

WHOSE BUSINESS IS TO LIVE

Stanton Davies and Jim Wemple ceased from their talk to listen to an increase of uproar in the street. A volley of stones thrummed and boomed the wire mosquito nettings that protected the windows. It was a hot night, and the sweat of the heat stood on their faces as they listened. Arose the incoherent clamor of the mob, punctuated by individual cries in Mexican-Spanish. Least terrible among the obscene threats were: "Death to the Gringos!" "Kill the American pigs!" "Drown the American dogs in the sea!"

Stanton Davies and Jim Wemple shrugged their shoulders patiently to each other, and resumed their conversation, talking louder in order to make themselves heard above the uproar.

"The question is how," Wemple said. "It's forty-seven miles to Panuco, by river----"

"And the land's impossible, with Zaragoza's and Villa's men on the loot and maybe fraternizing," Davies agreed.

Wemple nodded and continued: "And she's at the East Coast Magnolia, two miles beyond, if she isn't back at the hunting camp. We've got to get her----"

"We've played pretty square in this matter, Wemple," Davies said. "And we might as well speak up and acknowledge what each of us knows the other knows. You want her. I want her."

Wemple lighted a cigarette and nodded.

"And now's the time when it's up to us to make a show as if we didn't want her and that all we want is just to save her and get her down here."

"And a truce until we do save her--I get you," Wempel affirmed.

"A truce until we get her safe and sound back here in Tampico, or aboard a battleship. After that? ..."

Both men shrugged shoulders and beamed on each other as their hands met in ratification.

Fresh volleys of stones thrummed against the wire-screened windows; a boy's voice rose shrilly above the clamor, proclaiming death to the Gringos; and the house reverberated to the heavy crash of some battering ram against the street-door downstairs. Both men, snatching up automatic rifles, ran down to where their fire could command the threatened door.

"If they break in we've got to let them have it," Wemple said.

Davies nodded quiet agreement, then inconsistently burst out with a lurid string of oaths.

"To think of it!" he explained his wrath. "One out of three of those curs outside has worked for you or me--lean-bellied, barefooted, poverty-stricken, glad for ten centavos a day if they could only get work. And we've given them steady jobs and a hundred and fifty centavos a a day, and here they are yelling for our blood."

"Only the half breeds," Davies corrected.

"You know what I mean," Wemple replied. "The only peons we've lost are those that have been run off or shot."

The attack on the door ceasing, they returned upstairs. Half a dozen scattered shots from farther along the street seemed to draw away the mob, for the neighborhood became comparatively quiet.

A whistle came to them through the open windows, and a man's voice calling:

"Wemple! Open the door! It's Habert! Want to talk to you!"

Wemple went down, returning in several minutes with a tidily-paunched, well-built, gray-haired American of fifty. He shook hands with Davies and flung himself into a chair, breathing heavily. He did not relinquish

his clutch on the Colt's 44 automatic pistol, although he immediately addressed himself to the task of fishing a filled clip of cartridges from the pocket of his linen coat. He had arrived hatless and breathless, and the blood from a stone-cut on the cheek oozed down his face. He, too, in a fit of anger, springing to his feet when he had changed clips in his pistol, burst out with mouth-filling profanity.

"They had an American flag in the dirt, stamping and spitting on it. And they told me to spit on it."

Wemple and Davies regarded him with silent interrogation.

"Oh, I know what you're wondering!" he flared out. "Would I a-spit on it in the pinch? That's what's eating you. I'll answer. Straight out, brass tacks, I WOULD. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

He paused to help himself to a cigar from the box on the table and to light it with a steady and defiant hand.

"Hell!--I guess this neck of the woods knows Anthony Habert, and you can bank on it that it's never located his yellow streak. Sure, in the pinch, I'd spit on Old Glory. What the hell d'ye think I'm going on the streets for a night like this? Didn't I skin out of the Southern Hotel half an hour ago, where there are forty buck Americans, not counting their women, and all armed? That was safety. What d'ye think I came here for?--to rescue you?"

His indignation lumped his throat into silence, and he seemed shaken as with an apoplexy.

"Spit it out," Davies commanded dryly.

"I'll tell you," Habert exploded. "It's Billy Boy. Fifty miles up country and twenty-thousand throat-cutting federals and rebels between him and me. D'ye know what that boy'd do, if he was here in Tampico and I was fifty miles up the Panuco? Well, I know. And I'm going to do the same--go and get him."

"We're figuring on going up," Wemple assured him.

"And that's why I headed here--Miss Drexel, of course?"

Both men acquiesced and smiled. It was a time when men dared speak of matters which at other times tabooed speech.

"Then the thing's to get started," Habert exclaimed, looking at his watch. "It's midnight now. We've got to get to the river and get a boat--"

But the clamor of the returning mob came through the windows in answer.

Davies was about to speak, when the telephone rang, and Wemple sprang to

the instrument.

