

Vultures of the Lost Valley

A Richard Knight Tale by Donald E. Keyhoe

Down upon the flood-lit Washington Airport came a sleek Douglas transport. And from it ran a strangely-costumed girl wielding a glittering dagger in spirited attempts to protect herself from the burly men who sought to stop her. Only the lightning decision of a tall, well-built man in a car on the driveway saved her. That man was Richard Knight. And this surprising incident was destined to send him upon the most startling adventure of his career—an adventure which, wholly unknown to him, had begun more than half a century before he was born.

CHAPTER I THE MAN CALLED "Q"

AGAINST the black walls of that hushed and dim-lit room, the lone occupant's face had a ghastly appearance. It was a withered yellow, like old parchment, and the man's bony hands matched his shriveled features. A brighter light might have shown that his face was a plastic mask, and that his gnarled hands wore skillfully-fashioned gloves which extended under his sleeves. But the dim light was deflected away from the desk, and the motionless figure seemed only a wizened old man sitting there in the shadows.

The room was as silent as a tomb. There was no break in its dull black walls, not even a sign of an exit. The sinister creature behind the desk might have been a mummy sealed in that gloomy chamber. But the glittering eyes back of the mask-slits gave proof that he was alive. They moved restlessly across maps and papers before him, and once they lifted to look at a peculiar electric clock near a dictaphone box on the desk.

Almost on the dot of nine, a buzzer sounded. The masked man touched one of the dictaphone switches.

"Number Eight is here," a jerky voice spoke from the box. The words were in a foreign tongue.

"I will see him," the masked man said curtly in the same language. "Listen in, and take the usual notes."

He pressed a button, and a vertical crack became visible in the wall directly before the desk. The two wall-sections slid into niches, leaving a space the size of a door. The aperture was barred by a panel of heavy glass, curved outward to avoid reflections and shadows. Because of the black walls and the arrangement of the light, the glass was practically invisible.

A small room, black-walled like the first, could be seen beyond. A sallow man with nervous, shifty eyes had just entered from a door on the left. He halted, uncertainly. The man behind the invisible barrier connected a second dictaphone on the wall of the other room.

"What is it?" he asked sharply, in English. "Do they suspect anything?"

"No," came the mumbled response from the box on his desk. "I've new information on the agent you asked about. He's at Richmond, working on the explosion case at the Drake aircraft factory."

The masked man quickly leaned forward.

"You mean the man listed on the secret roster as 'Q'?"

The sallow man nodded, his shifty eyes briefly resting on the figure in the shadows.

"I still don't know his real name, but I've found he works with Naval Intelligence, too—and they call him 'Q' the same as the Army does. Also, he operates with the foreign service division of the State Department when he's abroad, as well as with Army and Navy attaches. And he has some connection with the Department of Justice. I think he's a free-lance agent with authority, to call on any Government office for information and help. But they don't mention him as anything except 'Q.'"

"How did you learn all this?" demanded the other man.

"I managed to overhear a few words between General Brett and Commander Martin—Martin is assistant chief of Naval Intelligence here in Washington. I heard them say 'Q' was at Richmond, and also something about a new system for communicating with him, and later I saw them working on some papers. When General Brett went to the anteroom with Martin I sneaked in and read as much as possible. I've jotted down all I could remember."

"But you saw nothing to indicate the identity of the agent?" queried the masked man.

"No, but this may give you a lead. It said to play up the idea that 'Q' was simply a globe-trotter with friends in the Army and Navy whom he met while he was in the diplomatic service. Also, it said he was to be given Government planes without question, even those on the experimental list—so he must be an expert pilot."

The man back of the glass barrier had abruptly stiffened. "Leave your copied information with the man who admitted you," he said harshly. "He will pay you according to the agreement."

THE sallow man flushed, turned away. As the sliding wall-sections closed, the masked man flicked another dictaphone switch.

"The condensed file on Richard Knight!" he snapped.

For a minute there was no sound but the faint ticking of the clock. Then the jerky voice hurriedly spoke:

"Richard E. Knight, born at Washington, D. C., December 5, 1910. Son of Meredith Knight, at one time American ambassador to France. Educated for the diplomatic service. Speaks most major languages fluently. Served abroad for two years, then resigned, stating he desired a more active life. Shortly after, began intensive instruction piloting airplanes, then purchased a fast plane, toured the United States, Canada, Mexico and South America. Won two air races in 1934 with special racer built for him. Has toured here and abroad, 1935 and 1936. Invariably travels by air, either in his own planes or commercial lines; recently has been accompanied by another pilot named Larry Doyle, who is—"

"Stop!" grated the masked man. "Why was I not told of this connection with Doyle?"

"The information came but two days ago, *taisa*," faltered the unseen speaker. "This is the first time you have been here since then."

"Very well," said the man in the black room. "Get the file on Doyle. I wish to refresh my mind on a certain detail of the Chapei incident."

While he waited, he pulled open a drawer at the side of the desk, ran his weirdly-gloved hands over a number of photographs. He removed two, flung them on the desk. The first was the picture of a U. S. Marine Corps pilot, a homely man who scowled up belligerently around a crooked nose. Under the photo was the caption, "Lieut. L. A. Doyle, U.S.M.C, ordered court-martialed for unauthorized activities against the Japanese during the attack on Chapei."

The second picture showed a tall man in faultless evening attire. His eyes and mouth had an indolent humor about them, yet his face was stronger than Doyle's. His whimsical smile subtly disguised the firmness of his jaw and the power of his eyes. The caption beneath this picture read, "Richard Knight, sportsman and globe-trotter, a recent winner at National Air Races."

The masked man's eyes twitched angrily from one face to the other.

"Memorandum B, on Lieutenant Larry Doyle, U.S.M.C.," the jerky voice suddenly spoke from the dictaphone. "During the occupation of Chapei, Doyle entered the battle area in an intoxicated condition. He insulted a Japanese officer and resisted arrest. Was rescued by an unidentified American civilian, who under cover of darkness tricked Japanese soldiers into believing he was one of their officers. On the following day an unknown pilot believed to be the same American rescued Doyle after the latter had taken off in a Chinese plane and shot down a Japanese pilot. Doyle was about to be destroyed by a flight of Mitsubishi's when the other man attacked them, flying an unmarked plane. He shot down two Mitsubishi's and crippled a third—"

"Omit the details of the battle," snapped the masked man. "I am quite familiar with them."

"Yes, *taisa*," said the unseen speaker. He went on hastily: "All attempts by agents of the *Kimitsu Kyoku* to learn the civilian's name met with failure. His identity was screened by not only the United States military forces in China but by the American diplomatic officials. Although Doyle

was forced to resign from the Marine Corps, to prevent international complications, the American Government refused to admit the existence of the second pilot, in spite of evidence—”

“That is sufficient!” the masked foreigner savagely interrupted. “I was blind not to see it long ago. The civilian pilot was none other than the free-lance agent, ‘Q’—and ‘Q’ is Richard Knight!”

An exclamation sounded from the dictaphone box.

“But the reports all say that ‘Q’ is a much older man—a veteran spy.”

“Only an assumption,” retorted the man in the black room. “No one has ever given us a good description of him. He strikes and is gone like a ghost. But it is plain enough now. Knight’s education, his languages and his training make up for his lack of years. I knew he would be espionage material in time of war, but his careless manner and his pose as a sportsman pilot fooled me. I was looking for an older agent in the search for ‘Q.’ But the whole thing—his resignation, his public life since then, must have been planned to hide his secret work. And this ruffian Doyle has twice been linked with espionage in a minor capacity since his court-martial. Evidently he has been working with this man Knight, while Knight used the role of ‘Q’ for the more difficult parts.”

“You must be right, *taisa*,” came the answer. “But now that we know this, it should be easy to arrange their removal.”

“No time will be wasted,” the masked man said harshly, “particularly when I know that they may be dangerously close to our great secret. Read me the data brought by Number Eight.”

“One moment, please,” said the jerky voice.

As he waited, the man with the mask stared fiercely at the picture of Richard Knight.

“So it was you who shot me down that day!” he rasped.

“What, *taisa*?” exclaimed the unseen man.

“Nothing! Nothing!” replied the other angrily. “Translate the material.”

The beady black eyes behind his mask took on a glitter of triumph as he listened to the translation.

“Excellent!” he said when it was finished. “Take this message and be ready to relay it through the usual channels.” He spoke rapidly for

a minute, then added, “Send in Pilot-agents Seventeen, Twenty, and Thirty-one if they have arrived.”

“They have been waiting,” said the man with the jerky voice.

The masked man switched off the dictaphone, pressed the button which opened the wall-sections. As the mechanism went into operation, he glared down at the picture of Richard Knight.

“Smile, cur!” he snarled. “You will not have the chance much longer!”

LIKE a dark meteor, the blue Northrop hurtled along under the stars, while the lights of Richmond faded away behind. Richard Knight glanced over the maze of radiolite dials before him, then looked back under the transparent enclosure. Larry Doyle was dimly visible in the rear cockpit.

“Still broken-hearted, Lothario?” Knight inquired solicitously.

Doyle glowered at him around his crooked nose. “Swellest blonde I ever laid eyes on—and you haul me away before I even get her phone number!”

Knight grinned. “Love’s young dream blighted again. Let’s see, isn’t that the fifth time this week?”

“Just because you’re a woman-hater,” Doyle said aggrievedly, “is no reason I’ve got to be one.”

Knight’s deep-blue eyes held a briefly sober look. “You’ll live longer in this game if you’re on your guard,” he answered. “After that close shave in Singapore I should think—”

“Oh, Lord!” groaned Doyle. “Don’t remind me about it! How such a swell-looking doll could be a spy—and here I wanted to marry her!”

“She was unusual,” admitted Knight. “But those are the very ones—”

“I know,” said Doyle bitterly. “First rule of counter espionage: ‘Always suspect everyone, especially pretty women.’ But it’s a helluva life if you can’t enjoy yourself once in a while.”

He cast a dismal glance back at the faint glow which, marked Richmond. Knight caught the movement in the small, angled mirror before him.

“Larry, my boy,” he said amiably, “you’re a sucker for a pretty face.”

“Anyway,” snickered Doyle, “I know how to pick ‘em.”

Fifteen minutes passed, while the plane swiftly flew on. Then Doyle spoke to Knight once more.

“Say, what do you suppose General Brett wants?”

Knight gazed over the long cowl of the speeding Northrop, his eyes on the flashing airway beacons ahead.

“He must have a fresh angle on these mysterious explosions,” he replied.

“What’s your idea?” demanded Doyle. “Do you believe that the Drake plant was blown up by some new kind of bomb?”

“There’s something strange about it,” said Knight. “I never saw such a completely wrecked building.”

“General Brett must have some hot dope, from that message,” exclaimed the other man.

“We’ll soon know,” said Knight. “We’re more than half-way—there’s the Marine Corps field at Quantico.”

Doyle did not answer. Knight turned quickly to look at him. “I’m sorry, old man—I wasn’t thinking.”

The ex-Leatherneck managed a twisted grin. “It’s okay, Dick. I ought to be over it by now, but somehow I can’t forget the outfit. You know the old saying, ‘Once a Marine, always a Marine.’ “

Knight slowly nodded. Doyle gazed down moodily at the field where he had once served. Turning back to the controls, Knight brought the double-banked Wasp to full speed, so as to leave Quantico quickly behind. It was the first time in months that he had slipped up and mentioned the Corps. But knowing the other man’s feelings, he made no attempt to remedy the slip.

THE Northrop raced on through the crisp October air, flying at six thousand feet above the Potomac. Knight glanced out at the green and red wingtip lights, then back at the mass of instruments, knobs and buttons in the cockpit. From the outside, except for the special retractable landing-gear, the ship was similar to the Army’s new attack model. It appeared to be merely a fast sport plane designed for private use. But in spite of its innocent appearance, it was even more deadly than the Army type.

Hidden in each of the wing-roots was a .50 caliber gun, and farther out in the thick cantilever wings were two standard Browning .30’s. Electric buttons on the side of the stick controlled this lethal battery, and actuated the sliding flaps which covered the gun-muzzles. Concealed in a recess aft of Larry Doyle’s pit were two more .50 caliber guns, short-muzzled for easy handling. They had a wide arc of fire above the fuselage, and could be quickly lowered to fire through a tunnel below.

There were other secret devices—a tiny, powerful camera, operated from either cockpit; a releasing system for smoke or deadlier gas—the tanks were not yet connected; a carefully hidden bomb-rack, from which high-explosive grenades could be discharged through a trap in the belly. The racks were empty now, and some of the other devices were not quite finished. But they were there, soon to be put in commission.

Until that moment, Knight had not realized how much the ship was like himself. Neither he nor his ship were what they seemed. Both were pretenders, hiding grim secrets. Both were weapons in the deadly, invisible war of spying and counter-spying. He took a look at the angled mirror. Even his face was a lie—the carefully careless smile with which he masked his thoughts.

He was Q, free-lance agent, with more power than any other agent had ever known. He had felt the thrill of intrigue, the fascinating spell of dangerous adventure. But he knew now, with a grim, quiet shock, what it had cost. He had let himself become a human machine, with all his natural emotions coolly, precisely controlled. A brief rebellion swept over him. Larry Doyle was right....

Then he smiled ironically into the darkness. It was a little too late for rebellion. He had chosen this path, and there was no turning aside. He forced the thought from his mind.

A mass of light showed about twenty miles ahead. He watched it through the vague disc of the fast-whirling prop. In a few minutes they would be able to see the floodlighted shaft of the Washington Monument. He had unconsciously eased the double-radial to cruising speed as Quantico fell behind, but at that they would reach the capital in five minutes. He reached down to set the stabilizer for landing.

Suddenly the reflection of a winking green light showed in the cowl mirror. Quickly alert, he looked back, then his hand leaped to the throttle. Like queer-colored shooting stars, three pairs of red and green lights were streaking down through the darkness. Three planes were diving in V-formation straight at the Northrop's tail!

