



THRILLING ADVENTURES

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J. S. WILLIAMS, Editor

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YAQUI GOLD

*Quest for Treasure and
Desperate Struggle Against
Savage Foes in the Texas
Big Bend!*

A Complete Novelette
By WAYNE ROGERS
Author of "The Great God Honi," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Living Map

"PSSST! What's that?"
"Red" Dolliver's hand dropped lightly but warningly to his partner's arm, but Jim Benson had already spied the fracas on the sidewalk. His foot clamped down on the brake, and he quickly brought the little car to a shuddering stop beside the curb.

It was midnight; the street was poorly lighted and deserted, in one of El Paso's meanest sections. No time or place to mix in a street brawl, but as they passed the sidewalk both men had noticed the unevenness of the struggle and heard a plaintive, quivering cry for help.

From both sides of the car they leaped and sprinted back toward where three men were pounding and tugging at a whimpering, pleading figure, intent on dragging him into a car that stood at the curb.

"Please! Please! Have mercy, señores!" he begged, as he planted his heels against the pavement and



When Red felt his gun being

covered his head and face as best he could.

"Here—what's the idea?" Jim Benson demanded as he ran up, followed half a step later by his partner.

One glance revealed that the victim of the assault was an old man, and that his assailants were three burly ruffians. Their response to Jim's demand was instantaneous. With a vicious blow one of them knocked the old man to the street and bent over him, while the other two turned to face the intruders.

Red Dolliver's fist lashed out as one of the men turned on him with a guttural curse. The fellow was no mean antagonist, and for a few minutes Red had his hands full. Then his heavy fist connected squarely and the thug staggered back.

Jim, too, was having plenty to do to handle a man who was taller and heavier than he. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the old man



taken from him, he swung his mighty fist in protest

was lying on his stomach, his shirt ripped off his back, and his assailant kneeling beside him while he held a flashlight close to the prostrate man's skin.

Then the air was full of flying fists and enraged curses. Red's assailant, staggering back, fell headlong over the man kneeling on the sidewalk. As if that were a signal, the two scrambled to their feet and all three ruffians made a bee-line for their car.

The motor was still running, so it was the work of only a few seconds for them to throw the machine into gear and disappear down the street.

The old man, meanwhile, had rolled over and propped himself up on an elbow. Jim knelt beside him and helped to raise him.

"*Gracias, señor, gracias,*" the old man panted, as he struggled to get his breath. "You were just in time."

"Are you badly hurt?" Jim asked. "Want us to take you to a hospital?"

"No hospital, please, *señor*; that is not necessary." The old fellow's voice was vehement with anxiety, and he was hastily stuffing his shirt back into his trousers. "Only get me away from here. Only do not let Buck Morgan get me again!"

"Don't worry, old-timer, those birds won't get another crack at you," Red Dolliver chimed in. "Let's take him up to our dump until we decide what to do with him, Jim."

A GREAT pair, those two partners. Along the length of the Mexican border, throughout the stormy republics of Latin America, and in many a far-flung outpost of civilization, they were well-known—always the two of them. Red Dolliver, mighty of muscle and hard of fist, and Jim Benson, no less hard-boiled than his partner but recognized by,

him as the planning genius of their combination.

Between them they helped the old man to his feet and into the roadster. Then Jim drove to the little bungalow only a few blocks away.

In the light of the bungalow living room the old man proved to be a Mexican of the peon class—probably an Indian, Jim decided. His hair was white and his face was incredibly wrinkled, but his eyes sparkled with a fire that his seventy or eighty years had not been able to quench.

That he had been able to put up such a battle against his assailants was a surprise to the partners. But they were due for more of a surprise when he stripped off his ragged shirt and bared his back.

It was covered with tattooing. There were trees, lines running this way and that, queer signs, and here and there figures and words.

"You are surprised, *amigos*, but I will explain," he assured them. "You have saved me from death. I will reward you with more treasure than you will ever be able to use."

"Treasure?" the partners exclaimed as one.

"*Si, señores*; the treasure of the evil Red Curly."

HUNDREDS are the seekers who have searched the lower counties of Texas for Red Curly's treasure. Dozens are the rumors concerning it that pass from mouth to mouth. With the mention of this fabled hoard, the old man had his listeners' attention.

"It was many years ago," he told them, as he lay back in a soft armchair, "twenty years before this century began, when I, Jose Parilla, with three *companeros*, was tunneling into a mountain near El Muerto Spring. We sought a rich gold vein. Out of the south came four riders and twelve loaded burros.

"When we saw them coming we were afraid and hid, but they discovered us. It was Red Curly and his *compadres*, and the mules were loaded with stolen treasure: silver bars, gold coins and rare jewels. A mighty treasure, *amigos*. Into the solid rock they forced us to drill a great hole fifty feet deep.

"When the mighty treasure had been lowered into the hole, we filled it and cemented it over. Then one of Red Curly's men reminded him that they must make a map so that they could find the treasure again. They had no paper; nothing on which to write. Then it was that one of the others whispered to Red Curly and the leader grinned evilly.

WHEN we had filled the hole within ten feet of the top I learned the meaning of that grin. Standing on top of the hole Red Curly shot down at my *companeros* and killed them. Only I was left alive. With a heavy heart I shoveled the dirt in on my *companeros*. When I finished, the top was smoothed over and made to appear as if the hole had never been there. Then it was my turn. They seized me and stripped off my shirt.

"A fine parchment!" Red Curly laughed as he slapped my back.

