



GOLD FLIES THE GAUNTLET

by ORLANDO RIGONI

It takes lead to guard gold. That's why Tom Liston, pilot for the Roaring Buck, needed a sky-chaperon for that heavy pay dirt. He got one—Gunner Sloane, an hombre who could draw and shoot faster than a fuse can spit. But there was a debt on the books against Gunner Sloane—and when the lead began to fly, all the gold in the West wouldn't pay it.

TOM LISTON LEGGED ACROSS the narrow canyon that held the camp of the Roaring Buck Gold Mining Company. It was a deep canyon, with walls of granite crowding it in. There was no natural entrance to this tortuous place. It had been accessible by burro and pack alone until but a few short months before when the new company air service had finally broken the barriers of centuries.

At the upper end of the boisterous camp, the canyon widened out far enough to permit the operation of a plane. Tom was the only pilot in the service of the company. It was his duty to fly the gold bullion from the stamp mill down to the head office of the company at Bradley, a little town a hundred miles to the south across the tumble of hills.

Today he was mad. His blue eyes snapped and his usually pleasant mouth was drawn grim and tight. Even his long body seemed to be stiff and brittle and hard. He was looking for Max Haines, the superintendent, and since it was now the noon hour, he knew where to find him.

He pushed into the long room of the Golden Coin Bar, where many of the top men ate their lunches. Without turning his head at the jovial greetings of the men, he strode straight up to the table at which sat the super, with his son Andy Haines.

"That damned guard fell off the wagon like a ton of bricks, Max!" Tom snapped bluntly. "He's drunker than seven hundred dollars. I've got the afternoon loot to fly out of here, and I'm not taking any dead weight!" Max Haines was a big, slow talking, slow moving man. He was a raw product of the West, and the men swore by him. "Well, now, son, I ain't blamin' you none for bein' mad," he drawled. "Fact is, Kelly laid off the liquor longer than I expected, at that. He was damned set on keepin' that job as guard, too."

Tom insisted: "He's off the job as far as I'm concerned."

Max soothed him, "I understand, my boy. You're takin' your job serious. And that's the way to take it. If Kelly can't go, we'll get somebody who can. Yes, we've got to keep it a two-man team, considering the high value of the loads."

"Let me go, dad. It'll give me a chance to make up flying time,"

Andy, the kid, pleaded. He was large in build like his father, but he had a quick, nervous way about him. Tom was teaching the kid to fly, and had a tough time keeping him out of the air when there was nobody

around to keep an eye on him. The company owned two planes and the kid insisted that one of them was his, though he was never allowed to use it except under Tom's supervision. Tom liked Max, and he liked the kid. In many ways he felt responsible for Andy.

Tom vetoed the kid's proposition before big Max could start to talk.

It was hard going in those hills.

Before the planes had been put into operation, the gold used to be carried out on pack trains. Many of those trains never reached their destination—for they had been set upon by bandits, all the men and animals killed, and the gold taken away.

With the planes it was much safer. But lately, since the company had struck the rich dirt on the eight hundred level of the mine, there were vague rumors of another gang in the hills which was intent upon stealing part of the treasure.

So Tom refused to take the kid as guard. "There's killers in those hills just aching to drop my plane," he told Max. "A lucky shot and it would be all over. It's no job for a green man. We need a man who knows how to use a gun . . ."

Big Max slapped his leg. He jerked his head toward the bar. "There's just the man you need, Tom. They call him Gunner Sloane. Ain't been here long, but he can draw a gun and shoot faster than a fuse can spit. I wouldn't want to meet him in a tight place."

"I don't take much to having strangers chaperon that pay dirt," Tom complained.

Max scowled, "You won't be takin' no chances. When you get him in the air, he can't harm you none, 'cause he'll need you to bring him down."

AND so the thing was arranged, and Tom, Andy, Gunner Sloane, and a man by the name of Mellenthin, who had taken up with Gunner, all headed for the landing field.

The company planes were sadly dissimilar in design. Tom's ship was a four-place Stinson Reliant, equipped with a Lycoming engine—a sleek, swift job. The other ship that Andy used was an old Douglas mail plane with single pit and covered express compartment. It had one feature the Stinson lacked, and that was a synchronized machine gun shooting through the prop. The weapon crouched like a watchdog on the cowl of the old ship.

