



A gun crashed as Smooth turned; and a voice called, "Okay, gentlemen—get on with the party!"

Crooked Caribbean Cross

By BORDEN CHASE

STARTING out in New York to trace a gun that should never have turned up there, SMOOTH KYLE and GILDA GARLAND eventually landed in Bolivia and found themselves up against an infinitely tougher assignment: fighting a sinister Fifth Column menace that spread its tentacles over all of South America and encircled their homeland as well.

INSPECTOR MCNEARY of the Treasury Department, who is directing their work from New York, is profoundly worried; for the safety of the nation is directly threatened by the operations of German agents, aided by American and South American gamblers.

The set-up:

BIG RENO CORDOZA, a Manhattan toughie,

was found carrying an automatic that had been shipped to England with a consignment of arms. Radio reports indicated that the *Clivedenning*, the ship carrying these arms, had been torpedoed and sunk.

So *where* and *how* did Big Reno get the gun? As he is about to tell, he dies suddenly, victim of *curare*—deadly South American poison—mysteriously left on a sliver in his shoe.

RAMON OBALDA, a lawyer who visited Big Reno shortly before his death, is found to be directing certain mysterious activities of JOSEPH GARADO and MIGUEL PANZA, South American gamblers operating a place on Madison Avenue. And these two employed Reno as a steerer before he was picked up by police.

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Investigation of Obalda runs into a dead end when he is found, killed by *curare*, at the place where he was supposed to meet his boss; and the boss is gone, undiscovered.

MEANWHILE Smooth, having shot Panza to save the life of MARIA VALERA, a Bolivian singer, flies with Maria to Cuba in pursuit of Garado and STEVE DREYFUS, a gambler who has been working with the South Americans. Gilda, left in New York, continues the investigation at that end.

With the Cuban Captain TEODORO SEIJO, Smooth discovers a German arms hideaway and submarine base in an island cave; and later, having a glimpse of Maria's brother, CARLOS VALERA, he is sure that Carlos was among those present when he ran into a gun fight with the Germans there.

But Captain Seijo is unable to check further on the Valeras. When he visits the home of RUFINO PONSICO, Bolivian patriot with whom they were staying in Havana, he finds that all three have fled, leaving no trace.

Steve's next act is to stir up STACEY BELLVILLE, a gambler operating in Havana, whom he suspects of having some connection with Garado and Dreyfus. With a pilot, ENTRIALGO, and a plane provided by Seijo, Smooth chases Bellville to La Paz, Bolivia; and on the way they are shot at by a blue plane.

Once they reach La Paz, things happen fast. Much to Kyle's surprise the American Consul, BILL CONOVER, takes a personal interest in him—though Smooth is sure he never saw the man before.

Then at dinner he and Entrialgo meet two Bolivian beauties: DOLORES CONCORDIA and ROSA PRIETO. Suddenly remembering the name of PABLO PRIETO, local politician who belongs to a strong pro-German group, Smooth concludes that the girl has been sent out to get him—and becomes interested in her a once.

Together they go to visit a new gambling place that has opened up; and Smooth gets another shock. Working in the place are MARTY DOYLE and TOM BENSON, gamblers whom he knew in New York. And for the payoff: the beautiful Esposita, who runs the place; turns out to be—none other than Gilda Garland, whom Smooth thought safely back in New York!

GILDA explains that she has established this place as a front in order to join forces with Smooth in La Paz, where she logically expected him to be. Her system, however, is the opposite of that used by

Garado and Panza in New York: her fixed wheels rob the small-timers, and pay off the big politicians.

After they talk this over, Smooth leaves with Rosa Prieto, and they set out for the gambling establishment of SEÑOR DULTANTO—another friend of Garado's. Instructing his pet cab driver, PETE QUILLACOLLO, to stand by, Smooth enters and meets Dultanto; asks to get in a poker game.

But he is watchful. Dultanto looks about as sinister as Mickey Mouse; his smile would put most people at their ease. But it lifts the short hairs on the back of Smooth's neck, and makes him wonder what is going to happen next. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

MEET ME WITH SABERS

THREE men were seated at a green-covered table. Two were obviously Germans. The third was wearing the uniform of an army officer. Dultanto introduced them as Herr Mueller, Herr Mittelstaedt, and Colonel Salgar.

Mueller looked up and grunted when Smooth explained that he spoke almost no Spanish and less German.

"Dot is nodding new," he said gruffly. "You Yankees of the North do nod bodder to learn. You know no bedder."

"Thanks," said Smooth easily. "We *have* been stupid—about you guys." He took out Panza's wallet and bought chips. "What are we playing—anything opens?"

"*Si señor*," said Colonel Salgar. "And there is no limit—*comprendo*?"

"And we play only for cash," added Herr Mittelstaedt, in perfect English that carried a slight Oxford accent.

"Then let's hope you've got enough," said Smooth.

The cards were shuffled and cut. Colonel Salgar dealt and Mittelstaedt passed. Mueller opened for a hundred bolivianos. Smooth glanced at his hand and found four queens winking at him. He moved a pile of chips toward the center of the table and said, "Up!"

"*Herr Gott!*" cried Mueller. "You know what you do? You raise two thousand bolivianos!"

"My error," said Smooth. He moved an-

other stack forward. "I meant to raise it four thousand."

Mueller threw down his cards. Mittelstaedt looked again at his hand and tossed it into the discard. Colonel Salgar smiled and pushed a stack of chips to the center.

"It is a pleasure to play with you, *señor*," he said. "I will stay." He picked up the deck. "How many cards?"

"Three."

The officer's eyes widened. "I beg your pardon—how many?"

"Three," said Smooth again as he discarded.

Colonel Salgar flicked three cards across the table. He dealt one card to himself and looked long at Señor Dultanto who stood at a little distance from Smooth's shoulder. Then he discarded and picked up the single card.

"It is your bet, *señor*," he said. The laughter had gone out of his voice.

Smooth looked at his draw—a four of clubs. The second was a nine of clubs. The third was a king of diamonds. Now he was sure he had walked into a cold deck. The four queens had been fed to him with the expectation that he would raise heavily before the draw. Mueller and Mittelstaedt would then, of course drop out.

But Colonel Salgar had dealt himself the five, six, seven and eight of clubs, along with an off card to prevent him from holding a pat hand. That might have appeared suspicious. But no matter how much Smooth raised before the draw, it would have been quite legitimate for Salgar to stay and try to fill his double-end straight flush.

Had Smooth decided to stand pat with his four queens, the next card would have gone to the dealer: a four of clubs. This would have given Salgar a straight flush from the four to the eight.

On the other hand, if Smooth had pretended he was trying to improve two pairs and had called, for one card, he would have drawn the four. The next card—the nine of clubs—would fill the top end of Salgar's straight flush.

