangsters marched single file up the rough trail at double-quick, and back of them came the bedraggled, but swaggering, G-man—the former Marine—beating time with a Tommy-gun, to the song he silently sang in his thoughts:

“From the halls of Montezuma to
the shores of Tripoli,

We fight our country’s battles, on
the land and on the sea.

First to fight for right and freedom
and to keep our honor clean,

We are proud to claim the title,
United States Marine.”