

Hot Water

Cornell Woolrich

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Title: Hot Water

Date of first publication: 1935

Author: Cornell Woolrich (as Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich) (1903-1968)

Date first posted: Aug. 17, 2019

Date last updated: Aug. 17, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190836

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Argosy Weekly, December 28, 1935]

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By CORNELL WOOLRICH

Here was a kidnaping that left the Hollywood movie colony aghast—a kidnaping with a sensational double-cross attached to it

Hot water is two things. In slang it means getting into trouble, in geography it means a gambling joint just across the California state-line in Mexico. Agua Caliente means hot water in Spanish. It means both kinds to yours truly, after what happened that time. I never want to hear the name again.

Ten o'clock Friday night, and all is quiet in Fay North's forty rooms and swimming pool, out in Beverly Hills. Fay has just finished a picture that afternoon and has said something about going to bed early and sleeping until next Tuesday. I have been all around, upstairs and down, seeing that the doors and windows are all locked and that the electric burglar-alarm is in working order, and I am in my own room just off the main entrance, peeling to pajamas and ready to pound the ear, when there is a knock at my door. It is the butler.

"Miss North has changed her mind," he announces; "she is spending the week-end at Agua Caliente. Please be ready in ten minutes."

I am not asked to go, you notice, I am told I *am* going. That is part of my job. Miss North parts with a generous helping of her salary each week, in my direction, and it is up to me to stick close and see that no bodily harm comes to her. It really isn't an unpleasant job for this reason: on the screen Miss North has become famous for playing tough, rowdy characters, but in real life she isn't like that at all. She doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, and never goes to parties or even night clubs; so all I really have to do is ride back and forth to work with her and shoo salesmen and newspaper-writers away from the door.

But she has one great weakness, she is crazy for gambling. She never wins, but that doesn't seem to stop her. I feel sorry for her, but it is her money and none of my business what she does with it.

Anyway, she has stayed away from Agua for some time now, after dropping so much there the last time, so she is entitled to blow off steam, I guess, after working so hard. I shake my head about all the good sleep I'm going to miss, but I sling on my shoulder-holster, pack a couple of clean shirts, and go out and wait for her in the car without saying a word. A plane would get us there in a couple of hours, but that is another thing about Fay, she won't get in one, so it means we have to drive all night to be there when the border opens at nine.

Well, she comes out of the house in about five or ten

minutes and it seems just the three of us are going, her, me and the driver. For once she is giving Timothy the slip. He is her manager and a very good one, too, but he raised Cain about her losses the last time he was down there with her, and I guess she doesn't want him around to rub it in. He doesn't like the place anyway, doesn't think it's safe for her to go down there carrying so much money. She has brought several big bags with her, enough to stay for a month, but I guess that is because she is a woman and you have to dress up there. She gets in back and away we go.

"Well, Shad," she says, "I guess you could kill me for this."

"No, ma'm," I say, "you haven't had a day off in quite some stretch."

Shad isn't my name, but she calls it to me because when I was new on the job she got the habit of speaking about me as her Shadow.

"Timothy doesn't need to find out," she says. "We'll be back by Monday morning, and if he calls up tomorrow I told the butler to say I have a bad headache and can't come to the phone."

It doesn't sound to me like that is very wise; Timothy might come over twice as quick if he thinks anything is the matter with her, on account of she is such an important investment, but she doesn't ask for my opinion so I keep it to myself.

Then she says: "This time I can't lose! I'll show him, when I come back, whether I'm jinxed or not, like he always says. I'll make up all my losses, because I know now just what to do. I

consulted an astrologer in my dressing-room during lunch today, and she gave me a grand tip. I'm dying to see if it'll work or not."

First-off I figure she means just another new system, every time we go down there she has a new system, none of which ever works, but later I'm to find out it isn't that at all. The funny part of it is that with me it's just the other way around, I don't give a rap about betting or games of chance; in fact, don't believe in it at all, but I never yet chucked down four bits or a dollar on any kind of a table at all without it collected everyone else's dough like flypaper and swept the board clean. So then I always picked the nearest sucker with a long face and made him a present of the whole wad—minus the original buck of course—and he went right back and lost it. The wages I get from Miss North are enough for me; I'm no hog.

Well, we drive all night, pass through Dago about seven in the morning, and roll up to the bridge across the Mexican border just as they're getting ready to open it for the day. Miss North only has to show her face and we clear it, only as usual one of the guardsmen can't resist hollering after us, "Drop around, don't be bashful!" which is the catch-word from one of her pictures. She's so used to hearing it she just smiles.