It was an old-gag: one seldom used in fast company. But Colonel Salgar was evidently not a professional. He had brought in the cold deck too quickly and Smooth had used the routine method of spoiling a fixed deal. He had simply tossed away one pair of queens and held the other pair.

Now he glanced quickly at his cards and pushed a stack of chips to the center.

Salgar shook his head. "It is yours, *señor*."

Smooth pulled in the chips. "Thanks a lot, Colonel. Too bad you didn't fill. We could have made it an interesting hand."

"No doubt," said Salgar.

THE deal went to Mittelstaedt and Mueller, then came to Smooth. His fingers were a little out of practice but he made them behave with sufficient agility to confuse the men at the table. Señor Dultanto was standing near the entrance of the room and Smooth caught an amused expression on the gambler's face as the play started again.

"Won't you join us?" asked Smooth.

"I think not," said Dultanto.

Smooth shrugged, glanced at his hand and realized he had been just a bit sloppy in the deal. He waited for Mittelstaedt to open and wondered if the German had the kings that were intended for him. When Mittelstaedt put out a stack of chips Smooth felt better. Mueller stayed. So did Smooth. Salgar raised. The others played along and Smooth dug deep to fill his straight.

"Make it big," he said casually to Mittelstaedt.

The German smiled. "You seem to be lucky."

"Why not?" said Smooth. "I'm dealing."

Colonel Salgar lifted an eyebrow. "I hope you are joking, *señor*. We do not encourage cheating in La Paz. The last stranger who tried it was—er—crossed off the list. I think you know what I mean."

"Perfectly," said Smooth. "The last stranger was crossed, and the last native was—er—double-crossed."

Colonel Salgar's dark face colored and he studied his cards. Study did him no good. Nor did it help Mittelstaedt. Smooth's flush beat the German's threes and again Smooth reached for the pile.

A tall, handsome man with a black goatee and iron-gray hair had come into the room. He watched the play until the deal came around to Smooth again and then looked at Salgar. "Do you mind if I join?" he asked quietly.

The colonel gestured toward an empty chair at Smooth's right. "It is an honor, Señor Valera. Who could object to playing with one of the *gente decente*?"

Valera bowed to each of the players and seated himself. He turned to Salgar. "The sons of good families, as you call us, have to ask many favors in La Paz these days. Sometimes I wonder why our forefathers bothered to fight with Bolivar for freedom if we are now to hand our country to foreigners without a struggle."

Tension had come to the room. Mueller and Mittelstaedt said nothing but it was obvious they were displeased. Colonel Salgar seemed ashamed. He introduced Smooth who immediately offered the cards to Señor Valera.

While the tall grandee riffled the deck between his slender fingers Smooth thought of another Valera whose fingers were equally slim. Marie Valera—the girl who had saved his life, offered to help him, and had then disappeared with her brother.

Undoubtedly this gentleman was a relative. That he was a man of family and importance was evident by the silence that had greeted his remark.

COLONEL SALGAR grew more ill at ease as the game progressed. The Germans were annoyed but made no comment. For a time the stakes were small. Smooth played honestly but watched Colonel Salgar. He caught the officer dealing seconds to Valera and filling hands for the Germans.

Then Smooth decided it was time for fireworks. He started an interesting story and riffled the cards a dozen times, build-

ing a set of hands. The story continued, and still he kept shuffling.

"You will rub off the spots, *señor*, if you do not deal soon," said Salgar at length.

"Sorry," said Smooth. "I'm just trying to keep the game honest. Nothing like a long riffle once in a while."

He put the deck in front of Valera and held his breath. The tall gentleman touched the deck but did not cut the cards. And this was what Smooth wanted.

There was dynamite in this deal. Colonel Salgar opened, with aces and fours. Mittelstaedt raised on three tens and Mueller raised again on three queens.

Then it was Valera's turn. He saw Mueller's raise and kicked it slightly. Smooth dropped out. Colonel Salgar looked again at his aces and fours, and decided to stay.

There were two more raises that caught Salgar in the middle, but he was in for money and had to stay. Then it was time for the draw.

"One," said the colonel. Smooth flicked him an ace to make a full house. He looked at Mittelstaedt.

"Two for me," said the German. He got another ten to make four, folded his cards and tried to look bored.

"Zwei!" grunted Mueller. "Doo card for me!"

Smooth spun the fourth queen across the table along with a deuce. The German's eyes popped and he leaned forward eagerly. Then Smooth turned to Valera.

"One card, *señor*," said the tall gentleman.

"A pleasure," said Smooth.

He dealt to Valera, put down the deck and leaned back in his chair. Dultanto had left the room for a moment but now he stood near the entrance. Salgar checked and Mittelstaedt bet. Mueller kicked it and Señor Valera bought additional chips. He piled up two stacks and pushed them toward the center of the table.

"*Herr Gott!*" said Mueller. He dug out a fat wallet and put it on the table. "I push it up—so!"

"Why not wait for your turn?" said

Smooth. He turned to the colonel. "Up to you."

Salgar looked at his hand. He looked at Smooth Kyle. Then he tossed his cards aside and shook his head. Mittelstaedt shrugged, saw the raise and came again. Mueller was almost blubbing in his eagerness as he boosted.

Once more Señor Valera raised. Mueller's lips were trembling now. So were his hands as he bought more chips. He waited impatiently for Mittelstaedt and then kicked it again.

Each time the pot grew Smooth turned to Colonel Salgar and smiled sweetly. At length both Germans were forced to call.

"A straight flush," said Valera quietly. He showed his cards—the same cards Salgar had tried to deal to himself earlier in the game. "The four, five, six, seven, and eight of clubs."

"And how do you like them apples?" Smooth asked Salgar. "Isn't that a beautiful hand, Colonel?"

"Very," said Salgar slowly. "If anyone but Señor Valera had held it, I might *possibly* believe there had been some cheating."

Valera's eyes grew bright. "You question my honesty, Colonel Salgar?"

"Not yours, *señor*," said Salgar.

"Mine, perhaps?" said Smooth.

"And if I do?" said Salgar slowly. "Does that interest you, Señor Kyle?"

VALERA leaned forward quickly. "It interests me, greatly. I am not accustomed to having my friends insulted."

Salgar laughed. "Señor Kyle is your friend?"

"He is."

Mueller leaped to his feet. "*Ach! Mein lieber Gott!* Id is a trick! Dey are friends! Dis Yankee from de Nord gives goot cards to Valera!"

"You are a fat pig, Herr Mueller," said Valera quietly. "I will be happy to kill you in the morning."

Mittelstaedt was standing now. "Rather odd, I might add," he said in his affected Oxford drawl. "The *Andinos* are gamblers

—quite. But seldom have I seen one of the *gente decente* condescend to play in the house of Señor Dultanto. Yes, it is rather odd."

Señor Valera smiled. "And you, too, Herr Mittelstaedt—it will be a pleasure to accommodate you." He turned to Colonel Salgar. "Would you care to join your friends, Colonel? I shall be glad to have my representative call upon you."