In one motion, Knight snapped off his lights and zoomed.

"What the hell?" Doyle erupted from the rear.

"Trap!" Knight said swiftly.

CHAPTER II THE GIRL FROM THE PAST

EVEN as he spoke, four scarlet tracer-lines shot out of the gloom. But for the warning of his mirror, the Northrop would have been riddled. He pulled up in a tight climbing turn, shoving the throttle full on. Another set of tracers fanged out after the two-seater. He felt the pound of bullets as the burst drilled his right wing.

Doyle was bellowing profanely in the rear pit, and abruptly his brace of .50-guns hammered into action. Knight swerved southward at the top of his climb, trying to put the glare of the capital's lights between them and their attackers. The unknown pilots had also switched off their lights, but a sudden hail of tracers marked the nearest man's position.

Knight banked, coolly pressed one of the stick buttons. High-speed Browning .30's spat out two fiery torrents as the sliding flaps uncovered their muzzles. The other ship skidded, was out of range in a flash. Knight quickly changed the pitch of the prop, and the Northrop climbed dizzily.

The two other ships had screamed down for a right and left crossover. One of them zoomed hastily under a blast from Doyle's guns. The second plunged by, then zoomed up underneath the two-seater. As Doyle whipped the twin .50's down to fire through the tunnel, the other planes charged at the tail with furious speed.

Bullets bored through the enclosure above Knight's head. He flung the Northrop into a screeching turn. The tremendous centrifugal force almost blacked-out his senses, but with a quick shove at the stick he lessened its dangerous pull. For a second, he could see nothing of the other planes. Then a fast-moving blur showed against

the lights of Washington. The other plane banked just as he saw it, and their combined speeds sent the two ships hurtling toward each other at a terrific pace.

Knight's ungloved fingers shifted on the stick-buttons. With a muffled pound, the heavy gun in the left wing-root flung out a tongue of fire. There was a crash, a rising shriek which cut through the roar of the radial. As he rolled to one side, flame geysered up from the stricken plane. He had a fleeting glimpse of a Boeing F7B1, its blazing engine half-torn from the ship. The pilot was frenziedly trying to bail out.

Just as the man sprang up, the wind-whirled inferno swept back and caught him. His coat and parachute blazed, and he vanished in a mass of fire. But though the odds were now reduced to two, Knight knew their danger was greater than ever. The dazzling glare of the flamer made the Northrop a perfect target.

Tracers streaked in from two directions as he hauled the stick back. He shot the Northrop up on its tail. A torrent of smoking slugs swept across the cowl. He twisted out of a vertical S, raked a flitting shadow. The other man reversed hastily. Knight plunged in at an angle, forced him back toward the flaming wreck. The burning ship was now five hundred feet below, but its glare showed the other plane as the pilot chandelled.

The second plane was another Boeing, and this time Knight plainly saw the Air Corps insignia on its wings and tail. A hulking, bare-headed pilot glared back from the cockpit. Huge goggles covered the upper part of his face, but Knight instantly recognized his massive jaw and his yellow hair, the latter so close-cropped that his skull seemed almost shaved. It was only for a second, then the Boeing pitched down through a plume of smoke from the flamer.

Suspecting a trick, Knight did not follow. As he reversed, a hail of lead from behind ripped open the streamlined enclosure. Above the resulting shriek of the wind, he faintly heard Doyle cursing. He looked back. The third F7B1 was almost in the dead area behind the Northrop's rudder. Doyle was angrily jerking his guns from side to side, trying to catch the Boeing without hitting the two seater's tail.

Knight swiftly rolled. The Boeing was again racing into the blind position when the other F7B1

reappeared. The bare-headed pilot signaled, and both ships charged for another converging attack.

“Tunnel!” Knight tossed over his shoulder at Doyle.

The ex-Marine slammed the twin .50’s down to the

lower position. Knight quickly nosed over to put Doyle in range. The heavy guns beat out a thunderous chant, and he heard Doyle’s yell of triumph. He zoomed, banked steeply. One of the Boeings was plummeting earthward, its tail cleanly shot off. The other plane whirled away as he cut in the wing-root guns. He saw the bare-headed pilot cringe over his stick, then the plane dived madly into the darkness.

A THOUSAND feet below, just discernible in the fading glare, a parachute was blossoming out. The pilot of the crippled ship had managed to jump before his tailless plane crashed. As Knight watched, the man slipped the ‘chute recklessly and disappeared in the gloom.

“Drop a flare!” Doyle yelled. “I’ll bail out and nab that bird!”

Knight switched on the inner-cockpit phones to be heard above the howling wind.

“Stay where you are!” he said. “Borg would finish you before you were half-way to the ground.”

“Borg? You mean the gorilla with the shaved head?”

“Yes, he’s as cold-blooded a devil as ever slit a throat. He’s a Dane, but his own country kicked him out years ago. He’ll fly, steal or kill for the highest bidder.”

“I wonder who the hell he’s working for now? And how did they get those Army ships?”

Knight keenly searched the gloom as the Northrop roared on. “I don’t know how they got them,” he answered. “But this proves that the explosion mystery is far more important than we thought. We must have been near the secret, or they wouldn’t have been so anxious to wipe us out.”

“That message from Brett!” exclaimed Doyle. “It must have been a fake!”

“At the least, there’s a leak in Army Intelligence. If we work fast, we may be able to spot it.”

Knight pointed the two-seater down in a swift power glide as he spoke.

“I’m going to land at Washington airport and borrow a car from Jack Hughes, to save time reaching Brett’s house. Take over after I get out and fly across to Bolling Field. Tell them to put a double-shift at work on the ship, so it will be ready in case the general has some new mission for us.”

“Okay,” said Doyle. “Then what?”

Knight looked around quizzically as he caught the hopeful note in Doyle’s voice.

“Sorry, Lothario—business first. Meet me at General Brett’s. And keep your eyes open—I’m beginning to have a faint suspicion that somebody doesn’t like us.”

Doyle grinned around his twisted nose.

“Maybe it’s the brother of that red-head in St. Louis. I had to let him think she liked you instead of me. Come to think of it, he’s an Army pilot, too.”

Knight shook his head hopelessly, turned back to the controls. Over the cowl, he could see the line of traffic on Memorial Boulevard, where it paralleled the river. The Northrop swept over Alexandria, slanted toward the Washington Highway Bridge, near the Virginia end of which lay the capital’s airport.

The floodlights went on just as he started to signal, and he saw a Douglas transport sweep down and land. He threw the switch which lowered the Northrop’s wheels, then dropped in a forward slip. The Douglas had rolled well past the administration building, was slowly turning to taxi back. Knight braked the two-seater to a quick stop within fifty feet of the line. Pulling off his leather jacket, he slid back the bullet-torn enclosure and climbed out. Doyle took the controls, and the Northrop thundered away.

A few moments later, after brushing aside Jack Hughes’ questions, Knight came out of the Eastern Air offices. The floodlights had been switched off, and the Douglas was taxiing with the aid of its landing-lights. He went past the loading-platform gate, found Hughes’ car. It was a twelve-cylinder coupe with rakish lines. He started the motor, turned on the lights.

Sixty feet away, a man in the rear of a large sedan hastily moved back from view. Knight put

the coupe in gear, drove a short distance, and stopped.

He had recognized that fierce, dark face at once. The man was Sito Hiroki, colonel in the Japanese air force, and now air attache at the Embassy in Washington. There was an unconfirmed suspicion in Army Intelligence that Hiroki was also an important member of the *Kimitsu Kyoku*, the Intelligence Department of Nippon.

Knight hesitated, his eyes on the sedan. It was probably a coincidence, Hiroki's being here. Yet the man's hasty shielding of his face was odd. And he was not in an embassy car, for the sedan did not have diplomatic tags. Could he have had a connection with that unexpected attack?

Knight's conjectures were abruptly ended. The Douglas had stopped at a little distance from the canopied loading-area. As the engines went silent, there was a sudden commotion within the plane. Then the door to the cabin flew open and a girl sprang to the ground. Knight had a glimpse of a young and exquisitely beautiful face, of a costume both strange and picturesque. The girl was dressed like a Spanish maiden of almost a century past.

She halted under the canopy light, staring around with a bewildered look in her dark eyes. An angry shout sounded from behind her. As she whirled, Knight saw a golden wreath sparkle in her hair.

A thin, swarthy man had jumped from the cabin, his pinched face distorted with rage. The girl's hand flashed to her bodice, reappeared with a tiny dagger. She struck at the man's outstretched arm, and he fell back with a howl of pain. The girl turned and ran desperately through the gateway.

"Stop her, you fools!" someone said hoarsely from the pilot's compartment. "She'll ruin everything!"

Two men jumped from the plane, charged past the first one. The girl sent a dazed glance about her, then ran toward the parking-space. Knight had stepped from the coupe. He caught a furtive movement from the shadows near Hiroki's car, and quickly slid his hand under his coat. This might be some trick involving him.

The girl sped past without a look in his direction. She seemed to be making for Hiroki's car, but suddenly she sprang around. A liveried Japanese chauffeur lunged after her. As she saw

Knight, she ran toward him, her red lips parted breathlessly.

"Save me, *senor!*" she gasped in Spanish. "These men will kill me."

For a split second, Knight searched her upturned face, then he leaped at the Japanese. The man's pronged fingers darted toward his eyes. Knight's left arm moved with pistonlike precision. His fist made a crunching sound against the brown man's jaw, and the chauffeur crumpled to the ground.

Spat! A bullet from a silenced gun drilled one of the coupe windows. Knight whipped out a .38, jerked his head toward the car.

"Get in!" he said in the girl's native tongue. "Keep your head down!"

But instead, she caught at his hand.

"We cannot hide in there! We must run!"

The men from the Douglas were within fifty feet of the car. Knight pumped two shots over their heads and they dived back of another machine. He wheeled, lifted the girl in both arms and placed her in the coupe.

As he jumped into the driver's seat, a shot crashed through the rear window and two more ricocheted from a fender. He sent the car forward in a burst of speed. The girl gave a startled cry, and frantically gripped his arm.

Only by a swift jerk was he able to miss the end of the airport office.

"Let go! Keep your head down!" he warned her.

"But the queer little house!" she cried. "It is moving!"

Knight stared across at her. From the wild look in her eyes, she might never have seen an automobile before. Another bullet crashed through the rear window, spattering glass and piercing the top of the windshield. He threw his right arm about the girl, pulled her down in the seat. The car lurched into Military Road, roared toward the Highway Bridge. He switched in the dual-ratio axle, sent the car racing around the curve at sixty miles an hour.

The girl struggled to sit up. Just as she raised her head, a huge bus loomed before them. She shrank down with a gasp. Knight spun the wheel, and the two machines passed with only inches to spare. The bridge traffic was fairly light. He cut around two other cars, pressed the throttle to the

floor. They reached the other end of the bridge with the speedometer at eighty.

He slowed to sixty, took a quick look back. The pursuing sedan was only halfway across. He raced to 14th Street, swerved into Potomac Park. From the direction of the Speedway exit he heard the wail of a motorcycle siren. He turned off the headlights, cut into one of the roads to the Monument. As he stopped in a shaded spot, he heard the police motorcycle charge past on the other road. In a few seconds the sedan also roared by.

The girl moved, and then he realized he was still holding her tightly. He withdrew his arm.

"I think we are safe now, *senorita*," he said quietly.

SHE sat up, and by the glow of the dash-lamp he saw her clearly for the first time. Her beauty almost took his breath. He had met lovely women before, but this girl was as exotically beautiful as an orchid. She gave him a quick, half-frightened look from under her long black lashes. Then slowly the fear died out of her face, and she smiled, as a child might smile at someone suddenly trusted.

"You are very brave, *senor*. But for you, Benita would now be dead."

The soft Spanish words were like music. For a moment, Knight forgot his usual wariness as he watched the movement of those expressive red lips. Then like the jab of a needle, his words to Doyle came to mind:

"You're a sucker for a pretty face...."

"Perhaps we'd better get things straight," he said guardedly. "Why did they want to kill you?"

Again the frightened look came into her lovely black eyes. "I am sorry, but I can tell only one man—*el Jefe de Ejercito*."

Knight looked down at the jeweled dagger she had dropped on the seat.

"And why must it be only the Secretary of War?" he asked.

He purposely put the question in English. The girl hesitated, then replied with a quaintly charming accent.

"Because, *senor*, Old Jeem warn' me I must talk only to that one. Please, you will take me to heem?"

"How did you know I spoke Spanish when you called to me for help?" Knight asked suddenly.

She looked puzzled.

"But I did not know it. I speak to you in Spanish because I am excited, and it is my own language. I forget Old Jeem say I am to speak only the English when I am in the *Estados Unidos*. And everything, it is all so very strange—"

"Who is Old Jim?" Knight asked as she paused for breath.

"*Un Americano*, like you, *senor*—only he is much, much older, and not so beeg and strong."

She smiled up at him again from under her sweeping black lashes. Knight struggled to overcome the spell she was casting over him. The whole thing was preposterous. She was obviously acting a part, and yet....

"I don't mean to be rude," he said firmly, "but I must have an explanation. In the first place, what's the reason for this costume?"

"Costume, *senor*?" She looked bewildered, then slowly glanced down at her tight-fitting bodice, her short, flowing skirt, and the gay, decorated shoes on her little feet. A hurt light came into her pretty, dark eyes, but she lifted her head proudly.

"I am sorry, *senor*, if you do not like me. I know I must be very different from the ladies of your world."

Knight felt an absurd sense of guilt, as though he had slapped a child. Yet she must be playing with him.

"Suppose we omit the pretense," he said without rancor. "I don't know what's back of all this, but it's plain you're connected with Hiroki. And I think you know who I am."

She looked at him helplessly. "I do not understand what is thees Hiroki. And how could I know you, *senor*, when I do not ever see you before?"

"My name is Richard Knight," he said, watching her closely. "Perhaps you have heard someone mention it?"