Tom climbed into the Stinson and soon Andy had the inertia starter screeching. The Lycoming caught with a blast of thunder that drowned out the racket

even of the stamp mill on the opposite hill. Tom gunned the engine and jerked the throttle half way back to warm the engine quickly.

He then turned to inspect the boxes of gold that were fastened in a special compartment built where a rear seat had been removed. Then he stepped out and around to the rear to inspect his empennage.

The Stinson lurched suddenly! There was a wild cry! Tom leaped back toward the cabin. The left hand brake had slipped. The Stinson was moving in a slow circle—and in the path of the churning prop, his back to the menace, stood Gunner Sloane!

Tom couldn't reach the switch in time to save Gunner. He knew that, and he added his fierce cry of warning to that of the kid.

Then the kid hurled his lean body at Gunner like a catapulted thing! He hit him below the knees. Down they went in a cloud of dust as the death blade swung above them! The shadow of a wing crawled across their backs.

Tom reached the switch, cut the mighty engine. The two men scrambled from the dirt. There was a scowl on Gunner's heavy face.

"Thanks, kid," Gunner growled, "you saved my life and I won't forget it."

The kid shrugged. "Wasn't anything much, Gunner. Maybe you can teach me to shoot sometime," he said, taking the man's big thick hand in his own slim, white one.

Tom was mad. The accident was uncalled for. "Listen, you," he addressed Gunner, "if you're working with me, you've got to learn to keep away from the nose of a plane when the engine's gunning!"

Mellenthin, red faced and grinning, broke in: "Do you want me to fix that brake, Liston? You two'll have to get along—at least for this trip."

"What do you know about brakes?" Tom's eyes squinted.

Mellenthin cocked his head. "Not much—but it slipped, didn't it?"

"I'll tighten it myself," Tom growled.

Then he turned on Andy Haines. "Listen, kid, you came close to getting your head knocked off. Better stay away from here until you're asked to come around.

"Baloney!" Andy flung at him, "I can fly as good as you can—and some day I'll prove it!"

Tom glared at him. "As long as you keep that notion in your head, you'd better stay on the ground," he warned him. And he wasn't bragging.

Tom tightened the brake, then gave Gunner his

final instructions. "Keep your hands off the controls. We probably won't have any trouble. But if for any reason we do, don't do any killing unless you have to."

Gunner nodded grimly. Tom was a little puzzled by that face. It was pugnacious enough, but there was a hint of frankness about it that contrasted strangely with the man's gruff and decidedly blunt manner.

He started the engine again. Jabbed the throttle wide. For five minutes he let this craft of wood and wire and cloth tremble to the mighty blast of power. Then he kicked off the brakes. The Stinson leaped down the narrow field. Lifted! He swung down the canyon until he cleared the high ledges, then he circled south.

Beneath his trucks washed a wild, jagged country. A forced landing anywhere there would be fatal. He cast a furtive look at Gunner. The big man didn't have the usual tense, alert attitude of the novice flyer.

"Have you been up before?" Tom asked casually.

Gunner shook his head. He didn't look at Tom. His eyes were searching the terrain below them. Tom pulled the stick and sent the Stinson up to ten thousand. He jerked another look at Gunner.

"You can try those controls if you want to," he grinned.

Gunner stared at him. "No—no—thanks. I haven't got a hankerin' to put us down in these hills."

They roared along for twenty miles—thirty. In half an hour they had covered more ground than the old pack trains used to cover in a day. And the pack trains had always been in danger. Here in the air they and their gold were as safe as—

The Stinson gave a sharp lurch. Its left wing tip swung high and the tail sloughed down! Tom cursed, fought with the wheel. The turn and bank indicator did a loop. The rev counter built up as the ship suddenly nosed over!

Tom jerked a wild look at Gunner. "Let go that wheel!" he screamed. Had the man gone suddenly mad? There had been cases like that.

Gunner's face was set like stone. Tom cried at him again, but the only answer was a slow, thin grin. Tom snatched for his gun, but the Stinson suddenly screamed out of the dive on one wingtop, causing Tom's head to hammer against the cabin braces. Flame was snorting from the ports of the roaring radial engine.

"I'm gettin' off here," Gunner cried in a steady voice.