After that comes a sandy stretch with a lot of cactus, and then flowers, fountains, and a lot of chicken-wire architecture show up, and that's Agua. Miss North engages her usual lay-out and signs the book "Peggy Peabody" or something, to fool

any reporters that may be hanging around. Everybody always stays up all night down there, but I suppose she has to have some place to powder her nose in and change clothes between losses. Anyway, I see to it that I have an adjoining room with a communicating door between. Then we separate to scrape off some of the desert, and in a little while she knocks on the side-door.

"You're armed," she says, "so maybe you better take care of this for me until tonight," and she hands me a little two-by-four black toilet-case with her initials on it in gold. "I'm so absent-minded I'm liable to mislay it just when I need it—"

Well, I'm just nosey enough to snap the latch and look in it —it isn't even locked, mind you!

"It's the stake for tonight," she smiles sweetly. "Fifteen thousand. I didn't bring much along this time because I'm so sure of doubling or tripling my ante."

"But, Miss North," I groan weakly, "carrying it around like this—"

"Yes, don't you think that's clever of me?" she agrees. "I just dumped out all the gold toilet articles. No one would think of looking in there." Then she says, "See you later," closes the door, and leaves me to do the worrying about it.

Well, the first thing I decide is, it don't stay in that beauty-kit, which hasn't even got a key to it. No matter where it goes, it gets out of there. So I empty it out—it's all ticketed just the way the bank gave it to her—stack it neatly inside a big, roomy envelope, seal it, write her name on the outside, and take it

down to the manager's office. He's an American, of course, and perfectly reliable.

"Put this in your safe," I say, "and keep it there until Miss North or me calls for it when the session opens tonight."

"If her luck," he grins, "is like what it usually is, she might just as well not bother taking it out, because it will only come right straight back in again." Then he takes out a fat bundle of vouchers and tells me not to bother Miss North's head about it, but don't I think maybe she'd like to clear them up and start with a clean slate before she starts plunging again the next few nights?

"But Timothy wrote off everything she owed you people, right after she was down here the last time, and that's over two months ago," I object. "I heard him hollering, that's how I happen to know. Lemme see the dates on some of those."

Well, some are only from the weekend before, and all of them are later than the last time she was there.

"There's somebody been down here impersonating her," I warn him, "and getting credit from you. You better warn your bankers and notify the police."

His face drops and he tells me, "I never know when she is here and when she isn't. She always stops off under an alias anyway.

"Well, I can't afford to attract attention to a thing like this, it would stop the picture people from coming here, so we'll just have to forget about these, and I'll tip off my staff not to let it

happen in future."

And he tears the whole lot of them up and dribbles them into the wastebasket. Most of them were only for medium-sized amounts anyway (which is another reason I know they're not Fay's), but it just goes to show there are some regular guys, even in his business.

Well, she comes downstairs after awhile, but I don't tell her about it, because she's down here to relax, in the first place; and in the second, it's Timothy's look-out, not hers, and everybody in her business has this impersonating stunt pulled on them at one time or another. It's nothing new.

She's wearing smoked glasses to keep from being recognized; but then, almost everybody else around is, too, so it don't mean much.

Well, we spend a quiet afternoon, me tagging after her while she strolls and buys picture-postcards; and then at five she goes back to her room to get ready for the fireworks, telling me I can eat downstairs, but she's going to eat alone, up in her room.

Now, here's where the first mistake comes in. I have a right to stick with her, even if I have to eat outside her room door, but I figure everything's under control, that she's safer here than she would be in her own home, that I'm right down at the foot of the stairs if she needs me, and that she'll be down again as soon as she's through dressing.

So I sit me down in the big patio dining-room, and I tear a sirloin at four bucks a throw (not Mex, either). After awhile the dancing quits and the stars, I mean the ones in the sky, show and the big gambling rooms light up, one after the other, and things get right down to business. And still no sign of her. I know I haven't missed her, because I'm right on a line with the stairs and she'd have to pass me on her way in. So I dunk my cigarette and I go up to see what's keeping her.

Well, it seems I pick just the right time for it; a minute later and I wouldn't have seen what I did; a minute sooner and I wouldn't have either.

Just as I get to the top of the stairs and turn down the corridor leading to her room and mine I catch a strange dame in the act of easing out of my door. She didn't get in by mistake either, one look at the way she's tiptoeing out tells me that. "Oho," I say to myself, "a hotel-rat—or rather a casino-rat, eh?"