"Ricardo Caballero?" she repeated, for he had spoken in Spanish. "It is a name I like, but no, I have never heard it. You see, I come from so far away—"

"From where?" he asked quickly, as she stopped.

"Please do not ask me anything," she pleaded. "Take me to the *Americano* army chief."

"That isn't easy," he parried. "It's late, and even in daytime he sees few people."

"But I must see him at once—tonight!" the girl said anxiously. Her slim fingers flew to a curious wide belt she wore. She unfastened a velvet pouch hooked behind the buckle, quickly drew something from it.

"Show him this!" she exclaimed. "Then he will talk with me."

Knight looked down. There in the girl's hand, blazing like green fire under the dash-lamp, was a huge, carved emerald.

CHAPTER III THE GREEN MADONNA

TRYING to hide his amazement, Knight bent over for a closer inspection. The stone was oval-shaped, almost two inches in its longer dimension, and more than three-quarters of an inch through. It was a rich, velvety green, with a blazing color he had never seen in any other emerald. Delicately carved in the center was a cameo like figure of a Madonna, perfect in every detail.

Knight was no jewel expert, but anyone who had read even a brief history of famous stones would have known that emerald at once. The jewel in Benita's hand was the long lost "Green Madonna," the historic "Lost Emerald of Navarre," as collectors had called it for years.

Slowly, he looked up from the stone. The girl was watching him with an eager, expectant smile.

"Now you understand, *senor*?"

"I can see why they were trying to capture you," he answered, a trifle grimly.

"Oh, but they did not know about the Madonna," she exclaimed. "They did not even know about me—until I jumped out to escape."

"You mean you were hidden—you stowed away in the ship?" Knight demanded.

Her pretty brows drew together with a puzzled look. "Ship? But no, a ship goes on the water, Old Jeem say—and that terrible machine rides in the air."

Knight faced her with a trace of exasperation. "There's no sense in keeping up this farce. You climb out of a plane and then expect me to believe you don't even know what it is."

Her black eyes suddenly blazed at him. "Benita does not lie, *Senor Caballerol* No one can say thees to me!"

For a moment their glances clashed, then all the fiery passion vanished from her face as swiftly as it had come. Contritely, she laid her hand on his arm.

"Forgive me, I forget you could not know. Until one month ago, I do not ever see anything from your world. That is why I am so frighten' when thees strange little house start to move. Then I remember the machine Old Jeem tell me about—but it is all so different from what I expect. Now you understand, Ricardo?"

"Perfectly," Knight said with a wry smile. "You think I'm a half-wit—and I'm beginning to agree with you."

"Do not be angry," she said pleadingly. "Take me to *El Jefe*, and afterward if he say it is all right, I tell you everything."

Knight gazed a moment longer into her upturned face. Her eyes were as clear and direct as a child's.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, as he reached for the ignition switch. "If Doyle learns about this I'll never hear the end of it."

Benita looked at him quickly. "Thees Doyle—she is your wife, no?"

Knight chuckled. "I'm not married. And Doyle happens to be a tough *hombre* with a crooked nose."

He started the engine. The girl watched his every motion as he put the car in gear and let out the clutch. Her first panic had given way to an alert interest. He let the machine roll slowly along the edge of the Monument Park. Benita's black eyes widened as she saw the towering, flood-lighted pillar. He swung back into the park, headed toward 17th Street. The girl looked up at him suddenly.

"Thees Doyle with the crooked nose—he is the father of your sweetheart, yes?"

Knight shook his head, smiling. "Only a friend."

"Then why he not want you to talk with me?" she demanded. "Perhaps he does not like *senoritas*?"

"He would probably give his right arm to be in my boots," said Knight.

“Give the right arm for the boots? I do not understand,” said Benita.

“You would if you knew Doyle,” returned Knight.

SHE gave him a long glance, then looked ahead. They had swung into 17th and were crossing Constitution Avenue. The girl stared at the nearby buildings. Knight watched her as they came to Pennsylvania Avenue. A streetcar was rumbling down toward the White House, and two lines of automobiles were waiting for the traffic lights to change. Newsboys on the corner were shouting the pre-midnight editions.

Benita’s face mirrored an almost naive amazement. He found himself struggling again between suspicion and wonder. Her story—what little she had hinted—was fantastic. Where could she have been, in what part of the globe could she have existed, never to have known the slightest thing about modern civilization? The idea was incredible, yet she seemed so utterly sincere.

“How long were you in that plane?” he asked abruptly.

She tore her gaze from the lighted streets, her dark eyes shining with excitement.

“Oh, many hours—I hide in it yesterday after the sun is down.”

“Yesterday!” said Knight, startled. “They could have flown the Atlantic or come up from South America in that time. When did the plane take off—start to move?”

“I do not know,” she answered. “I hide under what Old Jeem call the tarpaulin, and lie still like he tell me. It is very dark and when the machine rides in the air I am afraid they will find me. And once I think I will die, I feel so ill.”

“You must be starved!” exclaimed Knight. “I’ll find a place and get you something to eat.”

“No, I must see *El Jefe* first,” she said anxiously. “Beside, I am not so hungry now—all thees wonderful place make me forget I do not eat.”

She gazed back at the street. They had turned into Connecticut Avenue, were passing the Mayflower Hotel. A limousine had drawn up, and the uniformed footman was holding open the door while four men and women in evening clothes stepped out under the lighted marquee.

“How beautiful!” Benita whispered. “It must be a great palace. And the lovely *senoritas*—now I know why you look so queer at me.”

“If I did,” said Knight, “it was because I—” he broke off, pressed down on the throttle. “We’d better hurry,” he muttered.

The vivid beauty of her face was suddenly clouded by a haunting sadness. “*Si*, I had forgotten—I must not think of thees great new world.”

She sat back against the seat, her eyes closed. Knight stole a glance at her as the traffic thinned. The golden wreath was like a coronet against the black sheen of her lustrous hair. She had replaced the emerald in its pouch, and her hands were clasped in her lap.

A feeling of compassion came over him as he saw the faint, weary droop of her lips. She was so young, and if her story were true she had gone through a terrible ordeal. Then his glance fell to the dagger. Thoughts of Hiroki, and of the “Green Madonna” came darting back into his brain.

Where had she obtained that long-lost stone? Was she a liar, after all—linked with some jewel ring, perhaps with a criminal spy-group? Hiroki was not above a crooked enterprise if it did not conflict with his work for his country. Could she be a pawn in some fantastic trick? The thought sickened him, but his doubts remained.

BENITA opened her eyes before he could erase the suspicion from his face. Her red lips curved in a wistful little smile.

“You still doubt me, *senor*?”

Long afterward, he remembered that moment and blessed what then seemed weakness. For as he looked down into that wistful, beautiful face, all his ugly suspicions faded like mist beneath the sun.

“No, Benita,” he answered, and his voice was suddenly husky. “I don’t doubt you—now.”

“I am glad,” she said simply. “With you, I am not afraid anymore.”

Knight gazed over the hood as the car rounded Dupont Circle and turned into Massachusetts Avenue.

“Benita, please don’t think I have tried to trick you. The Secretary of War is not in Washington. I am taking you to one of his closest officers—a

man who knows all the Army secrets. Will you talk to him?"

She searched his eyes, then a trusting smile came into her lace.

"I believe in you, Ricardo. You are not like those terrible men who came from your world. Yes, I will talk with the officer—if you go with me."

"I'll be there," he promised. He drove swiftly for three blocks, warily surveyed the street as they neared the old brownstone house in which General Brett lived. The only person in sight was an old man limping along with a cane.

Knight took another quick scrutiny, then parked in front of Brett's house. He switched off the lights, jumped out to open the other door. The old man had shuffled past the nearest street light, but Knight saw his face for a second. It was a withered yellow, like old parchment. The bony hand gripping the cane matched his shriveled face.

As Benita stepped from the car, the shuffling figure suddenly jumped to one side. In a flash, he raised his cane, aiming it straight at the girl. Knight leaped in front of her, struck desperately at the cane. There was a click, a venomous buzzing sound, and a steel dart whizzed past his head.

Benita screamed. Knight whirled in an agony of fear that she had been hit. But she was pointing wildly beyond the car, to where two gunmen were rushing from the shadows of Brett's house.

He heard a metallic zang, like a steel spring vibrating. The man with the withered face was lifting the cane-gun again. Knight thrust Benita into the car, whipped out his .38. The man with the cane ducked back just as he fired. The cane-gun gave another snarling buzz, and Knight felt the dart rip through his sleeve. He hurled himself forward, snatched at the curious weapon.

His fierce jerk tore it from the yellow-faced killer's hand. But before he could aim the .38, the man had raced around the car. Knight spun back toward the gunmen.

He fired as he whirled, and the first assassin's gun fell from his loosening fingers. As the man toppled, his companion flung a wild shot at Knight. The bullet drilled the top of the car. The door of Brett's house burst open, and Knight saw the gray-haired Army general, a service .45 in his hand. As Brett ran down the steps, the second

gunman frantically wheeled. Knight triggered the .38. The gunman lurched back with a bullet in his shoulder, and his spasmodic jerk sent his shot high above the general's head. Knight clubbed the gun from his hand. The man reeled back with an oath, dodged around the coupe and fled.

Knight wheeled to look for Benita. He gave a strangled cry. The yellow-faced killer had dragged her out the other side of the car, and his bony hands were gripped about her throat. She was sagging in his grasp.

FOR the first time in his life, murderous rage surged through Knight's veins. He charged around the car with the fury of a madman. The other man sprang back, releasing Benita, and Knight caught the unconscious girl as she started to fall. The killer lunged toward him, then wildly turned and ran as General Brett dashed up. He sped back of a parked car and vanished around the nearby corner. Ignoring the general's excited questions, Knight lifted the girl in his arms.

"Benita!" he groaned, as he saw the livid marks upon her throat. With an icy dread he put his ear to her breast and listened.

"Is she dead?" the general whispered.

The tortured look died out of Knight's eyes. "No, thank God!" He turned toward the house, but his gaze never left Benita's face as he carried her up the steps.

The shots had aroused the neighborhood, and alarmed residents were opening their windows to look out. Knight quickly stepped into the hall to keep the girl from being seen. The general's wife, a plump, motherly woman, was coming down the stairs, a negligee hastily thrown about her. A frightened maid followed.

"Good Heavens, Dick!" Mrs. Brett exclaimed as she saw Benita. "What's happened? Is she—"

"Some fiend tried to strangle her," Knight said grimly. "If you'll call a doctor—"

"Get some ammonia, Marie!" Mrs. Brett told the maid. "I'll telephone."

Knight carried Benita into the living-room, tenderly put her down on a divan. General Brett had entered with him. There was a puzzled look on the elder man's kindly face as he noted the details of Benita's costume.

"It's a strange affair," Knight said, before the general could speak. "There's an espionage link

somewhere, and the more we can keep from the papers, the better. I don't want them to know about this girl."

Brett glanced from him to Benita, then nodded.

"You usually know what you're doing. But that dead gunman out there will complicate matters with the police."

"Call it an attempted hold-up," Knight said, without looking up. "I was alone—leaving your house after an ordinary visit—I shot him in self-defense."

"We'll have to keep your name out of it," said the gray-haired general. "Otherwise it will ruin your work for us. I'll get Commissioner Thomas on the wire and have him clamp down on the police angle."

The maid appeared with the ammonia as he went out, and in a moment Mrs. Brett came into the room. Knight was kneeling beside the divan, moving the opened bottle back and forth near Benita's nostrils.

"Poor child," said Mrs. Brett. "How could anyone wish to harm such a beautiful—be careful, Dick. Let her breathe naturally for a minute."

A faint color was beginning to steal back into Benita's face. Knight unfastened her belt, laid it aside. The pouch behind the buckle came open and the emerald slipped out. Both Mrs. Brett and the maid stared at it, but before he could speak there came a squealing of brakes outside, followed by a hasty command in Doyle's voice.

"Wait a minute, corporal—we may have to go back to Bolling, after General Brett hears what happened."

In a moment Doyle appeared in the hall, a bruise on the side of his face. General Brett was with him.

"—jumped us the second we left the field, sir," Doyle was saying fiercely. "I think I nicked one of 'em, but they got away before—"

He stopped, open-mouthed, as he saw Knight bending over Benita.

"Well, for the love of Pete!" he blurted out. Then his eyes fell on the ugly marks on her throat. "Holy cats! Somebody try to kill her?"

"Yes," Knight said savagely. "A masked devil who was with that dead man outside."

"Dead man?" exclaimed Doyle. "There's no stiff out there."

Knight and the general stared at each other, then Brett hurried to the door. He was back in a few seconds.

"Doyle's right! The body is gone."

Knight stood up quickly. "You didn't see anyone as you drove up?" he asked Doyle.

"A car was turning the corner," Doyle answered. "That's all."

"Fast work," Knight muttered. "It's my fault, General—I wasn't thinking of anything but—"

Brett followed his glance toward Benita. An expression of sympathy came into his kindly face.

"I understand, Dick. I would have felt the same way. But who is she—and why is she wearing that costume?"

"I don't know who she is," Knight said slowly. "I never saw her until about an hour ago."

CHAPTER IV SPY DEN

GENERAL BRETT and the others looked at him in amazement. He started to explain, but in that moment Benita began to stir. She gave a little moan, put her hand to her throat. As Knight bent over, her curling black lashes swept open. For an instant, terror was mirrored in her beautiful eyes.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "You are safe now."

Her lips moved in a brave attempt at a smile. Then he saw she was trying to speak. He bent lower.

"I knew you would not let me die, Ricardo," she whispered.

A lump came into his throat. "Don't try to talk now," he said huskily. He turned to Mrs. Brett. "She hasn't eaten in over twenty-four hours."

"Poor little thing!" exclaimed the general's wife. "Marie, bring her some milk and wafers, and then fix an omelette."

As the maid hurried out, the shriek of police sirens became audible. The general turned to Knight.

