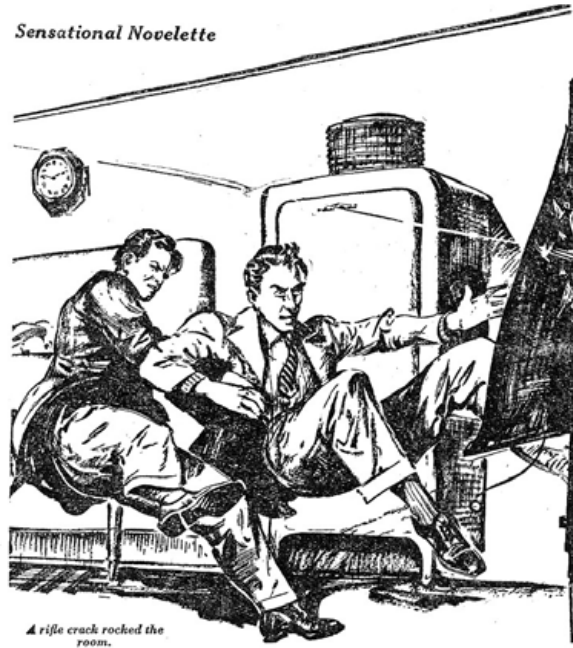
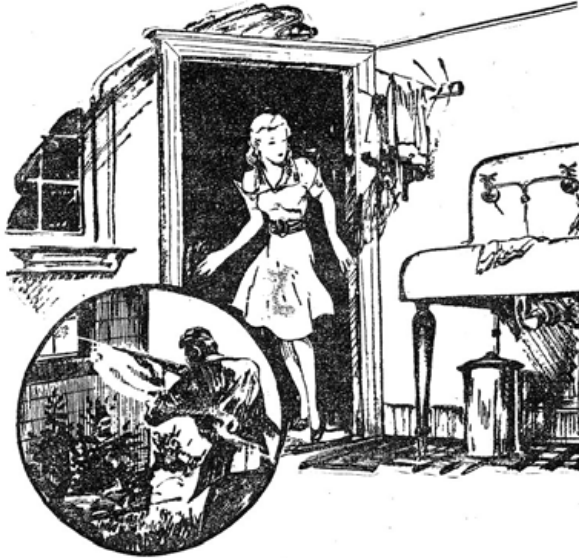


Mystery of the Mexicali Murders

By J. Lane Linklater

Sensational Novelette



Alan Rake, free-lance investigator, flew down to Mexicali on a mystery mission. But before Rake could line up his job, his client went out by the bullet route. And Rake's only clue was a black bandanna—a bandanna that enshrouded the key to Rake's own coffin.

CHAPTER I

FIVE-GRAND FADEAWAY

THE small plane from the north circled and came down. It had one passenger, an undersized, stocky man in whose volatile fleshy face was explosive energy. His perspiring cheeks glistened in the light from the airport office as he walked toward it. He carried one very battered handbag. Billions of stars glared down at him from the sky over the great Imperial Desert.

The man got in a service automobile. In a voice that rumbled harshly like a freight car he told the driver: "Take me to the Hotel Worth, my boy."

The driver said: "Sure."

The man lighted a cigarette. His whiskered fingers protected the flame and threw the light into his restless eyes. Alan Rake, private

detective, was a long way from home. A dozen miles south was the Mexican border. Just ahead was the miniature metropolis of Imperial County, El Centro.

It was dusty and very hot. The time was exactly eight thirty-five in the evening, but the temperature was still well over a hundred. They were passing into the outskirts of El Centro, and even the houses seemed to sprawl in sultry discomfort.

Alan Rake said to the driver: "I've got work to do and I like to work fast. I'll probably have to run around the country and I need someone who knows his way around. Someone who don't scare easy."

The driver reflected. He grinned. "Slummer Smith is your man. Slummer's been all around. Knows everybody. He's got a car and free-lances."

"Okay."

At the Hotel Worth Alan Rake got out and

stood on the curb. A lot of places were open all down the street and the lights were very bright. The town was alive. Rake gave the driver a ten-dollar bill and said: "I'm going in to register. Tell your pal Slummer to get here right away."

He went in, registered, and was taken to a room. In the room he felt in his pocket, brought out a telegram. He read it:

WANT YOU FOR CONFIDENTIAL
WORK STOP NAME YOUR OWN PRICE
STOP MEET ME NINE O'CLOCK
TUESDAY NIGHT AT 437 BOXER PLACE
EL CENTRO STOP TELL NO ONE.

BRADLEY WARNBECKER

Rake thrust the yellow paper in his pocket and went downstairs. He waited on the sidewalk. Soon a large sedan came alongside. The driver was a small man and very wiry. He might have been thirty-five, or forty-five, or fifty-five. His roundish face wore a fixed lugubrious look, and it was lined and blackened by hot desert winds.

