

ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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Cover by Marshall Frantz

Illustrating Señor Flatfoot

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In an instant the bandits had Toby trussed up with agonizing efficiency



Black Sky Before Sunset

Fly low, Toby Wayne. Down in the valley there's a committee of welcome waiting—composed of a politely savage Mexican bandit, a thorny Scottish engineer, and a ton of slay-as-you-go dynamite

By LOUIS C. GOLDSMITH

Author of "Medals for Madmen," "He Flies Through the Air," etc.

TOBIAH WAYNE was quartering northwesterly over a deep, rock-walled canyon of the Sierra Madres when his engine quit. On the vaguely drawn Mexican map the canyon looked like a frayed raveling, gathering from many small gorges into a tiny, wrinkled thread and abruptly ending nowhere.

But Toby was used to Mexican maps and their vagarities. He'd been fighting them, and other things, for the last two years. The other thing had him whipped; completely whipped.

It was fuel trouble. The big radial of his Norford highwing didn't stop dead, as it would have with ignition trouble.

He shifted tanks, checked fuel pressure, worked the altitude adjustment; but his chief interest was the country below. There was only one place to land. That was on

a narrow bench, slightly raised from the floor of a side canyon. If he got in there, he thought, it would be more a matter of good luck than good flying.

The engine sputtered feebly for a dozen turns of the prop and stopped. Toby cut his switches. He wanted that engine as cold as possible. A forced landing and a crackup with a hot engine is bad form—very bad form if you have gasoline in the tanks.

Stalling, his wheels barely clearing a mesquite clump, he dragged the stick clear back, toed down on the brakes. He landed with them half set, and rode them as hard as he dared. At that he had to ground-loop at the far end to keep from running off the bench.

He found the trouble in short time—as soon as he had walked through the forward, four-seat passenger cabin, the big freight compartment aft of it and around outside to the nose. A stream of gasoline, the size of two fingers, gushed through cowling louvers.

He leaped back inside and closed the selector valve. He couldn't have moved faster if that gasoline were his own life blood. As a matter of fact, that's just about what it represented. Service stations on the backbone of the Mexican Sierras are few and far between. A man can starve to death twice trying to find one.

Having stopped the gasoline flow, Toby walked a safe distance from his ship and lighted a cigarette. Looking at his homely, sun-and-wind blackened face, you wouldn't know that he'd just stopped ten feet short of rolling over a thirty-foot outcropping bluff. This wasn't because Toby was an insensitive animal, or a man of iron nerves. It was merely that he had been slapped down so many times in the last two years that he was getting used to it.

He stood up and flipped his cigarette in the general direction of a lizard that had been studying him with beady, unblinking eyes. Tobiah Wayne was a big man; so very big that in the Flying Cadet corps they had called him "Tiny!"

"No use cryin' over spilt milk," he ob-

served tritely and went into the freight compartment to get his tool roll.

HE GOT the safety pins out of the cowling and took that off. He examined the broken feed line and something very near to emotion came into his brown eyes. He looked at the bottom cowling. "Rifle bullet," he commented. "Right through the settling bowl."

He swore softly and climbed up on the wing to sound his tanks. The left wing tank was intact, fifty-seven gallons; the main center-section tank had fifty minutes of gas in it; the right, as he already knew, was empty. He got busy removing the feed lines for repair.

Toby had them laid out on the ground and was gathering dry mesquite wood to heat his soldering iron when he heard the rattle of shale rock.

"*Buenos días, señor.*"

There were five horsemen, and more coming. The leader wore a huge black sombrero, embroidered with tarnished silver, banded by disks of the metal, the size of peso pieces. On a smaller man it would have looked ridiculous.

"Hello," Toby answered. "I didn't know anybody lived around here."

"*Como se dice?* I no spick the English, *señor.*"

That was no hindrance. Toby had come down into Mexico two years before, with everything he had, to make good on a small airmail contract. He had studied the language until he could speak it as well as a native.

Toby repeated his words in Mexican.

The leader shrugged. "Nobody lives around here, *señor.*"

The way the words were spoken brought a quick glance from the American. This man spoke pleasantly but that was the only pleasant thing about him. The horsemen were collecting in a circle about the plane. They sat easily alert, side-slouched in their saddles. Each saddle had a booted carbine; each man carried at least one side-arm.

The black-hatted leader was making a

cigarette out of dry corn husk. He squinted upward at the afternoon sun. "I think Pedro makes one damn' good shot, eh?"

Toby wasn't exactly surprised. "One of your men shot me down?"

Black-hat chuckled. "*Si, señor.* Pedro say he think he will shoot you. We laugh at him. We have all tried such shots. Pedro aims his rifle, like this, with one hand. His horse stumbles, the rifle goes *bang—*"

"And that gives him just enough lead to hit me," Toby finished, disgusted at this quirk of fate. "Well, now that you have me down, what do you want?"

"Ah, yes." The leader blew smoke from mouth and nostrils, studying Tobiah Wayne. "Everybody wants something. Not so, *señor*? I think first I will take that gun you have."