"The commissioner said he'd be here with the chief of detectives. I'll have to tell them something about this, though the removal of that dead gunman simplifies matters."

Knight's blue eyes sobered. "It's possible some of your neighbors saw Benita. If you say she is a niece who is visiting you, and that I was bringing

her home from a private costume party, that ought to cover it. That and the hold-up story.”

Brett looked thoughtfully at Benita, then his shrewd gaze returned to Knight’s face.

“Sure you know what you’re doing?” he said.

Knight quietly nodded. The general went out and closed the door. Benita watched him go. As she turned her head, the golden wreath shone against her dark hair. Mrs. Brett looked at her and sighed.

“Where on earth did you find her, Dick?” she asked in a low voice. “She’s like a princess from some other age.”

Benita gazed up at her gravely. After a moment she smiled, then she glanced across at Doyle. The homely ex-Marine gulped as her dark eyes rested on him. She looked at his twisted nose, then back at Knight.

“I do not see him give the right arm for your boots,” she whispered.

Mrs. Brett discreetly hid a smile, but Doyle grinned mockingly at Knight.

“Woman-hater, huh?”

Knight reddened, but the entrance of the maid saved him from reply. As he arranged a cushion behind Benita’s head, General Brett opened the hall door.

“Dick, I’d like to see you and Doyle,” he said. “The Commissioner insists on a few questions.”

Benita caught Knight’s hand as he turned. “Do not leave me, Ricardo,” she pleaded.

“Mrs. Brett and Marie will be with you,” he said gently. He picked up the emerald from where it lay on the divan. “I’d like to show this to the general. He is the officer I told you about.”

The haunting sadness came back into her eyes and she sat up anxiously, but Brett had already gone into the hall.

“Yes, show him the Madonna,” she whispered, “and when thees hurt go away, I tell about Lost Valley.”

HER last words startled Knight, but he could see that every word was costing her pain, and he did not question her further. He took the emerald and followed Doyle into the hall. Benita’s dark eyes were still watching him as he closed the door. Doyle groaned dismally.

“All my life I’ve been looking for a girl like that, and then she has to fall for you.”

“You’re crazy,” snapped Knight.

“Maybe it’s just as well,” Doyle said gloomily. “If she ever looked at me that way, I’d probably drop dead.”

“I just happened to be the one who helped her,” Knight retorted. “She’s a little frightened at everything, and naturally she clings to the first person who—I mean she probably feels she knows me a little more than—what are you grinning at, you idiot?”

“Holy cats!” Doyle said softly. “Old Dick Knight—fallen like a ton of bricks!”

“She’s hardly more than a child,” Knight growled. “Probably not over eighteen.”

“Just a babe in arms,” said Doyle. “Oh, hell—why couldn’t it have been me!”

Knight wrathfully started to answer, but the library door opened and General Brett beckoned them inside. He introduced Commissioner Thomas, and Knight described the two gunmen and the yellow-faced killer, adding his suspicion that the man’s yellow face was a mask. After questioning Doyle about the attempt to slug him, the commissioner departed. General Brett returned from seeing him out, looked keenly at Knight.

“Now, Dick, what about this girl?”

“First,” said Knight, “does this have any significance for you?”

He held out the carved emerald. Brett stared at it, shook his head.

“It’s known as the Green Madonna,” said Knight. “It was owned for three centuries by the ducal house of de Navarre in Spain. It disappeared around 1840, and there’s always been a mystery about its vanishing.”

“I remember hearing of it, now,” said the general. “But—you mean the girl had this emerald?”

“Yes,” Knight answered. He looked from Brett to Doyle. “And now you’d better brace yourselves for the rest of it.”

Quickly, but omitting no details, he told them what had happened at the airport and everything up to the strangling of Benita. Doyle’s mouth opened and stayed open. The gray-haired general showed almost as much astonishment.

“But, Dick, it’s incredible—it’s preposterous!” he said when Knight had finished. “Surely you don’t believe her?”

"I do," Knight said firmly. "I'll stake my life she's telling the truth."

"But what possible explanation—"

"Just before we came in here," said Knight, "she mentioned something about a 'Lost Valley.' Where it is, I don't know. It might even be on another continent. But it's my belief she was born and brought up in some place not known to the rest of the world, and completely cut off from all communication until recently."

"Do you think that air attack had any connection with this business?" Doyle cut in.

Brett started. "What air attack?" he demanded.

Knight told him of the Richmond message, and the trap into which they had flown. The general's kindly face grew stern.

"That means a leak in my office. A records clerk named Carson has acted peculiar lately. I'll have him grilled the first thing in the morning."

"I'm afraid that's only a minor angle," Knight said. "The thing is still hazy, but I'll wager that the air attack, those queer explosions and fires, and this mystery of Benita are all hooked together. Hiroki seems to be in on it, too. And it must be a secret of tremendous importance, from the desperate attempts they made to silence her."

"Then we must question her as soon as she can talk!" exclaimed General Brett. "Why isn't that doctor here, confound him?"

He quickly picked up the phone, held the receiver to his ear for a moment, then stared at Knight.

"The line has gone dead!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a muffled scream sounded from the living-room. Knight whirled to the hall, ran madly for the other door. It burst open just as he reached it, and Mrs. Brett stumbled out, one hand before her eyes. A cloud of tear-gas poured from the room, but Knight had a brief glimpse of the maid, Marie, lying on the floor with a cut at the side of her head.

"Benita—they took her—the balcony!" gasped Mrs. Brett.

Knight snatched out his gun and plunged into the swirling tear-gas. His eyes were streaming when he reached the balcony, but through the opened French windows he could see a car in the drive below. Two men were running toward the machine, carrying Benita. He leaped to the rail.

The driver shouted a warning to the other men. One of them threw the struggling girl over his shoulder, flung open the rear door. The second man spun for a quick shot at Knight.

Knight fired, and the man dropped. At the same instant General Brett and Doyle charged into the drive from the front of the house. The man carrying Benita tumbled her into the rear seat, sprang in after her. Knight jumped to the ground, but the car was already streaking toward the alley beyond Brett's garage. He pumped his last shot at the tires. The general shouted at the corporal from Bolling Field, and the Army machine sped into the drive. Knight followed Brett and Doyle into it.

"They turned left!" he said in a taut voice. "Step on it!"

HE fleeing car was swinging into 22nd Street as they reached the alley. They raced after it, followed as the other machine turned into Massachusetts Avenue. At high speed, both cars tore around Dupont Circle. From somewhere behind them a police exhaust whistle shrilled.

"A fine time for them to wake up!" said Brett. "We can't blame the police," Knight said bitterly. "I should have stayed with her."

He slid a fresh clip into his gun. The other car careened from the avenue southward into 18th Street, swerved again and went East. The Army chauffeur kept even, but could not cut down the lead. The police car was shrieking along well behind them.

The abductors' machine dashed across 14th, sped for a block and a half and skidded recklessly into an alley. When the corporal made the turn, the other car was not in sight. He raced on through, but there was no sign of the machine as they came out.

"Stop!" Knight ordered. "They're back in the alley!"

He jumped out as the man jammed on the brakes. Doyle followed, and Brett was half-way out when Knight hastily shook his head.

"Wait for the police, General. You can get quick action. Tell them to get more men and surround the square!"

He ran into the alley with Doyle behind him. A dark courtyard appeared on the right. He saw the other car back in the gloom, its lights off.

“Sneak over to the left,” he muttered to Doyle. “I’ll take this side.”

The police exhaust-whistle blasted from nearby, and the Army chauffeur made a raucous answer with his horn. Gun poised, Knight reached the abductors’ machine, just as Doyle closed in from the left. But there was no one in the car.

“They can’t be far away,” Doyle said tensely.

“Listen!” whispered Knight.

A door made a faint squeak from the blackness beyond them. He and Doyle tiptoed forward. Steps led downward, apparently to a basement, but he could see nothing at the bottom. He was halfway down when a light flashed in his face. He dived under it, hurtled against a man’s legs. The man tripped, and Knight’s flying tackle threw him over backward. He hit the bottom of the steps with his head. A single groan, and he lay still. A second figure lunged through the beam of the fallen flashlight. Doyle swore like a trooper, dived from midway of the stairs.

A blackjack hissed toward Knight’s head. He jerked aside, caught it on his shoulder. Doyle’s gun-butt cracked into the second man’s skull, and the would-be killer slumped like a sack of grain. Knight jumped to his feet, clutching the flashlight with his left hand. The door to a dark hall stood open before them. He twitched the flashlight, saw a room at the farther end. He thought he caught a hasty movement as they ran toward it, but when they reached the room it was empty.

“What the devil?” Doyle said hoarsely. “There’s no way they could’ve got out of here.”

Knight swept the beam around the room. It was littered with old boxes, broken furniture and rubbish, but there was no other exit visible. Suddenly the door began to close. He tried to catch it, but it thudded shut, and he heard the click of a locking-device connected at the top.

It hardly closed when a muffled cry came to his ears. It was Benita’s voice—and it seemed to come from back of the wall at his left. He hammered against the paneled surface. One spot sounded different.

“Come on!” he flung at Doyle. “We’ll have to break it in!”

Shoulders turned, they hit the wall together. It held solidly. Knight rapped out another signal, and they charged again. This time a hinged section flew open without resistance, and they

plunged headlong into another room. As Knight jumped to his feet the secret door whizzed shut and he saw a magnetic lock snap into place.

HE had dropped the flashlight, but he had no need of it. A tilted light from still another room shone through the doorway which connected them. Knight’s pulses suddenly leaped. Behind a desk, in the shadows of that other black-walled room, was the man with the queer, shriveled mask. Just beyond him stood Borg, the hulking Dane, and gripped in Borg’s powerful hands was Benita!

Knight sprang toward the doorway, his gun leveled.

“Raise your hands, you rats!”

The masked man reached quickly across his desk. Knight fired straight at his head. To his astonishment, the bullet flattened before his eyes. Then he realized that an invisible glass barrier stood between them.

“I appreciate your kind intentions, Mr. Knight,” the other man snarled through the dictaphone. “But you and Mr. Doyle are the rats in this trap!”

Benita suddenly kicked out at Borg’s shins. The huge Dane howled with pain and grabbed at his knee. The girl flashed past the desk and ran to the seemingly open doorway. A pitiful, stunned look came into her face as she brought up against the barrier.

“Ricardo!” she moaned. “Open it—let me through!”

Doyle and Knight both were furiously pounding with their guns on the curved glass, but they barely scarred the surface. Helplessly, Knight saw the masked man spring around his desk and clutch Benita with his oddly-gloved hands. She whirled, clawed at him desperately. The plastique mask came off, revealing the fierce, dark face of the Japanese colonel, Hiroki.

“Assassin!” she cried. “It was you who killed old Enrique and the others!”

Hiroki only smiled. Knight hurled himself insanely at the glass.

“You damned fiend!” he raged.

The Japanese glared at him and Doyle. “You’ll never leave here alive—either of you!”

He jerked the mask back into place, wheeled savagely to Borg.

“Forget you ever saw my face—if you wish to continue living!”

The big Dane nodded dumbly. Hiroki gestured for him to seize Benita again. Just then his dictaphone buzzer sounded, and Knight heard his snarled words through the box on the wall behind him.

“Well, what have you learned?”

“Police, *taisa!*” came the hasty reply in Japanese. “Another car has arrived—I heard them send word for reserves—they are surrounding the block!”

“*Yomiji!*” swore the infuriated colonel. “We will have to abandon the place. Take your key file in a dispatch case. Connect your bomb circuit with mine and go out through the emergency passage. Wait at the end.”

He pressed a button under his desk, and Knight saw a panel slide open in the shadowy wall behind the desk. The fuming Japanese motioned to Borg.

“Take the girl through that passage. A man will be in the garage at the end. Tell him to have the car ready, that we are going to the old farm in Virginia.”

“But there is only one plane left there,” protested Borg. “And that is the single-seater I used tonight when—”

“The stolen Douglas has been taken there,” rasped Hiroki. “The police would have learned everything if it had remained at the airport. Our only safe plan now is to fly to Lost Valley. On the way I’ll make this little fool admit how much she told at Brett’s house. We may have to abandon the entire scheme, but I don’t think they learned that much.”

Knight sprang to the dictaphone box on the wall.

“Benita!” he shouted. “Where is Lost Valley?”

She twisted around in Borg’s grasp. “Old Jeem’s map—in my belt!” she gasped. Then a hopeless light came into her eyes, and Knight saw the belt there on Hiroki’s desk.

“Take her out of here!” grated the Japanese.

FOR one last instant, Benita’s despairing eyes clung to Knight’s face, then Borg shoved her into the passage. Without a glance at the two men pounding madly against the glass barrier, Hiroki took several papers from his desk and tore them to pieces. He picked up Benita’s belt, hurriedly

withdrew a folded map from a slit in the back. The map was old and tattered. He gave it a swift look, ripped it and let the pieces fall. Knight stared down at a fragment which dropped on the desk near the glass. A thin red line had been drawn straight across the map, and he saw two cities through which it passed. Hiroki caught his tense glance as he turned to the clock on his desk.

“Small good that will do you!” he said harshly. “When these clock hands make connection, you and your meddling friend will land in hell!”

He moved the hands, opened a drawer and set a mechanism which Knight could barely see. Doyle frantically emptied his gun at a chipped spot on the barrier, but the bullet-proof glass held. Hiroki laughed contemptuously. Reaching down into another drawer, he produced a jar of colorless liquid and tipped it over on the floor. The torn papers smoked and blackened as acid spread over them.

“Just in case the blast should leave anything!” rasped the Japanese. He stiffened as a muffled thudding sounded through the walls. Leaping to the clock, he re-set the hands, then ran to the passage. The panel closed and he was gone. Doyle charged across at the hinged secret door, wildly trying to burst it open.

“The magnetic lock!” exclaimed Knight. “That’s our only chance.”