"For two days they kept me tied down while he who had whispered to Red Curly jabbed needles into me. It was hot, *amigos*, and the pain was maddening, but when I moved they kicked me brutally. At last it was finished and Red Curly looked at me with a question in his eye. I knew that he considered whether he should kill me immediately and take my skin.

"But the good God spared me. He sent the Apaches and they killed all but Red Curly and me. As we were being pursued I saw my opportunity and slipped away from him. That is the last I ever saw of Red Curly, but I have heard that he was hanged.

Certainly he never returned for his treasure."

"And it has been lying there all these years!" Jim exclaimed "You never went back for it?"

"No, *amigo*, that treasure is not for me. It is evil money, stained with the blood of my *companeros*. For years I have tried to forget about that which I bear on my back. Men have sought me for it, but until now I have escaped.

"Buck Morgan has sought me before. Tonight he caught me, and if you had not come it would have been my death. For that I am grateful, *amigos*. Though I vowed never to return to that evil spot, I will go back with you so that you may have the treasure before it falls into the hands of other evil ones."

JIM lifted his eyes from the old man's lips and looked at Red DOLLIVER. In his partner's eyes he saw mirrored an excitement equal to his own. Treasure—buried treasure! The lure of it had them.

"You will take us to this treasure?" Red asked, struggling to suppress the excitement in his voice.

"*Si, señor*, that will I do—but we must act quickly. Buck Morgan already knows somewhat of the treasure. Tonight, as I lay there on the sidewalk, he read none. He will lose no time starting after it. We should go very soon."

"El Muerto Canyon is in the Big Bend," Jim considered. "We can stock up most of our supplies in Alpine. We'll get going the first thing in the morning."

"Okay," Red agreed enthusiastically. "Me—I'm ready to start as soon as I can chuck my duds into the valise."

"Very good, *amigos*, very good," Jose endorsed, as a smile of satisfaction lit up his withered face.

But in his eyes Jim caught a fleeting glimpse of something that was

more than satisfaction. Was it triumph? Jim could not be sure, but it clouded his enthusiastic plans with the first hint of uneasiness.

CHAPTER II

Desert Disaster

THE three men had left El Paso in the roadster at dawn. Under its seat and in cleverly contrived compartments were stored tools that would never be employed on an automobile: emergency rations, and certain other articles of which the police might not have approved. The rumble was filled with powder and dynamite, drills, a small and compact radio, and their clothing.

By mid-afternoon they were in the heart of the Big Bend country of Texas, a land of mountains, canyons and mesas, grown over with greasewood, coarse chino grass, Spanish dagger and thorned bush.

It was here that trouble started. The motor of the car wheezed and knocked, then came to a sudden and decisive stop. Upon investigation they found the roadster had been disabled purposely. Someone had put a load of emery in the oil and it had worked its way all through the motor, smashing it up very thoroughly.

Jim was inclined to suspect Jose, but Red disagreed. They said nothing to the old man. They decided to continue on foot. Food and water were essential, likewise picks and spades and a quantity of dynamite.

Carefully they made up the packs, great heavy ones for themselves and a much lighter one for Jose. In a clump of greasewood Jim hid the radio and a few of their more valuable possessions. The rest they had to leave in the stalled car.

All night they trudged on. The first streaks of light were stealing

out of the east when they plodded into a hill-walled canyon and sank down gratefully beside a spring. But they did not get a chance to drink. Abruptly a rifle in the hand of a hidden marksman cracked sharply, the bullet whistling above their heads, driving them away.

WITH Jose in the lead, they darted and twisted their way across the canyon, while leaden messengers of death whistled about their ears.

"Buck Morgan!" Jose shouted fearfully as he ran. "It is Buck Morgan here ahead of us. Come, I know where there is a cave."

"Rotten shots—they never touched us!" Red Dolliver gloated as he dived into an opening in the rocky side of the mesa that was more like a burrow than a cave.

"Never mind, they'll have plenty of chance to practice up," Jim said grimly, as he dropped his heavy pack to the cave floor. "How do you figure we're going to get out of here? They have the place surrounded, and we haven't any too much water left."

Day brought heat—scorching, enervating heat. The glaring sun lit up the canyon with blinding brilliance, yet nowhere were Jim and Red able to see a sign of their besiegers.

"Water's about gone," Red commented, as he shook his nearly empty canteen. "I have a hunch that fellow, whoever he is, is gone. Think I'll take a chance on slipping down to the spring."

Before he was half a dozen feet from the mouth of the cave, Red knew how wrong his guess had been. From two points on the shaded opposite wall of the canyon, little puffs of smoke went up as shots cracked out and bullets sought him. To attempt to escape was suicide, so the partners piled loose rocks at the entrance of the cave and prepared to spend the day there. By turns they slept, but before nightfall they were

exhausted from the heat and from lack of water.

Evening came at last, bringing some respite from the heat. As darkness fell they decided to make a break for it.

With nothing but their revolvers and their canteens they crawled from the cave as soon as night was fully descended. Not a sound came from the opposite wall. Slowly and carefully they worked their way down to the spring, with Jose following them. Still not a shot impeded their progress.

"Oh, man—water!" Red gasped as he crawled up to the spring. But as he began to lower his mouth to the inviting surface, he was yanked back quickly.

"No—no!" Jose hissed in his ear. "It is a trap! See, there, on the other bank."

ON the other bank, close to the water, lay the body of a little burro, swollen to twice its size, its blackened tongue protruding horribly from its mouth.

"Poison!" Jose whispered.