"It's Carson," he interjected, as he listened. "They haven't cut the wires across the river yet.--Hello, Carson. Was it a break or a cut? ... Bully for you.... Yes, move the mules across to the potrero beyond Tamcochin.... Who's at the water station? ... Can you still 'phone him? ... Tell him to keep the tanks full, and to shut off the main to Arico. Also, to hang on till the last minute, and keep a horse saddled to cut and run for it. Last thing before he runs, he must jerk out the 'phone.... Yes, yes, yes. Sure. No breeds. Leave full-blooded Indians in charge. Gabriel is a good hombre. Heaven knows, once we're chased out, when we'll get back.... You can't pinch down Jaramillo under twenty-five hundred barrels. We've got storage for ten days. Gabriel'll have to handle it. Keep it moving, if we have to run it into the river----"

"Ask him if he has a launch," Habert broke in.

"He hasn't," was Wemple's answer. "The federals commandeered the last one at noon."

"Say, Carson, how are you going to make your get-away?" Wemple queried.

The man to whom he talked was across the Panuco, on the south side, at the tank farm.

"Says there isn't any get-away," Wemple vouchsafed to the other two.

"The federals are all over the shop, and he can't understand why they haven't raided him hours ago."

"... Who? Campos? That skunk! ... all right.... Don't be worried if you don't hear from me. I'm going up river with Davies and Habert.... Use your judgment, and if you get a safe chance at Campos, pot him.... Oh, a hot time over here. They're battering our doors now. Yes, by all means ... Good-by, old man."

Wemple lighted a cigarette and wiped his forehead.

"You know Campos, José H. Campos," he volunteered. "The dirty cur's stuck Carson up for twenty thousand pesos. We had to pay, or he'd have compelled half our peons to enlist or set the wells on fire. And you know, Davies, what we've done for him in past years. Gratitude? Simple decency? Great Scott!"

* * * * *

It was the night of April twenty-first. On the morning of the twenty-first the American marines and bluejackets had landed at Vera Cruz and seized the custom house and the city. Immediately the news was telegraphed, the vengeful Mexican mob had taken possession of the

streets of Tampico and expressed its disapproval of the action of the United States by tearing down American flags and crying death to the Americans.

There was nothing save its own spinelessness to deter the mob from carrying out its threat. Had it battered down the doors of the Southern Hotel, or of other hotels, or of residences such as Wemple's, a fight would have started in which the thousands of federal soldiers in Tampico would have joined their civilian compatriots in the laudable task of decreasing the Gringo population of that particular portion of Mexico. There should have been American warships to act as deterrents; but through some inexplicable excess of delicacy, or strategy, or heaven knows what, the United States, when it gave its orders to take Vera Cruz, had very carefully withdrawn its warships from Tampico to the open Gulf a dozen miles away. This order had come to Admiral Mayo by wireless from Washington, and thrice he had demanded the order to be repeated, ere, with tears in his eyes, he had turned his back on his countrymen and countrywomen and steamed to sea.

* * * * *

"Of all asinine things, to leave us in the lurch this way!" Habert was denouncing the powers that be of his country. "Mayo'd never have done it. Mark my words, he had to take program from Washington. And here we are, and our dear ones scattered for fifty miles back up country.... Say, if I lose Billy Boy I'll never dare go home to face the wife.--Come

on. Let the three of us make a start. We can throw the fear of God into any gang on the streets."

"Come on over and take a squint," Davies invited from where he stood, somewhat back from the window, looking down into the street.

It was gorged with rioters, all haranguing, cursing, crying out death, and urging one another to smash the doors, but each hanging back from the death he knew waited behind those doors for the first of the rush.

"We can't break through a bunch like that, Habert," was Davies' comment.

"And if we die under their feet we'll be of little use to Billy Boy or anybody else up the Panuco," Wemple added. "And if----"

A new movement of the mob caused him to break off. It was splitting before a slow and silent advance of a file of white-clad men.

"Bluejackets--Mayo's come back for us after all," Habert muttered.

"Then we can get a navy launch," Davies said.

The bedlam of the mob died away, and, in silence, the sailors reached the street door and knocked for admittance. All three went down to open it, and to discover that the callers were not Americans but two German lieutenants and half a dozen German marines. At sight of the Americans,

the rage of the mob rose again, and was quelled by the grounding of the rifle butts of the marines.

"No, thank you," the senior lieutenant, in passable English, declined the invitation to enter. He unconcernedly kept his cigar alive at such times that the mob drowned his voice. "We are on the way back to our ship. Our commander conferred with the English and Dutch commanders; but they declined to cooperate, so our commander has undertaken the entire responsibility. We have been the round of the hotels. They are to hold their own until daybreak, when we'll take them off. We have given them rockets such as these.--Take them. If your house is entered, hold your own and send up a rocket from the roof. We can be here in force, in forty-five minutes. Steam is up in all our launches, launch crews and marines for shore duty are in the launches, and at the first rocket we shall start."