He aimed quickly, fired. The slug hit the lock housing, but the bar did not move. He fired twice more. At the third shot, a heavy spring let go and sailed across the room. Part of the locking-bar went with it.

General Brett and a police squad with axes were just crashing down the other locked door as Doyle and Knight plunged into the rubbish-filled room.

“Run!” Knight shouted. “The place will be blown up any second!”

There was a wild rush for the exit. The general tripped as they dashed up the stairs to the courtyard. Knight hauled him to his feet, and they ran for the alley. They had almost reached it when a deafening explosion shook the ground. Flame leaped up, and bits of hurtling stone filled the air. A jagged piece struck the side of Knight’s head. As he went down he heard Brett shout at Doyle. He felt them lift him, then everything turned black....

When he opened his eyes a doctor was bending over him, adjusting a bandage around his head. He looked about, saw Mrs. Brett and the general, and Doyle watching anxiously beside them. Then he saw that he was in Brett's living-room, on the same divan where Benita had lain. His eyes met the general's in a mute question. Brett sadly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Dick. Doyle told us, but in the confusion after that blast the car got away. They crossed Key Bridge and reached an old farm they'd used as a hide-out."

Knight groaned. "Then they escaped in the Douglas?"

The general regretfully nodded. "We just got the full report. They shot two Virginia State troopers, set fire to the farm-house and the barn where they'd hid their planes, and took off. Pilots from Bolling and Naval Air have been trying to find the ship, but until daylight—" he made a helpless gesture.

Knight pushed the doctor aside, shakily got to his feet.

"I'm going to the Japanese Embassy! I'll make somebody tell!"

"It's no use," Brett said wearily. "After Doyle told me about Hiroki, I called Madison and had him go out there, representing the State Department. They produced Hiroki's resignation dated a month ago—said he had left for Mexico to go into private business. They swear they don't know a thing about it—and without proof we don't dare make any charges. Our hands are tied."

"Not mine!" Knight said grimly. "I'm going after those butchers!"

"But you don't know where they went," objected Brett.

"I saw a bearing on part of a map Benita had in her belt." Knight's jaw set in a hard line. "I'm going to find where they took her if I have to fly clear around the globe."

CHAPTER V LOST VALLEY

IT was more than twelve hours since Northrop had taken off from Bolling Field. The ship roared along under a mass of leaden clouds, through which shone only the faintest rays of the late afternoon sun. Range after range of mountains

showed below, the lower slopes dark with pine and fir trees, a few of the higher peaks capped with snow.

Flying mechanically, Knight watched the desolate scene beneath, while Larry Doyle dozed after an earlier turn at the stick. They had refueled twice. Doyle and he had taken shifts in crossing the Eastern and mid-Western States, but for the past three hours he had kept the controls, grimly following the line he had extended on his map.

Despair was slowly crushing out his hope. The mountains of northern New Mexico had yielded nothing. The Painted Desert and the Grand Canyon region of Arizona were now behind them. There remained only two hundred miles between them and the settled area of southern California. Two Army squadrons had already searched over most of this distance, operating on orders from Washington, and General Brett had relayed their reports to him by radio. The Douglas had not been sighted.

The Northrop passed close to a jutting ridge, swayed in bumpy air. Knight nosed down, his tired eyes searching the valley beyond. There was no sign of habitation—no place where a plane could safely land. He scanned it with field-glasses to make sure, then wearily climbed again. The bumpy air jolted Doyle into wakefulness. He stared around, then leaned forward to look at the check-marks Knight had made on their course line.

"Looks bad, Dick," he said glumly. "Brett said the Army ships had already been over this stretch."

"I know, but they also said the visibility was poor," returned Knight. "They're searching East from the Panamint Range again."

"I'm afraid it won't be any use," said Doyle. "This course might be a hundred miles off from the line on that other map. All you saw was one short bit of it—and that probably wasn't straight."

"No," Knight said in a dogged voice, "it had been drawn carefully. It passed straight Louisville and Ashland, Kentucky. And we're on the exact extension of that line."

"Maybe so," Doyle replied dubiously. "But my guess would be Mexico. There are plenty of God-forsaken spots down there."

Knight shook his head.

“The Japanese Embassy would never have mentioned Mexico, if that were the case. They intended to lead us off the track.”

He sent the Northrop through a pass between two frowning peaks. A canyon appeared ahead, its precipitous sides rising from a rocky floor three thousand feet below. A waterfall spilled down into darkness where the walls came together at the North. The canyon twisted off to the Southeast, gradually widening. Knight pointed the ship down in a curving glide. It would be the same story.... rocks, a mountain stream, trees—and no sign of human life. He was mechanically reaching for the field-glasses when Doyle leaned forward under the hastily-patched enclosure.

“There’s one of the Army ships—the pilot’s signaling us.”

Knight looked around quickly. A Curtiss pursuit had come into sight from around one of the peaks. The pilot was gesturing to them as he approached.

“Guess he means they searched this stretch,” yelled Doyle. “He’s shaking his head and—”

His last word ended in a howl as Knight hit the throttle and backsticked. Tracers shot through the space where the Northrop’s tail had been. The Curtiss zoomed fiercely after the faster ship. Another burst blazed from its guns, and a smoking stream gouged the fuselage before Doyle could whirl his guns.

“Why, the dirty louse!” bellowed the ex-Leatherneck. He snapped the .50’s around, but the Curtiss pilot renversed and fled wildly. Knight snapped the two-seater into a tight bank, raced after the other ship. The Northrop was within half a mile of the peak when a quick suspicion leaped into his mind. He zoomed at full speed. Almost in the same instant, four ships hurtled from behind the peak. Spreading out swiftly, they charged at the two-seater.

“Holy cats!” yelled Doyle. “They’re Drake pursuits!”

KNIGHT flung the ship toward the nearest single-seater. Doyle was right. The four planes were PV-11’s—unmistakably products of the now ruined Drake factory at Richmond. But every one of the first twenty Drake pursuits ordered by the Army was supposed to have been destroyed in that terrific explosion and fire!

The explanation flashed through his brain, but he had no time to think of it further. The Drakes were swarming in with all the speed of their special Conqueror engines, and from four directions machine-guns were flaming at the Northrop. He cut loose with his .30-.30’s as the first ship came briefly under his guns. The pilot flipped out of range, tried to roll back on the right. Knight heard Doyle’s twin-guns stutter.

Two of the Drakes shot in from left and right, and their criss-crossed tracers met above his head. He shoved the stick forward, and the two-seater plunged. The Wasp thundered furiously as the Northrop went past the vertical. Knight braced himself, pushed the stick clear forward.

Wings screeching, the two-seater bunted on over into an outside loop. The two Drakes pitched by before they could turn. He made a swift half-roll, heard a profane outburst behind him as Doyle came right side up. One of the other two Drakes was rocketing down the sky. Knight switched in his wing-root guns. The Drake’s four Brownings were spitting, but the pilot sheered away frantically as Knight’s .50’s crashed his wing. Knight moved the rudder a fraction of an inch. A black-dotted line ran across the Drake’s left wing. It ripped through the cockpit, leaving a mangled thing to sag down over the stick.

The PV-11 nosed over, went helling downward. Half-way to the ground it shed the battered wing. Fire leaped up where it struck, deep in the canyon.

A hail of slugs pelted the cowl in front of Knight. He kicked away, but a sudden uneven beat in the roar of the radials told him the engine had been hit. He zoomed, trying to clear the ridge at his left. The three remaining Drakes raced in to drive the Northrop back, and the Curtiss drilled in at the tail.

The leading Drake pilot signaled a fierce negative to the man in the Curtiss. Knight stiffened as he saw the dark face under the Drake’s cockpit enclosure.

It was Hiroki!

Sight of the Japanese gave him a furious lust to kill. He whirled the two-seater onto its wingtips. His senses swam from the tight turn but he could still see that darting ship. His fingers clamped on the .50-gun buttons. The heavy tracers lanced out at the plunging PV-11, but Hiroki was too quick.

With a violent split, he was clear, and the crashing force of the .50's was spent in space.

The Curtiss was darting from side to side, stabbing bursts close to the Northrop's wings. Doyle slammed his twin-guns around, clamped his fist on the triggers. The Curtiss tried to dive beneath the two-seater. Doyle spun the mount, poured a hot blast into the smaller ship. The tail of the Curtiss collapsed like a house of cards. The terrified pilot took one look, went headfirst over the side. Five hundred feet below, he opened his 'chute and slipped it toward the canyon.

The double-banked Wasp began to shake and miss. Knight swore through set teeth. They were being forced down toward the wider end of the canyon. Even now, they were almost too low to clear the surrounding ridges, and the three Drake pilots were trying to hem them in, to cripple them still more.

One of the ships flashed past with a quick burst at the right wingtip. Under the heavy mica cockpit-cover, he saw the hulking figure of Borg. There was an ugly grin on the Dane's brutal face. Knight tried to swerve the two-seater, but Borg climbed steeply out of range. Hiroki dived into the Northrop's single blind spot—directly behind the rudder. Doyle left off firing at the third Drake, and spun the .50's around. But the Jap air colonel clung tenaciously to his safe position, though his guns remained silent.

Borg streaked down again, poured two short bursts at the Northrop's prop. Knight kicked away. His hasty skid gave Doyle clear aim at Hiroki. Doyle jerked the twin-mount, and the smoking .50 caliber guns raked over the Jap's right wing. Hiroki dived precipitously under the two-seater. Knight plunged after him, and his high-speed .30's eagerly throbbed into action. Bits of dural flew from the Drake's tail, and he saw the tracers probe up toward the pit.

HIROKI hastily stood on the rudder, and the Drake leaped sidewise. Before Knight could realign his guns, the Japanese pitched headlong into the canyon. The Drake twisted back toward the rocky walls and was lost from view. The dive had taken the Northrop almost to the brink of the chasm. Knight pulled up, trying to turn away. Borg charged in furiously to herd him back. Doyle

crashed a fusillade at the Dane, and Borg hurriedly rolled clear.

Sixty feet above the chasm, Knight desperately banked. The lowered wing almost scraped the rocks as he turned. Like a javelin, the third Drake shot down at them. For a second, Knight thought the pilot intended to crash straight into him. Then the single-seater zoomed, with Doyle savagely firing after it.

The boiling air currents left by the Drake hurled the Northrop down toward the rocks. Knight lunged on the stick, and the two-seater roared into the canyon, missing the edge by less than a yard. As he pulled back for one final effort, the engine began a fierce vibration. He eased it to half-speed, but the vibration increased to a dangerous point. Helpless, he closed the throttle and cut the switch.

With the two Drakes hovering above, he glided between the cliffs. Doyle elevated his guns for a shot at Borg.

"Hold it!" said Knight. "We'll need those guns below!"

"All we'll need will be a hearse after we hit those rocks," Doyle flung back.

"Take a look around that curve," said Knight.

He pointed ahead, to where the canyon turned and widened. Though it lay in the shadow of the precipitous walls, the jagged floor had given way to a stretch of flat open ground. Heavy groves of trees bordered one side, lining the banks of the stream from the waterfall. The flat area extended for more than half a mile between the woods and the cliffs on the left, its edges irregular but its lateral dimensions wide enough for even cross-wind landing of planes.

Beyond this clearing was another thick grove of trees, then the canyon swelled into an almost circular valley about five miles across. Except for the main clearing and a few open patches here and there, the rest of the valley was rugged and heavily wooded. At the extreme Southern end was a vast slope of rock, evidence of an avalanche in some distant past. The wall above it rose vertically for two thousand feet. There was no way out that Knight could see. The winding stream vanished in a dark ravine at the foot of the frowning rocks.

At one side of the flat clearing, Hiroki's plane had come to a stop. The purple shadows of the

towering cliffs fell across the landing space, but Knight saw men running out from the base of the precipice. Behind them a number of stone buildings and huge log houses were visible in the shadows.

“We’ve found it!” Doyle shouted. “It must be Lost Valley!”

Lost Valley! A strange, fierce thrill shot through Knight. Whatever the history of this queer, forgotten place, Benita must be here. He stared down eagerly past the bullet-torn wing, their peril for the instant forgotten.

There was the Douglas, before one of the huge log buildings. The front of the structure was open, and under its high roof he could vaguely see other planes. There was a similar lean-to type of building next to it, with still more ships. The rear ends of both structures were built against the cliff.

“What are you going to do?” Doyle bellowed as he ran the wheels out.

“I’ll land and swing around so you can cover those devils,” Knight said. “Get ready for—”

“Look!” yelled Doyle. “They’re bringing out a machine-gun!”

Knight stiffened. The gun-squad had appeared from the third log shack. The men were running toward the spot where Hiroki’s ship had stopped. He cast a hasty look backward. The two PV-11’s were following, but keeping well out of range of Doyle’s guns. He slid his fingers up to the stick buttons. The prop was blocking the two .50’s in the wing, but the other guns were outside the propeller arc.

HE nosed down, swung toward the AA scurrying gun-squad. Hiroki and the men about him broke and ran. The gunners hastily set down the weapon, tilted the muzzle. Knight pressed the second button, and the high-speed Brownings answered with a roar. Two of the gunners wilted. A third sprang to the weapon, and flame shot from its snout.

Bullets creased the Northrop’s wing, tore back through the tail. Knight crouched, ripped out another quick burst. The man tumbled backward, almost cut in two. The Northrop was nearly on the ground, and he could hear the two Drake fighters coming down through the canyon behind him. He landed, put on the brakes swiftly, letting the plane swing around.

Suddenly his heart turned cold. Two of Hiroki’s pilots had dragged a feminine figure from the nearest stone building. As they ran toward the Jap and the others, Knight recognized Benita. Doyle whirled the rear-pit guns to cover the group, but instantly Hiroki seized Benita and threw her in front of him.

“You dirty rat!” roared Doyle.

Crouching back of the girl, Hiroki pointed a pistol toward the Northrop. “Stand up, both of you!” he rasped.

A helpless look came into Doyle’s face. “My God, Dick, what’ll I do?”