Involuntarily Red pushed back from the pool and stared in horror at its inviting water.

"Well, I'm not going back into that trap," he decided at last. "Let's go hunt up these poisoning skunks."

"There is another canyon beyond this one," Jose suggested. "I do not know; perhaps it, too, has a spring. We cannot drink the poison or fight men who stay hidden."

"Jose's right, Red," Jim endorsed. "Take hold of yourself, old-timer. We may have a devil of a long walk ahead of us."

That walk was a nightmare. The sight of the spring had served only to increase their thirst, and the hours stretched on endlessly without a sign of water. Up ahead Jose trudged along, seemingly without fatigue.

Jim began to hate him, to blame him for all their troubles. Then he knew that the heat and thirst were getting him. Red's step, too, was uncertain, and he walked miles without saying a word.

They lost all track of time and distance. Life was just a treadmill of steps, and a torture of thirst. Vaguely Jim was aware that the east was brightening. They trudged on.

Then suddenly Jose came running back to them.

"Help—it comes! Look there, ahead!" he shouted.

Jim looked, but he saw nothing. Not until he had a canteen full of water in his hands did he come back to the world of realities.

"Easy, now, take it easy," a man's voice was cautioning, but even in his semi-delirium Jim was too experienced a hand to gulp the life-saving water.

There were two men beside them, he noticed now; two men and a burro. The older of the two was a fat, heavy-set fellow with a reddish mustache; the younger a gangling chap with loose lips and shifty eyes.

"Lucky thing I met you fellers," the older man was saying. "You're about all in. What you need is a good long *siesta*. My place is just down the next canyon. Reckon you can stick it out that far?"

RUFE GREINER had looked like an angel of deliverance out on the desert, but when Jim and Red faced him across his own table there was something about the man that filled them both with distrust. They had slept all day, they found, and now a hearty meal awaited them.

"Your Mexican is out hobnobbing with the cook," Greiner explained Jose's absence. "All right, boys, pitch in and fill up."

They did, stopping only long enough to answer their host's prob-

ing questions about their experiences.

"So you're a mining engineer, eh?" he said to Jim. "Then I'm in luck. I'm doing a bit of mining here myself. Got onto one of the old Spanish workings. We take out some mighty good ore now and then. Trouble is, we can't seem to locate the main vein. I can't afford to bring experts way out here. Maybe you'd have a look at the workings for me tomorrow, eh?"

"Sure thing," Jim agreed readily. "Mighty glad to help you if I can."

GREINER puzzled him, however. The big man seemed cordial enough, yet beneath his show of friendliness Jim sensed something else. It was as if he and Red were mice being played with by a sleek, fat cat—a cat with claws ready at any moment to be unsheathed.

Yet Greiner was genuinely concerned about his mine; that was apparent. Little by little he let drop bits of information about it.

Greiner's canyon, it seemed, had once been inhabited by a tribe of Yaquis, who had long since been driven over the nearby border into Mexico. They had been working a gold mine of amazing richness, a mine which the Spaniards had tried to locate, with evidently only partial success.

That night Jim Benson lay awake long after Red's snores proved that he was dead to the world. Jim could not be so easily satisfied as Red. There were things about this layout that puzzled him.

What had become of Jose? It was curious that the Mexican had made no attempt to communicate with them during the evening. Jim could not altogether forget the light of triumph that had gleamed momentarily in the old man's eyes when he knew they would undertake the trip for the treasure.

Perhaps, as Red sometimes dis-

gustedly told him, Jim was an old woman for worrying about things, but still—

At last he fell asleep.

It was not the sun that woke Jim the next morning, but a frantic bellowing and screaming. Hopping out of bed, he looked out of the window of their upper story room and down into a clearing in which two full-grown steers were battling ferociously. Right in their path sprawled a three-quarters naked brown youngster of perhaps five or six years.

Helplessly his mother screamed and danced at a safe distance from the flying hoofs. Then like a flash Jose appeared from nowhere and darted between the infuriated animals, snatched up the tyke and scrambled back to safety.

It was a heroic thing, but what impressed Jim most strongly was the expression of horrified terror that contorted Jose's face when he saw the youngster's danger. It was as if his whole world teetered on the brink of oblivion.

NOW he was stroking the tot tenderly and crooning to him Spanish and Mexican endearments. The mother, too, had overcome her panic. Assured that her offspring was safe, she promptly cuffed and smacked him soundly, then threw her arms around Jose's neck.

"*Padre—padre mia!*" she cried, as tears rolled down her cheeks. "If it had not been for you—"

Jim Benson sat back on the bed as Jose and his entourage passed out of sight around the building. *Padre*—father. Yet Jose claimed he had not been in this country for many years.

Again Jim remembered the stalled roadster and the suspicion of Jose that had flashed across his mind at that time.

What did it all mean?

CHAPTER III

The Living Dead

IN THE full morning sunlight Rufe Greiner was not quite the man of the night before. Now there was a bloated bagginess to his face that Jim had not previously noticed, and the lines of furtive cunning around his eyes and his mouth were more pronounced.

He hovered over the table as Jim and Red ate their breakfast, obviously excited and anxious to get at the work of the day.

"We will go right down to the mine," he suggested as soon as Jim emptied his coffee cup.

As they stepped out of the building, Jim got his first clear view of the Greiner property. The dwelling was a rough, two-story building, with several nondescript little shacks grouped behind it. Some two hundred feet away was the mine shaft, and close by the mill with its young mountain of tailings spreading out behind it.

