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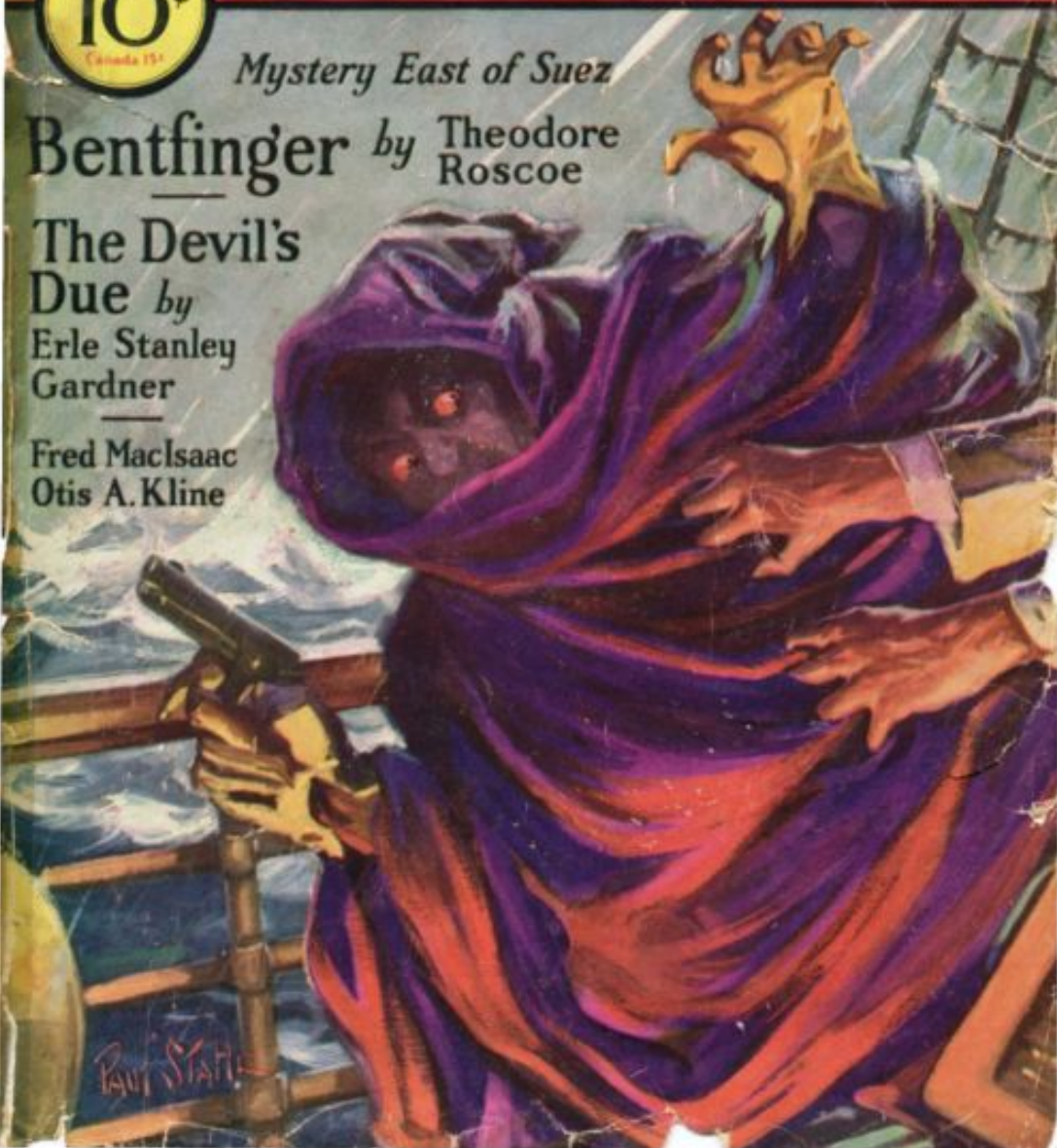
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The Devil's Due

By

ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "The Man with Pin-Point Eyes," "Priestess of the Sun," etc.

First published *Argosy*, May 23, 1931.

As a free-lance adventurer in diplomacy, Major Brane of California undertakes to hijack a secret oriental treaty without the least idea who has it or where it is—and the penalty of failure is death

CHAPTER I. AN ORIENTAL TREATY.

It was early in May that those who prided themselves upon inside knowledge of oriental affairs learned that Chiang Kai-shek had secretly agreed with Japan to repay the fifty-million-dollar Nishihara loans.

Major Copely Brane had known of the arrangement well before the first of May. Major Brane, free-lance diplomat, adventurer in international politics, knew many things which even those who prided themselves upon their inside information did not even suspect.

But the Nishihara loans did not concern Major Brane in the least, and he strolled down Grant Avenue watching the lighted windows of the Chinese curio stores with tolerant amusement, accurately appraising the real and imitation in Chinese art.

There were shuffling steps behind him, and a young Chinese lad jog-trotted by with breathless haste. Perhaps there was the faintest suggestion of a flickering glance toward Major Brane; perhaps it was because the runner swung very far toward the curb to avoid touching Major Brane; perhaps it was merely some telepathic warning: but, as the runner passed, Major Brane became very alert, very cool, very deliberate.

The runner vanished into a lighted doorway in the middle of the block.

Major Brane strolled along the sidewalk, his light cane tapping the pavement. His eyes were as steel. He came abreast of the lighted doorway where the runner had vanished. A man was just thrusting some object into the display window.

The major's eyes glittered to the hands. They were yellow hands, shapely, tapering to points at the fingers, and the object that was being placed in the window was a bit of carved jade which had been fashioned into a Buddha. Both stone and workmanship were of the highest quality, and Brane's eyes kindled with the delight of a connoisseur.

The yellow hands slid a bit of pasteboard in front of the jade, and upon that pasteboard was a price which was so ridiculously low that no collector could ever have knowingly passed up such a buy.

But the major was thoughtful as he stepped into the store. He was not forgetful of the young man who had passed him in such a hurry and vanished into the curio store.

The door to the street closed behind Major Brane.

The door was glass. The window was of glass. The thronged sidewalks were plainly visible. The figures of Chinese and whites, of plain-clothes men and of San Francisco's nightly tourist crop, straggled past that window.

It seemed impossible that there could be any danger.

Major Brane stared into the eyes of the man who smiled a greeting from behind the counter. A student of Chinese character would have doubted very much that the owner of those eyes was a humble curio merchant, and Major Brane was a student of Chinese character.

"The jade Buddha you have just placed in the window," said Major Brane, and indicated the object with an inclination of his head, "interests me."

The man behind the counter said no word. He bent to the window, took out the jade Buddha, handed it to Major Brane.

Major Brane turned the object over in his hands. Close inspection revealed that it was all that Major Brane had hoped it might be.

“Is that price right?” asked Major Brane.

The Chinese picked up the pasteboard tag, studied it.

“I will ask the proprietor,” he said in excellent, accentless English, and moved toward the rear of the store. “This way, please.”

And, with the sound of that voice, Major Brane knew at once that this man was no mere curio dealer, was no employee of any sort. But the jade Buddha was almost priceless, and the glass windows showed the lighted thoroughfare with its crowded pedestrian traffic.

Major Brane moved toward the back of the store. But his right hand was close to the lapel of his coat, and there was an automatic suspended just under the left armpit. His senses were keenly alert, but if he heard a very faint rumbling sound behind him he supposed it was out in the street.

The Chinaman stepped under an electric light as though to observe the jade figure more closely.

“The price is right,” he said.

Major Brane nodded. “I will buy it.”

The Chinese bowed.

“It is yours . . . and I am forced to ask a slight favor of you, Major Brane.”

Major Brane stiffened as he became aware that the man knew his name. His right hand became rigidly motionless.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Yes. I must ask that you come with me to the Master. And if you will please lower your right hand, you will have no temptation to reach for your weapon.”

Major Brane partially turned, but his right hand remained elevated. From the corner of his eye he glanced toward the place where the lighted street should have showed through the plate-glass windows, where hundreds of ears could have heard the sound of a shot, or a cry.

But his eyes encountered a blank wall.

In some mysterious manner, partitions had slid into place while Major Brane was inspecting the jade figure. The front of the store, as well as the street, was shut out from the vision and hearing of the two men.

Major Brane smiled, a quick, courteous smile of easy affirmation.

“I shall be pleased to accompany you,” he said, and lowered his hand from the vicinity of his coat lapel.

The smile of the Chinese matched his own.

“I felt certain you would be reasonable, major.”

The man clapped his hands. There was a stirring of motion within the half shadows of the darkened interior of the storeroom. Three men slipped upon furtive feet from places of concealment.

“I felt *certain* you would be reasonable. This way please.”

The major followed his guide. He was a student of Chinese psychology, and he knew when resistance was useless. The Chinese possess infinite patience, a capacity for detail which is unique. When a Chinese has planned that a certain thing is to happen in a certain manner, it nearly always does. It is also most unwise for one to interfere with such a plan, as long as one is within the power of the Chinese.

So Major Brane walked with steps that may have been apprehensive, but were outwardly willing enough.

They went through a door, into a passage, down a flight of stairs to a basement, across the basement to a steel door which swung open for them by some invisible mechanism, along this passage, up a long flight of stairs, and paused before a door.

The outer side of this door was of steel. The guide smacked his palm against it and waited. Major Brane said nothing.

They stood before that door for fully ten seconds, then a bolt clicked, the door swung open.