Toby would have given him his forty-five automatic without argument. You can't argue successfully with a score of armed men. But as the bandit swung from his horse his big rowelled spur jabbed into the Norford's rudder.

The ripping of tight fabric did something to Tobiah Wayne. The essence of two years of smoldering anger boiled into his brain. He leaped and struck at the same instant. His hard-balled right fist caught the bandit between the eyes. The man dropped; the brim of his sombrero came forward, covering his swarthy face.

Toby drew his Colt and started to back up against the Norford's fuselage. That would be no protection against a bullet. His movement was pure instinct. Toby knew that he was going to die shortly.

A RIFLE butt caught him in the small of the back. He pitched forward onto his face, his automatic exploding twice as he fell. One of the men tried to force his horse to trample him. The horse rebelled, rearing and plunging. Another rifle butt came plummeting down. Toby twisted with the blow so that the metal-shod wood grazed the back of his head.

"Stop that! You, Manuel, I order you to stop. All of you." The leader spoke.

Toby played dead. It wasn't a hard thing to do. He was still groggy from the glancing blow and his back felt as though hot lead were running through his spine.

"You think you will give him an easy death?" Black-hat inquired. His boot thudded against Toby's ribs. "I don't think so. I think he will stay right here. He will get very hungry, yes. But the thirst will be much, much worse. Pretty soon the *zopilotes* will be flying nearer and nearer, watching him die. Perhaps they will begin to eat his eyes out before he is completely dead. I have seen that happen."

Toby heard them moving about the plane, heard the gurgling of water as they divided the contents of his two-gallon canteen. They took his money belt; he heard the clinking of the twenty-peso gold pieces; the satisfied chuckle of the leader as he counted them.

Toby bulged his muscles as much as he could while they bound him with rawhide thongs and threw him on the ground, face upward, and removed his hat so the afternoon slant of the sun struck him. There was little of the mid-day heat in it now, but tomorrow . . . tomorrow he would suffer the tortures of a man-made Hell. Finally the bandit leader emptied his pistol haphazardly into the Norford.

They were gone.

Toby relaxed, not trying to struggle out of the rawhide bindings. They weren't so tight, now that his muscles were relaxed.

This, Toby thought, was probably the end of his Mexican adventure. Two years before he had signed a contract with the federal government of Mexico to carry airmail and what passengers and freight he could pick up over a four-hour inland route in southern Mexico. Since then he had spent almost all of a comfortable inheritance, greasing the palms of Mexican politicians.

He had made just one try for justice from a Mexican court. It had cost him a thousand dollars gold to learn that a Mexican mechanic, once hired, must be given three months pay upon dismissal, even

though he comes to work drunk and carelessly burns up a two-thousand-dollar hangar.

Toby waited until long after dark, waited until he could feel a slight moisture of dew on his face. Dry rawhide stretches when it wets wet.

It was long past sun-up before he had his hands and arms free. The rest should have been easy, but he was almost exhausted from his night of struggling with the tough rawhide. It took him an hour to get the other knots undone and free his ankles.

Only one of the leader's bullets had done any harm to his ship. But that was plenty. A hole was drilled through the left wing tank. There was not more than an inch of gas left in it.

Toby soldered the gasoline lead pipes, splitting a larger gauge of copper tubing to sleeve the joint and by-passing the shattered glass settling bowl. He worked in an absent-minded, methodical manner. He had not much more than a half hour of flying time left in the center-section tank. A half hour would leave him still up in the high Sierras. He wouldn't be any better off there than where he was.

The sun broiled moisture from his body. He had found a few drops of water left in his canteen and had licked greedily at these. Occasionally he squinted up into the glaring sky. The *sc pilotes* were up there, as the Mexican had predicted. They were circling lower, watching his stumbling movements about the plane.

Once he stopped and looked at the tangled thongs that had bound him. He saw himself as he might have been, lying face upward, his eyelids scorching, shriveling, under the blistering beat of sun. The eyes were wide, then, naked to the sun. Buzzards made tentative, hopping advances, hooked beaks eager for those tempting tit-bits.

The black-hatted one had seen such things happen, had planned such a death for the American. Anger heated the flyer's brain at the thought, such anger that he was dizzy with it for the moment.

He put a sloppy patch on the fabric of his rudder. His eyes ached from the glare of sun. When he closed them they felt rough, as though some one had been playing marbles with them on a sandy beach.

A shadow crossed the plane. The buzzards were coming lower, gliding, soaring with the up-thrusts of heated air currents; watching him.

"Everybody wants something," Toby muttered. "They want me. Everybody wants something."

He stopped, tilting his head in a startled manner. The words seemed to repeat themselves. "I want something," he shouted at the blue, pitiless sky. He tried to keep his dry, sun-peeled lips from twitching. "I want to see that Mex hung and quartered. I want to see every Mex in the world hung and quartered!"

He was moving now like an automaton. He got into the plane and shoved the inertia starter button.

TOBY didn't try to climb up out of the main canyon. Climbing would slow him and drink too deeply of his precious gasoline. Occasionally he looked straight downward at the dry canyon bed. Once he thought he saw horsemen. But his eyes were beginning to do funny things now.