Perhaps twenty feet on the other side of the shaft stood another building. It was long and low, flat-roofed. Looked as if it might have been a mess-shack if the mine were working a large staff. There were windows only at the front end, and these were closed with heavy, barred shutters. The door, too, was stoutly barred.

A curious looking building, but somehow Jim felt that it was in keeping with the rest of the layout. There was something wrong about the place; he could sense it all about him. For one thing, there seemed to be nobody else on the premises but Greiner.

Jose and the woman with the youngster had disappeared, and there had been no further sign of the fellow who had been with Greiner out on the desert.

"Here we go," Greiner exclaimed

eagerly as they reached the shaft. "Perhaps you will go down first, Mr. Benson. And now you, Mr. Dolliver."

After they had reached the lower level Greiner's own bulk blotted the light out of the shaft as he made his way laboriously down to them.

THAT mine was a revelation to Jim Benson. In a few minutes he was convinced that Greiner actually had located one of the old Spanish workings. Stout pillars of ore supported the roof, but once they made their way into the newer sections he was amazed and shocked at the shoddiness of the timbering.

Timber was at a premium in this country, so Greiner used it as sparingly as possible. Jim could readily understand why, as he complained, he was troubled by cave-ins and slides. It was a wonder he had not had a greater catastrophe.

"There is the layout," the mine owner said, as they finished their inspection. "There are other drifts here that have been worked out entirely. But somewhere down here there is a vein that is so rich that the gold can be dug out with a chisel. It's your job to find that vein. That's what I've got you here for."

Greiner's voice had been changing, until it ended in a snarl. Jim had seen no gun on him, yet suddenly a revolver appeared in each of his hands as he backed away from them. In the same instant Jim felt his own weapon snatched from its holster.

Red, too, felt his gun being taken from him and swung his mighty fist in protest. He might better have saved the energy. He got only the barrel of a revolver across the top of his head for his pains and fell unconscious to the floor.

Greiner was not alone now. Two other huskies were ranged at his side: the long, gangling fellow Jim

had seen before—and another fellow whose face was oddly familiar.

"It's up to you to find that vein," Greiner informed Jim. "The quicker you do the better it'll be for you. And you're staying here till you do—get that? When that *hombre* comes out of it, tell him that's just a sample of what he'll get if he tries to start trouble."

Then, to the fellow whose face Jim was striving to place, "Come on, Buck; we've wasted too much time already. Get the men on the job."

Buck—Buck Morgan! In a flash Jim placed the fellow. This was the thug with whom he had traded blows that night on the street in El Paso! This was Buck Morgan!

WHILE Jim worked over the unconscious Red, Rufe Greiner and his assistants made their way back to the shaft. Red's eyes were just opening when a new noise filled the tunnels of the old mine—the scrape and shuffle of feet as men started climbing down the ladder and making their way through the workings.

Without a word they filed by, a procession of wraiths, of scarecrows. Gaunt and ragged, their eyes dull and unseeing, they shuffled mechanically to their stations. Soon the place was filled with the noise of drills, of shovels scooping up ore, and of feet trudging with loaded sacks to the bottom of the shaft.

Apparently there was no boss over these automatons, no slave-driver to keep them at their tasks. Yet they worked steadily, almost feverishly.

"Looks like a lot of ghosts," Red muttered, "but they sure can work. What kind of a hell is this we've fallen into?"

"Dunno, old-timer, but I'm going to find out mighty quick," Jim assured him, as he strode over to one of the workers.

It was not until he grabbed a shovel and started to work beside

one of the toilers that he could get an answer from them. Then the fellow he was helping looked at him without interest.

"There's no time to talk," he said in a weary, lifeless monotone. "Two new men means that the quota goes up."

"The quota? You mean you have to produce a certain amount per man? How do they know who isn't doing his share? Who are these people anyway? Why do you fellows let them get away with this sort of thing?"

JIM had many other questions, but as he gazed into the pale, apathetic face of the poor drudge beside him, the answers to some of them came to him unspoken. Ragged, unshorn, dirty, wasted and sick, these poor devils were broken in health and in spirit. If they ever had any resistance, it was beaten and starved out of them.

When the day's quota of ore fell short they did not eat. Under the guns of the husky guards they were helpless, and resistance was out of the question.

"Once or twice a newcomer tried to start trouble," the shoveler droned on in his monotone. "Once we refused to come up the shaft. They sent down gas. Terrible stuff that burned our eyes and made us choke. We had to come up. Next day we had to send up fifty percent more than usual. Same the day after that."

A mile of lost souls, of men who had vanished from the face of the earth. Tricked to this place, and imprisoned here to toil their lives away.

"I've been here nearly two years," the wasted fellow remarked listlessly. "Some of them have been here nearly five. They don't last much longer than that—even the best of them."

Five years of living hell! That

would be his fate and Red's unless they managed their escape very soon, Jim realized. Once they became enmeshed in this deadly routine, all hope and strength would be ground out of them.

"Wait till we get out of here!" Red vowed hotly. "Wait till I get my hands on that fellow Greiner!"

Two days later Red admitted the uselessness of resistance. Whenever the poor slaves came up out of the shaft for meals, they were met and shepherded by husky guards armed with clubs and revolvers. To attempt resistance meant a blow over the head—in emergency a bullet.

For most of them, all thought of resistance was a thing of the past. Like poor blind human moles, they toiled underground most of the day and then scurried for their bunkhouses when they came up out of the shaft. So long had they been in semi-darkness that the light of day tortured their eyes and blinded them, rendered them helpless.