The room was furnished with rich carpets into which feet sank noiselessly; massive chairs of teakwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, golden ornaments, crystal chandeliers. An aged Chinese sat at a little table. A loose-sleeved silken coat, emblazoned with rich colors, draped itself from the withered form. The man had his hands concealed by the flowing sleeves.

The guide approached, bowed.

“Sin Sahng, k’wei chut lie.”

Major Brane bowed formally. He knew enough Cantonese to interpret the remark. And he knew that *Sin Sahng*, meaning literally “first born,” is applied to those who are very wise.

The aged Chinaman surveyed him with eyes that were as sanded ebony. Dull, they were, yet intensely black. The face was puckered and dark, like the inside of a dried lichee nut. The lips were sucked in, the center of a mass of wrinkles which radiated from the mouth.

The man made no sign, gave no gesture, said no word.

There was silence for the space of long seconds. During that time Major Brane was weighed in some invisible balance.

The man who had acted as guide bowed, turned to Major Brane. His English had a trace of the Oxford accent, but was fluent, easily followed.

“You are familiar with the situation in the East, Major Brane.”

The major nodded.

“And you style yourself a free-lance diplomat. You have accepted employment from various governments in times past.”

Major Brane nodded again.

The Chinese spoke more rapidly now. There was a trace of eagerness in his voice. “You have heard that Chiang Kai-shek has executed a secret treaty with Japan by which fifty million dollars are to be repaid to Japan.”

It was a statement, not a question, and Major Brane made no comment.

“Very well. That treaty cannot stand unless it has the support of the influential Cantonese in the United States. There is a powerful and dangerous clique that would like very much to discredit Chiang Kai-shek and to thwart the treaty. Now, in that treaty certain concessions are made to Japan. No one knows what they are but many would be interested. Yet it must be a secret treaty. To divulge it to the rabble would be fatal.

“Here is what that clique are doing. They are sending a man to this country with a forged treaty. The terms of the forged treaty are such that no patriotic Chinese would consent to it. It is the plan that this forged treaty will be carelessly guarded, and that the representative of some powerful newspaper will steal it and publish it.

“That will force Chiang Kai-shek into a place where he will have to exhibit the original treaty to prove that the other is a forgery. And, even then, there will be those who will believe

the forgery. It is a very good forgery.”

Major Brane bowed, smiled. His mind appreciated the typical oriental diplomacy, realized the damning possibilities of the situation. A stolen treaty published, a hue and cry among the Chinese, a party divided within itself, charges, counter charges, squabbles, strife.

The Chinese looked Major Brane squarely in the eyes.

“It will be your duty to secure that forged treaty before the opportunity is given the newspaper reporter to ‘steal’ it.”

Major Brane smiled indulgently, shook his head.

“No, thank you,” he said. “It is not employment I can accept. The holder of the forged treaty and the newspaper man will be in collusion. No man could prevent the delivery of that forged document.”

In answer the Chinese let his coat fall slightly open. The butt of a revolver showed, and his right hand hovered near that butt.

“No man except you, Major Brane. And the matter is of sufficient importance to us to keep us from accepting a refusal.”

The major pointed to the butt of the weapon. “Does that enforce your demands?”

The Chinaman’s eyes glittered.

“It is a symbol of power,” he said; and Major Brane, knowing the oriental mind, knew that he was left with no alternative in the matter of accepting the employment.

“When you succeed, there will be abundant money. In the meantime your wants will be supplied.”

The old man slid open a drawer in the table. A withered hand picked out an enormous package of bank notes, slid them across the table. The gold and jade nail guards scraped across the polished wood.

“But,” protested Major Brane, “if this forged treaty is stolen they will forge another.”

The Chinese shook his head.

“No. There are certain things about this forgery which cannot be duplicated, the paper and a seal. There will be only one attempt.”

“And who,” asked Major Brane, “will bring this document to this country? Where will it be delivered?”

The bland smile of the Chinese was accompanied by a gesture with the hand.

“We have not the slightest idea. If we knew, we could handle the matter ourselves.”

The major smiled.

“You are absurd. The thing is utterly impossible. Knowing who had this forged treaty, where it was to be delivered and to whom, one might manage. Without that information, it is like hunting for a needle in a haystack.”

The Chinese was still bland, but his words fell as a sentence of death:

“As we said, you are not at liberty to decline. And it may interest you to know, Major Brane, that we have banded ourselves together and taken an oath. That oath is that we will not fail. Those who do not succeed will join their ancestors.”

The major flashed a look at the old man.

He was sitting at the table, his head slumped forward, the eyes closed. He seemed asleep, and there was a smile flickering the corners of his mouth, a bland smile of cherubic innocence.

But Brane made no mistake in interpreting that smile. He realized that he was under sentence of death. He could annul that sentence only by thwarting the delivery of a forged

document by a person he did not know to another he had never seen.

“This way, major,” said his guide, and led the way through another door, down a passage, down stairs, around turns, up a short flight of stairs and to a side street.

That side street was two blocks from the curio store on Grant Avenue.

The guide extended to Major Brane the package of currency which the old man had slid across the table.

“For expenses, major. The jade Buddha you admired will be delivered to you. Good night.”

And a heavy door slammed, leaving Major Brane on the side street, a small fortune in currency in his right hand.

CHAPTER II. MEXICO.

The major walked up the dark side street to Grant Street. He could see no one following. At Grant Street he took a taxicab to the Palace Hotel. He walked across the lobby to the elevators, went to the seventh floor, alighted and walked to the stairs. He regained the third floor by the stairs, took a crowded elevator to the lobby, and debouched with the crowd. He took a cab to the Ferry Building, picked up another cab at the Ferry Building and went directly to the Southern Pacific depot at Third and Townsend.

He watched his chance and slipped through the exit gate, closing it behind him. He sprinted down the tracks, keeping well to the shadows of the long lines of dark Pullmans.

A long train was just pulling out, the huge locomotive hissing steam with every turn of the wheels. Major Brane stationed himself where he could grasp the handholds on the observation platform as the last car rumbled by him.

An illuminated, circular sign on the rear of the car bore the single word "LARK" in big letters, stretching from one side of the illuminated circle to the other. The background was of flaming red. Major Brane clambered over the brass railing, dropped to the observation platform.

A young woman, sitting with silken limbs crossed generously, surveyed him indolently. A nervous man, standing in the shadows, smoking, started apprehensively, flipped his cigarette away and walked rapidly through the car.

There were no other passengers on the platform. Major Brane dusted his hands together, waited a few moments, opened the door of the car and seated himself in the depths of an upholstered chair.

When the conductor came, Major Brane explained that he had lost his ticket. There was an argument, and Major Brane was ordered to leave the train at San Jose.

Whereupon Major Brane walked forward, went through two Pullmans, waited until the train was slowing for the city limits, opened a vestibule on the off side, and dropped lightly to the tracks, swinging himself with the grace of an old hand at the game.

He walked to a boulevard, flagged half a dozen automobiles, finally got one that gave him a lift to Palo Alto. Then he took a train as far as Burlingame, dropped off and had a rent car take him to San Francisco, where he went directly to the Hotel Whitcomb and registered as Adolph L. Sutter.

He went to his room, heaved a sigh of relief, drew water in a bath, and heard the ringing of his telephone. He took down the receiver; a young lady informed him that there was a package for him.

"There must be some mistake," said Major Brane. "I was expecting no package."

"It's for you," insisted the girl. "It's addressed to Adolph L. Sutter, and it's even got the number of the room on it. It came just about ten minutes after you checked in."

Major Brane smiled wanly.

"Send it up," he said.

Three minutes later a bell boy knocked at his door, handed Major Brane a wrapped package. Major Brane tipped the boy, took his knife, slashed the strings, unwrapped the box, lifted a heavy object from a tissue paper packing, and stripped off the soft white paper.

It was the jade Buddha which he had admired in the Chinese curio store.

At seven he arose, tubbed, shaved, breakfasted, returned to his room. There he consumed several cigarettes and thought deeply.

As his guide had so aptly reminded him, there is no greater incentive to success than the positive knowledge that the price of failure will be death.

Major Brane felt certain that the treaty would be released through a certain chain of newspapers. The forgery would be "stolen" to make it seem authentic. The details were probably all agreed upon.

Major Brane watched the smoke eddy upward from his cigarette while he checked over in his mind a list of the newspaper men who might possibly be intrusted with so delicate a mission.

At the end of an hour's thought Brane wrote the names of three men upon his memo pad. After ten minutes more thought, he crossed out one of the names. Then he called the office of a certain newspaper.

"I want to speak with Manly," he said. There was a moment of buzzing delay, then a woman's voice announced that Mr. Manly was out, but would return in an hour. Did Major Brane care to leave a message?

The major slowly drew a line through the name of Eugene Manly on the scratch pad.

"No," he said. "Let me talk to Sam Hargrave."

The answer was instantaneous.

"Mr. Hargrave is out and won't be back until the end of the week."

"Where can I reach him?"

"He's at the Cortez Hotel in San Diego."

Major Brane thanked her, hung up the telephone, lit a fresh cigarette.

The chances were that the bearer of the treaty which had been so carefully forged would not enter the United States. It would be much more theatrical, much easier, to have the theft take place in Mexico.

Major Brane snuffed out his cigarette, reached a decision. He went directly to his apartment, packed a light trunk, took a car to the Ferry Building, crossed the bay, and was driven at once to the Oakland airport. A tri-motored transport left for Los Angeles within half an hour, and Major Brane purchased a ticket.

The great plane came snarling up to the runway like a huge dragon fly. Major Brane stepped aboard. There were four other passengers. None seemed particularly interested in the major.