It was as though he were peering through thick glass, looking at a marine world. It was like the aquarium in Golden Gate Park. But in San Francisco they had fog, often; blessed moisture. Here there was nothing. Nothing but dry, seared mountain slopes.

He drained what little gas there was in the left tank into the main tank. He sat, cuddling the joy stick, waiting. They had taken his wristwatch and the panel clock hadn't run since the ship passed its acceptance tests.

There was no use looking at his map. That ravelling of a line that marked the canyon, was graven on his memory. The line ended abruptly. What was beyond it? Tobiah Wayne found that he wasn't greatly concerned about what was beyond. If

it was an open valley, he might get out of this. If not, those circling buzzards would have their fill of him.

Toby squinted ahead. He shut his eyes for a moment, rolling them about, as though to moisten them inside the burning sockets. He looked again. The canyon seemed to disappear. Ahead of him was a haze of distance. Beyond this the jagged outline of a mountain wall. He thought he saw trees in the foreground, buildings and a tall smokestack giving out a misty blue. The engine seemed to clear its throat.

Toby sighed and humped forward to the stick. As the engine stuttered again, sucking up the last of the gasoline and windmilled without power he eased the nose down to maintain flying speed. As though in obedience to that stick movement the canyon floor came upward to meet him. He would never make it. That round, mountain-walled valley ahead—if there really was a valley, if he wasn't imagining it—meant one final crackup.

An upblast of air struck his wings. Then he was being sucked downward toward the rock-strewn canyon floor. He held the stick back barely at flying speed, fighting for lateral balance. Suddenly he was aware of five hundred feet of clearance beneath his wheels. He was slanting down past that tall smokestack. The acrid fumes of burning wood struck his nostrils. Ahead was a flat stretch of mesa.

He eased the plane over a clump of stunted juniper and leveled off, too late. The ship struck wheels first and bounded. The thin, high-altitude air washed out from under his wings. He struck and bounced again, one wingtip slanting toward the ground. He jerked the stick back and to the left-hand corner, got the wing up. A horseman came toward him at a full, reckless run, the rider leaning forward over the saddlehorn.

Absentmindedly Toby cut his switches. As he walked slowly back through the cabin and freight compartment he heard a boyish voice calling to him in Spanish from the other side of the plane.

"That was so grand, *señor*, the way you jumped the airplane about. But why did you land here? My father does not like airplanes. I have always wanted to ride in an airplane. Where are you, *señor*?"

Toby moved slowly forward, outside the plane, reached for the slanting wing strut to steady himself. His head, where he had been struck by the rifle butt, throbbed with pain. "Everybody wants something," he said crazily, his voice high and thin. "You want an airplane ride. I wanta see every Mexican in the world hung and quartered."

The horseman had come around the tail of the Norford, and was leaning forward in the saddle to study Toby. Dark, curved brows lowered over eyes that were a deep azure. Red lips were straight in disapproval. Her skin was a tan, tinted with rose, like the early morning clouds just feeling the glow of sun behind them. A great wealth of corn-colored hair, in thick, smooth braids, was coiled low on a slender neck.

"But, *señor*, I am a Mexican. Why do you want me hung and quartered?"

Toby clung desperately to the wing strut, wondering if he had passed out while flying the canyon; wondering if this was some sort of after-death vision.

"You're not Mexican," he muttered. "Mexicans have black hair."

"But, *señor*, have you never heard of Spaniards who are not dark? My people are from Spain, but I am Mexican and am very proud to be . . . *Señor*, you are ill!"

"Hung an' quartered," Toby muttered and pitched forward onto his face. . . .

AFTER that Toby was aware of a growing bodily comfort, of lying in a wide bed between sheets and seeing faces that seemed to float in and out of his consciousness. The girl's face was there often. Once she jerked a cool glass from his hands. "No, no," she said in her husky, boy's voice, "you are a big pig. Too much water will make you sick."

Things came into focus. He was talking to a man, a tall, rangy American whose gray, clipped mustache, over a wide mouth, gave a touch of the military. He carried himself in an erect, efficient manner. Evidently the man didn't like what Toby had been saying.

"So you let some Mexican politicians fleece you and got held up by a Mexican gang and that makes all Mexicans a bunch of dogs, eh? Well, the same thing happens to your breed in the States, or any other place."

Tobiah Wayne realized that he must have been telling his misfortunes; whining about them. He felt shamed. He had never spoken of them before.

"You don't like Mexicans, and we don't like you," the man continued, his voice crisp with suppressed anger. "I've had experience with two of you boozing airplane pilots. One of them skipped out with a plane and sold it in Guatemala. I pistol-whipped the other Romeo and chased him out. It's either liquor or women or both. Now what do *you* want?"

Toby was conscious of a steady, rhythmic beat. The sound, or rather, the feeling of it, had been ticking at the edge of his mind. What did he want? Everybody wants something.

"What's that?" he asked, moving his hand in cadence with the sound.

"What? Oh. Those're mill stamps. This is the Jennings Latino-Americano mine. I'm Bob Jennings, owner."

"You're not Mexican."