"I have no wish to duel with you, *señor*," said the colonel. "If you insist, I can do nothing but oblige. But I have offered you no insult."

Smooth was enjoying this. "Perhaps the colonel would like to try a waltz with me? I'm not much with a sword, but I can toss slugs with you if it's in order."

Colonel Salgar's smile was thin. "I doubt that you will be in La Paz in the morning, Señor Kyle. Your kind seldom wait for the sun to come up."

"Aren't you going to be surprised!" said Smooth. He turned to Señor Valera. "Would you mind telling me just how I go about this dueling business?"

Valera frowned. "You are a visitor, *señor*, and I must warn you Colonel Salgar is an excellent shot. I know of only one person in La Paz who can surpass him." He turned to smile at Mittelstaedt and Mueller. "You gentlemen will have the honor to meet that man in the morning."

Mittelstaedt bowed. "As long as you have been kind enough to make the challenge, the choice of weapons rests with Herr Mueller and me. I think we both prefer the saber."

He glanced at his companion, and he could not keep the triumph out of his eyes.

"As you wish," said Valera. He glanced at his wrist watch. "Shall we dispense with formalities and agree to meet at six in the morning near the church on the Alto?"

Mueller grunted. "Dot is goot!"

Smooth drew a deep breath and looked at Salgar. "Do you get up that early, honeysuckle?"

"I shall be there," said the colonel sharply.

CHAPTER XXVII

FORCE IS ON THE MARCH!

HE LEFT the room, pausing to look wisely at Señor Dultanto who stood not far from the table. The gambler's smile was bland as ever. He bowed Mueller and Mittelstaedt out of the room and turned to Señor Valera.

"I am sorry, *señor*," he said. "But in an establishment of this sort, it is not always possible to guarantee the behavior of each guest. This Yankee of the North is a stranger and—"

"That will be enough!" said Valera. "Señor Kyle is my friend!"

Dultanto bowed again and stepped aside. Valera motioned to the door and Smooth marched from the room. He looked about for Señorita Prieto but she was not in sight.

Valera walked quickly to the hall, took his hat, coat and cane from one of the white-coated attendants and held the door open for his newly made acquaintance. Smooth pulled his black felt low over one eye, tossed his top coat over his arm and swished out of the gambling joint with all the elegance of a movie actor playing in the Three Musketeers.

"Ah, me!" he said. "If taffy-head could only see me now!"

"Pardon?" said Valera.

"Just a random thought, *señor*," said Smooth. He preceded Valera to the street, crooked a finger at Pete, the hackman, and opened the door for Valera. "May I drop you at your home?"

Valera stepped into the car and Pete moved close to Smooth. The hackman's eyes were wide in his round face. "You're with important man now; you know that, eh?" he whispered. When Smooth nodded the driver motioned toward the corner of the square.

"Skinny feller down there watching you. Waiting since you went in. When your girl came out alone he goes inside, then comes out again to wait."

"Thanks," said Smooth quietly.

He got into the car and Señor Valera

gave the driver an address. They left the small square, reached the Prado and rolled along the wide avenue to the older section of the residential district. Here Pete turned into a curving driveway and stopped before a home of gray stone where tall Corinthian columns supported the rounded dome of an elaborate portico. Señor Valera gestured toward the house.

"There are but a few hours until morning," he said. "Will you be my guest?"

"A pleasure," said Smooth.

He paid off the driver and followed Valera. When a butler opened the door, Smooth walked into a magnificent entrance hall and drew a deep breath.

A grand stairway with a deep-piled red carpeting circled from the main floor to the upper stories. Marble busts stood in niches at each landing and the pearl-gray walls were heavily ornamented with gold frescoes. Off to the left was a drawing room and through the open door Smooth could see a gold-plated and richly carved grand piano, behind which hung a Sixteenth-Century tapestry.

SEÑOR VALERA spoke quickly to the butler and walked with Smooth to the library. Again Smooth found himself in a room whose furnishings had cost a sizeable fortune.

The cabinets that held the books were of heavily carved hardwood that matched the mantel above the wide stone fireplace. Here a half dozen long logs blazed on a pair of huge andirons. The easy chairs and lounges were covered with priceless brocades and on the paneled walls were four old masters.

"Very nice," said Smooth slowly. "Very nice indeed!"

"Much nicer than I deserve," said Valera. He motioned Smooth to an easy chair near the fire and sat facing him. "Like other *Andinos*, I did not appreciate my home until the war came."

"*Andinos*?" said Smooth, "I don't quite understand you."

"That is a term applied to those who live in the mountains—the descendants of

those who fought with Simon Bolivar, the Liberator. Our families came to this country long ago. In fact, my people helped to build the church near which we will meet those swine in the morning—the church of San Francisco. It was built in 1547 in the upper town that is called El Alto.”

“That makes pikers of the boys who arrived on the *Mayflower*, doesn’t it?”

Valera smiled. “Our people got here a few years earlier, but unfortunately their descendants did not have sense enough to hold what their fathers had built. I am an example, *señor*. The Valeras, like the Patinos and many other families, built this city from nothing but a wilderness. Our money came to us from the tin mines, the silver mines—and there was lead, zinc, bismuth, and even gold.

“We grew soft and left our homes to travel in Europe and build other homes in Paris and Rome and London. Now the war has driven us home again; and what do we find?”

“I’ll pass,” said Smooth quietly.

“We find,” said Valera sorrowfully, “that Bolivia has been sold to the Germans. They are in the government—in the army—everywhere. Their money has corrupted the Bolivians who are in power. Germans dictate the policy of the country and rewrite its laws.

“Soon they will no longer place puppets in office and rule through them; they will turn the country into a fascist state and rule from Berlin.”

Smooth was silent for a time. He watched the fire play along the logs and sipped the drink that the butler had put on the table at his elbow.

“There is a little piece of paper in a vault at Washington,” he said after a time. “It’s called the Monroe Doctrine. Have you ever heard of that, *señor*?”

Valera lifted one hand in a gesture of dismissal. “Paper will not stop a *blitzkrieg*. It has failed to stop infiltration. Action is needed—it is needed now before it is too late! But how can we act? What is there to do?”

He laughed bitterly and lifted his drink.

“To night I went to Dultanto’s hovel, knowing I would find such men as Mueller and Mittelstaedt there. It was my desire to provoke a quarrel with as many as possible and perhaps rid my country of the vermin. But when these are destroyed, others will take their places.”

“Hold everything,” said Smooth. “Do you mean you deliberately started that jam?”

“Naturally, *señor*. I knew you were dealing those cards from the bottom.”

“Well, not exactly from the bottom.” Smooth laughed. “But the idea is the same.” He paused and looked across his glass at the tall aristocrat. “What else do you know about me, Señor Valera?”

“Only what my niece wrote in a letter that arrived this morning. Her name is Maria Valera, and she is living at the home of Señor Ponsico in Havana.”