The transport droned its way into the Glendale airport. Major Brane chartered a small cabin ship, and left the Los Angeles field within twenty minutes of his arrival.

The lighter plane seemed like a cork on the water compared with the huge tri-motored affair. It bounced over the air bumps, then settled to steady flight over the ocean, following the surf. Major Brane arrived in San Diego at four, and went at once to the Cortez Hotel.

He inquired for a room, asked about Mr. Sam Hargrave. There was no Samuel Hargrave registered, nor did the hotel have any reservations in his name.

Brane accepted the news with expressionless urbanity, registered, and was shown to a room. Then he went to a store, purchased certain articles of baggage, clean linen, socks, tie. He inquired again at the hotel for Mr. Hargrave, and hired a car to drive him across the border.

He was informed that it would take a dash at high speed to reach the border before it closed, and finally decided to charter a plane to run him across.

By that time every one on duty in the hotel lobby knew that the tall, close-clipped man with the steel-hard eyes was looking for a Mr. Hargrave, and that he had decided to go to Agua Caliente, at least to spend the night. And every one of those on duty knew that the man had registered as Major Brane of San Francisco.

Just before the major left the hotel, he noticed a man seated in an obscure corner of the lobby, reading a newspaper, smoking a cigar. Twice that man surreptitiously lowered the newspaper for a swift glance at Brane. But the major apparently paid no heed to those glances.

He recognized the features, however. The man was Samuel Hargrave, one of the star reporters of a powerful chain of newspapers. Brane had never met Hargrave, but he knew the reporter by sight because it was his business to know people who might have something to do with oriental politics.

And if Sam Hargrave did not know Major Brane by sight, he at least knew of him by reputation and name. As the major left the lobby, Sam Hargrave was moving toward the telephone booths, walking with a gait which he strove to make casual.

Major Brane, his eyes bright, his lips commencing to tilt slightly at the corners, was driven to the Lindbergh Field, bundled into a small cabin plane, and lifted into the air.

San Diego showed as glistening white in the fading sunlight. The lazy surf of the semi-tropical Pacific drifted in along a stretch of snowy sand. Far ahead could be seen the blue ridges of high mountains, the tablelike mesa of a lava cap. Closer, was a long valley, and on the other side of that valley Tijuana sprawled like some ugly thing.

The plane winged its way over the border city, high enough to escape the blare of mechanical music, the hectic noises of commercialized dissipation. Then it stood on one wing tip, banked, settled in a long slant.

The magnificent structure of the Agua Caliente hotel and casino shone like a polished jewel of pure crystal and ruby in the dying sun. The ground rose up to meet the wheels. The buildings loomed larger. The wheels jolted upon hard ground, and Brane was in Mexico.

Behind him he had left a trail broad enough for even the veriest tyro of a detective to follow.

He dined at the palatial resort, retired to his room, rested for an hour, and then took a cab to Tijuana.

"If," he muttered to himself, "something happens to me to-night, I'll know I'm on the right trail. Otherwise I've got to take a fresh start."

The thought of taking a fresh start was not pleasant. Time was precious, and he fully appreciated the exact price he would have to pay for failure. He could possibly elude the intangible surveillance of the Chinese, but he would be a marked man. There would be no more free-lancing in oriental politics.

Tijuana had calmed down since the border closed. Those who remained were there for a purpose other than idle curiosity. Drinking became a little more regular, gambling a little more deadly. Dark-eyed *señoritas* watched with alert eyes.

A swarthy Mexican lurched against him. The major stepped to one side, smiling patiently. "Gringo," said the Mexican, and sneered.

Brane continued to smile, his close-clipped smile one of patient watchfulness.

The Mexican moved on.

Major Brane turned down a side street. He could see figures ahead of him, moving dimly in the half darkness. He noticed that two men entered the side street from his rear.

Suddenly there was a shout, a cry, the thud of a body toppling to the dusty street. Running feet thumped the dust. They were slow, heavy, awkward feet. A shot rang out and a bullet glanced from the side of a building, sang off into the night.

He flattened against the wall and slipped a wary hand into the side of his coat where a flat automatic hung under his left armpit. At the same time he heaved a sigh of relief. He was on the right trail.

A man cried out. A figure ran toward him, leveled an accusing forefinger, crying out garbled accusations in Mexican. A uniformed figure materialized from a doorway and walked purposefully toward the major.

"He did it!" screamed the man who pointed. "He pushed my *compañero* from the sidewalk to the street. Then there was a blow, and he fired the shot. I saw it with these two eyes of mine. He—"

The uniformed figure glowered at Major Brane.

"*Señor*," he said, "you will consider yourself—"

A shadow became a substance, the substance that of a man garbed in conventional evening attire. He moved forward from some obscure patch of shadow, and his words cracked like a whiplash.

"Cease, desist!" he exclaimed in Spanish. "Bungler that you are! Son of a pig! Do you not know that this gentleman is innocent? That man who pointed is the one who should feel the weight of your sword. It is I, Señor Alvaro de Gomez, who speaks!"

And the man in uniform became at once humble, fawning, obedient.

"Yes, *señor*, yes, indeed. I go."

And the uniformed figure faded into the darkness. The other men seemed to melt in the shadows. Major Brane found himself gazing upon the man in evening clothes, who bowed low to the ground.

"*Señor*, shall we perhaps go to the lighted street? It is safer."

Major Brane permitted himself to be escorted toward the lighted sidewalk.

"Should we not investigate?" he asked. "I heard the sound of a body falling into the street."

His companion shrugged his shoulders.

"*Carramba*, it is no concern of ours! We are well out of the affair. Let the police attend to it."

Major Brane studied the man at his side. In the light which came from the main thoroughfare of the border city he could see each feature distinctly. The face was thin, nervous, alert. The eyes shone as ripe olives moistened in garlic oil.

The Mexican was aware of his scrutiny, rather seemed to enjoy it. When Major Brane shifted his eyes, the Mexican extended his hand.

"*Señor*, it is perhaps fitting that we should meet. These civil police are dogs, and they are stupid. It may well be they will make you more trouble, and you will need me as a witness. I am, therefore, the Señor Alvaro de Gomez, of the Mexican secret service. And you—"

"Major Copely Brane, of San Francisco."

The lips of the Mexican parted to reveal gleaming teeth.

"*Señor*, it is a pleasure!"

A lean brown hand shot out of the darkness, gripped the hand of Major Brane.

“You are at Agua Caliente, *señor*?” asked the Mexican.

The major bowed.

“It will be a pleasure to escort you there in my car. But first we will have a little cordial, a little glass of rare liqueur to celebrate our meeting. No?”

Brane nodded his assent.

CHAPTER III. IN THE BLACK.

They walked to the lighted thoroughfare, and turned to the right, crossed the street and went to the left down a little side street.

"It is more private here, and the cordials are better," explained Alvaro de Gomez; and the American made no protest.

The place was one of those unostentatious places where Mexicans cater to Mexicans. The commercial tourist places, taxed high licenses, vie with each other for the transient business by glaring lights, blaring music, open fronts. The places frequented by the natives are harder to find.

Once inside, however, there is no want of life and activity. The place selected by Señor Gomez was typical. A 'dobe front, a long passage, and then a back room where there was the glitter of light, the liquid ripple of Spanish conversation. There were *señores*, *señoras* and *señoritas*. They mingled together with that utter freedom from restraint which is occasionally found in such places where each one knows every one else.

Gomez himself held the chair for Major Brane. His manner was courtesy carried almost to the point of deference. And the attitude of those in the place toward Gomez was equally deferential.

Gomez snapped his fingers. A waiter came on the run.

"Liqueurs," said Señor Gomez, "some of the old stock. Tell the Señora Gonzales that it is I who ask."

The waiter bowed, withdrew.

Gomez leaned forward.

"You are here on business, *señor*?"

Major Brane studied the man over the flame of his match as he lit a cigarette.

"Yes," he said.

The Mexican's eyes lit with a smile.

"I have always prided myself upon being able to determine a man's occupation from his appearance. Yet in your case I cannot determine what your business is."

Major Brane shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Perhaps I have been indiscreet," said Gomez. "You know, we Mexicans are impulsive. I have taken a liking to you, *señor*, and I have told you frankly. I am Señor Alvaro de Gomez, of the Mexican secret service—and I am here on business."

Gomez turned to stare at the waiter as the cordials came to the table.

"You told the *señora* I was here, José?"

The waiter was thick-skinned, stolid-eyed, and his answer was not what the question called for.

"It is arranged, *señor*," he said.

Gomez scowled, flashed an apprehensive glance toward Major Brane; but that individual seemed not to have heard. The frown gradually left the Mexican's forehead.

"Go!" he spat at the servant, and the man shuffled from sight.

Gradually, the crowd began to thin, and another crowd filtered in to take its place. An enormously fat Mexican woman appeared from the kitchen. She waddled on slow legs from one table to the other.

Her walk was labored. She teetered from side to side, balancing her huge bulk. Her face never changed expression by so much as a quivering muscle.

At each table she made a comment or two in a loud voice, and then bent to whisper.

And she never looked toward the table where Señor Gomez sat with his new-found friend.

Major Brane noticed these things as he sipped his cordial. But he was placidly content. Action was starting, and that meant that he was on the right trail.

“*Diablo!*” exclaimed Gomez. “But you have attracted the most beautiful *señorita* in all the southland! Do not look now, I beg of you. But in a moment turn to the right. Look at the beautiful girl at the second table!”

“Now—now is the time you may look. There to your right, *señor*—*Carramba*, she has turned!”