Tom fought for control of the ship. "You'll wreck us both! There isn't a chance of landing. Get your hands off that wheel before I—I—"

Tom now had his gun out.

He whipped it up. But before he could fire a shot, Gunner's big arm swung across and brought a blackjack down upon Tom's unsuspecting head.

The instrument panel seemed to burst into stars!

Tom fought madly to keep his senses. It meant life and death—life and death! He could feel the plane screaming down—down—down! Darkness struck across his numbed mind like a stone . . .

WHEN Tom came to, his head was splitting. He blinked his eyes, was surprised to find himself still sitting in the Stinson. He was in a small clearing in a flat canyon. He looked around slowly. Gunner was out of the plane. Three faces were glaring at him through the open door of the cabin.

"What's the meaning of this?" Tom cried, jerking a look back at the gold box.

Gunner grinned, but there was no humor in his voice. "I've been waiting a long time for this break. I told you I was getting off here. Now scambolo—quick!" Tom gritted his teeth. He spoke fiercely: "And what got off with you? Not by any chance that \$20,000 shipment of raw gold? Just exactly what is this?"

Gunner jerked his head at the gold box. "Take a look-see and then beat it. Why I got off is my business, see?"

Tom growled, "I didn't think you could fly a plane, Gunner."

Gunner's eyes turned away as though he was ashamed. "I got a *Croix de Guerre* once," he said softly.

Tom inspected the two boxes of gold and found the seals unbroken. He hefted the boxes, found them full. It was getting dusk. He must have been there for hours. Had they doped him? What was their motive? He couldn't find the answers to those questions. He knew only that he had to get that gold safely to Bradley before these men changed their minds. Yes, he had to get it there before dark. He gunned the engine, jabbed the throttle wide, then held his brakes until the prop was tugging at the shaft. He hadn't much room for a take-off. It had taken an expert to land that plane. Who was this Gunner Sloane?

The ship leaped down the short space! Tom hunched low, his eyes narrowed and his hands like prongs clinging to the controls. Tail down—down! The Stinson leaped over the fringe of brush and trees with only inches to spare!

Tom circled up, fed soup to the engine. He was breathing hard. The whole thing was cockeyed. Were those men planning a raid on the Roaring Buck? Had

they let him get away with this small shipment so that they could play for greater stakes later on?

His mind was still a froth of thoughts when he set his ship down on the big field back of the head office at Bradley. The lights of the town were already blinking into life when Carpenter, the field man, came out to help him unload the ship.

Tom led the way into the weighing room to check in the shipment and get clearance. They now broke the seals on the boxes—and Tom leaped back with a cry of dismay. Carpenter stared with amazement, and Giles, the weigher, cursed softly.

The boxes were filled with dirt!

Tom gulped. He walked forward like a man in a trance and turned the boxes over. Then he gasped. The bottoms had been cut out with an acetylene torch, then spot-welded back with the dirt inside. He had been in such a hurry to get away from that meadow that he had let himself be duped.

Redfaced, he stammered out his story. Giles looked at him with squinted eyes.

"You'll have to tell this to the general manager. Brooks ain't a man who likes practical jokes," he said evenly.

"But it isn't a joke!" Tom cried desperately.

He followed. Giles into the front office. Brooks was a hard working, honest man, who expected of his subordinates what he asked of himself. When he had heard the story, his gray, firm face was tight.

"It's a wide yarn, Liston. You're responsible for that gold once it leaves the mine. You can't tell me that you could be robbed of your plane in mid-air and held on the ground for two or three hours while the gold was being removed—all without knowing anything more about it than you say. Of course, we were kind of worried about your lateness until we got your message saying—"

"My *message*?" Tom broke in.

Brooks nodded. "Yes, the radio from camp saying that you'd be late."

Tom felt old and tired. "I didn't send any message," he insisted. "I didn't have a torch to burn the bottoms out of those boxes. Those crooks were smart. They didn't break the seals—because they figured by the time we discovered the gold was gone, they'd get away."

"You could have had confederates in the hills. I don't want to be hard on you, my boy, but your explanation doesn't satisfy me. I happen to be from Missouri," Brooks said coldly.

Tom felt the anger consuming him. All right, if they needed proof, he'd get it. But how?