“What did she tell you?”

“That she had met you in New York while she was watching Panza and Garado. She writes that you are in the employ of the United States Government and have been trying to trace a gun found on Reno Cordoza before he was killed. She thinks the gun in some way concerns Bolivia and wants to know whether it is safe to work with you.”

Smooth laughed. “Since then she’s decided to work with the other side—or something.”

Valera’s heavy eyebrows drew down. “That calls for an explanation, *señor*. Maria Valera is a patriot!”

SMOOTH studied the fire while he tried to line up this new situation. Maria’s story had been good until the day Smooth left Cuba. She claimed to be working for her country and trying to learn what Garado and Panza were up to. But then had come that business with Carlos—and her disappearance. Now this obviously wealthy *Andino* claimed her as his niece.

Again Smooth juggled the figures. Señor Dultanto appeared to be the Number One man here in La Paz. He had arranged Bellville’s flight from Arica, and had un-

doubtedly sent the fighting plane to stop Smooth and Entrialgo.

The chances were even that Steve Dreyfus and Joseph Garado were somewhere in town, and it was a safe bet the seaplane had landed that load of armament not too far from La Paz.

Dultanto knew about Smooth. He had sent Rosa Prieto to walk him into that creepy joint on the square. The place was a set-up for a murder. Still, it was reasonable to suppose that Dultanto and the mob might hesitate to order a United States Government agent knifed during a card game. That would cause an investigation by the Consulate—something that would not help the Dultanto crowd.

A challenge to a duel was something else again. Such things were still done south of the Equator. And if Smooth were killed in the morning in front of witnesses, that might do the trick very nicely.

So far the figures were adding. Now it was simply a question of whether Señor Valera was telling the truth, or whether he too was part of the mob and had staged an elaborate setting for a fast play.

True, Smooth had provoked the quarrel by stacking the cards. The rest had seemed to be on the level. But these Latins were proving to be a clever people. They might be lousy lovers, but they certainly knew the art of double cross.

"Something is puzzling you, *señor*?" asked Valera finally.

"Yes," said Smooth. "You are."

"Why?"

"I want to believe you but common sense tells me not to."

Valera smiled. "I do not blame you. But in a few hours you will know. Herr Mueller and Herr Mittelstaedt are members of the German group here in La Paz. When I kill them, perhaps you will trust me. Until then, keep your secret, *señor*."

"THAT sounds all right to me," said Smooth. "But while we're waiting for morning, would you mind giving me the political set-up in La Paz?"

"Gladly," said Valera. "At present the

leading families of Bolivia are bringing pressure upon the government to restore the rule of the land to the people of Bolivia. The same is happening in other countries.

"The *Andinos*, or as we are sometimes called, the Yankees of the South, know *Der Tag* is close. We are doing all in our power to clean the fascist influences from our governments and work in co-operation with the United States.

"Here in La Paz we have been making some headway. Given a few more months, we might rid our government of all German and Italian influence. But now a new faction is working against us."

"Who are they?"

"People like Dultanto, Panza and Garado. Someone is financing them with unlimited funds. They are employing men such as Dreyfus and Bellville to open gambling houses in Cuba and New York. To these places are attracted men like Pablo Prieto, Manuel Castellon and Jose Codas—citizens of Bolivia who have the confidence of the working class. There are also some wealthy Bolivians who visit these places—men such as Señor Aldoza whose family is good."

"And these people are trying to muscle in?"

"Muscle?" said Valera vaguely.

"Trying to take over the government."

"Oh, I see: muscle the government," said Valera. He laughed. "That appears to be the case."

"Can't you round up enough votes to beat them at the election?"

"Elections in Bolivia are sometimes—er—slightly irregular. We change presidents quite suddenly, but seldom through an election. The custom is to have a bloodless revolution in which the new candidate is first made provisional *presidente*."

Smooth nodded. "And that's what Dultanto and his mob want—a bloodless revolution?"

"It may not be altogether bloodless this time, *señor*. It is that which worries us." He glanced at his wrist watch. "But we have talked too long. You will need some

rest in order to be at your best in the morning."

He stood and walked with Smooth to the winding staircase. On the upper floor he opened the door of a luxuriously appointed bedroom and stepped aside.

Smooth looked at the enormous bed that stood against a tapestry-covered wall. The head and foot were of Circassian walnut. Twin columns spiraled to the carved moulding that edged a paneled ceiling. There were brocade-covered chairs, bureaux and tables of patterned hardwood, and a pair of wide windows that looked out over a garden.

"And you left this for a home in Europe?" said Smooth.

"We seldom appreciate what we have, *señor*," said Valera. He gestured toward the furnishings. "Such things as these are unimportant. Men can live happily without them. But now we of the Andes are about to lose a treasure that is above and beyond all valuation."

"And that is—"

"Liberty!" said Valera. He walked to the window and looked out into the night. "Once that is gone, all else becomes nothing. You of the North are equally to blame. Always you have taken liberty for granted. It is your birthright, therefore you believe it will always be with you."

He turned and faced Smooth. One hand was lifted in a gesture that would have been over-dramatic in a lesser character than Señor Valera. "Force is on the march! The strength to seize and hold and subjugate; that is the new idea. And we who have grown too soft to hold our liberty must now lose it to this new idea!"

It hit Smooth hard. Hit him right in the chest. Gilda had said something like this. The same thought had been present in the conversations he had held with Entrialgo, the Cuban. Smooth had seen it in McNeary's face—heard it in his voice.

Everywhere people were looking fearfully toward this new idea. And now this tall gentleman with the iron-gray hair and military bearing had put it into words again.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE BLADE GOES HOME

SMOOTH was silent for a time. He walked to the window and stood beside Valera. "There are just two questions I'd like to ask, *señor*," he said. "Will you tell me if this new idea can think and breathe and walk? Can this force you talk about move of its own accord?"

"I do not quite understand."

"Then let's put it this way: is this idea something greater than man? Is it a god-like thing? Or is it something that was created by men?"

"Naturally, men have created it."

Smooth shrugged. "Then why let it get you down? I've never yet met the man I'd be afraid to try a waltz with. And—if I'm any judge of character—neither have you. At home in the States are millions more who will try their luck with anything that walks, crawls, swims or flies.

"If these Krauts with their new idea want to play rough—well, that's something for Hitler to worry about. The Kaiser got some foolish ideas a few years ago and had them knocked out of him. Hitler doesn't look any tougher to me than the man who ran the country before him."

Valera shook his head slowly. "But these people have no conscience! No scruples! They use trickery, deceit; they bribe and lie and cheat. They weaken a country first and then march across it."

"So what?" said Smooth sharply. "That racket is old! The mobs used it in New York and Chicago long before Hitler knew the meaning of the double cross. He can't teach us anything we haven't already seen. We licked the mobs, *señor*. In my own small way, I helped a little. Now I'm using the same routine on these Krauts in your city."