Pale as death, Benita looked up at Knight.

“Tell him to shoot, Ricardo! I do not fear to die, if you can save the others.”

Knight groaned, slid back the cockpit cover.

“He’s got us,” he said thickly to Doyle. He stepped onto the wing. Doyle swore savagely, reached up to open his cover. As he let go of the guns, a dozen of Hiroki’s men sprang forward with hastily drawn pistols. Five of them surrounded Knight as he jumped to the ground. One man struck him a vicious blow from the side. He lashed back, and the man fell. In a flash, the rest were on him. He dropped one more, then went down under a rain of blows and kicks.

“You cowards!” he heard Benita cry out. Doyle’s angry bellow added itself to the furor, and one of the spy-pilots gave a scream of pain. Hiroki’s snarl cut through the uproar.

“Stop, you fools! I don’t want these men killed yet!”

Sullenly, the pilots hauled Doyle and Knight to their feet. Knight was groggy from a venomous blow in the stomach, and he saw Doyle reeling drunkenly, blood flowing from a cut under his eye. Hiroki glared at them.

“Take them into my headquarters,” he grated. “And bring the girl, too.”

The two PV-11’s had landed, and Knight saw Hiroki waiting for Borg and the other man as he and Doyle were hustled along. He recognized two of the group of spy-pilots who surrounded them. One was a renegade Frenchman named Laroche, whom he had known to be mixed up with espionage in the Orient. The other was a Polish flyer named Motski, a man who had fled from his own country after selling army secrets to Russia. From the looks of the others, they were all in the

same class—renegades, exiles, cut-throat soldiers-of-fortune.

The two who held Benita prisoner were leering at her in a way that made Knight's blood boil. It was all he could do to keep from fighting his way to her side, though he knew it would do no good. His only hope of helping her was to wait and pray for a break.

He watched her for a moment. Her head was high, her eyes straight ahead as though her grinning captors did not exist. He tore his gaze away and forced himself to note what he could of the secret base Hiroki had established.

They were passing near the stolen Douglas transport. Back of it was the first of the huge log hangars. Only a small number of mechanics could be seen. The spy-pilots outnumbered them at least two to one. As he saw the interior of the hangars, he felt a sudden consternation. He was partly prepared, after seeing the PV-11's, but he had not realized the completeness of Hiroki's scheme.

SIXTEEN more Drake fighters stood in the first hangar, pushed close together to make room for a dozen F7B1's. In the second hangar were ten of the new Hollister XA-16 attack ships, which had been under test at the Hollister factory in Ohio, before the plant was wrecked by an explosion and fire similar to that at Richmond. With them were a dozen fast sportster ships, all single-seaters, which were in process of being armed as pursuit planes. A third hangar, just started, gave an ominous hint of still more planes to be added to this menacing secret air force.

The Japanese scheme was clearly, grimly evident. In some way they had discovered Lost Valley and had seen its possibilities as a base in time of war, a base for swift attack against the Pacific Coast cities and military stations. With the fast planes hidden here, it would take a raiding force little more than an hour to reach Los Angeles and the navy base at San Pedro. The Army and Navy flying fields at San Diego would be within easy reach, and in less than two hours San Francisco and Oakland could be attacked. Undoubtedly, Hiroki had made bombing planes.

Knight could guess now how the ships had been obtained. The Japanese had evidently selected aircraft factories which were two or three miles from cities, like the Drake and Hollister

plants, and the Boeing Company's East Coast subsidiary factory in Pennsylvania, where eighteen F7B1's were supposed to have been destroyed in one of the strange explosions. Hiroki's agents obviously had killed the watchmen and any others around the factory fields on the nights for their raids. It would have been simple, then, to run out the completed ships and rearrange the unfinished ones so that there would be pieces of wrecked planes found everywhere in the ruined shops.

Probably they had selected nights when the wind was right, so that the sound of the engines would not be heard in the nearby cities. Or the spy-pilots might have taken off just after the first explosion—he recalled that in each case there had been several blasts in quick succession, followed by the disastrous fires. But however it had been done, it was plain that the ships had been removed and flown here before the explosions. Perhaps a few were still hidden at spots like the Virginia farm. There must be other places, he surmised, where Hiroki had arranged for refueling en route to Lost Valley, and for securing tanks of gas and oil, ammunition and supplies, through crooked dealers or men on the payroll of the *Kimitsu Kyoku*. The Douglas had probably been used regularly for transporting supplies to the secret base. He remembered that a privately-owned Douglas was reported to have been lost in the Pacific Ocean while flying down the coast in foggy weather. This must be the same machine, and similar tactics must have been used to cover the disappearance of the private sport planes he had just seen.

Next to the uncompleted third hangar were several log shacks. A group of men and women was at work, under guard, carrying supplies from the Douglas into these huts. The men were dressed in homespun trousers and jackets, the women in costumes somewhat like Benita's, but more ruggedly made as though for everyday work. They worked with a dreary hopelessness, under the surly eyes of several armed guards. Knight saw where one man's jacket and shirt had been torn open for a lashing. Ugly welts stood out on his back, and the man groaned as he moved. One of the women looked up as Benita was taken by.

“Heaven help you, *mi nina!*” she cried. “These monsters will kill you—or make you slave like the rest of us.”

A look of infinite sadness crossed Benita’s beautiful face.

“Have faith, Consuelo,” she answered, “God will save us yet.”

Laroche, the French renegade, laughed uproariously. “You will need more than God to save you, my pretty one.”

Benita made no reply. One of her captors started a coarse jest, then broke off uneasily as a silence fell over the group. Knight saw Hiroki stride past with Borg. The Japanese entered one of the older buildings. It was made of crudely quarried stone, chinked with what looked like adobe mortar, and it appeared to be quite old. Like the other buildings, it stood on the slightly higher ground in the deep shadow of the cliff, apparently located there to be safe in the event of a flood from the turbulent mountain stream. He could see now why this little Spanish community had remained undiscovered. Even pilots flying off the airline routes would not be able to see the buildings unless they came down into the canyon.

His guards shoved him into the building, and others pushed Doyle after him. In the first room a man with earphones was turning the dials of a radio receiver. A number of scribbled messages lay beside him. The three prisoners were taken into the next room. Hiroki had seated himself back of a table, the automatic still in his hand. Borg stood at one side, glowering at Knight. On the wall behind Hiroki was a map of the United States, with attack lines drawn from Lost Valley to several points on the Pacific Coast. An organization chart for two bombing squadrons, an attack wing, and three pursuit squadrons hung beside the map. On the floor were three big chests, brass-bound, and each bearing a Spanish coat-of-arms. They were discolored with age.

Hiroki curtly ordered Doyle and Knight searched. When this was done, he sent out all the spy-pilots but Borg and Laroche. While the Dane and Laroche covered the two Americans, Hiroki turned savagely to Benita.

“And now,” he rasped in English, “I’ll give you one more chance. Where is the Green Madonna?”

CHAPTER VI ONE HOUR TO LIVE

BENITA’S face was white, but she did not reply. Hiroki’s left hand snaked out, cruelly gripped her wrist. Knight lunged at him, but Borg rammed a gun into his ribs. Hiroki gave the girl’s arm a furious twist.

“I know all about you and your emerald!” he snarled. “We caught the old American after you hid on the plane, and one of your people told us the rest. Where is the jewel?”

“I do not know!” she cried. “And if I did I would not tell you.”

The Japanese slowly lifted his automatic. “Perhaps this will change your mind.”

Knight grimly interposed.

“I’ll tell you—but it won’t do you any good. I left it at General Brett’s house.”

Hiroki gave him a furious look.

“*Sacre bleu!*” lamented Laroche. “There goes my share of two million francs.”

“Well, it cannot be helped,” snapped Hiroki. “There is still enough in these chests to pay all of you. And my main interest is the preserving of the secret.”

“But what if they uncover the truth about the emerald?” Borg muttered. “What if they learn the Spanish duke came to California and—”

“There’s no danger of that,” Hiroki interrupted impatiently. “If the jewel collectors haven’t found de Navarre’s trail in all these years, that stupid American general will fare no better.”

He released Benita’s wrist, turned angrily to Knight.

“And you, American pig! You and that crooked-nosed baboon will soon pay for the day you shot me down at Chapei!”

Knight calmly looked down at him.

“So you were the pilot I didn’t kill. Too bad I didn’t aim better.”

The Japanese jumped to his feet with an oath. Benita gave a cry, sprang between him and Knight as he raised his pistol.

“Benita—get back!” Knight shouted. He leaped past Borg, thrust her away from Hiroki’s gun. There was still rage in the eyes of the Japanese, but he slowly lowered the weapon.

“A very pretty scene,” he sneered. “I was not aware that the famous ‘Q’ had time for such

amorous pursuits. But it seems you do not require much time.”

“Oh, Ricardo!” moaned Benita. “You come here to save me—and now you will be killed.”

Hiroki’s lips curled. “You will soon join him, never fear. You will help him pay for forcing me to exile myself here.”

Knight’s face was like granite. He took a step closer, ignoring a thrust from Borg’s gun.

“They’ll find this place, Hiroki,” he said in a voice that was deadly quiet. “And some of your men will squeal to save their hides. When the Americans learn that you murdered this girl it will be your life for hers.”

For just an instant, Hiroki scowled. Then he laughed harshly.

“Your blind Army will never even suspect that this base exists—until I get the secret order from Tokyo to begin action. We have caught all the messages from your thick-headed general. He is unable to prove my connection, though I shall have to remain here. And the Army pilots are merely looking for a little valley with a Douglas plane in it. Brett doesn’t dream that all those other planes were not destroyed in their factories.”

Knight kept his face inscrutable, but Hiroki gave him a mocking smile.

“I suppose you are thinking they will also start looking for the Northrop. Don’t bother, Mr. Knight—they will find both ships.”

HE looked at Doyle and Benita, and a sick feeling took hold of Knight as he realized Hiroki’s meaning. Borg and Laroche had also caught it.

“Why go to that trouble, colonel?” growled the big Dane. “Why not shoot them now and keep the ships?”

“Imbecile!” snapped the Japanese. “The Army would search all the more if these two swine disappeared without a trace. Also, the girl’s mention of Lost Valley must be covered. I have thought of a way to do both. At dusk, you will take off in the Northrop with this smart American agent in the front cockpit. He will be drugged and will make no trouble. You will fly to the old ‘ghost town’ of Alicante, which lies in a valley eighty miles to the north. You will take to your parachute and let the plane crash there.”

“But how will I get back?” Borg said, alarmed.

“I am coming to that,” Hiroki retorted. “Laroche will fly the Douglas to Alicante at the same time, and will land by a flare. There will be two of our men with him—and several passengers. One will be this Doyle, who will be partly drugged. He also will have a parachute without a release ring, and will be thrown out at two thousand feet, so that it will appear he jumped when the Northrop went out of control.”

“You lousy butcher!” Doyle raged. He plunged toward the sneering Japanese, but Laroche drove a knotted fist into his solar plexus and he doubled over, gasping. As the Frenchman pulled Doyle back, Hiroki went on in a harsh voice.

“The rest is more complicated, so listen carefully. The girl and three or four of the other Spaniards will be tied and put in the Douglas. Some food and water, a lamp, and some other things will also be put on board. After you land, you will place these things in one of the old houses of the ‘ghost town.’”

“You don’t mean to leave the girl and the others at Alicante?” exclaimed Laroche, amazed.

“Yes!” grated Hiroki. “But they will be dead. My idea is to make it look like a scheme for bringing aliens from Mexico into this country.” He lowered his voice. “Motski will be one of the two men with you. He already has a police record for trying to smuggle aliens across the border. I shall prepare some papers to make it seem that the girl and the rest came from an obscure part of Mexico, and that Motski was the pilot for a smuggling ring.”

Borg and Laroche looked at each other. Hiroki’s slanting eyes narrowed.

“After the trouble he caused last week, he has no place here. And it means eliminating him from sharing in the final rewards. Have you any objection?”

Laroche grinned and Borg hastily shook his close-cropped head. The Japanese went on without emotion.

“When you land, shoot Motski at once. Then take the supplies into one of the houses so that it will appear to have been used as a hide-away for aliens waiting to be taken on by car. When this is done, come back and kill the girl and the others. Do it with a sub machine-gun fired from outside, so that it will seem that the cabin was riddled by the Northrop’s guns.

“Then go in and remove the bonds from the girl and the others. Place the machine-gun up in the pilot’s compartment, near Motski, so it will look as though he had fired on the Northrop before he was wounded and forced to land. If you work fast it should not take more than a few minutes. Three of the XA-16’s will land and pick up the two of you and the extra man. But before you take off, be sure that Knight has been killed in the crash. One of the airline routes passes directly over Alicante, and the Douglas and the wrecked Northrop are certain to be seen tomorrow morning.”

As Hiroki finished his cold-blooded orders, Benita looked in horror at Knight. He tried to manage a reassuring smile, but it was a ghastly mockery. Borg eyed the girl dubiously.

“What about her being seen in Washington? And the emerald business?”

Hiroki shrugged.

“Let them wonder about it. They will probably think she was working with Motski—perhaps was attempting to smuggle the jewel from someplace where it had been hidden in Mexico. Someone will possibly suggest that she was attempting to double-cross Motski, and that her mention of a fantastic lost valley was a trick to get the Army to protect her from him. Or they may think there is such a place in Mexico, and that she was kidnapped from there by Motski. It makes no difference—finding the two planes will end the search.”

“Are you sure the Northrop will be ready?” Borg rumbled. “They’ve got to shift a distributor from one of the Hollisters, and it’s only forty minutes to sundown.”

Hiroki nodded curtly. “It will be ready, and twenty minutes later you will be over Alicante.” His beady eyes shifted gloatingly to Knight’s face. “You have just one hour to live!”

Knight gave no sign of the turmoil within him. Hiroki leaned forward, a wolfish smile on his dark face.