"Since you are going aboard now, we should like to go with you," Davies said, after having rendered due thanks.

The surprise and distaste on both lieutenants' faces was patent.

"Oh, no," Davies laughed. "We don't want refuge. We have friends fifty miles up river, and we want to get to the river in order to go up after them."

The pleasure on the officers' faces was immediate as they looked a

silent conference at each other.

"Since our commander has undertaken grave responsibility on a night like this, may we do less than take minor responsibility?" queried the elder.

To this the younger heartily agreed. In a trice, upstairs and down again, equipped with extra ammunition, extra pistols, and a pocket-bulging supply of cigars, cigarettes and matches, the three Americans were ready. Wemple called last instructions up the stairway to imaginary occupants being left behind, ascertained that the spring lock was on, and slammed the door.

The officers led, followed by the Americans, the rear brought up by the six marines; and the spitting, howling mob, not daring to cast a stone, gave way before them.

* * * * *

As they came alongside the gangway of the cruiser, they saw launches and barges lying in strings to the boat-booms, filled with men, waiting for the rocket signal from the beleaguered hotels. A gun thundered from close at hand, up river, followed by the thunder of numerous guns and the reports of many rifles fired very rapidly.

"Now what's the Topila whanging away at?" Habert complained, then joined the others in gazing at the picture.

A searchlight, evidently emanating from the Mexican gunboat, was stabbing the darkness to the middle of the river, where it played upon the water. And across the water, the center of the moving circle of light, flashed a long, lean speedboat. A shell burst in the air a hundred feet astern of it. Somewhere, outside the light, other shells were bursting in the water; for they saw the boat rocked by the waves from the explosions. They could guess the whizzing of the rifle bullets.

But for only several minutes the spectacle lasted. Such was the speed of the boat that it gained shelter behind the German, when the Mexican gunboat was compelled to cease fire. The speedboat slowed down, turned in a wide and heeling circle, and ranged up alongside the launch at the gangway.

The lights from the gangway showed but one occupant, a tow-headed, greasy-faced, blond youth of twenty, very lean, very calm, very much satisfied with himself.

"If it ain't Peter Tonsburg!" Habert ejaculated, reaching out a hand to shake. "Howdy, Peter, howdy. And where in hell are you hellbent for, surging by the Topila in such scandalous fashion!"

Peter, a Texas-born Swede of immigrant parents, filled with the old Texas traditions, greasily shook hands with Wemple and Davies as well, saying "Howdy," as only the Texan born can say it.

"Me," he answered Habert. "I ain't hellbent nowhere exceptin' to get away from the shell-fire. She's a caution, that Topila. Huh! but I limbered 'em up some. I was goin' every inch of twenty-five. They was like amateurs blazin' away at canvasback."

"Which Chill is it?" Wemple asked.

"Chill II," Peter answered. "It's all that's left. Chill I a Greaser--you know 'm--Campos--commandeered this noon. I was runnin' Chill III when they caught me at sundown. Made me come in under their guns at the East Coast outfit, and fired me out on my neck.

"Now the boss'd gone over in this one to Tampico in the early evening, and just about ten minutes ago I spots it landin' with a sousy bunch of Federals at the East Coast, and swipes it back accordin'. Where's the boss? He ain't hurt, is he? Because I'm going after him."

"No, you're not, Peter," Davies said. "Mr. Frisbie is safe at the Southern Hotel, all except a five-inch scalp wound from a brick that's got him down with a splitting headache. He's safe, so you're going with us, going to take us, I mean, up beyond Panuco town."

"Huh?--I can see myself," Peter retorted, wiping his greasy nose on a wad of greasy cotton waste. "I got some cold. Besides, this night-drivin' ain't good for my complexion."

"My boy's up there," Habert said.

"Well, he's bigger'n I am, and I reckon he can take care of himself."

"And there's a woman there--Miss Drexel," Davies said quietly.

"Who? Miss Drexel? Why didn't you say so at first!" Peter demanded grievously. He sighed and added, "Well, climb in an' make a start. Better get your Dutch friends to donate me about twenty gallons of gasoline if you want to get anywhere."

* * * * *

"Won't do you no good to lay low," Peter Tonsburg remarked, as, at full speed, headed up river, the Topila's searchlight stabbed them.

"High or low, if one of them shells hits in the vicinity--good night!"

Immediately thereafter the Topila erupted. The roar of the Chill's exhaust nearly drowned the roar of the guns, but the fragile hull of the craft was shaken and rocked by the bursting shells. An occasional bullet thudded into or pinged off the Chill, and, despite Peter's warning that, high or low, they were bound to get it if it came to them, every man on board, including Peter, crouched, with chest contracted by drawn-in shoulders, in an instinctive and purely

unconscious effort to lessen the area of body he presented as a target or receptacle for flying fragments of steel.