"Routine? I did not know there was one. What is it that you do?"

"Start trouble, step back, and see what happens," said Smooth. He pointed to the phone. "Will you try to get a number for me, *señor*? My playmate has opened a place on Calle Recreo and I'd like to talk

with her. The last time I saw her she was calling herself *Señorita Esposita*."

VALERA was confused at the sudden shift in conversation. He tugged at his goatee, shrugged and reached for the phone.

"I will not try to understand you, *Señor* Kyle. And this *Señorita Esposita*—she too, is a mystery. There is much talk about her in La Paz. Within a few days she has become the woman whose name is on everyone's tongue."

"Why?"

"Oh, there are a thousand stories about her. Some say she is rich, some say she is financed by the Germans. Others claim she was sent by the United States. Everyone says something different, but all are agreed that she is charming. And now I hear you call her your playmate!"

He lifted the phone and spoke to the operator. There was a long wait and again he spoke rapidly in Spanish. Then he smiled and handed the phone to Smooth.

"I will call you in the morning, *señor*," he said. "Sleep well."

Valera left the room and closed the door. Smooth lit a cigarette, drew deeply and said, "Remember me, gorgeous? I'm the little boy in the blue suit."

"Hello, flap-ears," said Gilda. "Where are you?"

"With a friend."

"Is she nice?"

"Not bad for a brunette. She's cute but she calls me Cuddles. Think you can straighten her out?"

"Act your age, ape! Things are getting so hot in La Paz you could fry a steak on them, and there you are playing house!"

"Now what's wrong?"

"Everything," said Gilda. "I don't know what it is, but something is getting ready to break. You can feel it."

"Me? I can feel it?" Smooth laughed. "All I can feel is a cold breeze blowing in through the window."

"Then close the window and take an aspirin," said Gilda. "Your friend En-trialgo has a surprise for you, handsome.

He's a fast worker, that Cuban. I can't tell you about it over the phone but I'll wait for you at the hotel."

"Better not," said Smooth. "I've got to see a dog about a man in the morning. Catch you at breakfast. And remember, toots—I think you're grand."

"The same to you, funny-face. Keep your head down and try to put three in his chest. 'Bye, now!"

There was a click and Smooth looked at the receiver. Then he jiggled the hook and told the operator to call the number back. The answer was in Spanish. Smooth tried again. It was still Spanish.

Smooth hung up and took off his coat. That last crack of Gilda's about "three in the chest" sounded as if she were still one jump ahead. In some way, she might have learned of the fight that was scheduled for the morning. Or again, it might have been a chance remark.

Smooth took his gun from its leather and pulled out the clip. He emptied the chamber and put his thumbnail under the muzzle. No use trying to figure Gilda. No use even thinking about it.

Smooth cleaned the gun, reloaded it and put it in its holster. Then he stretched out on the bed and went to sleep.

IT WAS still dark in La Paz when *Señor* Valera introduced Smooth to four gentlemen who would act as seconds. Each was military in his bearing, polished in his manners and happy to be of service to a friend of *Señor* Valera.

A car was waiting and they drove through the deserted streets to the Alto. Smooth drew the lap robe over his chest to keep out the sharp morning breeze. He had little to say, but watched with interest as the car climbed to steep and winding streets to the town on the heights.

Señor Valera pointed to the cathedral, now complete after a century of construction. He pointed to the snow-capped peaks of Illampu and Illimani. The car passed a row of attractive homes, swung sharply up a street that appeared to be almost vertical and reached a level stretch.

"The church of San Francisco," said Valera. He gestured toward an ancient stone building. "We are almost there."

A ten-minute drive took them to a field bordered by rows of century-old trees. There were gardens of multi-colored blossoms edging the lawn and a winding dirt road continued on past the field to the pre-Incan Palace of Tiahuanaco.

The car stopped and Smooth saw another car standing beneath one of the wide-branched trees. A group of men were beside it and Smooth recognized Herr Mueller as one. The German had removed his shirt and was testing the balance of a heavy saber.

Señor Valera took off his coat, tossed it across the side of the car and opened his tie. He was unhurried in his movements and occasionally exchanged some light remark with one of his seconds.

There was a lengthy conference between Valera's friends and those of Mueller, Mittelstaedt and Salgar. Then the seconds returned and spoke with Valera. A man who was evidently a doctor put his instruments on a towel that had been spread upon the grass. He carefully wiped the blades of two sabers with an antiseptic-soaked swab of cotton.

"You do not mind waiting?" asked Valera. "I will try to be as brief as possible."

"Oh, take your time," said Smooth. He glanced toward the heavy-set German who was walking toward the field. "Better watch your step with Mueller. I noticed one of those Heidelberg dueling scars on his jaw."

"So much the better," said Valera. He shook hands with Smooth, took a saber from his second and smiled. "I have been thinking of what you told me last night, *señor*. Men have ideas; but they are only men. So—we shall now eliminate a few of those men and the ideas along with them."

"Now you're talking, pal," said Smooth. "Get right in there and start pitching. While you're at it, carve off an ear as a souvenir for me."

Valera laughed and walked onto the field. Smooth saw him whip the blade to

get the heft of the steel; and it was only then the place came alive.

UNTIL now Smooth had walked through this thing as if it were a dream. Duels just didn't happen any more. Not real duels.

He had seen a few so-called affairs of honor in Europe. Each man had strutted magnificently, made eloquent speeches to his friends and then stepped onto the field to wave a sword. A single scratch on a forearm brought an end to the affair. Both duelists embraced each other and the whole crowd had adjourned to the nearest bar for some serious drinking.

This was going to be different. Smooth saw that when the men crossed swords. He knew little of sword-play; but even a novice could not mistake the vicious slash with which Herr Mueller opened the party.

It was meant for Valera's face but the Bolivian parried easily. His point flicked the German's chest, drawing first blood, and Smooth waited for the doctor to rush forward and examine the wound.

Instead, Mueller charged forward like an angry bull, lashing at Valera's blade with all the strength in his broad shoulders. The Bolivian laughed and turned the German's blade easily. Then his own saber whipped forward and Smooth heard Mueller cry out.

"Your souvenir, Señor Kyle!" called Valera.

Smooth blinked. The thing was getting messy. It was all very well to ask for a man's ear, but it was something else again when you got it.

Smooth decided he didn't like saber fighting. He took out his case and lit a cigarette. When he looked again toward the field he saw the doctor kneeling beside Herr Mueller. Later, the German's seconds carried the man to the car. Valera tossed his sword to the grass and came toward Smooth.

"You are right, *señor*," he said quietly. "They are only men."

"How badly is he hurt?"

"He is not hurt, *señor*. He is dead."

Valera accepted a glass of brandy from one of his seconds, the sabers were again swabbed with antiseptic and the Bolivian walked jauntily to the field where Herr Mittelstaedt waited. There were the usual formalities, and Smooth seated himself on the running board of the car to watch.