“Perhaps you misunderstood about the drug, Mr. Knight. It will make you physically helpless—but you will retain your senses. You will hear the wings begin to scream after Borg jumps. You will be able to feel yourself plunging to your death!”

Knight looked down unmoved at the smirking Japanese.

“There must have been a special corner of Hell reserved for you, Hiroki.”

The other man gestured furiously to Borg and Laroche.

“Get them out of here! Have them locked up until I’m ready for them. Lock up the girl separately—I’ll give them no last maudlin moments together!”

BORG kicked open the other door, bawled for some of the men. Four of the spy-pilots hurried in. Benita’s anguished face turned toward Knight.

“Farewell, Ricardo!” she cried in a broken voice.

Knight tried to hide his despair.

“No, not goodbye,” he answer. “Don’t give up hope, *mi querida*.”

Hiroki’s snarl cut short her reply, but Knight knew to his dying moment he would remember the look in her eyes. Borg and another pilot seized him as Benita was led away. Laroche and the fourth pilot brought up the rear with Doyle.

Benita was taken into one of the smaller stone buildings, while he and Doyle were hustled across to a larger one. There was a weather-beaten cross fastened above the doorway. A man with a gun at his hip stood guard. At Borg’s gruff order, the gunman removed a padlock from a chain across the door. Doyle and Knight were pushed inside, then the door was locked behind them.

The fading daylight sifted through cracks in the boarded-up windows, and as Knight’s eyes became accustomed to the semi-gloom he saw a simple altar at the other end, and a cross on the wall behind it. But the ruggedly-built pews had been scattered, and most of the space was filled with boxes of engine parts, cans of oil, and fuel drums.

He looked around hastily for a means of escape. Doyle followed his glance at the heavy, rough hewn boards on the windows.

“They’d hear us—we’d have to pound like the devil to get those boards off.”

“Not if we work it right,” Knight muttered. “They’ll test the Northrop’s engine to be sure it’s ready. We’ll try to break out when they rev it up.”

He rummaged hastily through one of the opened boxes. A connecting-rod was the nearest

approach to a lever he could find. Doyle took another one, and they started toward the other end of the old church. Over in a corner, tarpaulins had been spread on the floor, and bunches of waste had been wadded into crude pillows.

"They must lock part of the valley people in here at night," said Doyle. "Poor devils, think of living a peaceful life like that—cut off from everything—and then having Hiroki and his mob drop in and turn them into slaves."

"They won't be slaves much longer," Knight responded savagely.

"Even if we get out," said Doyle, "there'll be about thirty-five against us. Got the answer to that doped out?"

Knight peered between two boards on the nearest window. "It's getting darker every second, here in the canyon. We'll have a good chance to get past the buildings without being recognized."

"You mean we'll grab a ship?" exclaimed Doyle.

"No, we'll make for that machine-gun they dragged out. I'm going to mow them down like rats. It's the only way to save Benita now."

THEN from back in the shadows of the old church, there came a stifled exclamation. Doyle and Knight whirled. A little old man was hobbling toward them from where he had hidden behind the altar. His hair and beard were snow-white.

"Who are you?" he whispered feverishly. "What do you know of Benita?"

His words were in English without an accent.

"Are you the one she calls 'Old Jim'?" Knight asked quickly.

The white-haired man stared from him to Doyle. "Yes, I'm Jim Bradley," he answered. A pathetic eagerness came into his eyes. "You're from the outside? She reached Washington?"

Knight's face clouded. "She reached it—but they caught her before she told us enough. They brought her back here, and we were captured trying to find the valley."

A look of misery came into Old Jim's face. "That murderer with the yellow mask will have her shot," he groaned.

"Not if I can help it!" Knight said fiercely. He turned toward the window, but a shadow fell across the crack just as he lifted the connecting-rod. The man outside paused, then went on.

"You can never escape that way," Old Jim whispered tensely. "There is always someone in the next building."

"We'll have to risk it," said Knight, with a grim determination.

"No, there is a better way," the old man said in a hoarse voice. "We were going to try it tonight when they were asleep. I was down there when I heard the shooting."

He looked nervously toward the door, then hobbled to the altar. He pushed against it, and the altar began to slide back. A dim light appeared. Knight started as he saw the open space beneath.

"Where does it lead?" he asked hastily.

But the old man was already lowering himself into the hole. He took a lighted candle from a niche in the wall, held it so they could see to follow. Knight was the first. He found himself in a stone-walled vault about twenty feet square. Two of the stones had been removed, and the chamber was almost filled with earth from a small passage.

"This was the Duke of Navarre's hiding place for the gold they found here, and his treasures from Spain," Old Jim whispered. "That was before the earthquake that closed the pass in 1851 and trapped them all in the valley. The duke's grandson—Benita's father—had the chests taken out before he died. He divided everything equally—except the Madonna, which he gave to Benita."

"But where does the passage lead?" Knight broke in anxiously.

"Under the log house where they keep their guns and ammunition," replied the old man. "But it isn't quite finished—there's two or three feet left to dig."

Knight turned quickly to Doyle. "Help me pull the altar back over the entry. It may give us a few more minutes if they discover we're gone."

It was done in a moment, and they hurried into the passage after Old Jim. The old man hobbled along, shielding the candle with his hand.

"If only they had listened to me," he said sadly, "none of this would have happened. But they always thought I was crazy—except Benita. She believed all I told her about the outside world. But her mind is far above those of the others. Until this trouble, they were simple, contented people. There was grain enough in the little fields, and there has always been game in the woods and fish

in the creek. This is the only world they know. But Benita was educated by her father, after her mother died, from old books handed down from one Navarre to another. He used to dream, she told me, of a time when they might escape from the Valley and go to Spain.”

“But if you got in here,” grunted Doyle, “why couldn’t you get out again?”

“I fell from the rocks, in the old pass,” Bradley told him. “I was a prospector, and long ago I had heard a story of a mysterious Spaniard who found gold somewhere in this region. He was supposed to have fled secretly from Spain after trouble with the king, and to have built up a tiny empire in a deep valley. He was never heard from again, but I kept hunting the valley for years. Then when I found it, five years ago, I was almost killed by my fall, and since then I have been a prisoner like the rest. No one has ever been able to scale the cliffs.”

They had come to the end of the passage. It widened into a hole about six feet in diameter, which led up at a steep slant.

“If they dug straight,” Old Jim whispered excitedly, “this is under the wall of the cabin. The passage should break through just inside.”

Knight stared at two machete knives on the ground.

“Are those the only tools?” he said in consternation.

“Yes,” said Old Jim. “That’s why it took them all these nights. They told me about it when I was captured yesterday.”

KNIGHT threw off his leather jacket and his coat, seized one of the heavy knives and hacked furiously at the earth. Doyle took the other machete and began to dig with equal speed. As the dirt piled up, Old Jim knelt and scooped it back with his hands.

“God grant we’re in time!” he said fiercely. “If I could see those murderers dead and brave little Benita safe, I could die happy.”

“How did those devils ever find this place?” Doyle panted.

“An airplane had trouble with its engine and the aviator came down here,” answered the old prospector. “I knew it would happen, some time. I’d told them about planes, but only Benita believed me. The rest thought I was mentally unbalanced. They wouldn’t even believe about

telephones and automobiles, let alone about other modern things.”

“Hiroki’s spies must have heard about it from the pilot who was forced down,” muttered Knight, as he paused for breath. He wiped his dripping forehead. “Hiroki is the man back of it,” he explained. “He evidently wore that yellow mask when he was here before.”

“So that’s the answer!” Old Jim exclaimed as Knight went back to work. “I thought it was a gang of crooks using airplanes. The first one was a crook, if I ever saw one. As soon as I saw his face, I told Benita to have the women hide the gold trinkets they wore and not to say anything about the community treasure in the three chests. But it was too late. After they got over their scare at seeing the plane, they treated him like a god. I knew what was in his mind when he left, saying he’d send bigger planes to take them out of the valley. But nobody would listen—even Benita was too excited about seeing the world outside. Then one day they came—ten of them in the big plane, with machine-guns. Thank heavens I got Benita away before they saw her. They killed five men—shot them in cold blood when they tried to defend themselves, and they’ve made the others work like dogs ever since.”

“It’s a wonder they didn’t hunt you and the girl,” Doyle said as he gouged at the earth above him.

“They didn’t see us escape,” returned Old Jim. “We hid in the woods near the creek—lived on fish mostly—and after dark we’d sneak in close, hoping we could do something. Two nights ago, we heard them talking about flying in the big plane to Washington. I was going to hide in it—we found it wasn’t guarded, and I saw a place in the back. But I was afraid nobody at Washington would believe me, so we went back to our camp where Benita had left the Green Madonna, with her other things. I knew somebody would know about the lost emerald. But I twisted my bad leg in the dark, and I couldn’t get back to the plane. Benita insisted on taking my place. I couldn’t stop her, so I told her what to do when—”

All three men stiffened as there came a thudding sound directly above. Earth fell from the spot where Knight had been slashing, and through a narrow crack he saw the edge of a box. He hurriedly motioned Old Jim to move back with

the candle. From a little distance, the muffled drone of several engines was audible. Then the voice of Laroche sounded from above.

"Hurry up with that Tommy-gun, Motski. The ships are ready, and they're going to get the prisoners now."

Old Jim cast a frightened look back into the passage. Knight gripped his machete, swiftly but carefully began to widen the crack above him. The voices of the two spy-pilots had sunk to a mumbling note, but in a second Laroche snapped out an exclamation.

"*Mon Dieu*, what is the matter with you?"

"That Army squadron gave me a scare when it flew over," came Motski's shaky reply.

"*Pouf!*" said the Frenchman. "They are ten miles away by now, scurrying back to their nest. *Vite*—get the gun loaded and come on."

"They'll get us, sooner or later," Motski's hoarse answer came down through the widening crack. "I've a good idea to make a break for it. What do you say? I'll sneak in and get at one of the chests while they're out with the ships. I can steal enough gold for both of us, and we can be lost in Mexico before they find out."

"And have Japanese agents hunting us the rest of our lives!" snapped Laroche.

A large piece of earth tumbled from the roof of the passage. Knight went rigid as he saw the box tilt slightly. But the two men above apparently were not looking in that direction. He braced his shoulder under the box while Doyle frenziedly cut at the other edge of the hole. Suddenly, Old Jim's candle sputtered in a draft. Then a fierce yell sounded from the other end of the passage.

"Here's the answer! There's a secret tunnel!"

CHAPTER VII "CORNER OF HELL"

IN the cabin above, Laroche gave a startled outcry. Knight thrust up against the box, and with a violent push sent it toppling backward. Seizing his machete, he leaped up through the hole. Laroche had sprung to one side, his mouth wide open. Motski, the Pole, took a dazed look at Knight, then frantically snatched up the Tommy-gun. Knight hurled the machete with all his might. It struck Motski square between the eyes.

With his head split half-open, the Polish traitor crumpled. Knight dived for the machine-gun. Laroche's pistol roared but the bullet went into Motski's back. Knight wrenched the Tommy-gun from the dead man's grasp, whirled with the weapon spurting. Laroche fled, howling for help.

Doyle had clambered up into the log cabin, was pulling Old Jim after him. Curses and shouts rang through the darkened passage below, then a flashlight sent a probing beam upward. Knight fired down through the hole. A man screamed, and the light went out.

"Back the other way!" Borg's voice bawled. "They've broken into the gun-shack!"

Knight thrust the Tommy-gun into Doyle's hands, sprang across to a Lewis which hung on a rack. Loaded drums were stacked nearby. He slammed one into place, jerked back the charging-handle. As he wheeled, he saw Old Jim hobble toward the door with a .45 in his hand.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Let me go first!"

But the old prospector was already through the doorway. Knight dashed after him. In the gloom outside, men were running wildly toward the old church. He saw the Douglas and the Northrop a hundred feet away, and three of the Hollisters beyond them. Red and blue flashes from the exhaust stacks showed that the engines of all five ships were running.

"Make for the Northrop!" Knight flung at Doyle. "I'm going to get Benita!"

From the shadows of the second hangar, someone yelled a warning.

"This way! The prisoners are—"

Doyle's Tommy-gun spurted flame, and the man's yell broke in a groan. Knight was nearly to the building where Benita had been taken when he heard Doyle's bellow.

"Dick! They've got her at the Douglas!"

Simultaneously, two flashlights lanced out toward the fugitives. Knight swung the Lewis, pressed the trigger. The heavy gun pounded against his shoulder as it crashed out a thunderous burst.

Five or six of Hiroki's men went down under that furious torrent of lead. As he raced on toward the Douglas he heard Hiroki screeching to the rest. Pistols cracked from several directions, and he saw mechanics run toward the machine-gun

which had been used against the Northrop. Doyle scattered them with a few quick shots.

One of the flashlights spotted the Douglas just as Knight reached it. He saw Benita fighting desperately to keep from being put into the cabin. Suddenly Old Jim's snow-white head appeared in the glare. His .45 roared, and one of her captors fell. The others let go and leaped at the old prospector. He fired again, and one man dropped with a gaping hole in his head.

Before he could aim the third time, the other man hurtled against him and he tumbled over. The spy-pilot snatched at the .45, but Benita knocked it from his hand. Doyle was within ten feet of the Douglas. He whacked the barrel of his Tommy-gun against the pilot's head, and the man collapsed. Shots were whistling around the big ship as Knight reached it.

"Get inside!" he shouted at Benita and Doyle. "I'll stand them off while—look out, there's a man up forward!"

"Switch off the motors!" Hiroki's screech cut through the din. "Close in, the rest of you—shoot to kill!"

The engines of the Douglas went dead. Knight whirled, gripping the Lewis. A fusillade raked the onrushing men. Four of them dropped, and the rest ran wildly for shelter. Knight stabbed another blast after them, spun around to Benita. She was trying to pull the crippled old prospector to his feet. He appeared to be stunned.

"Quick—the rear seat of that next plane!" Knight said tensely. He jerked his head toward the Northrop.

"But what of Old Jeem?" Benita cried.