The man made a quick, impatient gesture. "I'm a United States American. I came down here to make a living when the States universities started quantity production on mining engineers. Do I have to go around blattting all the time that I'm an American? What would we think of a Mexican who came up and did that in the States?"

Toby couldn't answer him, or was too tired for the effort. The room was darkening from twilight outside but he could see it was a big room, the 'dobe walls whitewashed, the wide planks of the floor

showing the velvet sheen of hand polishing. An advertising calendar hung on one wall. A man in mining clothes was crimping detonator caps on dynamite fuse.

"He's left handed," Toby commented. "Or a damn' poor powder monkey."

Jennings followed his gaze. "What d'you know about powder monkeys?"

"My father was a construction contractor," Toby explained, and went to sleep on the last word. He dreamed he was a little boy again. He was helping Pat Murry load a hole, watching him split the golden sticks of dynamite, scooping screen dirt into the hole while Pat worked the tamp rod and lectured him on the placing of shots. And then there were sounds of shots. Or it was his mother popping corn for him in a pan with a tin lid.

Toby woke up and knew from the sunshine outside his window that it must be mid-day or near that. He stared at the upper glass of the window. He got up to examine it and noticed that his wrists were bandaged, where the rawhide had cut into them in his struggles to free himself. There was a round hole in the glass, with spiderweb cracks radiating from it. A Mexican tapped at his door and came in, carrying a bottle of boiled coffee extract and some hot milk.

Toby drank the *café con leche* greedily. "I could eat a cow, hooves, horns and all," he announced. He couldn't keep his eyes off that bullet hole in the window glass.

THE Mexican looked at him, unsmiling. Evidently he understood English and, just as evidently, he had heard Toby' delirious raving about Mexicans. He motioned toward a small side room. There were towels, a wooden tank of water with a gourd dipper. The floor sloped to a center drain.

The Mexican said, in English: "Your clothes have been washed and ironed, *señor*." He motioned toward a chair where Toby's khaki breeches lay neatly over his other clothes. His flying boots were on the floor, cleaned and polished; near them his

traveling bag. "The *señorita* wishes you to know that breakfast will be ready when you have bathed and dressed."

"You speak good English," Toby commented.

"Thank you, *señor*." The boy left.

Toby sloshed water over himself with the gourd dipper. His back was stiff and his ribs tender, where the Mexican had booted them, but his head no longer troubled him. He tried to whistle. His lips felt stiff. He didn't want to whistle, anyway. "I'm as popular here as a case of smallpox," he commented aloud.

The Mexican boy came back as Toby was finishing with shaving. He led the way down a wide hall, through an immense living room with rough stone fireplace and book-lined walls. Toby could see a dining room, through glassed folding doors, but the boy led him past this into a smaller breakfast room.

Toby had finished eating his papaya, three fried eggs with ham and quantities of toast, when the girl came in. She wore a jade-green house dress. Her hair gleamed dull gold, coronet braid circling a proudly tilted head. "Good morning, Mr. Wayne."

Toby got to his feet, feeling clumsy and uncouth with his size. "Is it still morning, *señorita*?" he asked, in Spanish.

"It is past ten o'clock," she replied. "Please, Mr. Wayne, we will speak English. Or American, if you prefer. I had my university education in the States." She sat down, motioning him to be seated, looking at him with cool aloofness.

"I seem to have told my name, and everything else," Toby said. "But I don't know your name."

"Roberta Jennings," the girl told him.

"Then you're . . . Bob Jennings is . . ."

"My father. My mother was Mexican—Spanish, if you like. But she was born in Mexico."

"Listen, Miss Jennings. What I said about Mexicans yesterday . . . I'd been through a lot of tough . . ."

"Yes. I know. You feel very sorry for yourself, Mr. Wayne."

Impulsive words came to Toby's lips.

"Miss Jennings, you're beautiful; you're positively queenly that way. But I wish you'd be more human."

She stood up, her lips straight. "I was going to discuss your situation with you," she said. "It seems better, though that you speak with my father. Please wait for him in the living room."

Toby watched her exit. "Just the same," he said aloud, "I'm going to be on your hands until I get that damned Mex who kicked me. And when I do get him I'll choke his neck till he's blacker than the sombrero he wears."

Toby found Bob Jennings waiting for him in the living room. His right arm was in a silk scarf sling.

Before the flyer could speak, a Mexican came to the opened porch door, removing his sombrero with a small bow.

Jennings commanded sharply, "Come in here, Huerto."

The Mexican stood, bewilderment of American shifted his arm in the sling wincing a little as though the movement hurt him.

"You just got here from the canyon gate?"

"*Si, señor*. I see the signal flag."

"But you didn't see the Caballero Negro. What were you and your men doing last night?"

"But *señor*, we were guarding the canyon. We were—"

"Huerto, you're lying. There's only one way to get into this valley and Caballero Negro got in. I'll take care of you later Huerto. That's all."

The Mexican stood, bewilderment on his face.

"That's all," Jennings repeated sharply. He turned on Wayne as the Mexican left. "Last night," he said, "I asked you what you wanted. Now speak up."