Mittelstaedt was much better than Mueller had been. He fought carefully and saved his strength. Valera thrust and the German parried easily. He did not attack in return, but for a solid five minutes let Valera do the forcing. Then he made his move.

It was fast as light—a short slash that would have opened Valera's skull had it landed. He forgot his caution and lowered his blade to thrust. Valera stepped in, parried and straightened his arm. Smooth reached for another cigarette as the blade went home.

CHAPTER XXIX

CRASH PARTY

HE PUT out his hand when Valera walked from the field and the Bolivian shook it warmly. There was more brandy, more conversation, more arrangements.

Then one of Colonel Salgar's friends came toward the car with a richly carved hardwood box. He opened the cover and offered it to Smooth. Two beautifully matched dueling pistols rested on their cushion of black velvet.

"No dice," said Smooth. "I might miss him with the first shot and it takes too long to reload. Ask him if he wants to make it automatics."

"That ees vary irregular," said the second.

"Sorry—it's the best I can do. Of course, if Colonel Salgar is afraid to use that gat he carries—"

"Colonel Salgar is not afraid!" said the second. He marched back to the car beneath the trees.

Again there was conversation. Señor Valera joined Salgar's friends and whatever he said to the colonel had the desired effect. Salgar took a heavy automatic from

the car, bowed to Valera and walked onto the field.

"The distance will be fifteen paces," said Valera when he returned. "Closer would be murder, with automatics. You will each fire six times. May I examine your gun, *señor*?"

Smooth handed over his automatic. One of Colonel Salgar's representatives examined it closely, saw that Valera had extracted the extra shells from the clip and went back to the car. One of Valera's men did the same with Salgar's gun. Then Valera shook hands with Smooth and pointed to the field.

"It may straighten your aim to know Colonel Salgar is sometimes spoken of as the next president," said Valera. "He is greatly favored by the German group."

"One of Hitler's boys, eh? Thanks, *señor*."

He stepped onto the field and suddenly wondered what had happened to his legs. They felt light and seemed to be moving of their own accord. The gun in his hand had grown heavy, and for the first time in months Smooth realized how beautiful the sun could be in the morning.

Why, this was a perfectly grand world! There were trees and birds and flowers—and Gilda. A fine chump he'd been! Colonel Salgar could probably shoot the teeth out of a comb at a hundred yards. And now he was going to tattoo a design on Smooth's chest.

"*Buenas dias, señor*. Have you noticed how nice the sun is this morning?"

It was Colonel Salgar talking, and Smooth wondered if the mug was a mind reader. Then he realized that Salgar's cheeks weren't any too rosy for all his smiling. He winked at the officer and turned to a man who was probably the referee.

"What's the set-up?" he asked.

"You will stand with the backs together," said the official. "I will say in English to commence. You will walk fifteen paces. You will turn and I will call in English—Fire! You will fire until guns are empty or one is dead."

"Very simple, indeed," said Smooth.

He stood with his back to Colonel Salgar and wondered whether the Bolivian was having trouble with his knees, too. It wasn't so much that Smooth objected to people shooting at him. Dozens had tried that. But the formality and quiet of the place was getting him. And those blossoms that looked so beautiful kept reminding him of floral wreaths. He heard the official give the word and he stepped off.

One, two, three—Smooth wondered what would happen if he turned quickly and dropped one into Salgar's hip pocket. Then he wondered what would happen if Salgar decided to do the same. Eight, nine, ten—it would be just like that mug to try a fast one. Thirteen, fourteen—and now for the payoff!

A GUN crashed as Smooth turned. "Why, you—" He leveled his automatic. His legs were all right now. That two-bit Bolivian had tried to jump the barrier.

Smooth saw that the official's arm was still high. Then he saw that Colonel Salgar was equally surprised.

"Okay, gentlemen!" called a voice from a nearby clump of trees. "Go right ahead with the party!"

That voice was familiar! Smooth crouched and turned toward the trees. Again a gun crashed. Smooth saw Clipper Delf step forward and fire three fast ones toward a flower garden at his left. The gunman was running now, weaving from side to side. He fired again.

A man stumbled from the garden. There was a gun in his hand and he was trying to lift it. He fell forward as Clipper's automatic crashed again.

"What gives, Clipper?" yelled Smooth.

"A couple of bums tried to make this a sure thing!" called the gunman. "Keep your eye on that dude with gun!"

Smooth spun to find Colonel Salgar's gun leveled. He heard the whine of a slug and the crash of the officer's gun.

As Smooth aimed he saw fire spurt from Salgar's gun again. Then his own au-

tomatic was kicking back against the heel of his hand. The first shot was bad. The second was better. Smooth got a third across and saw the colonel drop.

The quiet field had become a madhouse. Señor Valera had caught up a saber and was running toward the group near the German's car. Other guns were talking and men were running for cover.

Smooth sprinted across the field toward the flower bed. Clipper Delf was shoving shells into a clip. He waved to Smooth and laughed.

"You looked very elegant out there, Smooth," he said. "Too bad the boys from Lindy's couldn't see you."

"Never mind the smart cracks. What are you doing in La Paz?"

"Keeping you alive. Gilda was afraid someone would try to put a crease in your brow—and she was right!" He pointed toward the flower garden. "Four of them back here. Let's go, pal."

Smooth ran with Clipper toward the flower-laden bushes. A gun slammed and he tried a few quick ones in return. Clipper shouted and pointed to the left.

Smooth saw three men running. He had one shell left in his gun. He leveled and squeezed. Clipper fired at the same time.

A man went down and the other two raced toward a car parked further along the dirt road. They reached it, leaped aboard; and the car rushed off along the road.

"Two out of four," said Clipper. "Not so good, I must say."

"Did you see who they were—the ones in the car?"

"Yes. Steve Dreyfus and that Garado chump."

"Check," said Smooth. "I thought I recognized Steve." He pointed to the man who had gone down. "And here's our old pal Stacey Bellville. He had to fly all the way from Cuba to get this."

HE KNELT beside the gambler and rolled him over. Stacey's eyes were open and he tried for a grin. Two bullets had caught him in the back and when he

attempted to talk he coughed. Smooth lifted his head while Clipper Delf mechanically shoved shells into his clip.

"Nice—shooting," said Bellville.

"Not bad," said Smooth. "But why did you tie in with this mob, Stacey? I can understand a lot of things but I can't understand an American fighting his own kind."

"American?" said Stacey. He coughed and breathed heavily. "Not me, Smooth. The real name—is Schlözer—born in Schönhausen, like Bismarck. Always—always worked for the—*Vaterland*."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Smooth quietly.

"Soon," said the gambler. He gulped and tried again. "You'll lose—lose—lose! First South America, then—then the—world!"