"All right, all right," said Rake. "We're going to 437 Boxer Place. Know it?"

"Sure," said Slummer Smith. "Hell of a place."

They drove off. Rake said: "You know Bradley Warnbecker?"

"Seen him around. Everybody knows him. Hell of a guy. Lots of dough. Head of a big fruit-shipping outfit. Don't live here except this time of the year. Rest of the time lives up north."

Slummer stopped on a deserted road on the south edge of town. There was a group of seven shacks. None of them showed light.

"I think this layout belongs to Warnbecker," Slummer said. "Nobody lives here now. These places was put up a long time ago to rent to Mexicans. They're falling to pieces now."

Rake got out of the car. The shacks were arranged in a court, three on one side, three on

the other, and the seventh at the rear. The seventh was Number 437. It was very dark. Rake rapped on the sun-cracked door.

The door opened and the split widened very cautiously. A muffled voice said: "Come in, Mr. Rake."

RAKE went in. A lantern, turned low, stood on an upturned box in the corner. There was no furniture. The windows were boarded up. The man in the room was short. He had a prosperous middle. His face was surprisingly thin, giving the lie to his body bulk. The sharp eyes and the high cheekbones conspired to indicate a certain cunning, and an alert fearfulness.

Rake said: "So you're Warnbecker! What's up?"

Warnbecker's chuckle was like a nervous maiden's giggle. "Good Lord, but I'm glad you're here!"

"What's got you scared?" Rake said.

"A man named Curver is at the bottom of it, I think. He's pretty sore at me. I think he's up to something." Warnbecker thrust a plump hand into his pocket. He said: "Last night my shipping shed checker, a chap named Steve Ongar, found this on Curver's place. It belonged to a Chinaman—"

The flash was brief but bright. The report was sharp but very loud. The flash and the report came from a crevice in the boards of the window behind Warnbecker. Rake stepped aside quickly. Warnbecker fell on his face, as if he had been pushed.

Beyond the report, there was no noise. Rake stood still for a little while, then swiftly strode across the room. It was easy to see where the shot had come from. He returned to Warnbecker. The man of money was quite still. His back was a mess.

Rake muttered, "Rifle shot," and went out.

Slummer Smith was just coming in. He looked no happier than usual.

"Better get the coppers, boy," Rake said.

"They're tough babies, them coppers,"

Slummer said sadly. "Good coppers, but tough. They won't like you. Was it Warnbecker?"

"Yes. Someone got him. Did you see anyone?"

"Nobody out front."

Rake said: "Of course not. They came around back. Left the same way. No chance to catch 'em. Get the coppers."

Slummer wagged his head and drove away. Rake went back into 437. He ran through the dead man's clothes, especially the coat pocket, the one in which Warnbecker had thrust his hand. There was nothing in the pocket except a piece of cloth, square, about twenty inches each way. It was black silk.

Rake shoved the black silk cloth into his own pocket.

He was standing at the door when the police came. There were two of them, large muscular men in tan shirts, with conspicuous revolvers. Rake told them who he was. He even showed them his papers. And he learned who they were. One of them was only six feet tall and his name was Lagos. The other, named Cline, was taller.

Lagos and Cline took a look at the dead man. And they listened to Rake, rather too silently. Rake said: "Not much I can tell you boys. I came here to meet Warnbecker by appointment. As soon as I came in, someone shot him through that hole in the boards and beat it. Then I sent for you. That's all."

Lagos said: "Old Warnbecker getting bumped in a place like this! Say, this is big stuff!"

"You got no idea who done it or why?" Cline asked Rake.

"No more than you have, my boy."

"You say Warnbecker was hiring you?"

Rake showed him Warnbecker's telegram.

"But you don't know why?"

Rake said: "No more than you do, my boy."

"Well, you see how it is," Cline said. "You can go back to the hotel, if you want to. But

you better not fool around with this thing. You might get in somebody's way."

Alan Rake grinned. There was a sharp gleam in his eye. He said: "I can see how it is."

"No leaving town now."

"I can see how it is," Rake repeated. "I come down here to work for a rich client, expecting a fat fee. Maybe five grand. And now, no client. And no fee. Besides, maybe I did it."

"Well, you can see—"

"Sure. I might be working for some other lug. And maybe that wire is a fake. Maybe Warnbecker didn't send it at all. You can't tell about private dicks. A bad lot. Well, boys, I'll be around."

THEY watched Alan Rake as he went out, told Slummer to drive away. Slummer said gloomily: "It's a hell of a mess, all right."

Rake said: "Sure, I'm out a rich client and a fat fee. But it'll give me a chance to have a good time. Now, there's Mexicali. Heard it's a pretty hot place. I've always wanted to go there."