"I want a job in your mine."

Jennings looked up, surprised. "A job? What do you know about mining?"

"I know quite a lot about powder work. If you don't need a powder monkey I'll handle a shovel along with the best mucker you've got."

"What's your game, anyway?"

Toby shrugged, "I need gasoline and food. I'm broke."

"You've got a full stomach now. I'll give you what gasoline you need to clear out of here."

Toby shook his head, slowly. "You don't understand, Jennings." He motioned toward the southeast. "I'm going to get that man if it takes me the rest of my life."

Jennings' voice was dry. "That sort of heroic talk sounds good in the movies. About what I'd expect from you. But it'd take more than *you've* got to hunt a man down in those canyons."

The two men exchanged glances. Jennings' gray eyes were hard and straight. "All right," Toby agreed, after a pause, "I'll *borrow* the gasoline from you. I'll need three barrels. I can only fill the center and right wing tanks."

"Ours is in five-gallon tins. I'll send thirty of them up right away. Goodbye, Mr. Wayne. It's only a short walk to your plane, on the mesa."

TOBY was so blind angry as he strode out to the porch that he almost stumbled over an Indian servant woman. She was scrubbing a wide, dark brown stain from the porch floor. It looked to Toby very much like dried blood.

Toby went out to his plane to wait for the gasoline. Things were queer around this place. The Jennings girl—she was so beautiful that it left a man breathless—was a bundle of contradictions. Yesterday he had taken her for a young girl, in her teens. Today, he didn't know. She certainly had a regal air about her when she was angry.

But why were they all so worked up today? Bob Jennings was positively waspish when he talked to the Mexican; sounded as though he'd like to beat the man up.

Toby pulled the lower cowl, examined the solder joint he had made. With vibration constantly working on feed lines a solder joint was bad business. But he'd

crack up rather than ask this Jennings for a piece of rubber tubing.

He saw a two-wheel Mexican cart approaching, flanked by a rider. It was the gasoline and Roberta Jennings seemed to be superintending the job.

Toby got out his chamois funnel, took the five-gallon tins handed up to him. He pretended not to see the girl.

She was in riding clothes now. From the corner of his eyes he watched the way she sat the horse. No English saddle for that girl.

"It takes a lot, doesn't it? Gasoline."

"Forty-eight an hour," Toby said, tossing an empty can off to one side.

"Gallons?"

"Naturally."

"Well, you needn't bark. It must be grand—flying."

Toby looked up to see if she was being sarcastic. Their eyes met and held. Suddenly confused, she started bending the short quirt looped over a tanned little wrist. "Mr. Wayne, I guess we haven't acted very nice this morning. Bob and I."

"Not very. What happened to your father's arm?"

"Didn't you hear the shooting? You must have! One of the peons was killed—lung shot. And Bob got his forearm grooved, dragging him inside the house."

"Hey! I thought I dreamed that. About the shots."

"Honestly?" she asked, her face changing. "But you *were* dead beat out, weren't you. Bob . . . Dad, said once that he bet you were in there hiding under the bed." She paused, studying him. "Mr. Wayne, I have a feeling we owe you an apology."

"You're right you do. What was it, bandits?"

She nodded, twisting the quirt with angry fingers. "They shot poor Juan; he didn't even have a gun."

"Did they get anything?"

"About eighteen thousand. In gold-silver transport bricks. They shot him through the lungs."

"Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"Do something!" she repeated, turning her anger on him. "Every sound horse we've got is out after them. There's only one trail they can take." She pointed to the northwest. "Bob would have gone, but he couldn't stand a hard ride with that arm. He'd just slow things up."

Toby dumped in the last tin of gas. He studied the half cup of rusty water caught by the chamois skin. "Do you know how fast this thing will fly?"

She shook her head.

"A hundred and seventy, top speed. Doesn't that spell anything to you?"

"You mean you could find them from the air?"

He snapped his fingers. "Like that. If you know what direction they went."

She pointed again. "That's the only way they could go. This place is walled in with cliffs." The first eagerness left her. "But what good would it do, just seeing them from the air?"

"That's right," Toby admitted, screwing on the gas tank caps. "If we had a machine gun, or a few strafing bombs . . ." He climbed down from the wing. He went back, absentmindedly examining the patched rudder. He would have to have a new cover job on the old hack before he could get a States NC license for it. He looked at the alphabetical Mexican identification on the wings. He had grown to hate it, a symbol of his failure.

HE HEARD the dry squeak of saddle leather and looked up as the girl moved her pony over near him. Their eyes met again, without embarrassment. "What do they call you?" he asked. "Your friends?"

"My very good friends? They call me Bobby."

He pulled his eyes from her face. Her tone had warned him. Airplane pilots craved liquor or women or both. And what did he want? He wanted to get his hands on a Mexican who . . . "Your father has dynamite, hasn't he?" Toby asked suddenly. "For the mine."

"Dynamite," she said, making a con-

temptuous gesture. "People who know nothing about dynamite think—"

He stopped her, excitement growing in him. "Sister, I know more about dynamite than you think. Send those hombres down for a case of it. And a box of detonators. No fuse. And you scoot down to the cookhouse and bring back a sack of empty cans. Half gallon or gallon size."