"Radio Max, up at the mine, that I won't be in tonight," he snapped. "He might be worried." Then he strode out of the room.

NEXT day, as he flew back to the Roaring Buck, his mind worked swiftly. Whoever had stopped him had played into luck. Gunner never would have gotten the plane with that trick if Kelly hadn't gone and gotten drunk.

Flying low over the meadow in the hills where he had been forced down the day before, he could find no sign of the men who had robbed him. But they had a well-equipped camp somewhere, he was sure of that. They were certainly modern, these road agents—men who worked in the air. Grimly he continued his flight, finally roaring to a landing on the Roaring Buck field.

He legged out of the Stinson stiffly and went to the saloon. The noon crowd of top men hadn't yet arrived for their glass of beer. He ordered whiskey and gulped it. The raw liquor burned through his blood. He poured himself another drink.

Men began to filter into the place, talking jovially. When they saw Tom, they hushed. He could feel their eyes upon him. Let them gawp, damn them! They had heard of the missing gold. They thought that he was a thief, eh? Next they'd be accusing him of lifting their pay money!

He gulped another drink and the room swam about him. He wasn't used to liquor. Then Big Max came in and put his gnarled hand upon Tom's shoulder in a fatherly caress.

"Buck up, lad. It was a tough break. I don't believe you took that gold. It don't make sense that way. Get a hold on yourself so you can fly the afternoon millings out. We're putting some rich dirt through the old mill these days. I don't like the idea of holding the bullion here in the hills. And by the way, lad, that liquor ain't a goin' to help you much in the handling of the plane."

Tom whirled on him, brushing the hand away. "Let me go, Max. I'm done—through—finished! They can't call me a thief and expect me to work for them. Right now they've got the sheriff shadowing me—got the hills full of man hunters looking for my friends—my friends! That's what Brooks called them."

"Brooks is a hard man at times, Tom," Max said slowly, "but you can't blame him none. He's responsible for that gold."

"I'm done, I tell you," Tom cried hotly, "carry the gold out in your pockets!"

Andy came over. "Let me fly it out, dad. I can make the trip easy. Give me a chance . . ."

"Sure," Tom laughed dryly. "Fly it out, if you think you're so damned bright. You'll make a nice tender gosling for those buzzards to sink their claws into!" With that he pushed his way out of the saloon. He walked mechanically up to the bunkhouse that was built against the side of the cliff like a hornets' nest. He locked the door of his room, tried to rest. The thing had struck him so suddenly that he didn't know which way to turn. He'd never been questioned before—his record was clean.

But if he could find Gunner and those other crooks, the business would be solved. But they weren't dumb. They'd probably worked such schemes before. They were probably the remnants of some gang the federal men had broken up in some city.

Who had sent that message to Bradley saying he would be late? Mellenthin? Mellenthin had worked at the mine a long time. He hadn't come up with Gunner, he had met Gunner after Gunner had arrived there.

There was a rough knock on his door. Tom didn't move. He didn't want to see anybody. Then the voice of Kelly growled, "Let a fellow in, you loon. I've got something to be a tellin' you, lad."

Reluctantly Tom opened the lock. Kelly sidled in. "I want to make an apology, Tom. I wasn't exactly drunk yesterday."

"No," Tom snapped, "you were polluted!"

"I tell you I took one drink, no more. But that one hit me just like that!" He hammered his flat fist into his open hand.

"So what?"

"Don't you see? I was doped! I just want you to be knowing that I didn't let you down personal."

"Get out," Tom said impatiently, feeling a little twinge at his own anger. "You still look a little dopey. Go sleep it off."

THE next morning, Big Max cornered Tom in the mess hall. He dragged him to one side.

"Listen, fellow, you've got to take out the pay dirt. We've got two days' heavy run. I don't feel too safe here in camp with \$50,000 laying around. It's a dead to mortal cinch them thugs that robbed you ain't goin' to let this stuff lie idle."

"What's that got to do with me?" Tom asked evenly. "Nothing, you stubborn jackass. I'm asking you to do it for me—as a special favor. I'll get you a good guard—I'll even go with you myself, or—or let Andy go."

Andy Haines came over at the mention of his name. "Sure, Tom, let me go. I'll guarantee—"

"I'm not asking for guarantees," Tom snapped. "I'll go on one condition."