The Topila was a federal gunboat. To complicate the affair, the constitutionalists, gathered on the north shore in the siege of Tampico, opened up on the speedboat with many rifles and a machine gun.

"Lord, I'm glad they're Mexicans, and not Americans," Habert observed, after five mad minutes in which no damage had been received. "Mexicans are born with guns in their hands, and they never learn to use them."

Nor was the Chill or any man aboard damaged when at last she rounded the bend of river that shielded her from the searchlight.

"I'll have you in Panuco town in less'n three hours, ... if we don't hit a log," Peter leaned back and shouted in Wemple's ear. "And if we do hit driftwood, I'll have you in the swim quicker than that."

Chill II tore her way through the darkness, steered by the tow-headed youth who knew every foot of the river and who guided his course by the loom of the banks in the dim starlight. A smart breeze, kicking up spiteful wavelets on the wider reaches, splashed them with sheeted water as well as fine-flung spray. And, in the face of the warmth of the tropic night, the wind, added to the speed of the boat, chilled them through their wet clothes.

"Now I know why she was named the Chill," Habert observed betwixt chattering teeth.

But conversation languished during the nearly three hours of drive through the darkness. Once, by the exhaust, they knew that they passed an unlighted launch bound down stream. And once, a glare of light, near the south bank, as they passed through the Toreno field, aroused brief debate as to whether it was the Toreno wells, or the bungalow on Merrick's banana plantation that flared so fiercely.

At the end of an hour, Peter slowed down and ran in to the bank.

"I got a cache of gasoline here--ten gallons," he explained, "and it's just as well to know it's here for the back trip." Without leaving the boat, fishing arm-deep into the brush, he announced, "All hunky-dory." He proceeded to oil the engine. "Huh!" he soliloquized for their benefit. "I was just readin' a magazine yarn last night. 'Whose Business Is to Die,' was its title. An' all I got to say is, 'The hell it is.' A man's business is to live. Maybe you thought it was our business to die when the Topila was pepper-in' us. But you was wrong. We're alive, ain't we? We beat her to it. That's the game. Nobody's got any business to die. I ain't never goin' to die, if I've got any say about it."

He turned over the crank, and the roar and rush of the Chill put an end to speech.

There was no need for Wemple or Davies to speak further in the affair closest to their hearts. Their truce to love-making had been made as binding as it was brief, and each rival honored the other with a firm belief that he would commit no infraction of the truce. Afterward was another matter. In the meantime they were one in the effort to get Beth Drexel back to the safety of riotous Tampico or of a war vessel.

It was four o'clock when they passed by Panuco Town. Shouts and songs told them that the federal detachment holding the place was celebrating its indignation at the landing of American bluejackets in Vera Cruz. Sentinels challenged the *Chill* from the shore and shot at random at the noise of her in the darkness.

A mile beyond, where a lighted river steamer with steam up lay at the north bank, they ran in at the Apshodel wells. The steamer was small, and the nearly two hundred Americans--men, women, and children--crowded her capacity. Blasphemous greetings of pure joy and geniality were exchanged between the men, and Habert learned that the steamboat was waiting for his Billy Boy, who, astride a horse, was rounding up isolated drilling gangs who had not yet learned that the United States had seized Vera Cruz and that all Mexico was boiling.

Habert climbed out to wait and to go down on the steamer, while the three that remained on the *Chill*, having learned that Miss Drexel was not with the refugees, headed for the Dutch Company on the south

shore. This was the big gusher, pinched down from one hundred and eighty-five thousand daily barrels to the quantity the company was able to handle. Mexico had no quarrel with Holland, so that the superintendent, while up, with night guards out to prevent drunken soldiers from firing his vast lakes of oil, was quite unemotional. Yes, the last he had heard was that Miss Drexel and her brother were back at the hunting lodge. No; he had not sent any warnings, and he doubted that anybody else had. Not till ten o'clock the previous evening had he learned of the landing at Vera Cruz. The Mexicans had turned nasty as soon as they heard of it, and they had killed Miles Forman at the Empire Wells, run off his labor, and looted the camp. Horses? No; he didn't have horse or mule on the place. The federals had commandeered the last animal weeks back. It was his belief, however, that there were a couple of plugs at the lodge, too worthless even for the Mexicans to take.

"It's a hike," Davies said cheerfully.

"Six miles of it," Wemple agreed, equally cheerfully. "Let's beat it."

A shot from the river, where they had left Peter in the boat, started them on the run for the bank. A scattering of shots, as from two rifles, followed. And while the Dutch superintendent, in execrable Spanish, shouted affirmations of Dutch neutrality into the menacing dark, across the gunwale of Chill II they found the body of the tow-headed youth whose business it had been not to die.

* * * * *

For the first hour, talking little, Davies and Wemple stumbled along the apology for a road that led through the jungle to the lodge. They did discuss the glares of several fires to the east along the south bank of Panuco River, and hoped fervently that they were dwellings and not wells.