Just as Major Brane shifted his glance, the girl swung her head back with a swiftness of motion which showed she had anticipated the major’s glance.

And she was laughing.

The skin was a beautiful olive, the eyes large, luminous, black and twinkling. The crimson lips were held deliberately half parted, and the teeth, the tip of a red tongue, showed in a smile of frank amusement and appraisal.

For a moment only the girl held his eyes, then dropped her gaze in a gesture of mock modesty. Her pose, her every line, was one of alluring invitation.

Major Brane sipped his cordial.

“You would like to meet her, *señor*?”

“No!”

The word came as the crack of a lash, and Gomez lost the fatuous smile which had been upon his face. There was a flush of anger, which he controlled almost instantly. The mobile lips clamped firmly together, then broke into another smile.

“Ah, yes, you are on business. And with your race there is nothing that interferes with business. Is that true?”

Brane nodded curtly.

Alvaro de Gomez would have to use other bait if he wished to trap Major Brane—not that Major Brane was at all averse to being trapped; but he did not wish to appear too easy.

The Mexican settled back in his chair. His eyes clouded in thought. He beckoned to the waiter.

“José, ask the *señora* if she does not have something else. Tell her my companion would like to sample something else.”

José did not return. The diners toyed with food, sipped or gulped drinks as they chose. There was an atmosphere of suspension about the place.

Major Brane sighed, pushed back his chair.

“I am afraid—”

He did not finish. A door at the back opened. Two men appeared, masked, powerful men who wore leather chaps, leather jerkins, wide sombreros. The masks were black, and holes had been cut for vision. Through those holes diamond-hard eyes glittered in the lamplight, along the barrels of forty-fives.

One of the men spoke English with the accent of a Texan.

“Stick ’em up, folks!”

The other rattled off a similar command in the Mexican tongue.

Gomez started to his feet, saw the barrel of one of the forty-fives shift toward him, and his hands came up to his shoulders, hesitated, and then shot up high as one of the men grated an oath at him.

Major Brane’s hands were held high and rigid.

“We wants some money an’ we-all’d like pow’ful well to have a little cutie for company,” drawled one of the masked men, and his eyes were upon the *señorita* who had evidenced such an interest in Major Brane.

The girl cowered and screamed, settling back in her chair as though to cringe against its back for protection.

“No, no!” she screamed.

The Mexican bandit laughed, took two steps toward her, and the lights went out.

With the sudden blackness of the room, guns began to talk, the spitting fire of deadly death stabbed the darkness with orange-red spurts of flame. The guns roared in a salvo of sound, and then were silent.

A close observer would have noticed that three guns were fired at the very first, and that all three of the spitting streaks of flame seemed pointed in but one direction. And that direction was toward the chair occupied by Major Brane.

And, had the observer kept his head, which is most difficult under such circumstances, he would have noticed that after that first burst of fire, and just before the second round, there was a spiteful crack as a fourth gun answered, once.

Then came the roar of the second volley, and a moment of comparative silence. It was broken by the scream of a woman, the sound of a struggle, a coarse laugh.

There was the sound of a table overturning. A man gave a hoarse cry, a cry which abruptly terminated in a gurgle. There was the sound of a blow, and something thudded to the floor.

Alvaro de Gomez was swearing in a low-pitched monotone. There was no more firing. After a minute, the lights went on again.

Tables were tipped, chairs toppled, food spilled on the floor. A man was nursing a head which he claimed loudly and at frequent intervals was “broken.” The fat proprietress was screaming curses in a shrill voice which sounded as mechanical as the words of a phonograph record.

Gomez glanced toward the place where the beautiful *señorita* had been sitting. Her chair was vacant. The table where she had been resting her beautiful elbow was overturned.

Then Señor Gomez turned his dark eyes to the chair which had been occupied by Major Copely Brane of San Francisco.

The back of that chair had a round hole in it, where a steel-jacketed bullet had plowed its way. One of the rungs was reduced to a twisted mass of splinters, mute testimony of the course of another forty-five bullet. There was another hole in the leather seat of the chair, a dark-rimmed hole which had also been made by a forty-five.

There was no sign of Major Brane.

Gomez grasped a napkin from the table and wrapped it tightly around his left forearm. There was a bleeding groove cut in the flesh of that forearm, from that fourth weapon. Gomez cursed long and bitterly, yet in his eyes there was a trace of awe, a respect which had not been there before.

CHAPTER IV. ROULETTE.

With Mexicans who know the border, the resort of Agua Caliente is a matter of great pride. Here everything is perfectly decorous. A fortune has been spent to make the resort luxurious. There are courts where the moonlight shines softly from a sky that is clear and dry. There is an open-air patio where diners may have expensive foods, exquisitely cooked, served in the caressing sunlight of old Mexico. There is a long bar where thirsts may be quenched in an orderly fashion. And there is a gambling casino which caters to big losers.

At one of these tables where a roulette wheel spins, where an ivory ball clicks, jumps, clicks, jumps, and finally comes to rest in one of the metal-ribbed pockets, only gold is accepted in play. It was at this table that Major Copely Brane wagered a few bets, using ten-dollar gold pieces as though they had been but counters, yet playing conservatively.

The man at the wheel watched him with wary eyes, for it is players like Brane who present the greatest menace to a gambling house, men who push their good fortune but not their bad.

Several others were at the table, men garbed in conventional evening dress. Beautiful women with gleaming arms and white shoulders.

Major Brane placed a ten-dollar gold piece upon the thirty.

There was a rustle of motion. A smooth hand slid over the major's. There was the breath of perfume, the slight touch on his cheek of a tendril of hair, and a woman brushed against him as she straightened from placing a five-dollar gold piece, also on the thirty.

She was a beautiful woman, judged by any standards, and she was one who knew her way about sufficiently to dispense with formal conventions without losing her poise.

"Pardon," she said, and smiled into Major Brane's eyes, "the number looked lucky to me, also."

Major Brane smiled conventionally.

The wheel stopped, the ball in the double O.

Major Brane placed two ten-dollar pieces on the three, and the woman once more brushed against him as she placed a five-dollar bet on the three.

Unostentatiously, a floor man moved forward. For this is a recognized game of women adventuresses the world over. They will attach themselves to gentlemen who seem to have means at a roulette table, and will manage to share in his winnings by the simple expedient of helping themselves, either to more than their share, if they are also on the number, or, if they are not, by merely pretending they thought they were.

But upon this occasion there was no necessity for the intervention of the floor man. The woman's dark, smiling eyes sought those of Major Brane.

"Thanks for the hunch," she said, and flashed a smile into his face.

The croupier picked up the ball. The floor man moved away. Over the gambling tables at Agua Caliente each woman is allowed the privilege of determining her own standards of convention, which is as it should be. And if the beautiful woman with the gleaming shoulders and the dark eyes chose to talk with the slender man whose eyes were as polished steel, the management felt that it was unconcerned in the matter. Let the guests enjoy themselves as they wished.

The wheel clicked again, and once more Major Brane and the woman won. They smiled at each other. As the woman bent forward to pick up her winnings, her low gown slipped sufficiently so that a little more was shown than the dressmaker had intended.

She laughed frankly as she adjusted the garment.

“Evening gowns weren’t intended for long reaches,” she said.

The floor man did not even turn.

That, also, was purely the concern of the beautiful woman.

Major Brane returned her smile.

“We seem to have a winning streak,” he said, and deliberately played the thirteen, his eyes on those of the woman.

She started to follow his lead, then cringed back.

“The thirteen!” she said.

Major Brane smiled once more, placed a second gold piece upon the thirteen.

“Nothing venture, nothing have,” he said.

She shook her head and placed her bet on the seven.

The ball stopped in the thirteen.

The croupier half turned, raised a hand. Instantly another man came to take the wheel. For such is the policy of the management. Whenever a player commences to win at roulette, the management rushes in another croupier to relieve the one at the wheel. And for some strange reason which has never been explained, and which can probably never be explained, such a procedure usually stops the winning streak of the player.

A few minutes later Major Brane scooped up his gold pieces, walked to a cashier’s desk and changed them into currency. Then he strolled from the table.

The woman looked after him, caught his eye. The major returned the gesture with merely a bow of conventional good-night.

The woman sighed, continued to play the wheel, but there was an air of preoccupation about her as she played.

The floor man moved quietly to the side of Major Brane.

“If the *señor* left the table because of the *señorita*—?” The floor man paused.

Major Brane turned to look in his eyes.

“She is, perhaps, accustomed to make friends at the table?”

The face of the floor man became rigid.

“Not at all. The woman is Miss Edith Russell, from San Diego. She comes here often. With one exception you are the only one she has ever become friendly with over the tables. Shall I ask her to move to another table?”

“No, it will not be necessary,” said Major Brane. “You say she is staying here?”

“Certainly. She has an expensive suite, numbers three forty-nine and fifty.”

The major smiled affably.

CHAPTER V. A DANGEROUS SEARCH.

Brane sauntered to the moonlit court, then lost his appearance of leisurely indolence. He went into action as though he was matching his speed against precious seconds.

He found the rooms bearing the numbers three forty-nine and fifty, and knocked. There was no answer.

He selected a slender ring of keys from his pocket, fitted one to the door. It failed to work. He fitted a second. The bolt clicked as the lock mechanism turned, and Major Brane stepped into the room and turned on the lights.

He was playing in a game of life and death, and could take no chances. The woman hardly seemed to fit in with Señor Gomez, but her speaking to him might be part of the same plan.

He moved swiftly.

There were intimate articles of feminine attire upon the bed. The closet showed a rack of expensive gowns. The major paid these things no attention.