Well, I want to see what she's up to and find out who she's working with, if possible, so instead of giving myself away I quickly step back onto the stair-landing and lean over the railing as though I am watching what was going on below. Her head was turned the other way, so I know she hasn't spotted me. She thinks the coast is clear. She closes the door carefully after her and comes hurrying along toward where I am. I turn around slowly and size her up. She is a tough-looking little customer, with jet-black hair and layers of paint all over her map that you could scrape off with a spoon. She is dressed like a dance hall girl, too—or like what people that never saw one think they are like—only personally I never met one that was

such a dead give-away. In fact, I wonder how she ever got into such a ritzy place with such a get-up. She's got a red shirtwaist on, and a yellow and black checked skirt, like Kiki, that hurts your eyes, only it misses her knees by a mile. But what interests me mostly is that in one hand she is hanging onto that toilet-case that Fay turned over to me when we got in. I know it by the gold initials on it. She has lifted it from my room, without bothering to find out if it still has the money in it or not; maybe on account of Fay being right next door, she didn't have time. It is easy to see, though, that she must have overheard Fay tell me what was in it earlier in the day; that's how she knew what to go for. Probably eavesdropped outside our doors.

Well, she brushes by me close enough for me to touch her. She doesn't look at me at all, and I don't raise a finger to stop her.

It may sound funny, my not jumping on her when she is right at my fingertips like that; but the reason is I happen to know there is no money in that toilet-case. And as I said before, I would like to see if she has a shill working with her, and where she is heading for with what she thinks she has. Besides, a slippery staircase is no place to tangle with the kind of a customer she looks to be like; the casino bouncers are down below, and she is going down there anyway.

So I let her get two steps ahead of me, and then I turn and start down myself, as if I just remembered something that required my presence below. And I have one hand loose, ready to collar her if she tries to break and run for it.

But she doesn't; instead, she slows up and takes her time, not hurrying any more, like when she first came out of the room. I can see that she is going to try to bluff it out.

She swaggers along real tough, and everyone is turning around to look at her. Then, when she gets down to the bottom, she happens to pass a guy with a cigarette stuck in his mouth—and doesn't she reach out and calmly take it away and start puffing it herself, without even a thank-you!

She passes by the main entrance without a look, and heads straight for the big gambling-room, cool as a cucumber.

"Well," I say to myself, "if this don't beat everything for sheer, unadulterated nerve!" Instead of ducking, she is going to hang around the premises awhile and try her luck with money that she just lifted, which is so hot that smoke ought to be coming out of that case she is carrying this very minute—if it happened to have anything in it! All I ask is just one look at her face when she opens it and finds out what her haul is worth, maybe that will take some of the swagger out of her.

In I go after her, and I buttonhole the nearest bouncer, whom I know by sight.

"Send out for the cops," I say, "I'm going to present you with a pinch in just about thirty seconds. Camille, over there, squeezing her way in to the middle roulette table—keep your eye on her." And I tell him what she's done.

He sends out for the *policia* and he also sends for the manager, and then him and me and the other bouncer close in on her and get ready to pounce when I give the signal. But first

I want to get a load of her disappointment.

Well, they're as thick as bees around that table—two or three deep—but that hasn't stopped her; she's used both elbows, both hips and her chin, and blasted her way through to the baize. We can't get in that far; all we can see is her back.

"Wait a minute," I motion them, "she'll be right out again—into our arms. She hasn't anything to play with."

You can hear the banker say, "Place your bets," and "Bank is closed." Then the clicking of the little ball as the wheel goes spinning around. Not another sound for a minute. Then a big "*Ooh!*" goes up from everyone at once.

"Killing," says the bouncer, knowingly.

"Wonder what's delaying her?" I say. "She ought to have found out by now. Maybe she's picking people's pockets—"

The same thing happened a second time; a big long "*Ooh!*" sounds like a foghorn.

The manager shows up, and I tell him the story out of the corner of my mouth. "—caught her in the act, and followed her down here. But all she got was the empty kit," I snicker.

"That's what *you* think," he squelches. "I got my doubts! A voice on the wire, claiming to be Fay North, asked me to turn back that envelope, less than ten minutes ago. I took it up to

the room myself—"

"Did you see her take it from you?" I ask excitedly.

"No, that's why I think something's punk. An arm reached out from the room, but she stayed behind the door. Claimed she was dressing."

"Good Gawd!" I moan. "And you turned over fifteen grand like that without—"

"You told me North or you would claim it. The call came from 210, that's her room, I checked it with the switchboard operator."