THE long low house proved to be a combination bunkhouse and mess hall. Around the walls the bunks were built. In the center was a long table on which the nauseous meals were served. The place was filthy and stagnant, improperly ventilated and dimly lighted by weak lamps.

It was a pesthole for the twenty men now cooped up in it, but escape from it was out of the question. Its sturdy walls and heavily barred windows made it a veritable jail.

On the third day Greiner sought out his new recruits.

"Had any success yet?" he asked interestedly, as if he were no other than a regular mine owner interrogating his superintendent. "Come now—you mustn't take it that way," as he saw the bleak look on Jim's face and the hot rage rising in Red Dolliver. "I had to have expert advice, you know, and how else could

I get it? I heard of you, Benson, so I decided to get you."

"Then Jose's yarn was all a cock-and-bull story, eh?" Jim snapped.

"Jose is a good actor," Greiner chuckled satisfiedly, "but I trained him in that yarn. We'll have to use it again when we need recruits."

"Not if I get my hands around his throat, you won't," Red growled. "I've got a little argument to settle with him."

"Now, now, you mustn't be too hard on Jose," Greiner soothed, mockingly. "He had no choice. You see, he's quite wild about his grandson. I held the brat here and—well, Jose knew what would happen to the kid if he failed."

"You dirty devil!" Red Dolliver threw caution to the winds and leaped for Greiner's throat, but before he could lay a finger on the fat fiend two of his bullies were in action. Red's fists were helpless against their heavy clubs.

"**F**OOLS!" Greiner spat contemptuously. "I'm giving you a chance to get out of here. Find that main vein for me and you can go. If you don't you'll stay here until you sweat and cough your lousy lives away. Get that? I want action. I'll give you two weeks to produce results. If you ain't located the stuff for me by then my boys will take a hand and speed you up."

His "boys" were like human wolves, slavering and grinning at the prospect of being able to try out their tortures on these new victims. Two weeks of grace Greiner had given them, Jim considered. Two weeks to effect a way out of this death trap—or to die in it.

For long hours, while Red slaved to do the work of two men, Jim wandered through the musty tunnels and drifts of the old mine. Nowhere could he find traces of gold in worthwhile quantities, much less

the bonanza that Greiner was seeking. The mine was pretty well worked out. And nowhere could he find a possible avenue of escape.

With special care he studied those places where cave-ins had put a stop to the work. In each case the accident seemed perfectly natural. The timbering was so sloppily erected that he wondered how it held at all. In each of these cave-ins tons of debris blocked the tunnel so that it would have taken months of work to clear it away. Escape through one of these was out of the question.

IT was not until the beginning of the second week that he found the slightest encouragement. Then he was in a far distant part of the mine, so far removed from the workers that he could not even hear the sound of their picks and drills. All was still in this old tunnel, the air musty and dead and the dust of ages on the floor.

Jim had followed it to its end, a worked-out face of rock, and was about to turn away disappointed when a slight noise came to his ears. It sounded like the muffled tinkle of a pick against rock. Could it be an echo from the distant workers? He strained his ears but no sound of their labor came to him.

Again, faintly, came that muffled clink! It seemed to come from beneath him. On his hands and knees Jim went over the floor of that tunnel inch by inch, sneezing and coughing as the dust he raised threatened to suffocate him. After an hour of searching his pick tapped against a part of the floor that gave a hollow echo.

Eagerly he went to work on it, scooping away the dust, prying with his pick, until, close against the wall, he uncovered a slab nearly three feet square. When he wrenched it out of place he peered down into a black hole that smelled like a musty

old tomb. Notches were chipped into the rock for steps, and Jim soon found himself in another gallery of the old mine, a lower level, extending far beyond the upper tunnels Greiner was working.

More clearly now he could hear the distant clink of a pick.

With his light extinguished Jim groped his way stealthily along the old tunnel. Gradually the sound of the pick became louder. At last, far down the tunnel, he saw a brown-skinned man, naked to the waist, picking away at the face of the rock. The ore broke off easily and it fell heavily to the floor. Even from that distance Jim knew that it was high grade.

Had he stumbled onto Greiner's bonanza? And was there another way out of the mine down this tunnel? There was no opportunity now to investigate. He would have to come back at night, when this brown-skinned fellow was not at work. But how to get back into the mine after Greiner's slaves were locked up for the night?

CHAPTER IV

Light In the Dark

WHEN Red Dolliver climbed out of the shaft that night a pick handle was held securely by his belt beneath his shirt and trousers, while the head stretched its length down one trouser leg. Jim Benson's shirt and trousers covered the wooden handle of a shovel, while against his belly reposed the iron scoop.

"It's our one chance to get out of this place," Red agreed when he had heard of the new-found tunnel. "If we sink a hole in the floor in the back of the bunkhouse we won't have more than twenty feet to go to reach the shaft."

Carefully Jim explained their plan to their fellow prisoners, after their

jail had been locked up for the night. Here and there hope beamed momentarily in a haggard face, but for the most part these men had forgotten how to hope. By night they were too tired to wield a pick or shovel in what they were convinced would be only another abortive bid for freedom.

"All right; we'll handle this ourselves," Jim told them finally, "but there is not to be a word said about what we're doing. One word to Greiner or his thugs and I'll have the life of the squealer!"

EVEN this threat was taken apathetically. Fortunately for Jim's plan, Greiner and his assistants seldom came into the bunkhouse, and then never to the rear of the noisome place. By carefully packing the displaced dirt against the walls and under the bunks much of it could be hidden from view.