She knew how to take orders—and give them. The two Mexicans started their team off at a clumsy gallop. She flanked them, laying her quilt on their rumps.

"Showing off," Toby muttered, grinning. "Wonder how old she really is?" He started gathering a pile of rocks, half the size of his fist.

She carried dynamite to him from the case they had brought and opened. She watched him put a layer of the rocks in an empty, half-gallon peach can, two detonator caps on these, tamped dynamite, and more caps and rocks. Then he squeezed the can edges together. He looked up from slitting dynamite. "You clear out," he said.

"Poof! I'm not afraid of dynamite."

"Ever get a dynamite headache, sister?"

She fingered her quilt. "If you call me sister again you're going to feel this across your face."

She walked over to her horse and after awhile, when he looked up from the work, she was gone and the Mexicans had left with their men. He wished then that he hadn't been so abrupt. He felt a queer sort of loneliness. It was something like being homesick.

He had finished a dozen of the cans when Bob Jennings rode onto the mesa. "What's up?" he demanded.

Toby motioned to the northwest. "Want to take a look-see for those bandits?"

The mine owner turned from him to the case of powder. "And dynamite them?" he asked, in a hard voice. "I'd like nothing better. Can you shoot?"

"Expert pistol; Army."

"Target stuff," Jennings commented and wheeled his horse.

Toby dragged a rope from under the freight compartment tarpaulin and made the tin-can bombs and what remained of the case of dynamite secure to ring bolts. He had the motor going by the time Jennings got back with a rifle and two automatics.

"Where's Miss Jennings?" Toby inquired.

"Now look here, Wayne, don't get any funny notions about—" he stopped himself. "She's probably down at the house."

As he took off the mesa field, Jennings sitting beside him in the jump seat, Toby wondered why he was doing this. Both the mine owner and his daughter treated him as though he had leprosy. The old man got sore if he even spoke the girl's name. Why should he try to help them?

Jennings pointed to the trail leading northwest. "They'd have to stay on that for anyway sixty miles," he shouted. "Unless they want to climb one of these mountains. That wouldn't get them any place."

"When did this shooting take place?" Toby asked.

"Didn't you look at your watch?"

"My watch was stolen. Anyway I didn't hear them."

"You didn't hear them, eh?" Jennings' voice was sardonic. "Listen, Wayne, a lead man would have heard that ruckus. One of 'em even took a shot through your window."

Toby remembered that round, crack-webbed hole in the bedroom window. No wonder this man sneered at him. He didn't remember what he'd said last night in his half-conscious chatterings, but if Jennings thought he had hidden out from the gun fight that alone was enough to account for his attitude.

"All right, I heard them. I was hiding under the bed. But when did it happen?"

"Don't know exactly. Sometime before midnight."

Toby didn't know much about saddle horses. "How far would they be now?"

"Forty to sixty miles. All depends. They've got about fifteen hundred pounds of metal, remember."

TOBY climbed to higher altitude, till he was above the level of the mountains and could see into the canyons on each side. They spotted a large group of horsemen in the main canyon trail. Jennings' first excitement over these died as they rapidly overhauled the ground party. "My men," he explained.

Presently the canyon they had been following widened into the west slope of Sonora. Toby swept his hand across the spread of windshield, indicating the plain below them. Through the clear desert air they could have seen a horseman thirty miles away in any direction.

Jennings scratched his head. "We've missed them," he decided. "And if we missed them my riders'll miss them, too. That Caballero Negro's smarter than I thought."

"Caballero Negro?"

"Yeah. Their leader. He must've holed up some place along the valley edge."

"That means Black Gentleman?"

"Could mean that. But all old-time Spanish gentlemen were mounted. It's a fancy way of saying the Black Rider." Jennings made a grab for a side brace as the ship heeled over in a vertical turn. "What're you doing new?"

"He wears a black hat?"

"Yeah. Big black sombrero with a lot of fancy work on it. That's why he took the name. But how'd you know?"

Toby's mouth was grim. "That's the one who kicked me in the ribs. I think there's more than one way of getting into your valley, Mr. Jennings."

They were over the valley again. Jennings pointed to a notch in the south wall of the mountain, black cliff apron below it. "That's a waterfall in the rainy season. Better than a four-hundred-foot drop."

"Ever looked it over closely in dry season?"

Jennings' silence was an admission that he hadn't.

Toby followed the crooked line of the canyon in a zigzag course, trying to see under the overhang of rock walls. He was

surprised at the short time required to reach the east-trending side canyon where he had been forced down. Here the main gorge split into many branches. Toby made a wide circle, trying to search the branches. It was a hopeless task.

"You'll never find him in those canyons," Jennings shouted.

Toby nodded. He was sniffing the air in the cabin, frowning at the faint odor that might be only his imagination.

"We might as well go back, Wayne. But it was worth a try."

Toby had his head down low, close to the instrument board.

"What's wrong?"

Toby brought his head up from the stooped position.

"What's wrong?" Jennings demanded again.