"That's *my* room!" I tell him. "North's is 211, she wouldn't be in my room; she's too much of a lady! This phony was in there; I saw her coming out. C'mon! We've wasted enough time. The hell with the payoff."

The Mex police had come in by now, two of them, both higher-ups, this being the casino. The manager and the bouncers shoo everyone aside, the crowd falls back, and we get a good look at what has been going on. The phony is left standing there all alone. But she is so taken up she never even notices. And she has the fifteen thou all right. Or at least she had it to start with; now she must have two or three times that. In fact, everything in sight is piled up in front of her, nearly chin-high. Her system, it seems, has been to blow the bills she bets with her breath, like handfuls of leaves, letting them land wherever they want to on the number mat. The banker is green in the face.

The manager taps her on the shoulder. "You're under arrest."

The Mex line up one on each side of her. She's hard-boiled all right, like I knew she would be.

"Run along and fly a kite for yourself. Can't you see I'm busy?"

I stoop down and pick up the toilet-kit, which she has kicked under the table. I shake it in her face.

"This belongs to Fay North, I saw you coming out of my room with it, the manager here turned over fifteen thou to somebody's bare arm in that room. Now, are you going to come clean or are you going to see the inside of a Mexican jail?"

Well, she keeps looking me in the eye and looking me in the eye like she wanted to say something, and then she looks at all the winnings piled up on the table like she was afraid of something, and she just shuts up like a clam. For a minute I almost have a crazy idea that maybe it is Fay herself, under a heavy character make-up, only just then I turn my head and I see the real Fay come sweeping in the doorway like a queen, heading for one of the smaller side-tables.

"Hold on," I say, "she'll tell me in a jiffy. If it was just the empty kit this one lifted, you can turn her loose for my part, but if she phoned down for that money she goes to jail, dame or no dame."

I run over and I stop Fay and say to her, "Miss North, did you call down awhile ago for that money the manager was

holding for you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says, and gives me an unpleasant look through her smoked glasses. "Don't put me in a bad mood now. Can't you see I'm on my way to the table? Please stay away from me, I gotta have quiet to concentrate—"

I go back to them and I say, "Okay, off she goes!"

"Why, you—" she blazes at me, but she doesn't get any further. The two Mex lieutenants drag her out backwards by the shoulders, kicking like a steer, and there's quite a commotion for a minute, then the place settles down again and that's that. Since neither me nor the manager can talk spicko, one of the bouncers goes along with them to prefer the charges and see she's booked right.

Well, I'm afraid to go too near Fay, on account of she seems to be in a cranky humor and asked me not to distract her; so I sit down just inside the door where I can watch her and be the perfect bodyguard, without getting in her hair. She sure looks spiffy in her gold dress, but she keeps the smoked panes on even while she's playing. She has the usual luck, and runs out of the fifteen thou, which the house turned back to her, in no time flat. Then she starts unloading I.O.U.'s, and they come over to me to make sure there won't be any mistake like there was before, but I tell them to go ahead honor them, it's the real McCoy this time.

About the time she's another four or five in the red, a houseboy comes in with a message for her and she quits and goes out after him. I get up to follow her, and she gives me a dirty look over her shoulder, so I change my mind and sit down again, saying to myself, "Gee, I never saw her as snappish as this before!"

But my equilibrium has hardly touched the chair once more, when there comes a whale of a scream from just outside the casino entrance. Then another, which chokes off in the middle like a hand was clapped over the screamer's mouth. Then there's a shot, and the sound of a big eight-cylinder job roaring away from in front of the place with its throttle wide open.

By that time the chair is rooms behind me and I'm tearing out the entrance with my own loudspeaker in my hand. There's nothing to shoot at but a little winking red tail-light which is already clear of the casino grounds and just as I fire at it, it goes out, not because I hit it but because it's too far away to see any more. The porter is sitting on the front steps holding onto his shoulder for dear life, and one of her gold slippers which fell off when she was thrown in is lying there in the roadway.

There is also a scrap of paper a considerable distance away which they must have tossed behind them. I snatch it up as I dash for the garage where Fay's own car is bedded.

The driver is knee-deep in a crap-game, but luckily it is going on right inside the tonneau itself, so I just leap in at the wheel and bring the whole works out with me in reverse. He hangs on, but his three partners fall out, also one of the garage doors comes off its hinges, and almost all the paint gets shaved

off that side the car.

Once out it would take too much time to turn it all the way around so I just make a dive through the casino flower-beds and the wheels send up a spray of rose-petals and whatnot. The casino steps are seething with people and I yell back, "Notify the border! They may try to double back and get across with her—" but I don't know whether they hear me or not.