Jim marked off the digging space and went at it, but it was Red Dolliver's great strength that did most of the work. For three nights they worked steadily, sinking a hole nearly ten feet deep and then burrowing a tunnel across the intervening distance between it and the mine shaft. It was almost morning of the third night when Jim's pick broke through into the shaft. Carefully he stopped up the hole it had made.

That day was the most trying of their captivity. Not until they were sure that none of Greiner's men would be in the mine or around the shaft did they dare break through the thin barrier that still stood between them and the shaft.

It was the work of only a few minutes to smash it down, but from that moment on they would have to move fast, they knew. In the morning the hole in the shaft would probably be discovered. That gave them only the night hours in which to make their escape.

"It will be better if you fellows stay right here," Jim advised their fellow captives. "You haven't the strength to tackle the desert. If we get through we'll be back with plenty of men to free you."

Carrying only a canteen of water and armed with the pick and shovel handles, Jim and Red climbed through the aperture and into the shaft. Not until they were at the bottom did they light their lamps. Carefully Jim led the way to the hidden tunnel entrance, then down into the lower working.

ALL was now silent in the lower tunnel but they made their way along it cautiously and quietly nevertheless. For a moment they paused at the spot where the brown-skinned man had been at work, and Jim raised his lamp to the rock surface.

"Almost free gold!" he whispered in awe, as he fingered the rich stuff. "There are millions of dollars here!"

"Yeah, but me, I'm more interested in getting out of this hole," said Red Dolliver. All the treasure fever had left him.

Shortly beyond this point the tunnel widened and opened into a rocky cavern replete with a full assortment of stalagmites and stalactites. A short distance beyond another opening indicated where the tunnel continued.

Before the partners had a chance to cross the cavern, however, their progress was surprisingly interrupted. Noiselessly a brown-skinned fellow leaped upon Red's back, and in another moment Jim was wrestling with two others.

The fight was fast and furious, broken only by grunts from the brown-skinned battlers and a yelp of pain as Jim's pick handle crashed down on a black-haired skull. Red, unable to use his weapon, was locked in a wrestling embrace, precariously holding his balance as he and his

agile foe teetered about the cavern.

Jim's opponent now had hold of the pick handle, too, and it was useless as a weapon. The fellow was lithe and muscular and Jim had all he could do to keep the brown, searching fingers away from his throat. Gambling everything on a bit of strategy, he suddenly released his grip on the handle and put all his strength into a vicious uppercut.

It connected cleanly and the brown-skinned battler was lifted off his feet before he fell to the floor in a heap. By this time Red and his twisting, squirming opponent had lost their balance. Backward over a stalagmite they plunged. A low groan escaped Red's lips, but his fingers were tightly clenched in his opponent's throat and he did not relinquish his hold until the fellow was limp.

But when he tried to stand up he could not; his ankle had been broken or sprained on that treacherous stalagmite.

"OF all the luck!" he cursed quietly. "There's nothing for it but for you to go on alone, Jim. It's a cinch I can't go wandering around the desert with this ankle."

"What will you do?" Jim demanded.

"I'll get myself back to the bunkhouse before these fellows' playmates come looking for them." Dolliver regarded the prostrate men with interest. "Indians all right," he pronounced. "Apaches, maybe—though they look mighty like Yaquis to me. If you can tell me what Yaquis are doing roaming around on this side of the border?"

"That's just another conundrum to add to our collection," Jim told him, "but if I can get out of here and get help we'll find the answers to all of them. Are you sure you can get back to the bunkhouse?"

"Don't worry about me, feller. Get

going while you have the chance."

Silently they shook hands with a grip that meant more than words. Then Jim crossed the cavern and disappeared down the tunnel. Endless it seemed, winding on and on into the ground.

Then, at last, he felt a slight stirring of air. The entrance must be close ahead.

It was. Jim came upon it suddenly, and immediately he sensed the familiarity of the place. There were the rocks he and Red had wheeled into place. There was the spot from which he had traded shots with the gunman across the canyon.

This was El Muerto Canyon! Down below there was the spring and as Jim watched an antelope bent over the water and slaked its thirst. When the animal had had sufficient it ambled off down the canyon without the slightest ill effects.

Jim rubbed his eyes unbelievably. So old Jose had deliberately brought them there to the mouth of this cave so that he could take a rest to break the trip back to the mine. And he had deliberately led them around in a circle for weary hours until Greiner had appeared to take them in charge. Even the poisoned spring had been an artistic touch furnished for their benefit, to discourage any attempt to escape.

WITH his canteen slung over his shoulder and his pick handle clutched grimly Jim set out on that weary march across the desert to the stalled roadster. That was as far as he intended to go. Once he reached the car he would be able to deal himself a new hand in this game. Then he would return to Red and face the music with him.

It was dawn before Jim trudged wearily up to the auto. So far as he could see nothing in the car had been touched, nor had their belongings in the greasewood thicket been

disturbed. Lifting the cushion from the seat, he inserted his hand into a compartment behind the back-rest and drew out a flat automatic and several clips of cartridges.

Then he climbed into the rumble, after clearing out the supplies it contained, and pried loose the forward footboards. From a compartment revealed beneath these he dragged three wooden boxes, one long and narrow, the other two flat and square. With straps and cords from the luggage he tied these boxes together and fastened them pack-wise on his back. Then he was ready.

With a grim smile on his face Jim Benson turned back the way he had come.