"Two billion dollars worth of oil right here in the Ebaño field alone," Davies grumbled.

"And a drunken Mexican, whose whole carcass and immortal soul aren't worth ten pesos including hair, hide, and tallow, can start the bonfire with a lighted wad of cotton waste," was Wemple's contribution. "And if ever she starts, she'll gut the field of its last barrel."

Dawn, at five, enabled them to accelerate their pace; and six o'clock found them routing out the occupants of the lodge.

"Dress for rough travel, and don't stop for any frills," Wemple called around the corner of Miss Drexel's screened sleeping porch.

"Not a wash, nothing," Davies supplemented grimly, as he shook hands with Charley Drexel, who yawned and slipped up to them in pajamas. "Where are those horses, Charley? Still alive?"

Wemple finished giving orders to the sleepy peons to remain and care for the place, occupying their spare time with hiding the more valuable things, and was calling around the corner to Miss Drexel the news of the capture of Vera Cruz, when Davies returned with the information that the horses consisted of a pair of moth-eaten skates that could be depended upon to lie down and die in the first half mile.

Beth Drexel emerged, first protesting that under no circumstances would she be guilty of riding the creatures, and, next, her brunette skin and dark eyes still flushed warm with sleep, greeting the two rescuers.

"It would be just as well if you washed your face, Stanton," she told Davies; and, to Wemple: "You're just as bad, Jim. You are a pair of dirty boys."

"And so will you be," Wemple assured her, "before you get back to Tampico. Are you ready?"

"As soon as Juanita packs my hand bag."

"Heavens, Beth, don't waste time!" exclaimed Wemple. "Jump in and grab up what you want."

"Make a start--make a start," chanted Davies. "Hustle! Hustle!--Charley, get the rifle you like best and take it along. Get a couple for us."

"Is it as serious as that?" Miss Drexel queried.

Both men nodded.

"The Mexicans are tearing loose," Davies explained. "How they missed this place I don't know." A movement in the adjoining room startled him. "Who's that?" he cried.

"Why, Mrs. Morgan," Miss Drexel answered.

"Good heavens, Wemple, I'd forgotten her," groaned Davies. "How will we ever get her anywhere?"

"Let Beth walk, and relay the lady on the nags."

"She weighs a hundred and eighty," Miss Drexel laughed. "Oh, hurry, Martha! We're waiting on you to start!"

Muffled speech came through the partition, and then emerged a very short, stout, much-flustered woman of middle age.

"I simply can't walk, and you boys needn't demand it of me," was her plaint. "It's no use. I couldn't walk half a mile to save my life, and it's six of the worst miles to the river."

They regarded her in despair.

"Then you'll ride," said Davies. "Come on, Charley. We'll get a saddle on each of the nags."

Along the road through the tropic jungle, Miss Drexel and Juanita, her Indian maid, led the way. Her brother, carrying the three rifles, brought up the rear, while in the middle Davies and Wemple struggled with Mrs. Morgan and the two decrepit steeds. One, a flea-bitten roan, groaned continually from the moment Mrs. Morgan's burden was put upon him till she was shifted to the other horse. And this other, a mangy sorrel, invariably lay down at the end of a quarter of a mile of Mrs. Morgan.

Miss Drexel laughed and joked and encouraged; and Wemple, in brutal fashion, compelled Mrs. Morgan to walk every third quarter of a mile. At the end of an hour the sorrel refused positively to get up, and, so, was abandoned. Thereafter, Mrs. Morgan rode the roan alternate quarters of miles, and between times walked--if walk may describe her stumbling progress on two preposterously tiny feet with a man supporting her on either side.

A mile from the river, the road became more civilized, running along the side of a thousand acres of banana plantation.

"Parslow's," young Drexel said. "He'll lose a year's crop now on account of this mix-up."

"Oh, look what I've found!" Miss Drexel called from the lead.

"First machine that ever tackled this road," was young Drexel's judgment, as they halted to stare at the tire-tracks.

"But look at the tracks," his sister urged. "The machine must have come right out of the bananas and climbed the bank."

"Some machine to climb a bank like that," was Davies' comment. "What it did do was to go down the bank--take a scout after it, Charley, while Wemple and I get Mrs. Morgan off her fractious mount. No machine ever built could travel far through those bananas."

The flea-bitten roan, on its four legs upstanding, continued bravely to stand until the lady was removed, whereupon, with a long sigh, it sank down on the ground. Mrs. Morgan likewise sighed, sat down, and regarded her tiny feet mournfully.

"Go on, boys," she said. "Maybe you can find something at the river and send back for me."

But their indignant rejection of the plan never attained speech, for, at that instant, from the green sea of banana trees beneath them, came the sudden purr of an engine. A minute later the splutter of an exhaust told them the silencer had been taken off. The huge-fronded banana trees were

violently agitated as by the threshing of a hidden Titan. They could identify the changing of gears and the reversing and going ahead, until, at the end of five minutes, a long low, black car burst from the wall of greenery and charged the soft earth bank, but the earth was too soft, and when, two-thirds of the way up, beaten, Charley Drexel braked the car to a standstill, the earth crumbled from under the tires, and he ran it down and back, the way he had come, until half-buried in the bananas.