"I'll take care of him. Hurry!"

Knight pumped a hasty burst at three men who were running toward the gun-shack.

"Take the Northrop!" he rapped over his shoulder at Doyle. "I'll cover your take-off!"

THERE was no answer, and as he wheeled he saw Doyle running toward one of the Hollisters with Old Jim slung over his shoulder. More pistol shots cracked out, and he saw Laroche and a group of men charging toward the ships. Bullets dug into the ground behind him as he ran to the Northrop. Benita was climbing into the rear cockpit. A pistol blazed from the gloom, and bits of mica flew from the opened enclosure beside

her. Knight fiercely raised the Lewis. Laroche aimed his smoking automatic, but Knight's finger clenched the trigger before he could fire.

The last cartridges in the drum spewed out from the chattering Lewis. Laroche staggered back, his face a mass of blood. Two of the others wilted under that final barrage. Then Knight flung down the gun and vaulted onto the two-seater's wing. Slugs gashed the cowl as he threw himself down at the stick. He opened the throttle, stood on the left rudder pedal. The Northrop pivoted swiftly on the braked wheel, shot out into the clearing. He looked back, saw Benita grasping the sides of the cockpit. He jerked the throttle shut as the ship swerved into the wind. Leaning back, he hastily fastened her safety belt and slid the enclosure shut.

Tracers suddenly lanced out from the direction of the hangars. Knight whirled back to the stick, opened the double-banked Wasp. Searchlights were flashing up at three points, as Hiroki threw caution to the winds in the effort to save his plans. A ground gun sent a line of sparkling tracer at the Northrop. Knight whipped the stick back, and the plane zoomed with a moan of wings. The deadly tracers stabbed underneath. He lowered the nose, gained speed, then shot up in a chandelle. In a moment he heard Benita cry out.

"Look, Ricardo! They will kill Old Jeem and Doyle!"

Knight jerked around. He had seen one of the Hollisters sweep out, with Doyle in the front pit and the old prospector's white head visible above the rear pit. He thought they had safely taken off, but as he looked back he saw the other two attack ships charging after them. The gunner in the rear of the first XA-16 was already opening fire.

With his heart a lead weight in his breast, Knight plunged back. Benita might be killed—but he could not leave Doyle and Old Jim to die. He pressed the first stick button, and the .30's fanged down at the leading Hollister. His bullets cut across the wing, and the pilot hurriedly kicked away. Knight saw Borg stare up fearfully as the XA-16 rolled aside.

One of the searchlights pointed up at Doyle's ship. The second Hollister flew through the beam, and for an instant the dark features of Hiroki showed above the pilot's cockpit. There was an animal fury on that brown face.

Knight pitched the Northrop down at the Japanese and his gunner. Hiroki tried to pull up for a quick burst. The Northrop's .30's flamed again, and Hiroki had to turn steeply to save himself. It was only a brief respite, but it gave Doyle time to get clear. Knight looked anxiously toward the hangars. Five P7B1's and three of the Hollisters were being rushed out. The whole pack would be after them in a few minutes.

He shot the Northrop up in a furious climb, reached down to the radio "mike" pronged at the side of the cockpit. Switching on the transmitter, he quickly set the wavelength lever.

"Q to Air Corps," he shouted into the mike. "Q to Air Corps squadrons searching for Lost Valley!"

He threw the switch to receiving, jerked the phones over his head, but there was no answer. As he snapped the transmitter on again, Borg charged with guns blazing. Knight renversed, still shouting into the mike.

"Air Corps—Commerce stations—amateurs! Call Army squadrons searching for Douglas plane—tell them to rush to valley 80 miles straight south of Alicante—attack stolen F7B1's and Hollisters flown by spies—"

T-t-t-t-t-t-t-t! The rudder pedals shook as slugs hammered at the tail. Tracers smoked down into the cowl. Knight kicked sidewise, backsticked, and the two-seater shrieked into an Immelmann. The canyon wall seemed to spring out at them. He twisted away, held his breath as the ship roared past a ledge. The ship attacking them had zoomed in the other direction. As it vanished in the deepening gloom, he reached for the mike again. Then he saw that the last burst had wrecked the radio set.

HE climbed with the engine roaring at full speed. If they could get out of the canyon, they would have a good chance to escape. In less than an hour he could have Army squadrons speeding to the Valley. He stared around, looking for Doyle. He could see only one of the Hollisters, and it was dodging from side to side to keep out of the weaving searchlights.

Benita watched him anxiously from the rear seat. He gave her a quick, reassuring smile. But the next moment his smile changed to a look of dismay. One of the shifting searchlights flashed

across his wingtip, and in an instant all three beams were focused on the plane.

He started a tight loop, changed it into a fast split. He lost two of the beams, but the third flashed after him tenaciously. Partly blinded by the glare, he strained his eyes to see the canyon walls. At the Northrop's speed, they might crash into the rocks before he saw them. A Hollister shot through the edge of the beam, and a sudden pound of guns told him it was not Doyle's ship.

He banked with a furious speed to keep Benita out of range, but the other ship followed through. In desperation, he rammed the stick forward, hoping to dive out of the light. Suddenly, the hammer of heavy-caliber guns sounded behind him. Amazed, he jerked around. Benita was firing the .50's!

It was a brief, wild-aimed burst, for the heavy guns tore loose from her hands at almost the first shot. But the pilot of the other ship veered off with a panicky haste.

"Good work!" Knight shouted back at Benita. Admiration for her courage gave him a new strength as he went after the other ship. He saw it dart through the edge of the searchlight. Hiroki was glaring back, gesturing fiercely to his gunner. Knight cut in the Brownings. The gunner writhed crazily and died under that fiery hail. Knight flicked the stick a fraction of an inch, but with superhuman skill, Hiroki rolled from under his tracers.

Two P7B1's zoomed swiftly through the searchlights, racing to aid the Japanese, and Knight saw more P7B1's and Hollisters five hundred feet below. He swept the stick back for a hasty climb. There was no time to fight off Hiroki and the two Boeing pilots now. The others would be on them in a twinkling if he tried it.

Above and half a mile away, he saw tracers tangling like crossed wires. Doyle was fighting it out with Borg. He climbed in that direction. If he could help Doyle to drop Borg quickly, they might shoot down the two Boeings and Hiroki before the others reached them."

He tensed as two sets of tracers made red streaks on his left. Hiroki or one of the Boeing pilots was getting in range. Another set of tracers glowed at the right, and the lines began to converge. A numbing horror came over him as he thought of Benita. Then the numbness passed, and

a fury born of desperation drove him into a lightning turn.

His violent reversion caught the first Boeing pilot off guard. One swift, deadly thrust from the snarling guns in the wing, and the man in the P7B1 fell over his controls. The second Boeing hurriedly banked as the pilotless ship twisted down. Knight hurled the Northrop straight at Hiroki's ship.

The Japanese flung off into the darkness. Knight jabbed at the switch for his landing-lights. Two white tunnels pierced the shadows and caught the Hollister's wing. The light fell on the Jap's dead gunner, on Hiroki's startled face as he spun about in his seat. The stolen attack ship whipped to one side, as the frightened Japanese tried to escape from the lights. Knight cut him off with a burst, and Hiroki wildly kicked in the other direction.

A grim triumph welled up within Knight, but it was short-lived. Even as he centered his guns for the final blast, three Boeings plunged in at the Northrop. With a groan, he whirled for what he knew must be the end.

SUDDENLY a brilliant flash lit up the canyon, as a parachute flare swung down between the rocky walls. A second flare blazed up with a dazzling radiance, then six V's of Army pursuits dived headlong into the fight.

The three Boeing pilots reversed in panic and raced for the darkness. The first Army men pounced after them like hawks. Two hundred feet away, Doyle slashed around as Borg's plane was clearly revealed. Knight saw the big Dane throw both hands into the air just as Doyle's guns clattered. His bullet-like head jerked foolishly back and forth, then he lolled sidewise over the pit.

Hiroki had skidded away as Knight flung back toward the F7B1's. A look of stupefaction came into his dark face as he saw the Army ships. For an instant, Knight thought he would turn and flee. Then his dazed expression changed into frenzied rage. With a furious turn, he hurled his ship straight at the Northrop.

Knight went cold with horror. Seeing his schemes ruined, the Japanese meant to commit *hara-kiri* and take them with him in one terrific crash. Knight lunged on the stick, and the

Hollister streaked under the Northrop's tail with hardly two feet to spare. In a breath-taking loop, the blue plane screamed up and over. For an instant, he could see down into Hiroki's cockpit as the other man started to follow through. With a grim precision, he clamped all four stick-buttons.

Red lightning shot from the Northrop's guns. With mangling force, the .50's cut through the Hollister's cowl, and down into Hiroki's legs. Smoke poured back from the engine, over one man who was doomed, and one was already dead. One last frightful second, Hiroki glared up at Knight, and in his face was the baffled rage of a madman. Then the Hollister burst into flames and pitched to the earth.

Knight watched it strike, then he slowly, grimly nodded. Hiroki had gone to his "special corner of Hell."

IT was peacefully quiet in the candle lit room where Old Jim sat propped up in bed. The old prospector looked around at Doyle and Knight, then smiled back at Benita.

"I'm all right, my child. You are the one who needs rest—you have been through a great ordeal."

"Well, it's all over now," grinned Doyle. "Even if we can't prove any Jap hook-up, with Hiroki burned, the rest of those rats are penned up, and tomorrow the Army will have some transport ships here to haul 'em away."

"But it is you and—and *Senor* Caballero we must thank," said Benita. She glanced at Knight with sudden shyness, but he was studying the tip of his cigarette.

"The Army did the real work," he answered. "I've asked the senior officer to keep a guard detail here until the Government can give the Valley people what protection they need. Those who wish to leave will be taken anywhere they care to go, and a road will be blasted through the old pass, so that those who stay can have access to the outside."

"There, my child," Old Jim said to Benita, "I told you it would come some day. Remember your dreams? You can see the great world, and have a beautiful home—and even have a pretty new dress for every day in the year if you like."

Benita's dark eyes were shining.

"Si, I am so much excited." She stole a quick look at Knight. "But all thees—it is so new and strange, I not know—"

"I suggest," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, "that you let Mrs. Brett help you. I know both she and the general will be glad to have you stay with them, and they can protect you against the swindlers who will be after your money when this story comes out."

"And—and you be there, too?" Benita asked softly.

Knight forced himself not to look at her. "Occasionally," he answered, "but my work takes me away from Washington most of the time."

Her smile slowly faded. A puzzled expression came into her eyes, then she raised her head proudly.

"I understand, *senor*." She turned quickly to the old prospector. "I mus' go now, Jeem. I am happy for you—now you go back and see the little grandson you tell me about. But I see you again, before then."

She kissed his cheek, went to the door.

"*Hasta manana, senores*." She smiled at Doyle, then looked gravely at Knight. "You were very kind, *Senor Caballero*, when I am so frighten' in Washington. I mus' have seem a very silly and stupid girl."

She was gone before he could answer. As the door closed, Doyle glared at Knight.

"What's the matter with you—standing there like a wooden Indian?"

"I'm no fortune hunter," Knight said grimly. "With gold at its present rate, even without the Green Madonna, she'll have well over a million dollars. Besides that, she ought to see the world and meet other men."

"There are young men here in the Valley," Old Jim interposed sagely. "Some are not unhandsome—but I have never seen that look in Benita's eyes before."

"With all this excitement," muttered Knight, "she could mistake gratitude for something else. She's too young to know her own mind."

Old Jim glanced at him shrewdly. "I have known her five years, my boy. There is a brain in that pretty head."

Knight looked miserably at the floor. "Anyway, a man in espionage work—" he broke off, held out his hand to the old prospector.

"Doyle and I are taking off at dawn. Best of luck, Jim. Will you—tell her goodbye for me?"

Old Jim silently nodded, but Doyle erupted furiously.

"That's a fine trick! Sneaking out, scared to face her again because—"

"Shut up!" Knight said savagely.

"Afraid you couldn't go through with it!" roared Doyle. "Scared you'd let her know you're in love with her!"

"All right!" Knight snapped. "I admit it! Now will you keep still?"

He flung open the door to leave. There was a gasp, and he saw Benita, her cheeks crimson, turn and flee down the hall.

"Benita!" he cried. He ran and caught her at the end of the hall. "Benita—look at me!"

FOR a second, her cheeks still blazing, she tried to escape. Then suddenly, with a little sob, she was in his arms. Long moments afterward, she looked up at him from under her sweeping black lashes.

"I am very jealous of *Senor Doyle*," she whispered. "You say to him you love me—but you not tell me at all."

"*Mi querida!*" he said huskily. "I almost told you in the first hour after we met."

She sighed, her eyes like stars. "I am so ashamed' that you catch me listening. But I hear *Senor Doyle* ask why you are like wooden Indian, and I wait to hear what you say."

He started to speak, but she put her fingers to his lips.

"I hear all you tell Old Jeem and *Senor Doyle*. If you not like the gold, I give it away—without you, it is not anything."

Something caught in Knight's throat.

"My darling, you must live every one of your dreams. I am a secret agent of the United States—I cannot even ask you to marry me until my present work is over. It may be a year or more."

She smiled up at him. "And in a year I am nineteen—almos' an old, old woman. But I think I wait."

"I shouldn't let you," he said doggedly.

"Maybe you not help yourself," Benita answered. "Old Jeem say I am very stubborn little devil, sometimes."

The sweet curve of her lips brought an ache to his heart.

“*Querida*, there will be times when I’ll be halfway around the world. I won’t even be able to write you.”

“Then I go find you,” said Benita calmly.

“No, no!” Knight said in alarm.

“Foreign agents might try to strike at me through you. Promise you’ll never try to follow me on any of my missions.”

For a moment her pretty eyes clouded, then she shook her head serenely, gazed up at Knight.

“No, Ricardo, I not promise that. But—” she stood on tiptoe to whisper—“I promise I love you—always.”