Smooth felt the man's head sag. He lowered it to the ground and turned to watch Clipper Delf looking at the first man who had been hit. Smooth joined him and saw that Clipper had nailed Señor Dultanto neatly between the eyes.

"Dultanto, eh?" he said. "Too bad you're so handy with that gun, Clipper. This chump could have told us plenty."

"Can I help it if he forgot to duck?"

Smooth laughed and refilled his gun. He walked with Clipper to Señor Valera's car and found the Bolivian had added another of the German's group to his score. The others had managed to get away in their car and now Valera was anxious to chase them.

"They are murderers!" he cried. "Such a thing has never before happened in La Paz. I apologize, *señor*, on behalf of my city—my country!"

"It's all right with me, *señor*," said Smooth. "The boys bit off a little more than they could chew." He gestured toward the others. "Any of your friends get hurt?"

"A few scratches," said Valera. "We will chase those scoundrels and later return to my home to see what can be done about this disgrace. When the gentlemen of La Paz hear of it, things will happen quickly.

That Salgar! An officer! He should have been roasted over a slow fire."

"Not a bad idea, either," said Smooth. He introduced Clipper Delf. "Unfortunately, I've got a few other things to do this mornings. I doubt that we could catch those duck-hunters, but my friend and I would appreciate a lift into town. Later, perhaps, I'll give you a ring."

"Señor Kyle, you are strange!" said Valera.

He motioned Clipper and Smooth into the car; the others joined them. . .

CHAPTER XXX

JOYRIDE FOR GILDA

GILDA was having a late breakfast in her sitting room at the Hotel Paris when Smooth and Clipper arrived. At least, a breakfast had been served; but it was still untouched.

She was wearing a powder-blue negligee of French flannel, and a pair of deep crimson mules. Her eyes were tired; and when Smooth bent to kiss her, Gilda caught his nose between a thumb and forefinger and squeezed hard.

"Easy on the schnozz!" cried Smooth.

"A fine ape you turned out to be," she said. "Can't a girl get one night's sleep in this town without worrying about how many people are going to toss bullets at you?"

"Who told you?"

Gilda's laugh was short. "As a government agent you make a fine Boy Scout, handsome. Clipper Delf has been tailing you ever since you reached town."

Smooth swung to face the gunman. "So that's it! Pete told me some egg was following me. If I hadn't been so busy I'd have come looking for you, Clipper."

"You did, once," said Clipper. "When you left Gilda's place you almost spotted me. Then that round-hipped gal with the soft eyes came along and you forgot everything."

"And why not?" said Smooth casually.

Gilda picked up a roll, buttered it carefully, and threw it at Smooth. He ducked

and Gilda lifted the coffee pot. Smooth put up both hands and backed into a corner.

"You and your *señoritas!*" said Gilda. "Why is it that every clue you follow is wearing a skirt?"

"Now wait a minute, taffy-head," said Smooth. He walked forward, holding both arms in front of him defensively. "I guessed right about Maria Valera. She's a good kid and she's pitching for our side. I slept at the Valera house last night and—"

"You *what?*?" said Gilda and she lifted the pot again.

"With her *uncle!*" yelled Smooth. "He's a rare old bird; likes to play with swords and things."

"Explain—but fast!"

Smooth told of what had happened and Clipper put in an occasional word. While Clipper talked Smooth helped himself to Gilda's fruit juice. While Smooth talked Clipper sampled the eggs.

In desperation Gilda ordered two more breakfasts sent to the room and the men went on with their story. When they had finished Gilda shook her head slowly.

"It all adds up to zero," she said bluntly. "All this talk about Prieto, Aldoza and the rest gets us nowhere."

"But those are the birds who intend to take over! They want to grab the government!"

"That's something for Valera and his pals to worry about," said Gilda. "We weren't sent here to run the country."

"Sent here?" cried Smooth. "I had to think my way down here!"

"Quiet, handsome!" said Gilda. "You've got to face McNeary before long. And when he sees you he's going to ask two questions."

"What's the first?"

"Where did Big Reno's gun come from?"

Smooth laughed. "Get up to date, gorg-eous. I learned the Germans had a submarine base near the Isle of Pines. Every time they knocked off an ammunition carrier, they grabbed some stuff and brought it to this base. That's where Reno got his gun, and that gives me one hundred percent on the first question."

"Remarkable," said Gilda quietly. "Now try the second."

"Let's have it."

"What happened to the munitions after they were delivered to the Isle of Pines? Where did they go?"

"Wait a minute—that's two questions."

"Then answer the first."

"With pleasure," said Smooth. "They were loaded onto a seaplane, and that makes my score perfect."

"Not quite! Where did the plane go?"

SMOOTH breathed deeply. "I was afraid you'd do that, beautiful. Now you've gone and spoiled everything." He broke a piece of toast, reached across the serving table and dunked it in Gilda's coffee.

"Just between you and me and the next-door neighbors—I haven't the slightest idea where the plane went. That's why I'm bouncing around the mountains instead of tearing a herring with the boys in Lindy's."

"Did you learn anything from Valera?"

"Plenty," said Smooth. "He taught me how to take off a German's ear in one easy lesson."

Gilda rested her head on one hand and looked long at Smooth. Often she wondered what crazy twists of luck had kept him alive. And more often she wondered how he had managed to break some of the toughest cases ever handed to an agent. Nothing he did ever seemed to make sense. He had made enough wrong guesses to qualify him as a sport writer for any newspaper. But it never bothered Smooth Kyle.

Perhaps that was the answer. Nothing really bothered him. He took the good breaks with the bad, confident that the sun would come up in the morning and everything would be right again. And now he was facing her across a breakfast table less than an hour after a gun fight, and Gilda knew he had completely forgotten the dangers of the morning.

"Would it interest you to know," she said slowly, "that I've been working while you were following those feminine leads around La Paz?"

"That's your own fault," he answered.

"A girl can have a lot of fun in La Paz if she meets the right people."

"Smooth! Be serious."

"But I am," he said. "I've been waiting for the past half hour for you to tell me all about yourself. So has Clipper—haven't you, feller?" He turned to Clipper who had seated himself in an easy chair. The gunman was fast asleep.

"A fine thing!" said Smooth, and reached for the water pitcher. "Here we are, fighting the battle of Bolivia and that chump goes to sleep."

"Let him alone," said Gilda wearily. "And please try to realize you've got work to do. This place is boiling. I could feel it last night. We've got to move fast, Smooth."

"In which direction?"

Gilda held her breath and counted ten. There was a knock on the door and she called; "Come in."

Entrialgo stepped into the room followed by a young Bolivian officer who wore the gold wings of the Flying Corps on his tunic. Entrialgo bowed to Gilda, shook hands with Smooth and introduced the young officer as Captain Padilla.

SMOOTH sized up the newcomer quickly. About twenty-five years old, olive skinned with dark hair, not a bad jaw and a good pair of eyes. Smooth liked the way Padilla had gripped his hand; but didn't particularly like the way the young officer bowed and lifted Gilda's fingers to his lips.