CHAPTER V

The Drink of Death

IT WAS mid-afternoon before Jim returned to El Muerto Canyon and made his way carefully to the little cave entrance. Nowhere in the canyon was there a sign of life, but as he cautiously made his way through the long tunnel he had the unmistakable feeling that others had passed through it recently.

So it was no surprise to him when he heard sounds up the tunnel. Quickly he extinguished his light and groped his way slowly in the dark. That was necessary for only a short way. Soon he spied a light up ahead of him, and the sounds were becoming plainer.

As he approached the end of the tunnel, where it debouched into the cavern, he crawled on his hands and knees—then stopped amazed as he came to the point from which he could see into the fantastic place. Now it was filled with humans more weird than the fantastic ornaments which decorated it.

On a throne-like natural platform

at one side stood a wild-looking figure, his brown body streaked with black and white paint, his head covered with a hideous mask from which a wild crest of shaggy hair waved and tossed. Beside him were two more creatures who looked as if they had stepped from the nether regions, and grouped in a swaying circle were at least two dozen Indians, naked except for breech-clouts and the paint with which they were daubed.

Jim Benson had seen the Yaquis in their ceremonial paint; now there was no doubt in his mind that he was looking at a band of the fierce warriors from the south. They were painted for the hysterical war dance and already were worked up to fever pitch.

AS he watched they broke again into their barbaric rhythm, leaping and yelling, the cave curiously amplifying and muffling the sound at the same time. From behind his mask the leader's fierce eyes gleamed wickedly as the light from the sputtering torches flashed on them. Then he held up his right arm for silence.

"Bring them in!" he commanded regally when quiet was restored.

Immediately his two bemasked satellites sprang to do his bidding and returned from the other side of the cavern with the bound forms of Buck Morgan and his gangling, loose-lipped companion. Stark fear had transformed them.

The appearance of the captives threw the leader—Jim recognized him as a dread Yaqui medicine man—into a frenzy, and he danced with such fury that it did not seem possible his aged limbs would sustain him any longer. Suddenly he pirouetted and stopped short.

"For long years I have kept the faith and guarded the treasure of our forefathers," he orated to his followers. "You have gone to other

lands, but always I have stayed here beside our ancient heritage, to protect it from the greedy hands of the white man."

Jim Benson knew that voice. There before him stood Jose, the man whose tattooed back had led him and Red into all this trouble.

"I have worked for the white man; I have suffered indignities at his hands; my body bears the marks of his greedy scheming. I have not complained, because my place was here beside the walls of gold. When those walls were in danger I have protected them.

"But now the white men know our secret and the treasure of our people is no longer safe! They thirst for the Yaqui gold! Let them drink!"

From a little fire that smoldered near the platform he took a metal cup and advanced toward the prisoners. In a twinkling he held the cup to Buck Morgan's tortured lips and forced its contents down the captive's throat. Morgan screamed horribly and strained every muscle, but his captors held him fast until his body sank limply to the ground.

"Gold—molten gold!" Jim whispered to himself as he identified the terrible drink that was even then being held up to the clenched jaws of the other prisoner.

THE Indians were all staring fascinatedly at the ghastly drama being enacted there before them, and Jim took advantage of their preoccupation to crawl warily into the cavern and, keeping to the wall and using the stalagmites for cover, make his way slowly toward the other tunnel.

"That is the only way to stop the mouth of the white man once he discovers the Yaquis' gold!" Jose screamed. Again the Indians, now completely reverted to savagery, were weaving and swaying in their bestial dance. "There are other white men who know the Yaquis' se-

cret. None must live to spread the story!"

That meant death for Red Dolliver and all those poor slaves up in the bunkhouse, Jim knew. He must get to them and warn them, must organize them for some sort of defense.

Little more than a dozen feet lay between him and the tunnel mouth when Jose's wild yell brought the dancers up short.

"Now to the others!" he screamed as he leaped from his perch and took the lead in a serpentine course toward the tunnel.

The Indians were too close for Jim to attempt a dash for the tunnel mouth himself. All he could do was throw himself flat on the ground behind a barrel-like stalagmite and lie there motionless until the last yelling dancer had disappeared into the tunnel.

Fortunately for him he raised his head cautiously to be sure there were no others on guard. Half a dozen feet away squatted one of Jose's assistants in his full regalia. Jim did not dare to risk a shot. With a leap he brought the automatic crashing down on the fellow's skull.

THEN he crept to the tunnel mouth and listened. As soon as he deemed it safe he entered the black hole himself, feeling his way as best he could, while the howls of the Indians became fainter and more muffled ahead of him.

At last he reached the end of the tunnel and scrambled up the rock into the working above. The mine was deserted, except for the sprawled bodies of three of Greiner's assistants, and Jim raced toward the shaft without interruption.

He was still twenty-five feet away when a dull boom sounded in the shaft and a wall of air heavy with dust and the acrid smell of burned powder came rushing to meet him.

Jose had blown up the tunnel leading from the mine shaft to the bunkhouse and his prisoners were now safely penned in their trap.

That explosion ruined Jim's plan. Now he could not get to Red and help him defend the bunkhouse. Desperately he cast about for a way to help his partner—and thought of the dead Indian back at the tunnel mouth. Instantly he was on his way, racing back through the deserted workings to the hidden tunnel.

CHAPTER VI

Yaqui Madness

NO FOOD had been served in the bunkhouse all day and neither Greiner nor his assistants had come near the building. The shots and strange noises outside their prison interested only Red Dolliver. The colony of living dead men just sat on their bunks and waited they knew not for what.