There was a wardrobe trunk, and it was locked. Brane concentrated his energies upon it. He worked the lock with the third key, found that the trunk was almost empty. There was a locked drawer in the top, but that was also empty.

Then, because he was an old hand at the game, he started inching around the edges of the carpeted floor. He had traversed three sides of the room without result when he felt something crinkle under his foot.

He stooped to the carpet, found that it had been worked loose. He pressed his fingers through the opening between carpet and wall, felt the edges of an envelope, and heard a lilting laugh behind him.

“Did you want it *that* much?” asked a feminine voice, and Major Brane turned, to stare into the laughing eyes of the woman of the gambling table. And those eyes were divided by a small round hole which marked the business end of a blued-steel automatic.

She was holding the weapon with a steady hand, holding it so that Major Brane was looking directly into the muzzle, and that muzzle was just below and between her eyes.

Major Brane straightened.

“You,” he said, “must have entered through the other room and tiptoed in through the bathroom.”

She smiled sweetly at him.

“I did,” she said. “You should have taken the precaution of putting a blanket along the floor near the bottom of the door. It’s most effective when it comes to shutting out light. You see, when I came along the corridor and saw the ribbon of light along the bottom of the door, I knew some one was in this room.”

Major Brane bowed.

“It is a good point. I shall remember it.”

She was bubbling with laughter, this beautiful young woman, but she continued to hold the automatic where it was centered upon Major Brane.

“I did you the honor of taking such precautions when I burgled your room,” she said.

"My room?" asked the major, and then he smiled as the full significance of her remark dawned upon him.

"Yes," she said. "I left the gambling room right after you did and went at once to your room. I couldn't find what I wanted, but I found enough to verify my suspicions. Then it occurred to me that you had been just a little *too* casual when you strolled out. So I came here at once."

The man straightened and walked to a window. The girl followed him with the muzzle of the automatic.

"Of course," she warned, "you wouldn't want to make any sudden moves."

He nodded. "May I ask the reason for your interest in me?"

"You're after the treaty."

Major Brane's silence was expressive.

"And *I'm* after it," she added.

"Why?" asked Major Brane.

"I want to know what's in it."

"Do you want to keep it?"

"Oh, no! I want its terms."

Brane squinted his eyes.

"The government of the United States might be interested in such a treaty," he said, speaking cautiously.

Her face was as a mask.

"And there is one other government," speculated Major Brane, "which would be interested to know just what concessions Japan was to get in the event it should come to the assistance of Chiang Kai-shek."

Her face remained utterly rigid in its expressionless immobility.

Major Brane nodded. "You won't need the gun, Miss Russell."

"I have your word?"

He nodded.

She lowered the weapon, raised the long skirt of her evening gown.

"Don't look," she said. "No fair."

And she placed the gun in a cunningly concealed holster, adjusted her skirt, smiled.

"Has it occurred to you," asked the man guardedly, "that some chain of newspapers might like to publish the contents of this treaty?"

She laughed.

"How delightfully simple you are! Of course it has, you dear man! And I am to see that if the terms of the treaty are satisfactory to those whom I represent, it remains secret and is not published or stolen. If, on the other hand, there are certain things within that treaty that my principals would not like, I am to help in the loss of the treaty and its being published. What I do, you see, depends on the terms of the document itself."

Major Brane nodded.

"I see," he said, noncommittally.

Evidently this woman had no inkling that the treaty which was to be stolen might be a forgery. And Brane had respect enough for her ability to avoid any comment which might give her such a thought.

"Could we pool information?" she asked.

Major Brane watched the smoke which eddied from his cigarette.

“We might swap bits of gossip.” He told her what he had learned about Sam Hargrave’s whereabouts.

“All right,” she said, “I’ll match that, although I knew it already. When the treaty is stolen, it is to be taken from the bearer by one Señor Alvaro de Gomez, who is supposed to be in the employ of the Mexican government. He’s going to sell it to Hargrave for a lot of money.”

Brane’s smile lifted the corners of his mouth.

“Thanks. It may interest you to know that Señor Gomez tried to work a run-around on me this evening by which I was to be killed in rescuing a dance-hall girl from one who desired to escort her.”

She grinned gleefully.

“Oh, I knew all about that. The man who took the girl was really her man. He’s a Texan renegade, and the girl works for him. She was planted as bait. Then, when you were killed, it would have been in connection with a hold-up, caused by another gringo going native.”

She crossed her legs, fluffed her dress out, smiled cheerfully at him.

“Perhaps, then,” ventured Major Brane, “you know that in the *mêlée*, when I was supposed to sit still and be punctured, I jerked to one side, waited until Señor Gomez joined in the shooting, and took a pot shot at him which I think winged him. Then I went through a window, and came here. Did you know that?”

She shook her head.

“And that,” she said, “is interesting. I think, my friend, that when you gave me that piece of information, you went a little too far, and gave me something that I can use to checkmate you with.”

Major Brane’s eyes were unwavering.

“Perhaps,” he said.

She leaned forward, toward him, impulsively.

“Listen. I’m going to be frank. I like you—very much. I’ve heard of Major Brane, the free-lance diplomat, for years. I hoped some day we could work together. Won’t you pool information with me, and work together with me? Please!”

He shook his head.

“Then,” she said, “you’ll probably be killed. You know the sort of game we’re playing. Oh, how I’d hate to think I had to be the one to betray you to your death!”

The diplomat shrugged his shoulders.

“Fortunes of war,” he muttered.

Her eyes were blinking rapidly; a crystal-clear tear-drop appeared in the corner; she fumbled vainly for a handkerchief.

Major Brane got to his feet.

“Good night, Miss Russell.”

She stood in the door, watching him go. The tears were on her cheeks now.

“You’ll—probably—find my—hanky—in your room—I left the d-damn’ thing—somewhere.”

Then she banged the door.

CHAPTER VI. A NIGHT JOURNEY.

Major Brane went to his room. The girl had been there, just as she had said. There was a faint odor of perfume, an intimate, intriguing perfume. Major Brane traced the odor to a bit of lace and linen left on a table near the place where he had left his brief case.

That brief case had been purchased in San Diego and contained nothing but an empty notebook and some neckties.

He grinned, switched out his lights, went to the window, raised the curtain. The semi-tropical moonlight flooded the barren lands, half desert, showed the rolling hills to the north across the line, the dark gash of cañons, the groove that would be the river bed.

He looked down at the ground, saw that it was not inconveniently far away. In the dark he slipped on a hat, took a stick and his room key, and dropped to the ground.

To cross the United States border just above Tijuana at night is difficult. But Brane took great care. Dawn was breaking when the rental car he had managed to find north of the border, deposited him at the Grant Hotel in San Diego. He secured a room, left a call for nine o'clock, and went to bed.

When the call aroused him, he bathed, went to breakfast, had a shave, purchased some more clothing, and took a cab to the Cortez.

This time, however, he did not exhibit himself with any degree of prominence. He managed to keep well out of sight, and his new clothes made him inconspicuous, because they had been chosen for just such an effect.

It was in the first part of the afternoon that Sam Hargrave came in. He took a seat behind his favorite potted palm, inspected the entire lobby, then raised his finger.

A bell boy came to him instantly, and there was stealth in the bell boy's manner. He whispered a while, then departed.

Sam Hargrave arose, stretched, yawned, walked out of the hotel, down the sun-swept hill, strolling leisurely, as befits a man who has not a care in the world.

Brane watched him until he boarded a passing cab. Then the major sprinted for a cab, yelled "Depot!" to the driver, told him to rush, and settled back in the cushions.

Two blocks, and they had overtaken the cab in which Sam Hargrave was riding. Major Brane tapped on the glass.

"I've changed my mind. Follow that cab."

The driver nodded. The cab ahead was stalled at a corner, awaiting a traffic signal. When the light changed, both cabs moved ahead. Sam Hargrave's cab moved without any attempt at shaking off pursuit. Hargrave himself never so much as glanced behind. They went directly to the San Diego Hotel.

The reporter went to the room clerk, secured a key, walked to the elevators and was whisked up out of sight. Major Brane broke into a run, rushed to the desk.

"The man who just came in!" he said, breathlessly. "He scraped the fender on my car when he parked his. What's his name. Ring him. Get him down here!"

The room clerk glanced at Brane with uncordial eyes.

"I think you're mistaken. Hartley Stillman came in a taxicab. He always does."

Major Brane let his eyes flicker, as though in doubt.

“His room?”

“No. 632.”

“Thanks. Where are the house phones— Oh, never mind. I’ll go talk with the witnesses again. Maybe I got the wrong man.”

He walked back to the street, waited an hour until Hargrave came out again. Then he entered, walked boldly to the elevators, found Hargrave’s room, and picked the lock with ease.

He entered, found a brief case stacked with papers, a portable typewriter, carbon copies of a telegram, also a stack of mail.

He picked up a telegram, and heard steps in the hall, the rasp of a key against the door, the voice of Señor Alvaro de Gomez.

“But I tell you, *señor*, that—”

Major Brane stepped into the closet, closed the door. The door of the room swung open, closed. The bolt rasped into place.

“Getting careless, or else the chambermaid is,” muttered a guttural voice.

Alvaro de Gomez was speaking rapidly.

“It is all arranged. The parties wait in Ensenada. As soon as the coast is clear they will act. In the meantime this Major Brane is to be eliminated. Bah! He shot me, the swine! I shall have revenge. He will be removed from the scene of operations. No?”

The rumbling voice again.