As for notifying the Mex police, what could they do, chase the kidnap-car on donkeys?

"Snatched!" I tell the driver. "Right out of the doorway in front of everybody! I'll never be able to look anyone in the eye again if we don't head them off before this gets out. Reach over and grab the wheel."

He's been *tequila-ing*, but at least he knows what he's doing. He leans across my shoulders, I duck out of the way, and he hauls his freight over into the front seat. I give it the lights, and night turns into day ahead of us.

"Got gas?"

"Thank Gawd!" he says. "I filled her up when we checked in, to get it off my mind."

We finally get out of the grounds, and he tries to take the road to Tijuana and the border.

"Left!" I tell him. "Left! They went the other way, I saw them turn."

"But there's not even a road that way—nothing, just desert—not a gas station from here to Mexicali! We'll get stalled as sure as—"

"Never mind the geography lesson," I tell him. "Don't forget, they're not running on maple syrup either."

The asphalt doesn't go an inch beyond the resort-limits in that direction and as he says, there isn't even what you could call a road, just a few burro-cart tracks in the soft powdery dust. But one good thing about it the tire-treads of their heavy machine are as easy to pick up as if they'd driven over snow.

As if I had to be told this late what the whole idea is, I take time off to look at the piece of paper I picked up outside the casino. "Fifty thousand," it says in pencil, "gets her back. Notify Timothy in L.A. that the joke is on him, he'll know what we mean. We'll cure her of gambling, also of breathing, if he don't come across." It is all printed out; evidently it was prepared before they drove up to the casino.

"Americans," I remark to the driver. "You can tell by the way it's worded. It's our fault if we lose 'em, they'll stand out like a sore thumb if they stay on this side of the line."

"Yeah," he agrees, "like a sore thumb with wings; they're making pretty good headway so far!"

That crack in the note about curing her of gambling makes the whole thing look twice as bad to me, because reading

between the lines I get this out of it: Timothy must have engineered the snatch as a practical joke to begin with, to throw a scare into her and break her of the habit of running down to Agua and throwing away her money. But now his hired kidnapers have double-crossed him and turned it into the real thing, seeing a chance to get ten times the stage-money he paid them. And if there is anything worse than a snatch, it is a snatch with a double-cross in it. He knows who they are, and they know he knows; it's sink or swim with them and they won't stop at anything. Poor Fay is liable to come back to her public in little pieces, even after the ransom is paid.

We haven't once caught sight of them so far, even though they can't possibly make it any quicker than we can over a roadbed that consists entirely of bumps, ridges, hillocks, gullies, with scrub growing all over the place. And yet the treads of their tires are always there ahead of us in the glare of the heads, big as life, so I know we're not wrong. The visibility is swell too, everything stands out under the moon, the ground is white as cornstarch. It's not the seeing, it's the going, that is terrible. One minute the two left wheels are at a forty-five degree angle taking some mound, the next minute it's the two right wheels, and the springs keep going under us the whole time like concertinas.

"Go on," I keep telling him, "get some speed into it; if they can do it, we can! She paid ten grand for this boat."

"But it's supposed to be used for a c-c-car," he chatters, "not a Rocky Mountain goat. That *tequila* don't go good with all this see-sawing, either!" I take the wheel back from him for awhile and give him a chance to pull himself together.

A minute later as we ride a swell that's a little higher than most of the others, I see a red dot no bigger than a pin-point way off in the distance. In another instant it's gone again as we take a long down-grade, then it shows up just once more, then it goes for good.

"That's them!" I tell him. "They don't even know we're coming after 'em, or they wouldn't leave their lights on like that!"

"They wouldn't dare drive over this muck without any," he groans, holding his stomach with both hands.

"Watch me close in," I mutter, and I shove my foot halfway through the floor.

Immediately there's a bang like a firecracker, and a sharp jagged rock or maybe a dead cactus-branch for all I know, has gotten a front tire. We skiver all over before I can get it under control again.

"That's been coming to us for the past forty minutes," he says, jumping out. He reaches for the spare and I pull his hand away.

"That would only go too. Let's strip them all off and ride the bare rims, the ground's getting harder all the time."

We get rid of them and we're under way again in something like five minutes' time. But that puts the others five minutes further ahead of us, and the going before was like floating on lilies compared to what we now experience. The expression having the daylights jolted out of you is putting it mild. We

don't dare talk for fear of biting our tongues in two.