"A Merry Oldsmobile!" Miss Drexel quoted from the popular song, clapping her hands. "Now, Martha, your troubles are over."

"Six-cylinder, and sounds as if it hadn't been out of the shop a week, or may I never ride in a machine again," Wemple remarked, looking to Davies for confirmation.

Davies nodded.

"It's Allison's," he said. "Campos tried to shake him down for a private loan, and--well, you know Allison. He told Campos to go to. And Campos, in revenge, commandeered his new car. That was two days ago, before we lifted a hand at Vera Cruz. Allison told me yesterday the last he'd heard of the car it was on a steamboat bound up river. And here's where they ditched it--but let's get a hustle on and get her into the running."

Three attempts they made, with young Drexel at the wheel; but the soft

earth and the pitch of the grade baffled.

"She's got the power all right," young Drexel protested. "But she can't bite into that mush."

So far, they had spread on the ground the robes found in the car. The men now added their coats, and Wemple, for additional traction, unsaddled the roan, and spread the cinches, stirrup leathers, saddle blanket, and bridle in the way of the wheels. The car took the treacherous slope in a rush, with churning wheels biting into the woven fabrics; and, with no more than a hint of hesitation, it cleared the crest and swung into the road.

"Isn't she the spunky devil!" Drexel exulted. "Say, she could climb the side of a house if she could get traction."

"Better put on that silencer again, if you don't want to play tag with every soldier in the district," Wemple ordered, as they helped Mrs. Morgan in.

The road to the Dutch gusher compelled them to go through the outskirts of Panuco town. Indian and half breed women gazed stolidly at the strange vehicle, while the children and barking dogs clamorously advertised its progress. Once, passing long lines of tethered federal horses, they were challenged by a sentry; but at Wemple's "Throw on the juice!" the car took the rutted road at fifty miles an hour. A shot

whistled after them. But it was not the shot that made Mrs. Morgan scream. The cause was a series of hog-wallows masked with mud, which nearly tore the steering wheel from Drexel's hands before he could reduce speed.

"Wonder it didn't break an axle," Davies growled. "Go on and take it easy, Charley. We're past any interference."

They swung into the Dutch camp and into the beginning of their real troubles. The refugee steamboat had departed down river from the Asphodel camp; Chill II had disappeared, the superintendent knew not how, along with the body of Peter Tonsburg; and the superintendent was dubious of their remaining.

"I've got to consider the owners," he told them. "This is the biggest well in Mexico, and you know it--a hundred and eighty-five thousand barrels daily flow. I've no right to risk it. We have no trouble with the Mexicans. It's you Americans. If you stay here, I'll have to protect you. And I can't protect you, anyway. We'll all lose our lives and they'll destroy the well in the bargain. And if they fire it, it means the entire Ebaño oil field. The strata's too broken. We're flowing twenty thousand barrels now, and we can't pinch down any further. As it is, the oil's coming up outside the pipe. And we can't have a fight. We've got to keep the oil moving."

The men nodded. It was cold-blooded logic; but there was no fault to it.

The harassed expression eased on the superintendent's face, and he almost beamed on them for agreeing with him.

"You've got a good machine there," he continued. "The ferry's at the bank at Panuco, and once you're across, the rebels aren't so thick on the north shore. Why, you can beat the steamboat back to Tampico by hours. And it hasn't rained for days. The road won't be at all bad."

* * * * *

"Which is all very good," Davies observed to Wemple as they approached Panuco, "except for the fact that the road on the other side was never built for automobiles, much less for a long-bodied one like this. I wish it were the Four instead of the Six."

"And it would bother you with a Four to negotiate that hill at Aliso where the road switchbacks above the river."

"And we're going to do it with a Six or lose a perfectly good Six in trying," Beth Drexel laughed to them.

Avoiding the cavalry camp, they entered Panuco with all the speed the ruts permitted, swinging dizzy corners to the squawking of chickens and barking of dogs. To gain the ferry, they had to pass down one side of the great plaza which was the heart of the city. Peon soldiers, drowsing

in the sun or clustering around the cantinas, stared stupidly at them as they flashed past. Then a drunken major shouted a challenge from the doorway of a cantina and began vociferating orders, and as they left the plaza behind they could hear rising the familiar mob-cry "Kill the Gringos!"

"If any shooting begins, you women get down in the bottom of the car," Davies commanded. "And there's the ferry all right. Be careful, Charley."

The machine plunged directly down the bank through a cut so deep that it was more like a chute, struck the gangplank with a terrific bump, and seemed fairly to leap on board. The ferry was scarcely longer than the machine, and Drexel, visibly shaken by the closeness of the shave, managed to stop only when six inches remained between the front wheels and overboard.