"Ah, you are more beautiful than the blue-white peaks of the Andes when they are touched by the early sun, *señorita*," said Padilla. "You are like the heaven's new snow in the first flush of the morning-glow."

"And just as cold," added Smooth quietly.

Gilda wrinkled the tip of her nose at him and turned to smile at Captain Padilla. She motioned to a chair beside her.

"Sit down, Captain," she said, and her eyes made indefinite promises. "Were you successful this morning?"

"Who could fail when performing a mission for you, *señorita*?" said Padilla. "Ask

for the stars and I will fly to the heavens and bring them back to you."

"In a green and yellow basket?" said Smooth innocently.

Gilda ignored him and gave Padilla one of her very best smiles that were always accompanied by a slight flutter of her long lashes. Smooth saw the Bolivian flier reach for the chair. Gilda poured coffee and Padilla's hand trembled as he took the cup. His eyes lingered on Gilda's bright blond hair, and Smooth knew Gilda's evening had not been wasted.

"Then the plane is ready for use, Captain?" she asked.

"Within an hour," said Padilla. "The guns have been mounted and the racks are being bolted into place at this very moment. It can take off before noon, *señorita*."

"Take off?" cried Smooth. "For where? What happens around this place?"

Entrialgo laughed and nodded toward the Bolivian flier. "Captain Padilla is in charge of the army air field. He has been recommended to us by Señor Conover as an ardent patriot. One who loves Bolivia and is not in sympathy with those who would try to make it a Nazi state. We have asked him to equip my plane with bomb racks and machine guns."

"Why?" asked Smooth.

Entrialgo lifted one shoulder in a Latin gesture. "If our friend in the blue plane returns while we are searching for the ammunition depot, I would like to show him what real sport is like."

"Oh, we're going to look for the ammunition depot, eh?" said Smooth. His laugh was short. "I don't know much about Bolivian geography, but I *do* know there's over half a million square miles of it. If you fly eight hours a day you may find something in about forty years."

"It is not quite so bad," said Entrialgo. He turned to the Bolivian. "Will you tell Señor Kyle what we propose to do?"

"It will be a pleasure," said Padilla. He smiled at Smooth while Gilda refilled his coffee cup. "The Bolivian plateau is the only section of the country with which we

are concerned. It would be the logical place for such an ammunition depot.

"Fortunately the plateau is only eighty-six miles wide. It extends between the Cordillera Real and the Cordillera Occidental—two mountain ranges. The southern part is mostly desert and would hardly be a suitable landing place for a seaplane.

"That leaves us only two districts—the Yungas, which are the tropical valleys north of La Paz in the lake country, and the Valles, which are the valleys along the mountain ranges."

"How much ground do you have to cover?"

"Only a little over a thousand square miles."

Smooth shook his head wearily. "In other words you're going to try to find an acre of ground in a place the size of the state of Rhode Island—is that it?"

"I do not know of Rhode Island," said

Padilla shortly, keeping his eyes on Gilda.

Entrialgo leaned forward. "It is not quite so difficult," he said. "We will search only along the shores of the lakes and rivers."

"And wind up with a headache!" said Smooth. "Deal me out of that picture."

"Maybe you've got a better idea?" asked Gilda. She looked hard at Smooth and dropped a slow lid over one eye. "If you haven't, why not let us try this?"

She turned to Padilla and gave him a ten-dollar smile. "Señor Kyle likes to talk but he rarely says anything. If you will return to the field I am sure he will join you later for the first flight."

"And you, *señorita*?" said Padilla. "Will you fly with me?"

"I can think of nothing I would rather do," said Gilda. She stood and walked to the door with Padilla and Entrialgo. "Phone us when the plane is ready."

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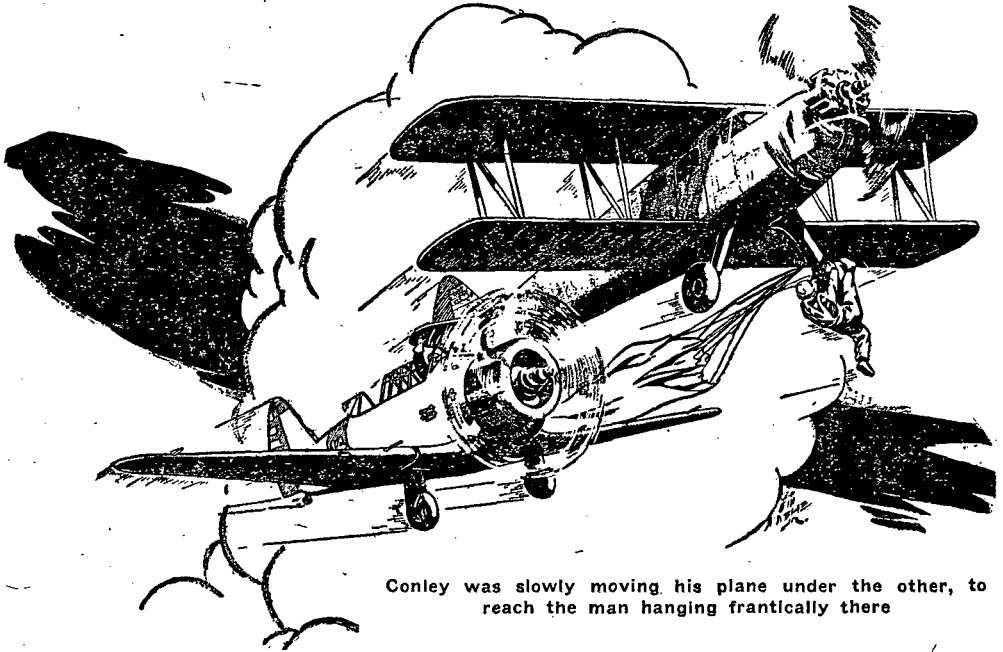
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Conley was slowly moving his plane under the other, to reach the man hanging frantically there

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Author of "Wings for Yankee Doodle", "The Devil Had a Treasure", etc.

I

ED STUART dogtrotted to catch up with Jacobs and Frank Conley as they walked together from hangar line to the solo-flight stage. His good-looking face was a moist red, but not from his running.

"That was a fast one you pulled, Careful," he growled. "You're getting pretty smart since Johns patted you on the back for your stunt flying."

Frank Conley turned to meet the cadet's anger. Ed was getting set to start a fight.

He'd known Ed so many years, fought with him so much, that he could read the signs.

"I don't get you, Ed," he said mildly. There was a placating smile on his round, homely face to meet the other's scowl. Like Ed Stuart he was close to six feet in height, but of a lighter build. Ed could probably lick him. He usually had when they were kids, though he hadn't found it so easy.

"What's on your mind, Ed?"

"That date for the graduation show. Thought you were pretty cute gettin' it so far ahead, didn't you?"