“Now listen here, Gomez, and get this straight. My hunch ain’t going to be mixed with a lot of crooked work. You go to Ensenada and lay all the lines so the paper will get stolen. Let the Chink raise a squawk, and you’ll be the goat, see?”

“Then to-morrow morning at eleven o’clock I’ll meet you at the top of the grade south of Tijuana. You can deliver the treaty to me there. I’ll have witnesses and deliver you the money. Then my papers ain’t mixed up with any stealing, or any murders. If you steal the treaty and then sell it to us *after* it’s been stolen, that’s one thing. If we get mixed up in the stealing, that’s another.

“And if you’re going to pull any murders, kidnappings, mayhem, or high treason, you do it before eleven o’clock to-morrow morning. Get me?”

There was a shuffling of feet.

“But, Señor Hargrave, I—”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear all your blah-blah. Here’s the sum we agreed on. Sign that receipt. All right. Get out of here, and don’t stick around any more. You’ve got the situation in hand. To-morrow at eleven, at the top of the grade.”

The sigh which Gomez gave could be heard through the closed door of the closet.

“To-morrow, *before* eleven, I shall settle personal matters of my own.”

The door closed again, but was not locked, from which Major Brane deduced that Hargrave had gone only as far as the elevator with his guest.

He glided from the closet, tried to manipulate the door into the adjoining room, was unable to do so. Took a chance, and slipped from the door of the room, went toward the stairs at the end of the corridor.

Hargrave was on his way back from the elevator as Major Brane rounded the corner of the corridor leading toward the stairs. For the swift flicker of an eyelash Hargrave could have seen that flitting figure.

Major Brane could not be certain—and he was painfully aware of the stakes for which he played. Failure meant death.

The major's next move would have greatly puzzled a spy, had one been on his trail. He went directly to the district in San Diego where scattered Chinese conduct laundries, and negotiated for the purchase of a laundry.

The surprised Chinaman who ran the place managed to retain sufficient presence of mind to ask a price that was about twice its real value. Brane immediately offered to pay a hundred dollars in cash for an option.

The Chinaman, wily, shrewd, was quite willing to take the hundred dollars, but unwilling to sign a document which had not first been interpreted to him by his attorney.

Major Brane then suggested that a Chinese interpreter should be called in to prepare the option, and that it be written in Chinese. And the laundryman, confused, but careful, consented to that.

The interpreter took unto himself great importance. He was about to prepare an agreement with this man, a *back gwice loe*, which would have for its object the protection of his countryman. He was not entirely certain as to just what was meant by an option, but he was entirely certain of the value of a hundred dollars cash money.

He wrote upon paper which was furnished by Major Brane, using a camel's-hair brush and jet-black ink, writing beautiful characters in profusion.

When the interpreter had finished protecting the rights of his countryman, Major Brane explained the various matters upon which *he* desired protection. The Chinese are a fair-minded race, shrewd as to bargains, scrupulous as to honesty, and the interpreter, having heard his client assent to the various terms suggested by Major Brane, laboriously inserted them in the document.

When he had finished, the paper was an imposing array of Chinese characters, stretching over a dozen parchment-like sheets of paper. Then Major Brane produced some ribbon and a stick of sealing wax.

Minus a hundred dollars, he left the place, leaving behind two very puzzled but enriched Chinese. Then he purchased a small brief case, put the paper within it, and took a plane for Agua Caliente. Edith Russell was on the landing field when he arrived.

"Welcome back to Mexico!" she said. "I was wondering what in the world had become of you."

"Well, now that you've found me, you'd better come back to the hotel with me."

She climbed in the waiting cab with the major, looked at him thoughtfully once or twice as she journeyed toward the resort hotel. Her eyes were filmed with thought, and Brane detected an expression which might have been pity.

At the hotel, Major Brane stepped from the car, turned to assist the woman to the ground. She made an exclamation of impatience, turned to the driver.

"Did you see anything of my purse?" she asked in Mexican-Spanish.

The driver protested at great length that he had seen no purse.

"Very well, I must have left it at the aviation field. I'll run there to look for it." Edith Russell slammed the door of the taxicab, snapped crisp instructions to the driver.

Copely Brane entered the hotel smiling. He noticed that the clerk at the desk gave him a single glance, and then reached for the telephone. Major Brane nodded a greeting and went

down the corridor toward his room.

But he did not enter his room. Instead, he knocked upon the door of the adjoining room. When he heard a rustle of motion from within, he speedily slipped around the corner of the corridor. After a few minutes he returned, tapped gently on the door of the adjoining room on the other side of his own.

There was no answer, no sound of motion. He took his skeleton keys from his pocket, opened the door. The room was untenanted. The bed was freshly made. He locked the door from the inside, sat down in a chair and waited.

Nor had he long to wait. Not much more than the time required for a fast machine to come from Tijuana to the resort.

There sounded the tramp of feet, the babble of voices, and then an imperative knock upon the door of the room Major Brane was supposed to be occupying.

There was a period of silence, another knock, a rasping order, and the door was crashed open as men poured into the room.

Major Brane took a chair, climbed upon it, and listened at the transom. From this point of vantage he could hear the conversation, crisp, and to the point.

“He has tricked us. But he is somewhere in the hotel. You will await him in this room. When he comes, arrest him. You will take him to Ensenada, and *en route* he will try to escape, my braves. You know what that means. You will do your duty. The law says that a prisoner who seeks to escape, despite efforts to halt him, may be shot.

“See that your arms are loaded, and that your aim is true. That is all, *amigos*.”

The door slammed shut, and the feet of a departing officer sounded in the corridor. The room remained occupied by the underlings who were trained to follow orders, no matter how strict those orders might be.

Major Brane returned to his chair, smoked and thought for half an hour. At the end of that time he slipped out into the corridor. There was but one place in the hotel where he felt he could be free from interruption, and he went to that place swiftly and silently.

It was the room registered in the name of Edith Russell, and Major Brane, picking the lock and bolting the door behind him, stretched himself in the depths of a chair, found a magazine, and gave himself up to an afternoon of reading and dozing.

When it had become quite dark he slipped from the hotel through a back entrance, and made his way to the sage-covered hills to the south. By the time the moon arose, he was well away from the hotel.

He used his coat for a pillow, cut sage stems with his pocket knife for a mattress, and managed to sleep fairly well until the chill of morning. Then he arose and resumed his walk.

CHAPTER VII. LONELY HIGHWAY.

Some twenty miles south of Tijuana there is a place where the road to Ensenada has been washed out and filled. Machines taking this rough section of road travel very slowly. Even hardened drivers reduce their speed here to a crawl.

Alvaro de Gomez was driving back to Agua Caliente, after making a hurried trip to Ensenada, seventy miles farther down into Lower California. He was in a hurry, yet he applied the roadster's brakes as the twisted stretch of rough road showed before his front wheels. So engrossed was he upon following the road, getting the best way through the series of bumps and ditched ruts, that he failed to notice the man who suddenly appeared from behind a clump of sagebrush until that man had almost reached the side of his machine.

Then Señor Gomez flung his angry dark eyes in a quick look of irritation.

The man by the roadside extended a hand and swung easily to the running-board. Señor Gomez noticed that the man seemed to be unarmed. In his right hand he carried a small and very new brief case.

"You!" exclaimed Alvaro de Gomez, staring at Major Brane with wide eyes.

Brane nodded. "I took a long walk from the hotel and became lost. Then I saw the automobile road and made my way down to it."

Gomez thought rapidly.

"My friend, it is a pleasure," he said, mechanically; then, with growing cordiality, "I will be only too pleased to see that you are returned to the hotel. *Diablo* you have a knack of getting into trouble, Major Brane! When I last saw you there were bullets flying. And, believe it or not, those bullets were aimed at me.

"But they missed, the assassins! I returned their fire, and terror gripped their craven hearts. They fled, and then I found that you, too, had fled. I intended to come and see you, *señor*, but one of the bullets found its mark in my arm. See, you can observe the bandage. But wait and I will show you the place itself."

And Gomez stopped the car, took his right hand from the wheel, half turned.

"See, it is here—"

And the right hand darted under the concealment of the coat, executed a swift motion, and whipped out a revolver.

Major Brane's left hand gripped the wrist which was emerging from the coat. His own right hand was in his coat pocket.

"I've been covering you ever since you started to talk," he said. "Hope I don't have to drill you."

And the Mexican, looking into those steel eyes, suddenly ceased to struggle, and let Copely Brane take the revolver from him.

His dark face flushed with rage, but he was careful to make no sudden moves with his hands. His eyes were glittering, his lips writhing.

"Bah!" he said. "You are in Mexico. Try to escape. See what happens to you then. You can never cross the border, my smart Americano!"

Brane wasted no time in conversation.

“Get over and let me at the wheel,” he said, “and don’t try any funny business!”

The man paused, felt the jab of metal in his ribs, and grudgingly complied. Major Brane took the wheel, turned the roadster from the road, and started it up the side of the wash, following a roadway so dim that there seemed hardly a trail to follow.

Gomez sat rigid, his eyes snapping.

The major pushed the roadster up the steep grade until a shoulder of the mountain hid the highway below. Then he brought the car to a stop, flipped open one of the doors.

“Get out,” he ordered.

Gomez got out with the silent rapidity of a trout shooting into the shelter of an overhanging rock. His right hand flipped to the back of his coat. The sunlight glittered on steel.

Major Brane, following him, dodged the first thrust of the knife by throwing himself back. Then he was out and on the ground, staggering to regain his balance. Gomez jumped upon him like a cat, striking and thrusting with the steel blade.