It was a cable ferry, operated by gasoline, and, while Wemple cast off the mooring lines, Davies was making swift acquaintance with the engine. The third turn-over started it, and he threw it into gear with the windlass that began winding up the cable from the river's bottom.

By the time they were in midstream a score of horsemen rode out on the bank they had just left and opened a scattering fire. The party crowded in the shelter of the car and listened to the occasional ricochet of a bullet. Once, only, the car was struck.

"Here!--what are you up to!" Wemple demanded suddenly of Drexel, who had exposed himself to fish a rifle out of the car.

"Going to show the skunks what shooting is," was his answer.

"No, you don't," Wemple said. "We're not here to fight, but to get this party to Tampico." He remembered Peter Tonsburg's remark. "Whose business is to live, Charley--that's our business. Anybody can get killed. It's too easy these days."

Still under fire, they moored at the north shore, and when Davies had tossed overboard the igniter from the ferry engine and commandeered ten gallons of its surplus gasoline, they took the steep, soft road up the bank in a rush.

"Look at her climb," Drexel uttered gleefully. "That Aliso hill won't bother us at all. She'll put a crimp in it, that's what she'll do."

"It isn't the hill, it's the sharp turn of the zig-zag that's liable to put a crimp in her," Davies answered. "That road was never laid out for autos, and no auto has ever been over it. They steamboated this one up."

But trouble came before Aliso was reached. Where the road dipped abruptly into a small jag of hollow that was almost V-shaped, it arose out and became a hundred yards of deep sand. In order to have speed left

for the sand after he cleared the stiff up-grade of the V, Drexel was compelled to hit the trough of the V with speed. Wemple clutched Miss Drexel as she was on the verge of being bounced out. Mrs. Morgan, too solid for such airiness, screamed from the pain of the bump; and even the imperturbable Juanita fell to crossing herself and uttering prayers with exceeding rapidity.

The car cleared the crest and encountered the sand, going slower from moment to moment, slewing and writhing and squirming from side to side. The men leaped out and began shoving. Miss Drexel urged Juanita out and followed. But the car came to a standstill, and Drexel, looking back and pointing, showed the first sign of being beaten. Two things he pointed to: a constitutional soldier on horseback a quarter of a mile in the rear; and a portion of the narrow road that had fallen out bodily on the far slope of the V.

"Can't get at this sand unless we go back and try over, and we ditch the car if we try to back up that."

The ditch was a huge natural sump-hole, the stagnant surface of which was a-crawl with slime twenty feet beneath.

Davies and Wemple sprang to take the boy's place.

"You can't do it," he urged. "You can get the back wheels past, but right there you hit that little curve, and if you make it your front

wheel will be off the bank. If you don't make it, your back wheel'll be off."

Both men studied it carefully, then looked at each other.

"We've got to," said Davies.

"And we're going to," Wemple said, shoving his rival aside in comradely fashion and taking the post of danger at the wheel. "You're just as good as I at the wheel, Davies," he explained. "But you're a better shot. Your job's cut out to go back and hold off any Greasers that show up."

Davies took a rifle and strolled back with so ominous an air that the lone cavalryman put spurs to his horse and fled. Mrs. Morgan was helped out and sent plodding and tottering unaided on her way to the end of the sand stretch. Miss Drexel and Juanita joined Charley in spreading the coats and robes on the sand and in gathering and spreading small branches, brush, and armfuls of a dry, brittle shrub. But all three ceased from their exertions to watch Wemple as he shot the car backward down the V and up. The car seemed first to stand on one end, then on the other, and to reel drunkenly and to threaten to turn over into the sump-hole when its right front wheel fell into the air where the road had ceased to be. But the hind wheels bit and climbed the grade and out.

Without pause, gathering speed down the perilous slope, Wemple came ahead and up, gaining fifty feet of sand over the previous failure. More

of the alluvial soil of the road had dropped out at the bad place; but he took the V in reverse, overhung the front wheel as before, and from the top came ahead again. Four times he did this, gaining each time, but each time knocking a bigger hole where the road fell out, until Miss Drexel begged him not to try again.

He pointed to a squad of horsemen coming at a gallop along the road a mile in the rear, and took the V once again in reverse.

"If only we had more stuff," Drexel groaned to his sister, as he threw down a meager, hard-gathered armful of the dry and brittle shrub, and as Wemple once more, with rush and roar, shot down the V.

For an instant it seemed that the great car would turn over into the sump, but the next instant it was past. It struck the bottom of the hollow a mighty wallop, and bounced and upended to the steep pitch of the climb. Miss Drexel, seized by inspiration or desperation, with a quick movement stripped off her short, corduroy tramping-skirt, and, looking very lithe and boyish in slender-cut pongee bloomers, ran along the sand and dropped the skirt for a foothold for the slowly revolving wheels. Almost, but not quite, did the car stop, then, gathering way, with the others running alongside and shoving, it emerged on the hard road.