A peculiar little gleam like a puddle of water shows up a little while later and when I see what it is I stop for a minute to haul it in. It's that gold dress of hers lying there on the ground.

"Good night!" he says in a scared voice. "They haven't—"

"Naw, not this soon. Not until they make a stab at the fifty grand," I say grimly. "They probably made her change clothes, that's all, to keep her visibility down once it gets light—"

And away we go, him at the wheel once more.

The sky gets blue, morning checks in, and we can cut the lights now. There's still gas, but it's rapidly dwindling.

"All I ask," I jabber, keeping my tongue away from my teeth, "is that theirs goes first. It should, because our tank started from scratch at the casino, they must have used up some of theirs getting to it from across the line. They also got eight cylinders to feed."

A little after six we pass through a Mexican village, their treads showing down its main lane. Also, there is a dead rooster stretched out, with all the neighbors standing around offering sympathy to its owner. "They left their card here," I say. "Let's ask." We put on the brakes and I make signals to them, using the two Spanish words I know.

"How many were in the car that ran over that hen's husband?" I signal.

They all hold up four fingers, also swear a lot and tear their pajamas.

"Hombres or women?" I want to know.

All men, is the answer.

"M'gard!" groans the driver, "Maybe they give it to her and buried her back there where we found the dress!"

"She's still with them," I answer. "They got her into men's clothes, that's all. Or else there are four in the gang and they have her trussed up on the floor."

We have a little trouble starting, because they have all collected around us and seem to want to hold us responsible for the damage. A couple of 'em go home for their *machetes*, which are the axes they chop maguey-plants with.

"We're cops," I high sign them, "chasing after the first car, which has *bandidos* in it." When they hear that, they send up a big cheer and clear out of the way. Unfortunately, we knock over a chicken ourselves, just as we're pulling out; a hen this time.

"It woulda been a shame to separate them two," says the driver, blowing a feather off his lip.

There are no firearms in the village, so we don't slow up to explain.

"Shoulda got water," says the driver. "We'da gotten a lot more than water if we waited," I tell him.

It's hot as the devil by nine, and every bone aches.

"We must be way to the east of Mexicali by now," I mention. "What are they going to do, keep going until they hit the Colorado River?"

"They must have some hide-out they're heading for between here and there," he thinks.

"They're looking for one, you mean. They didn't have time to get one ready. It was Timothy who cooked up the thing yesterday morning after he found out where she went to. She didn't even know herself she was coming down to Agua until the last thing Friday night—"

At nine twenty-two by the clock I say, "What're you stopping for?"

"I ain't stopping," he says, "the car is. Maybe you'd care to cast your eye at the gas-lever?" I don't have to, to know what he means. We're without gas; and in a perfect spot for it, too.

The wheels have hardly stopped turning before the leather seats begin to get hot as stove-lids.

"All I need is a pinch of salt," he says, "to be a fried egg. Well, as long as we're not going any place any more, here goes!" And he hauls a long bottle of tequila out of one of the pockets of the car and pulls the cork out with his teeth.

"Hold on!" I say, and I grab it away from him. "How about trying this on the tank, instead of your insides? Maybe it'll run on this—"

I hop out and run around to the back and empty it in. He follows me out with two more bottles.

"I laid in a supply," he says, "for that garage-party of mine last night—"

"Give it the ignition," I snap, "before it finds out what it's using."

Well, sure enough, the engine turns over on it, and when I get in next to him, it starts to carry us!

"You shoulda bought a kegful," I gloat, "it's lousy with alcohol!"

"Anyway," he mourns, "it'll take us to some different place to roast in."

"I can't figure," I'm telling him, "why it hasn't happened to them; they haven't had a chance to fill up since we've been on their tail—"

When suddenly he stops, this time of his own accord. "It has!" he says. "There they are—or am I just seeing mileages or whatever they call those things?"

They're so far ahead we can't even see the car; it's just the flash of the sun on nickel we can make out from way off. But it holds steady in one place, meaning they aren't moving any

more, they've stopped. There are three long, gradual, intervening hollows between us and the flash, separated by two medium-sized rises, not high enough to cut it off. But on a line with them, to the left, there is quite an abrupt crag or cone-shaped mound, the highest thing for miles around, its shadow falls the other way, they're right out in the blazing sun.

"They're stalled," I say, "or they would have gone around it into the shade. Cut way over to the left, if we can put that thing between us and them maybe we can sneak up and get the drop on them—"

It isn't the odds that matter, but I keep remembering they have Fay with them, and they are just the kind of rats if they see us coming would—I know the driver is armed without having to ask, she always insisted that he carry a gun on his person just in case. I replace the shot I fired at them from the casino.