Brane managed to get a grip on the wrist, pushed the knife to one side. Gomez broke loose, flung down his shoulder, made a ripping thrust that Major Brane dodged by pulling his stomach back out of the way.

There was the flash of streaked motion, the impact of a fist, and Gomez staggered backward.

Brane flung forward, managed to wrest away the knife, whipped up a left in a short, vicious uppercut and dragged the man back toward the car. He searched the side pockets, found an old tire repair kit, some rusty tools, a bit of rope. He tied Gomez hand and foot with the rope.

“Guess I won’t have to insert a gag. You’ll manage to get loose after a while . . . What did you do with Edith Russell? She went down to Ensenada before you did, but she hasn’t come back.”

Señor Gomez shrugged his bound shoulders.

“I was forced to treat her as an adversary. She came to Ensenada by plane, and I sensed her mission. I left her bound and gagged in her room. It will be hours before she is released.”

Major Brane nodded, turned his attention once more to the car. Under the seat he found a massive envelope, heavily sealed. Breaking it open, he found within a long document in Chinese, covered with stamped impressions, bound with silk and seals. Beyond question that was the forged treaty he was looking for. He slipped it into his brief case.

The last sound he heard as he finished backing the roadster was the Mexican’s mocking laugh.

“Try getting out of Mexico, Major Brane! You will stand with your back to a ’dobe wall yet, unless the buzzards eat your eyes out in the sage. To-morrow at this time you will be carrion. You are a devil, and you will receive the punishment of the devil—”

There was more, but the roar of the motor drowned it out.

A vast surge of relief filling his soul, the American drove for a few miles toward the south. Then he stopped the car, took the treaty pact and buried it deep in a sandy excavation, marking well the place. That forged treaty might come in handy again some time.

Then he returned to his car and journeyed on south toward Ensenada to find Edith Russell. He knew that the road north between him and the border was closed. The Mexican officials would see to that in their alarm over the theft of the treaty. There was a warrant for his arrest

out, and Sam Hargrave waited at the top of the grade out from Tijuana, doubtless scrutinizing each automobile as it toiled up the steep slope from the ocean. He would recognize Gomez's car, of course, and pursue if it did not stop.

Major Brane made rapid time. The roadster fairly leaped over the road. The blockhouse guard at the midway point offered a slight obstacle, but nothing more serious than could be squared with a ten-dollar bill.

He pushed the roadster up the winding grades where the road left the ocean and zigzagged over the mountains. The blue of the bay of Todos Santos loomed before him, and Major Brane stepped on the gas, literally leaping the roadster forward and down the long slant of road until he was within sight of Ensenada.

Down to the south of the town, along the smooth sweep of the beach, the new million-dollar hotel and casino sent its towers and minarets up into the glittering sunlight.

Major Brane sent the roadster down along the beach drive at high speed, roared up to the turntable in the rear of the casino, and slammed on the brakes.

He jumped from the car, carrying his brief case, and entered the long corridor of the resort. A deferential clerk bowed him a welcome.

"I'm looking for a young lady who came here by plane yesterday. She is slender, has very dark eyes and dark-brown hair. She may have registered under the name of Russell or under some other name."

The clerk interrupted, smiling, nodding.

"But yes, *señor*. She is here herself, still in her room. The name upon the register is Señora Alvaro de Gomez. Her husband left but an hour or two ago to attend to some business in Tijuana. He will be back."

Brane stifled any expression of surprise which he might have shown.

"Will you ring the room of Señora Gomez?" he asked.

The clerk bowed, smiled, motioned toward a Mexican girl who was even then plugging in on the telephone.

Major Brane registered, in his own name. The clerk assigned him a room.

"You have some Chinese here?" he inquired.

"Indeed yes; a most unfortunate case. They have been robbed. It is of some treaty which meant much to them. They appealed to Señor Alvaro de Gomez, who, they say, is connected with the secret service of our government. If it has really been taken, the officials will close the roads to the border and the boats to the mainland. Criminals cannot escape from Lower California."

Major Brane nodded. The leisurely Mexican hospitality of the place made itself manifest in the chatter of the clerk, was made manifest again in the smiling courtesy of the bell boy who came forward to relieve him of the brief case.

"The room number of Señor Alvaro de Gomez is—"

"Is 573, and you will be called immediately upon his arrival."

Major Brane bowed his thanks, was escorted to his room. He tipped the bell boy, closed the door, waited but a scant thirty seconds, and then started a search for room 573.

The search was not long. The room was on the lower corridor, in a wing which fronted the sea, the patio, and the sun-glittering sand. Major Brane had occasion once more to use his assortment of skeleton keys, and then the door swung back.

CHAPTER VIII. A LAST EFFORT.

Edith Russell was lying upon the bed, trussed like a fowl. Her wrists and ankles were each tied to a corner of the bed, and a gag was in her mouth. The sheets had been ripped to make the bonds, and the tying was a most workmanlike job.

Major Brane took out his knife, started ripping away the bonds.

The girl's eyes were moist. Tears had coursed down her cheeks and dried upon the bed linen. The tears started once more as she beheld Major Brane bending over her. Then the gag came out, the last of the bonds was parted, and the girl sat up.

"Bah!" she spat, running out her tongue, opening and closing her mouth.

"Was it as bad as that?" asked Major Brane, and smiled.

"It was worse," she said. "How come you're here? They'll kill you. There were orders out to see that you were killed yesterday."

Major Brane nodded his head.

"The treaty?" he asked.

"The treaty's gone. You'll have a chance to read it in the papers about day after to-morrow—if that'll do you any good."

"Suppose," suggested Major Brane, "you tell me what happened."

She smoothed out her dress, shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing much to it. I'm an aviatrix, and I had a plane cached for last-minute stuff. You saw me yesterday just as I was taking off for this place."

He nodded.

"Well," she went on bitterly, "I knew that Lai Chuan Hung was here at the hotel with the paper. He was to give it to Alvaro de Gomez—though why he should do that is beyond me. Gomez is in with your friend the newspaper reporter.

"My government instructed me to secure the treaty. It's a draft, you know, not binding until certain routine formalities have been done. If the terms were according to certain rumors, my government wanted the treaty suppressed. If the terms were satisfactory I was to see that the document was returned to the Japanese government with a statement showing that the Chinese bearer had been guilty of treachery, and was about to sell the treaty draft to the press.

"Well, I knew that Gomez was to come here and get the treaty. So I figured I'd come on down ahead of him, register as Mrs. Alvaro de Gomez, get acquainted with the Chinaman, and see if I couldn't get the treaty before Gomez got here.

"Whether they were wise to me all along, or whether the Chinese fell for me and were being nice, is more than I know. But they acted as though I could have had a dozen treaties if I'd wanted them.

"Just as I had things O. K., who should show up but Gomez. And Lai Chuan Hung, of course, piped up and told Gomez that his wife was already at the hotel. So Gomez walked right in on me with the Chinese, let on that I really was his wife, and that I was supposed to meet him here. The Chinese threw a big supper for us and showed me every honor. I tried to get Gomez drunk, but he slipped a powder in my drinks after I'd gotten a little groggy myself.

"I woke up this morning to find him grinning down at me and showing me the treaty he had, telling me he was going to leave me here until after the treaty had been safely delivered.

And he tied and gagged me just like you see me.”

Brane nodded his sympathy. His forehead was creased in thought. “Your plane’s here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Mexico isn’t going to be healthy for either one of us.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“There’s a chance we can pull a fast one on this Hargrave. Maybe we can locate him after he crosses the line and before he’s delivered the treaty. Then we could take it away from him. You are armed?”

He nodded.

“Let’s go,” she said, and jumped to her feet, gathered her skirts about her, shook them out, glanced around the room at her wearing apparel, intimate garments strewn about, a pair of wrinkled pyjamas on the foot of the bed, stockings on the floor.

“Isn’t it a mess?” she said. “No time to straighten up or to pack. We’ll just go.”

They went out the back door of the hotel, got into the roadster Major Brane had commandeered, drove to the place where the girl had left her plane.

She fastened on a helmet, put on a leather coat, tossed him helmet and goggles.

“Let’s go,” she said.

He climbed into the forward cockpit. She climbed in the back one, manipulated levers and switches. The prop whirled. The engine coughed, sputtered, coughed again and took up a beating roar of power. They sat in their places while the motor tuned up and the temperature stepped up to a point where it was safe to cruise.

The girl signaled him to the effect they were going, and gunned the ship. It rolled faster and faster along the bumpy field. Suddenly she zoomed upward in a crow hop and a swift climb.

Major Brane watched the buildings of Ensenada cluster together in a little group, grow smaller, drift astern. The bay of Todos Santos showed as a great crescent of blue, basking in the sunlight. Faintest threads of white showed where the miniature surf lapped at the clay beach.

The plane circled twice, then headed straight over the mountains. The serpentine roadway twisted and turned in loops, looking like some white strand of rope flung over the darker surface of the mountains.

The plane gathered speed and altitude. In a surprisingly short time the border could be seen far ahead, groups of buildings that sprawled in the sunlight. Tijuana showed as a blotch, Agua Caliente as a white blob.

The plane throbbed and roared through the dustless air, gathering speed, eating up the miles. The girl turned it to the right, swinging more and more away from the road to San Diego, farther toward the mountains.

Brane turned, raised his eyebrows in a question. He did not understand why she was heading in that direction. She reassured him by a wave of her hand. Conversation was impossible in the open plane, the wind roaring past, the engine droning its song of power.

Agua Caliente kept shifting farther and farther to the left. When the international boundary was about below them, the girl suddenly shut off the power. The plane began to slant downward.