Red could not understand the strange yells and shots, but he knew that something unusual was afoot. With threats and cuffs he bullied the human moles into some semblance of activity. Under his direction they broke up the bunks to provide themselves with clubs.

By late afternoon Red could stand the mystery no longer. With a club he smashed away at one of the barred windows until he knocked loose a plank from the shutter and was able to see what was going on outside.

Greiner's house and the shacks behind it were deserted. Nowhere was there a sign of life about the place, but before long there was plenty of activity. Suddenly the mine shaft began to spew forth an amazing stream of painted savages. Leading the pack came the fantastically garbed medicine man.

Red counted thirty of them, armed with clubs, knives and revolvers

they had taken from Greiner's men. In a swarm they descended on the bunkhouse and threw back the outside bar on the door.

"Ready now!" he cautioned his pitiful group of defenders.

RED, armed with a stout club, took his place nearest the door. The moment it was pushed in his club went into action, crashing down on Indian skulls right and left. Howls of pain were his reward, and the mob gave way, dragging back with it two who had been knocked unconscious.

"Victory number one," he encouraged the trembling ragamuffins behind him. "Now stand back away from that door. They know what to expect and will not be so anxious to walk in for more."

Twice more the Yaquis tried to carry the door by storm, but the rain of blows which met them in the narrow opening was too much for them. Outside Jose was exhorting them to renewed efforts and the howls of the war dance came in terrifyingly to the panicky defenders.

Then Jose resorted to fire. Helpless to defend the back of the building, the imprisoned men had to listen to the preparations as kindling was piled against the wall and the flames started to leap up to the roof. Gradually the heat made the rear of the building untenable, and the flames were spreading rapidly toward the front.

"Nothing to do but make a rush for it," Red Dolliver grated, as he eyed the oncoming flames. "Better than frying here."

Grimly he watched the raging furnace. The heat in the building was already terrific. It was only a matter of a few minutes now before they would have to charge out into that mob of howling savages.

Too wary to chance further contact with those head-splitting clubs, Jose's tribesmen were content to cir-

cle the doorway at a safe distance. It would be only a matter of seconds before their victims must come out, and they knew it.

Now that death was staring him in the face Red found that he could regard it dispassionately. Too bad to go out like this at the hands of a lot of savages with whom he really had no argument. Jim would bring help sooner or later, but by that time there would be nothing left but corpses to tell the story.

The flesh on the back of his neck was baking; he could smell the cloth of his shirt scorching. The miserable crowd huddled around him began to whine plaintively.

"Okay, you fellows," he said grimly. "Let's— Wait a minute! What kind of deviltry is that?"

"THAT" was a commotion that had started at the mouth of the mine shaft. Out of it popped a hideous, leering mask—but beneath the mask was a white man. All the paint with which he was daubed could not entirely cover his white skin.

Now the fellow was out of the shaft and was squatting on the ground, contorting himself in a weird sort of dance while behind him he was busily dragging something heavy and shiny out of the shaft. Red Dolliver's eyes threatened to pop out of his head.

"He's a white man!" Jose screamed in his rage. "Don't let him fool you! He has killed Lone Horse and stolen his vestments!"

With his revolver spitting bullets a big buck led the charge and the mob turned as one man to sweep that fantastic figure away from the shaft head. But Jose was not the only one who had read that strange performance correctly.

His club swinging in a deadly circle around his head, and a wild rebel yell heralding his approach, Red Dolliver charged out of the bunk-

house, covered the twenty feet to the shaft in a split second, and flung himself on the ground beside the white Indian.

"And what in hell are you doing here, I'd like to know?" he demanded as he began feeding a belt of ammunition into the machine-gun Jim Benson had just managed to rig up.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat! came the deadly hammering, and a roaring, hissing stream of lead swept the blood-mad Yaquis irresistibly before it.

That deadly fire blasted the Yaquis away like leaves before a hurricane. In a few minutes nothing remained of Jose's tribesmen but a dozen lifeless bodies and a few racing figures rapidly disappearing down the canyon.

"LOOKS as if you were getting kinda warm," Jim observed as he pulled the mask over his head and watched the flaming roof of the bunkhouse go tumbling down in a shower of sparks. "What do you think—have we cleaned up things satisfactorily?"

Red did not know whether or not things were really all cleaned up. He was keenly interested in the whereabouts of one Rufe Greiner, and there were a few things he

wanted to discuss with Jose also.

But that was not to be. As they were patching up several wounded Yaquis and looking for others the sound of sobbing brought them to the rear of Greiner's house. There a weebegone youngster sat contemplating a gruesome spectacle.

Greiner and Jose, now without his mask, lay clutched in a death grip. Jose's knife was deep in the heart of the fat man, but Greiner's heavy fingers were closed relentlessly around the old man's throat. Jose was on top, and the sun beat down on the map tattooed on his naked back.

"Poor devil," Jim pitied him; "he was a pretty good Injun at that. We'll use some of this Yaqui gold to send this little tyke off to school."

"Righto!" Red agreed promptly, "And the rest of it—" Jim hesitated. "Well, I don't hanker much for mucking around underground here any more than we have to—but we could get out enough of the stuff to outfit us properly for that proposition down in Bolivia—"

Red Dolliver's eyes filmed dreamily; became pools that mirrored longingly the call of the far places. Then a grin spread over his face from ear to ear.

"Put it there!" he demanded as he thrust out his big paw.