"Get back into the cabin," Toby ordered. "Strap yourself down tight."

He turned the gasoline selector valve to "off." The engine started popping on what gas remained in the lines. Toby swung south again, toward the narrow bench where he'd had the other forced landing. He cut his switches and studied the country five thousand feet below, trying to get an indication of wind direction.

"What happened?"

Toby pointed to a damp place widening on the floor boards ahead of their feet. "Blown back from that patched feed line," he said. "Do as I told you and don't bother me."

"I'll take it here," Jennings decided.

"You're a fool if you do." Toby's voice sounded loud, with the engine dead. He tried to judge a thousand feet over the bench and brought it around for a three-sixty landing.

He held it at a moderate gliding speed, feeling the jerks of vertical air currents. A dead-stick landing takes a nicety of judgment, even in flat country.

Toby was aware of the other man sitting tensely beside him, watching his movements on the controls. He wished that Jennings would go back into the cabin. Then he dismissed Jennings from his

mind. This job would take everything he had.

HE JERKED the side window open, listening to the thin whisper of wind around the struts. He judged his last turn to come in high over the east end of the bench. A current of hot air shoved him upward. He dropped the right wing and shoved left rudder for a slip. Immediately he struck a cool, down-trending air current and flattened to save his altitude. You can always lose altitude with a side-slip, but with dead motor you can never regain it.

They were down to a hundred feet and too high to get the full length of the bench. It was short enough at best. Toby dropped the wing again, felt an upward surge and jammed the stick hard over. Air rushed through the opened side window like water into a stove-in boat. He was much too high.

He jerked the stick back, keeping it in the corner, stalling, the plane was in a nose-high side-slip. If he over-shot they'd go rolling down a thirty-foot break, a hot engine in their laps, an airplane wrapped around them. And as though that wasn't enough there was the dynamite in the freight compartment.

Twenty feet high and they were almost to the landing end of the bench. He could feel her dropping. The landing gear would never take that impact. He flattened wings, dipped the nose, leaving rudder on for a fish-tail. A quick back-jerk of stick and full opposite rudder to straighten her.

They were on the ground and stopped with fifty feet to spare. Toby felt good. He felt proud of himself. "Guess I'm beginning to learn how to fly," he said.

Jennings looked at him, not understanding the quick elation that comes to a pilot after a thing like this. "Yeah," he said. "And now what?"

Toby got out of the ship for a smoke. Jennings followed him. He grudgingly took the cigarette Toby offered. He nodded toward the plane. "That flying—must take a little of courage. I was scared blue."

"Pink. I was scared pink." Toby grinned. "You're a stubborn guy, Jennings. You always believe I hid under the bed last night. I'm going down and look for tracks. Tracks leading *out* of the main canyon."

"You still think that bunch went through there?"

Toby shrugged. "We'd be in a nice spot now if they rounded the bend down there. Twenty to two."

"I'll go with you."

"Wait for me."

They both whirled around at the voice.

"Roberta! What in--how the thunder did you get here?"

Roberta Jennings had both hands up, smoothing her hair. She was making a desperate attempt at composure. "I—I had the boys lead my horse back. I just happened to be under that canvas. I—"

"Young lady, you're not too old yet for a paddling. A damned good paddling!"

Toby held his face straight. "Exactly what she needs. I'm going down and look for tracks while you do it."

He came back, almost immediately, mounting the slope in quick, zigzag rushes. "They're coming! A mile or so down the canyon. The sound carries plain."

"Get those guns out! Roberta, you hide—"

"Jennings, listen! We wouldn't have a chance."

"Want to run for it, eh, you stuffed shirt. We're goin' to stay here and take care of this girl. Both of us."

Toby ignored him; he was inside the freight compartment. "Take this dynamite," he commanded. "I'm giving orders here, Jennings. Not you."

Jennings took the cans of dynamite.

"Those have detonators in them," Toby warned. He came out last, carrying the half case of dynamite.

"See that outcroppin'?" He put his arm over the girl's shoulder, turning her body, pointing. "That overlooks the main canyon. Can you shoot a rifle?"

"I can," Jennings offered.

Wayne scowled.

"Not with that arm in a sling. It'll take pretty good shooting. A hundred yards, and hit one of the tin cans."

"Bobby can do that, all right."

"Of course I can," the girl said, very quietly.

"Carry some of these bombs over with her. Don't throw 'em unless they try to rush me. There'll be two cans I'll want you to shoot at. Don't shoot till I holler. The south can or the north can. D'you get it?"

"No. What—"

"Think it over while you're getting there. I've no time to lose explaining."

THEY watched him start over the edge of the bench, the dynamite hugged to his chest. Loose rock skidded from under him. He slid twenty feet down the steep slope on his back, tin cans rattling on top of the dynamite.

"He put rocks and detonators in those," the girl said, hands clenched tightly at her breast.

Jennings' face was working queerly. "You take this other pistol, Bobby. We'll do as he says."

They made slow progress, up the slope from the bench, then around the shoulder of the mountain and down to the outcrop of basalt. Roberta carried the rifle and her father carried four of the smallest cans, using his arm sling for a basket and taking the punishment of the sharp edges cutting into raw flesh.