She nosed it forward, then banked, sideslipped the altitude out of the wings, straightened, gave the motor a little more gun, and headed for a level stretch of field.

Major Brane could see two cars drawn up here, could see people running about. One of the cars got into motion, circled around the field. The plane settled. The wheels struck the ground, sending up little jars through the motor.

The car which had circled came roaring alongside them. In the car was a driver, and next to the driver was Alvaro de Gomez, grinning evilly and holding a shotgun in his hands, the barrels pointed straight at the heart of Major Brane.

The major had his hands up by the time the plane came to a stop.

The girl shut off the motor, jumped up in the cockpit, and spat forth swift sentences in Spanish.

"I have done my part of the bargain. You do yours. Remember your promise. He is not to be hurt. He gives up the treaty and then he escapes."

Alvaro de Gomez smiled the more, his yellowed teeth shining like fangs of a hound.

"Yes, yes. He gives up the treaty. Major, you are a devil, and there is a saying in your country that the devil should have his due. Your due, my dear major, lies in the shells which are in this shotgun, ready to tear out your heart. But I may give you a chance if you keep your hands up and do not make any sudden moves."

He continued to hold the shotgun covering Major Brane, and the eyes of the man held the gleam of murder, the red tinge of blood lust.

A figure was running toward them from across the field. The driver of the car was getting out, ready to cross to the plane.

Major Brane turned toward the girl, his hands in the air.

"You double-crossed me, eh?" he asked.

She nodded defiantly, yet there was a suspicious catch in her voice as she spoke.

"Sure. I'm Hargrave's assistant. I helped Gomez at Ensenada. Then you caught him. He rolled down the hill, a passing motorist turned him loose, took him to a telephone. He telephoned me how to trap you."

Major Brane nodded.

The running figure came up, Hargrave, grinning, his breath coming in panting gasps.

"Well, major—you lose!" He clambered to the side of the cockpit. "Keep 'em up!" he said.

His hand went inside Major Brane's coat, groped around. He made a thorough search, taking the automatic also.

"Try the brief case," suggested the girl when the search had failed to reveal the treaty.

Hargrave felt down in the cockpit, found the brief case. He opened it, and a smile wreathed his countenance.

"Safe and sound," he said.

He opened the paper with its array of Chinese characters, its red seals.

"That," he said, still puffing from his run, "just about concludes the case. O. K., Gomez."

He got down from the side of the cockpit.

"I can go?" asked Major Brane.

"Sure, major, sure. Sorry we had to be rough, but you started the ball."

He walked toward the place where he had left his machine. Alvaro de Gomez laughed, and his teeth showed unpleasantly as he laughed.

"Unfortunately, the *señor* is still in Mexico, and there are several charges against him in Mexico. It is my duty to see that he is taken to the *carcel*. After he has arrived there perhaps he

will be released.” Gomez laughed uproariously. “Perhaps!” he chortled. “Perhaps, indeed! And then again, perhaps the devil gets his due.”

“Wait!” snapped Hargrave, turning on his heel. “We can’t be mixed up in any murder. Remember that.”

Gomez bowed. “Señor Hargrave, you are in my country. You must abide by the law. And it will not be a murder. It will be an execution.”

The two men faced each other, Hargrave angry, Gomez leeringly sure of himself.

The girl whipped a comment to Brane’s ears.

“There’s the border, two hundred yards over there. Could you cross it on the run?”

The major shook his head. “They’ve got cars.”

Señor Gomez climbed up to the fuselage.

“Come, Major Brane. You are under arrest. And I warn you, *amigos*, that to interfere now will be to compound a felony and aid in the escape of a felon.”

Hargrave frowned. “You promise he gets a fair trial, that he’ll be arrested according to law?”

Gomez smirked. “Oh, but certainly! To be sure, what is fair depends upon various things. I will see that the devil gets his due . . . Get out, major. Careful, now. The foot here—”

The girl’s hand reached out. The major saw the glint of the sun on a wrench, heard a cry, the thunk of the wrench on the skull of the Mexican. He heard also the girl’s cry:

“Hang on, major!”

And then the motor gave a cough. The prop became a glittering circle. The slip-stream clutched at his clothes. The plane started to move.

Gomez staggered to his feet. He flung up the shotgun. The plane gathered momentum. Major Brane strove to pull himself back to the cockpit. The rush of air pushed him back as with a giant hand. He felt his fingers slip from the smooth surface, catch, slip again. His legs slid along the upper surface of the wing. He caught a strut with his left hand.

He saw a succession of holes appear in the wing. Buckshot, which had thundered from the shotgun of Alvaro de Gomez. Yet the sound of the report had been drowned in the roar of the motor.

The plane crow-hopped, zoomed upward in a long glide. The ground fell away below at a startling rate, and Brane was still perched precariously upon the lower wing.

His hand was getting numb with the strain. The ground was a thousand feet below. His fingers gripped something solid, a handhold. He raised himself. The wind tore at him, shrieked past the struts, whipped his garments, threatened to tear the clothes bodily from him. Then he got one leg into the cockpit, climbed in, turned and grinned at the girl.

The plane roared northward.

After an interval the white buildings of San Diego glided below. The prop ceased to circle with such speed. The roar of the motor died, and there came that peculiar swishing sound which comes to planes when they are nosed toward the ground with motor throttled low.

They made a landing. The girl cut the motor, slipped back the goggles, grinned.

“Well, that’ll even things up for two-timing you at Ensenada. Let me get some gas, and I’ll deliver you f.o.b. Los Angeles.”

Major Brane smiled his thanks.

“You’re not sore over that Ensenada business?” went on the girl. “You’ve been at this game too long not to know the rules. It’s all fair, like love and war.”

Major Brane nodded. “Yes,” he said, “everything goes.”

They filled up with gas. The plane took off, winged northward. The girl swung inward from the beach, cut off from Capistrano, and dipped low over the rolling hills, the jagged cañons, the oak-covered valleys.

Suddenly the motor skipped, coughed, skipped again. The girl’s face whitened. She worked the throttle. The motor roared again. She was turning into the wind now, fighting for altitude. Abruptly, the motor went dead. The plane lurched. She screamed some warning, but the words were whipped from her lips by the rush of air. The plane slanted downward. The wheels hit on a slope, bounded, hit again, bounced. The plane swung, almost capsized, then jolted to a stop.

The girl got up, pale as death.

“Always knew I’d get into trouble doing that. Like to skim over the hills, it’s so beautiful here. Thank Heaven we managed the forced landing! It’s wild here. We’ve got a long walk, if we have to walk.”

They tinkered with the motor until dark, then built a fire. Throughout the long night they sat, dozed, replenished the fire, talked.

Edith Russell told Major Brane that she had known him by sight for some time, that she had always thrilled to hear of his exploits, always longed to meet him, to match wits with him. As a victor, she generously avoided saying anything about what she supposed was Brane’s failure to get the treaty.

At dawn they started to walk. It was noon when they reached San Juan Capistrano. Edith rushed to a store and emerged with a paper.

“Well, major, it’s hard luck, but we’ll see how they’ve played it up.”

She looked at the front page in puzzled incredulity. Then an item caught her eye. The item announced that Lai Chuan Hung, a Chinese diplomat staying at the palatial resort at Ensenada, had committed suicide. The article mentioned that the cause of suicide was despondency over having been outwitted in a political coup by some unidentified free-lance diplomat.

The girl stared at Major Brane with wide eyes.

“Then—the—paper—”

Major Brane finished the sentence:

“—Was an option to purchase a Chinese laundry in San Diego.”

The girl’s face showed mingled emotions, rage mixed with respect and admiration, and the respect amounted almost to awe.

“You had it all figured out?”

“Certainly. I’d seen you at a dance with Hargrave. I figured you must have gone to Ensenada by plane. I left Gomez with a few loose knots so he could untie them and get to a telephone. I thought he’d probably telephone you to set a trap for me, knowing I had gone to Ensenada. I thought you’d run me north and into Hargrave’s hands. I hadn’t counted on your landing in Mexico and delivering me to Señor Gomez.”

The girl gasped. “You—you devil!”

But Major Brane only smiled.

“You’ll remember what you told me. All’s fair in love and war. You should give the devil his due.”

“The treaty?”

Major Brane lit a cigarette.

“Ah, yes, the treaty—you’ll remember, Miss Russell, that your story did not hang together too well. The mysterious government that wanted to supervise Japan—the story of being trapped in the evening at Ensenada, yet having your pyjamas over the foot of the bed . . . Who tied you up, Lai Chuan Hung?”

She nodded her head. “But what did you do with the treaty? Tell me, please!”

She was close to him, gazing into his face with eyes that were like stars, lips that were half parted, a face that was tilted back and up.

“You wonderful, wonderful man! What *did* you do with the treaty?”

She would have moved even a stone statue, this beautiful woman who was so alert, so vitally magnetic, so sophisticated, and she was standing very close indeed to Major Brane.

But, as she had so aptly reminded him, all was fair in love and war. And Major Brane thought of the jade Buddha, symbol of the power of the men who had commandeered his services, and he thought of the unpleasant results of a failure.

“The treaty?” he said dreamily. “I must have lost it. In the excitement, I did something with it, and for the life of me I can’t think what!”

The mask dropped from her face. Rage snapped from the glittering eyes. “You devil!” she snapped, and turned on her heel.

Major Brane inhaled deeply from his cigarette, sighed—for she was very beautiful—turned and walked to the stage office.

“When’s the next stage for Los Angeles?” he asked.

THE END.

[The end of *The Devil's Due* by Erle Stanley Gardner]