"Anything reasonable," Big Max promised.

"All right. I'm going alone. I'll take the Douglas because it's got a machine gun mounted. I'll get that gold safely to Bradley if I have to fight every foot of the way!"

Max protested, "I've had them loading the Stinson and—"

"Change the load to the Douglas," Tom interrupted. Then he stalked out. The kid followed, protesting that he had a right to go along. Tom refused to relent.

He went to his room and jerked on his flying togs. He took his time. Carefully, he cleaned and loaded his automatic. He felt eager and impatient now that he was again facing trouble. His face was a grim mask as he left the bunkhouse. He expected trouble this trip—and he'd be ready for it!

When he reached the field, the men had just completed the transfer of the bullion. Mellenthin was crawling down from the nose of the ship, having just helped fasten the metal hood over the express compartment. The engine of the Douglas was throbbing.

Tom squinted. The kid had started that engine. He stopped at the radio shack for his goggles. Then he marched over to the Douglas.

"What's the idea, Andy? I told you to keep off that ship!"

The kid flushed. "You think you're the only guy in the world who can run a plane, eh?" he said. "I was just warming the engine. Some day I'll prove that I can handle this ship on my own!"

Tom went back to the Stinson to get his strip map. He meant to chart a course farther south than his former route, in the hope of flying around any trouble that might show up. But as he turned his back on the Douglas, he heard the mighty engine leap into thunderous life.

He whirled. Too late! The kid, taking a desperate chance, was in the cockpit, hurling the loaded ship down the field like a catapulted thing! It screamed into the air—lifted.

There was instant confusion on the field. Tom ran swiftly to the Stinson to give chase to the crazy kid. He got the Lycoming engine started, but it was cold. He warmed it with brief, screaming blasts. The engine spit fire from its cold guts. He taxied to the line!

Tom hunched down, snapped the throttle wide as the Stinson leaped away, he could hear Mellenthin

crying like a crazy man. "Stop that kid . . . that plane . . . it isn't safe . . ."

The Stinson leaped into the air. Up—up—up! The Douglas was now a speck in the distance. What had Mellenthin meant about that ship not being safe? And now Tom realized that the kid was taking the old trail across the meadow in which Tom had been robbed two days before.

Tom fed soup to the straining Lycoming. He had to overtake that crazy kid. If anything should happen to him, Tom would never forgive himself. He watched the wild earth slide below him. He watched the speck that was the Douglas getting larger and larger as the faster Stinson crept up.

Suddenly he stiffened. Up from the jumble of earth came two planes! They circled up for the Douglas!

Tom prayed. He thrust the throttle against the stop and cursed the Stinson for slowness. But it wasn't slow. It was swiftly tearing in upon the three ships that had already begun to maneuver across the sky.

The Stinson had no armament but a Tommy gun stuck in a rack on the wall near the pit. And Tom had his automatic. Those were the only weapons available to him, while he could already see that the two attacking ships had menacing m.g.'s crouching on the cowlings!

The kid was wobbling about uncertainly as the first enemy ship, a two-place Waco, began climbing his back trying to force him down. The kid was fighting his way clear. The other attacking ship was likewise a Waco, though a smaller model, and stuffed into the small pit was Gunner Sloane!

TOM'S mouth drew into a straight line. He had vowed to take this gold through. All right, he'd show them if he was crooked or not. This would be a fight to a finish . . .

He jerked the Tommy gun from the rack. He swung the controls over and sent the Stinson screaming between the two bandit planes. He crouched as the first ship lashed back. His finger pressed the trigger. The Tommy gun rattled, bucked, and stammered in his lean hands! Little black holes appeared in the wings of the Waco. They looked like finger smudges.

Tom cursed, twisted his ship around. At the same instant, he heard Gunner diving upon him, and he tensed. A flurry of lashing slugs stung through the cabin like wasps! He fought the controls, lifting the Stinson in a sloppy loop. He hadn't headway enough to break over. The ship hung suspended for a moment—then rolled over flat!

Gunner was waiting for him. For ten minutes, Tom tried to shake that dogged plane from his tail. But it was no use. Gunner was trying to force him down. And he was coming perilously close to killing him in the effort to put him out of the fight.