"If they flash like that," he remarks, turning at right-angles to the left, "so do we—they've seen us by now."

"They're facing the sun, and it's behind us," I remind him, "won't be straight overhead until noon. They can't tell, unless they got energy enough to climb on foot all the way to the top of that crest. I don't think they even know we've lasted this far —"

We keep going in a big wide loop, and the hillock slowly shifts, first to dead center, then on around to the right. The

winking flash their car gives off disappears as the crest gets in the way, and now we and they are on opposite sides of it.

"Now we'll close in," I say. "See if we can make the shade, anyway, before we get out of the car."

"You shoulda been a general at the Marne," he tells me admiringly.

"How do you know I wasn't?" I squelch.

The shade cast by the summit keeps backing away from us, distances being deceptive in that clear air, but finally when the ground has already started to go up, up, it sweeps over us like cool blue ink—and what a relief! I give him the signal to cut.

"We go the rest of the way on our own."

"Aren't you going to use the car for a shield," he says, "if they start firing at us?"

"There isn't going to be that kind of firing. Miss North is right in the middle of them."

We get out, and on foot we start up to the top on our side, instead of, as he wants, circling around the base. Looking down on them from above will give us a big advantage, I figure; they won't know whether we're a whole posse or just two fellows. It's a tough climb, too; the hill, which looked so smooth from way off, turns out to be full of big and little boulders, and with a tricky grade to it.

"Everything's under control," he heaves behind me, "except

suppose it turns out they just stopped to rest instead of being stalled, and they've gone on while we been doing our mountain-climbing act?"

I don't bother answering, it would take too much breath away from my footwork. If they were just resting, they would rest in the shade, not out in the broiling sun.

We get to the top finally, and I motion his shoulders down, so they won't show against the sky-line. Then we both stick our noses over and look. The car, being further out, comes in sight first—but there is nobody, in it or near it.

"Don't tell me they've gone off on the hoof and left it—" he whispers.

"Sh!" I shut him up, and crane my neck higher. They're in closer to us, right under the brow of the hill, which is almost perpendicular on their side. Three of them are standing around talking it over, and there's a fourth one a few yards away sitting by himself on a boulder.

I nudge the driver and point with my gun. "What d'ye want to bet that's Fay North? He's the only one wearing smoked glasses, like she had on, and the poor guy's barefoot, d'ye notice?" Otherwise the figure has on dungarees, a shirt, and a cap pulled way down on its head.

Well, I have everything doped out beautiful. They haven't seen us yet, so we'll get the drop on them from above, make them reach without having to do any shooting at all, have her frisk them, and then march them ahead of us back to our own car. So I motion him to edge over further along the crest, away

from me, so it'll look like there are more of us up here. He's been standing right behind me, gun in hand, looking over my shoulder. He turns to do like I say, and then something happens.

All of a sudden he's flat up against me backwards, pressing as close as he can get and quivering all over like jelly. There's a clatter, and he's dropped his gun. It sounds like a bee or hornet is buzzing around us. He's crowding me so that I can't get out of the way without going over the crest in full view of them, and he has no room to move, badly as he wants to. I twist and look past him, and aiming out of a cleft between two boulders alongside of us, at about chin-level to him, is a perfect honey of a rattler, coiled in striking position. It's so close to him the weaving of its head almost seems to fan his face—or it looks that way from where I am, anyway.

There's no time to think twice; I whip up my hand and plug three shots into it, close enough to singe the line of his jaw. There's no trouble hitting the thick bedspring coils, I could have almost reached out and touched them, if I'd cared for the pleasure. It strikes with a sort of a flop, but it's dead already, and hangs down like a ribbon. But there goes our chance of surprising them; in a split second we have to topple on our bellies and back away, the way bullets are pinging all over the rocks around us, and sending up squirts of dust. They are certainly quick on the draw, those guys.

The three who were together have shot apart like a busted

tomato. One gets behind a bit of scrub; one gets in closer, where there's a little ledge to protect him. And one doesn't get any place at all; goes down on his knees as I get rid of my three remaining shots.

The driver has grabbed up his gun, and shoved over to the other side, to have elbow room. The figure sitting by itself further out has jumped to its feet and started to run toward the car. I can tell by the way she runs that it is Fay North, just as I thought. But she can't make time on the hot sand in her bare feet, stumbles and waddles. The one under the ledge suddenly darts out after her before I have finished reloading, and the second one breaks for it too, at the same time; which is what you call team-work.