When they finally got out on the rock they could see the flyer below them. A few hundred yards around the turn they saw horsemen, coming at a slow, tired walk. Jennings counted them. "Twenty-four," he said. "See the black-hat leading them?"

"Can you tell if they have the gold?"

"On those pack horses, most likely. Must have been quite a job getting it up that cliff. Look! Wayne's pointing."

Her voice was trembling a little now, but her hand was steady.

Roberta pulled the rifle lever to see if there was a shell in the barrel. "That's

one's nearest the mine. That's the north can, isn't it?"

"Right. Take a sight on it, Bobby. Remember: a deep breath, then let out part of it. Squeeze, don't jerk the trigger."

"Keep still, Bob. I'm nervous as a cat already."

"It's only a target, kid. You can shoot twice that good. There's the south can. See? He's keeping still. Wants to surprise them."

"Will we be able to hear him, Bob?"

"Get yourself in hand, kid! Of course we will. You can hear those horses, can't you?"

"Somebody's taking some big chances around here, Bob. And it's not you nor me."

"Your dad's gettin' old, Bobby. He used to be able to judge men."

"Remember, last night? He kept saying, 'Everybody wants something.' He hates Mexicans."

"He was out of his head, baby. Quit talking!"

"There's nothing wrong with me, is there, Dad? There's no reason why—"

Her father interrupted, looking at her sharply, as if she had just told him something new and interesting.

"Bobby, your mother was the best woman in the world. Much too good for me. Watch! He's got both hands up in the air!"

"*Buenos días, señor.*" The voice carried up to them distinctly. It was pleasant; composed.

The horsemen stopped. There was an uneasy silence.

Toby's arm started to lower, slowly. He was talking in Spanish, keeping his voice level. "Back of you, Señor Caballero Negro, is enough dynamite to blow you and your gang to hell. In front of you there is also dynamite. And there is dynamite under all those boulders around you. I would advise you not to move."

SILENCE followed. The Mexican pushed the sombrero from straight black bangs of hair. He looked about him

uneasily. His right hand left the bridle reins, started slowly toward his hip.

"No! No, *señor!* You are covered with rifles." The American pointed to the other side of the canyon.

The Mexican threw his head back, laughter rumbling in his chest. "That is a fine story, *señor.* You should frighten the Caballero Negro, eh? You are one big damn fool, *señor.*"

"Shoot the north can," Toby ordered, barely raising his voice. He stooped down behind the protection of a boulder.

Nothing happened.

The Mexican turned to his men, teeth flashing with amusement.

The canyon floor lifted behind them. Thunder rolled out, to cover the sharp crack of a rifle. Split rocks whined through the air. One man pitched forward from the saddle. Three horses were down. There was a high, nickering scream of pain.

Toby's voice flailed out in a crackle of words.

"Watch out! There's more of it. Do you want more?"

"*Señor ! Señor! Compasión!*"

Toby waited, his body dripping with sweat. "Shoot that horse!" he commanded, no longer able to stand the animal's suffering.

A rifle cracked from above. The horse's head twisted and was quiet.

"Start throwing your guns down. Watch out they don't hit that dynamite!" Toby raised his voice: "Up there on the rocks—one of you mer come down here. You, Jennings!"

Jennings' figure rose from behind the rocks above them

Toby watched them disarm in frantic haste. He wanted to laugh now. He was shaking all over.

TOBY guarded the two outlaws who put the wounded man in the freight compartment, where the gold and weapons were already stowed away. He and Jennings had made the bandits do this work, and unsaddle their horses and turn them loose.

They grouped the Mexicans closely around the pile of tin can bombs that remained. "If they try any funny business, Jennings, just take a pot-shot at those bombs. You won't have to bother sending your men after them then."

Jennings nodded, looked up at the sun. "Can you get your kite patched up in time, Wayne?"

"I can try," Toby said listlessly, walking slowly toward the airplane. His feet seemed like dead. He had that feeling he got after a long, tough flight. A limp, all-gone feeling.

An enervating, pervasive soul-weariness . . .

But it was worse than flight exhaustion, he thought. It was the strangest feeling he'd ever had. He'd wanted something. Wanted it with everything he had. Now it was his. If he wanted to he could go over and kick that Mexican's face in. But he didn't want to. Everybody wants something. But when they get it—well, they'd

just as well cut the switches and call it a day.

"I'll help you."

"That's all right, Miss Jennings. You'll get yourself dirty."

"I might as well learn now. If you're going to take a job flying Bob's gold, you needn't think you'll keep me away from this plane."

He was much taller than the girl. Standing near her that way, he found that his lips were just level with the massed, gleaming gold of her hair.

"Did I hear you say something about a job, Miss Jennings?"

"Don't be stuffy, Mr. Wayne. My very good friends call me Eobby."

"Bobby." He repeated the name, looking down at her red, smiling lips. "Bobby, I want—"

Her eyes, crinkled with amusement, carried half a promise. "We'd better get this plane fixed and all set to fly, Toby."