At the same instant, Tom saw the kid. He was skidding the Douglas flat to head in and help Tom. The kid was in a direct line for a shot at Gunner, but somehow he held back.

Tom understood. The kid couldn't take to the idea of killing. He was afraid to press the trips! Tom could see his hunched head and the face white as new chalk. The kid was glaring through the ring sights of the mounted gun, but his thumbs refused to press the trigger!

At the same instant the two-place job caught the kid again for a no-deflection shot! Tom cried at the kid, "Breakaway! Wing down!"

But the kid seemed to be paralyzed. He sat like a statue in the pit of the Douglas, eyes staring wide and arms rigid. Tom groaned as the gun on the cowling of the other ship rattled and bucked—hurled death into the Douglas! The thugs seemed anxious for blood.

Tom pulled the Stinson out and tried to get across to save the kid. He could see the slugs hammering closer—closer—forward toward the pit! A great hand seemed to grip the skin of his chest and twist it into a knot. He couldn't save the kid!

Tom knew he couldn't save the kid. He yelled for the kid to bail out, but realized that the kid didn't even have a 'chute on. The whole thing was crazy—preposterous! It was like war . . .

At that instant, Tom saw an unreal thing. Although he couldn't get over to save the kid, Gunner Sloane could. Gunner had pulled over and was motioning wildly to the other ship to stop firing at the Douglas.

Tom suddenly sensed the reason. The kid had saved Gunner on the field at the camp of the Roaring Buck. Now Gunner was trying to pay back that debt.

But Gunner's comrades ignored the signal. They had the kid in their gun sights, gold in their eyes! If Gunner wanted to pull out, that was his business.

Then the kid began to press the trips of the machine gun on the Douglas—pressed them frantically, wildly, like a novice would. He was shooting futilely through thin air! Then the gun on the cowling jumped, tore loose from its mounting! The synchronizing gear had kicked out. A hail of hot lead hammered into the screaming prop, chopping it from the hub of the roaring engine! The mounting of the gun had been loosened. Tom remembered Mellenthin leaving that plane.

The kid was doomed. Tom knew that and his heart stood still. He whirled back to have vengeance upon the killers, but skidded flat, almost stupefied by what he saw.

Gunner was hurling his ship in between the kid's tail and the Waco that was diving upon it, spitting lead! There wasn't room there for passage. Tom felt hot curses leap past his lips, as Gunner's ship crashed with a rending, tearing screech into that other plane! A wing tore off! The two-place exploded in a mass of flame. The fire swept back blotting it from the sky!

With a tightlipped grimace of horror, Tom heard the screams of the doomed men in that ship. No chance to jump. They were caught by the flaming oil before they could unsnap their safety belts. He jerked a look over at the kid. Andy was fighting his crippled ship down toward a clearing below.

On his other side, Gunner was bailing out from the wrecked ship he had used to save the kid. Tom could see blood smeared across the Gunner's chest. He understood. Gunner had stopped hot lead that was meant for the kid, as he had screamed through that opening. He had written "paid" to the debt he owed the kid—with blood for ink and eternity for paper!

Then Tom circled down. He saw the kid fishtailing awkwardly in for a landing on the small meadow. The kid overshot the clearing and wiped the wings off the Douglas in the trees beyond. But he was unhurt, and he ran up as the Stinson settled.

TOM ignored the kid. He leaped out, ran back down the canyon to where Gunner was settling under the white mushroom of his chute. He reached the prostrate form—to find death stealing over the features.

Gunner opened his eyes, tried to grin. "Damned sorry, Liston," he gasped, "b—but it was great sport while it—it lasted. I—I never wanted the gold, anyhow. It—was the excitement. Seemed like old days in—in France . . ."

The Kid leaned close. "Thanks, Gunner," he said simply.

Gunner shook his head. "We're even, kid. Guess—guess I won't be able to teach you to shoot af—after all. That other gold is buried at the forks of Little River," he added.

"Mellenthin was mixed up in this?" Tom asked softly.

Gunner gasped, "He—he only sent that radio message to Bradley that day. I ma—made him do it—at the point of a gun . . . threatened him into silence. Let him off ea—easy . . ."

Then Gunner collapsed and his face assumed that curious, frank expression that had always puzzled Tom.