The driver gets him the second step he takes, and he slides to a stop on his ear. But the first one has already caught up with her, whirled her around, and is holding her in front of him for a shield. To show us who she is, he knocks the cap off her and all her blond hair comes tumbling down.

"Hold it, don't shoot!" I warn the driver, but he has sense enough without being told.

The guy holding her starts backing toward the car with her, a step at a time. He's holding one arm twisted painfully behind her back, and you can see his gun gleaming between her elbow and her body sighted on us, but she's game at that. She screams out to us: "Stop him from getting to that car; he's got a tommy-gun in it!" Then she sort of jolts, as though he hit her from behind.

I burn at that, but there's nothing I can do. But the driver doesn't seem to have that much self-control. He's suddenly flying down the incline almost head-first, in a shower of little rocks and dust, arms and legs all waving at the same time. But at least not dropping his gun like before. When I see that, I break cover too, but not quite that recklessly, keeping bent double and zig-zagging down the slope.

Fay is almost hidden by smoke, the way the guy behind her is blasting away, but I see her suddenly come to life, clap her elbow tight against her ribs, imprisoning his gun and jarring his aim. He tries to free it, they struggle, and she gets a terrific clout on the jaw for her trouble. It seems impossible the driver didn't get any of that volley, but he keeps going under his own momentum, as though he can't stop himself.

Fay is out cold now, we are both almost over to her, but the thug with her is only a yard or two away from the car. He lets both her and the gun go and dives for it. He tears the door open and gets in. I jump over her where she is lying, without stopping, because once he gets his hands on that tommy-gun—

He has his hands on it already, as I light on the running-board, but that split second's delay while he is swerving it my way costs him the decision; I tomahawk him between the eyes with the butt of my gun. The tommy goes off spasmodically in the wrong direction and the windshield up front flies in pieces; then him and me and it all go down together in a mess in the back of the car.

The driver shows up in a minute more and sort of folds up over the side of the car like a limp rag, head down. There's

blood trickling down from his shoulder.

"Gee, that was swell," I tell him when I get my breath back, "the way you rushed him from the top of that hill! If it wasn't for that he'd 'a' been sitting pretty behind this tommy-gun by now."

"Rushed him hell!" he grunts. "I lost my balance and fell down it, that's what happened!"

We truss up the guy in the car, who is all right except that my gun broke his nose, and then we go back to where Fay is sitting up in the sand, looking very bedraggled. Her shoulder is wrenching from the way he had held her, and there is a lump on her jaw, and her face is all grimy and dust-streaked. Even so, when we stand her on her feet and she takes off those smoked glasses, him and me both stare at her and blink and stare some more.

"I know—never mind rubbing it in," she groans. "After this, I'm through passing myself off as Fay North, rubber-checks or no rubber-checks. What an experience! I'm her stand-in," she explains, limping back to the car. "Same measurements, coloring and everything. I guess that's what gave me the idea. But all I ask you boys is to pick a nice cool jail for me where the sun never shines—if we ever get back to civilization."

When it finally dawns on me, which isn't right away, that the real Fay has been enjoying the hospitality of a crummy Mexican jail since the night before, due to me, I begin to wonder if it mightn't be better to stay out in the desert where I am than go back and face what I have coming to me.

About three o'clock a plane sent out from the casino to look for us sights us and comes down, and the girl and the driver go back in it, but we neither of us say anything about what she has done. I stay there with two cars, two dead snatch-artists and one live one, a pailful of water and a stack of sandwiches for company; and it's early Monday morning before I'm back in Agua with the rescue-party sent out to get me.

She's been let out of course, but she's standing there waiting for me on the casino steps.

"Gee, Miss North," I mumble, "how was I to know that was you, in that black wig and all—?"

She shakes her finger at me and says, "Now don't try to act modest. You knew what you were doing, and I think it was simply wonderful of you! That was my new system, of course. Remember, I told you I consulted an astrologer the day we left Hollywood. She told me the trouble with my betting was I had the wrong aura! I was too blond and refined. She said if I'd send out tough brunette vibrations my luck would change. Of course I couldn't tell you, because that would have broken my winning streak."

"Then you're not sore?"

"Sore? Why it was wonderful of you, Shad, the way you put me in jail to save me from being kidnaped. Such foresight—such cleverness! And I'm through with Timothy for trying such a thing on me. You're my business manager from now on—and I won't take no for an answer!"

As long as she won't, I don't try to say it.

THE END

[The end of *Hot Water* by Cornell Woolrich (as Cornell George Hopley-Woolrich)]