While they tossed the robes and coats and Miss Drexel's skirt into the bottom of the car and got Mrs. Morgan on board, Davies overtook them.

"Down on the bottom!--all of you!" he shouted, as he gained the running board and the machine sprang away. A scattering of shots came from the rear.

"Whose business is to live!--hunch down!" Davies yelled in Wemple's ear, accompanying the instruction with an open-handed blow on the shoulder.

"Live yourself," Wemple grumbled as he obediently hunched. "Get your head down. You're exposing yourself."

The pursuit lasted but a little while, and died away in an occasional distant shot.

"They've quit," Davies announced. "It never entered their stupid heads that they could have caught us on Aliso Hill."

* * * * *

"It can't be done," was Charley Drexel's quick judgment of youth, as the machine stopped and they surveyed the acute-angled turn on the stiff up-grade of Aliso. Beneath was the swift-running river.

"Get out everybody!" Wemple commanded. "Up-side, all of you, if you don't want the car to turn over on you. Spread traction wherever she needs it."

"Shoot her ahead, or back--she can't stop," Davies said quietly, from the outer edge of the road, where he had taken position. "The earth's crumbling away from under the tires every second she stands still."

"Get out from under, or she'll be on top of you," Wemple ordered, as he went ahead several yards.

But again, after the car rested a minute, the light, dry earth began to crack and crumble away from under the tires, rolling in a miniature avalanche down the steep declivity into the water. And not until Wemple had backed fifty yards down the narrow road did he find solid resting for the car. He came ahead on foot and examined the acute angle formed by the two zig-zags. Together with Davies he planned what was to be done.

"When you come you've got to come a-humping," Davies advised. "If you stop anywhere for more than seconds, it's good night, and the walking won't be fine."

"She's full of fight, and she can do it. See that hard formation right there on the inside wall. It couldn't have come at a better spot. If I don't make her hind wheels climb half way up it, we'll start walking about a second thereafter."

"She's a two-fisted piece of machinery," Davies encouraged. "I know her

kind. If she can't do it, no machine can that was ever made. Am I right, Beth?"

"She's a regular, spunky she-devil," Miss Drexel laughed agreement. "And so are the pair of you--er--of the male persuasion, I mean."

Miss Drexel had never seemed so fascinating to either of them as she was then, in the excitement quite unconscious of her abbreviated costume, her brown hair flying, her eyes sparkling, her lips smiling. Each man caught the other in that moment's pause to look, and each man sighed to the other and looked frankly into each other's eyes ere he turned to the work at hand.

Wemple came up with his usual rush, but it was a gauged rush; and Davies took the post of danger, the outside running board, where his weight would help the broad tires to bite a little deeper into the treacherous surface. If the road-edge crumbled away it was inevitable that he would be caught under the car as it rolled over and down to the river.

It was ahead and reverse, ahead and reverse, with only the briefest of pauses in which to shift the gears. Wemple backed up the hard formation on the inside bank till the car seemed standing on end, rushed ahead till the earth of the outer edge broke under the front tires and splashed in the water. Davies, now off, and again on the running board when needed, accompanied the car in its jerky and erratic progress, tossing robes and coats under the tires, calling instructions to Drexel

similarly occupied on the other side, and warning Miss Drexel out of the way.

"Oh, you Merry Olds, you Merry Olds, you Merry Olds," Wemple muttered aloud, as if in prayer, as he wrestled the car about the narrow area, gaining sometimes inches in pivoting it, sometimes fetching back up the inner wall precisely at the spot previously attained, and, once, having the car, with the surface of the roadbed under it, slide bodily and sidewise, two feet down the road.

The clapping of Miss Drexel's hands was the first warning Davies received that the feat was accomplished, and, swinging on to the running board, he found the car backing in the straight-away up the next zig-zag and Wemple still chanting ecstatically, "Oh, you Merry Olds, you Merry Olds!"

There were no more grades nor zigzags between them and Tampico, but, so narrow was the primitive road, two miles farther were backed before space was found in which to turn around. One thing of importance did lie between them and Tampico--namely the investing lines of the constitutionalists. But here, at noon, fortune favored in the form of three American soldiers of fortune, operators of machine guns, who had fought the entire campaign with Villa from the beginning of the advance from the Texan border. Under a white flag, Wemple drove the car across the zone of debate into the federal lines, where good fortune, in the guise of an ubiquitous German naval officer, again received them.

"I think you are nearly the only Americans left in Tampico," he told them. "About all the rest are lying out in the Gulf on the different warships. But at the Southern Hotel there are several, and the situation seems quieter."

As they got out at the Southern, Davies laid his hand on the car and murmured, "Good old girl!" Wemple followed suit. And Miss Drexel, engaging both men's eyes and about to say something, was guilty of a sudden moisture in her own eyes that made her turn to the car with a caressing hand and repeat, "Good old girl!"