"Mexicali ain't what she used to be," Slummer said.

Rake said: "Where did Warnbecker hang out when he wasn't at the hotel in town here?"

"Office and shipping shed down at Lebber. Six miles south of here, toward Mexico."

Alan Rake grinned cheerfully. "So we'll stop there," he said, on the way to Mexicali. "Maybe I'll dig five grand out of this yet."

They were headed south on the highway. Rake said: "So tell me about Warnbecker's business."

"Cantaloupes in this section, mostly. We ship thousands of cars of cantaloupes from these parts in a few weeks. They're much earlier here than anywhere else in the country. If you sit down to a cantaloupe in New York on the first of June, you know it came all the way from down here in the lower corner of California."

"I don't sit down to cantaloupes, not any place," said Rake. "What did Warnbecker do about cantaloupes—grow 'em?"

"More of a shipper than grower. He worked it like this. He'd got maybe twenty fellers around here with ranches for growing cants. Warnbecker would help finance growing the crop and then handle its shipping and selling. For that he would get a share of the ranch profits, if any, and a percentage on what the stuff sold for. He was pretty foxy, and he kept the books, so the ranch owners would usually get the short end. Nobody liked him."

"Then maybe one of these ranch owners could've got sore. Ever hear of a guy named Curver?"

"Sure. One of Warnbecker's contract ranchers."

"Well, Warnbecker mentioned Curver. Also a checker named Steve Ongar. And a Chinaman."

"Didn't know Warnbecker had anything to do with Chinamen." Slummer sluiced the sweat from his brow. "What I can't figure is why they didn't plug you, too!"

"The guy didn't have a chance—and he had to get away. But that isn't what interests me."

"So what interests you?"

Rake said: "Why did the guy wait until I got there before plugging Warnbecker? That, my boy, is important."

Slummer swung off the highway into a road running east, kept on it until he crossed the railroad tracks. He followed the road paralleling the tracks a little while. Lights loomed ahead.

"That's the Warnbecker headquarters," said Slummer.

"Stop this side of it," Rake ordered.

Slummer took the car off the road and stopped. He said: "To the right is the shipping shed, with the railroad slip by it. You can see the freight cars. The building to the east is the office. Beyond that is the cook shed and

bunkhouse."

"They're still busy at the shipping shed," Rake said.

"Sure. The guys out in the fields start picking ripe cants in the morning. They keep on picking as long as there are ripe ones to pick, way into the night. At the peak of the season, like it is now, it keeps the boys busy until two or three o'clock in the morning. But what the hell has that got to do with who bumped Warnbecker?"

"I wouldn't know," said Rake, "yet. Has Warnbecker got a family?"

"Wife and kids up north. Only relative I know of down here is his cousin, Pete Torlan."

"Does Torlan come down here for the shipping season?"

"Torlan lives here. Warnbecker had Torlan in his company. Torlan's job is running things for him here in Imperial Valley. Warnbecker himself has other business up north and he only stays here a couple of months, during the busy season."

"Torlan a nice guy?"

"Nobody could work close to Warnbecker and be a nice guy."

"Drive closer to the shed, my boy."

CHAPTER II

SATAN'S DOORSTEP

SLUMMER took the car up to the space between the shed and the office. Rake got out and leaped onto the platform. A huge truck was standing against the shed. Crates of cantaloupes were being unloaded from it and trucked across the shed, into the railroad refrigerator cars.

The men doing the trucking were stripped to the waist. So was the young man with the manifold sheet who was doing the checking. The men were all too busy to more than glance at Alan Rake. Presently the truck was unloaded and labored away. The men sat on

boxes, waiting for the next load.

Rake crossed to the young checker. He said: "I'm a stranger. Just nosing around. What's your name, my boy?"

The checker was red-headed and fair-skinned. He had a straightforward face, but his blue eyes looked strained—something more than the strain of ordinary fatigue.

"Me? I'm Steve Ongar."

"Well, Steve, you keep pretty busy around here, eh?"

"You bet we do. This time of night it begins to let up a little, though," said Ongar.

"Any new men on the job here?" Rake wanted to know.

"Not for a week." Steve Ongar fiddled with his pencil. He added good-naturedly: "You must be checking up on something."

Rake said: "Maybe." With a quick movement he took out of his pocket the square of black silk cloth he had taken from Warnbecker. He held it where no one but Steve Ongar could see it. "You recognize this?"

Steve Ongar suddenly froze. He blurted: "No."

Rake chuckled and put the cloth in his pocket. "Okay, boy. Old Warnbecker told me."

A big touring car swirled swiftly up the road, stopped against the shed. The man who got out was burly. He promptly got on the platform, near Rake. He had a thick solid neck, force in his massive jaw, craftiness in his bright eyes. He looked at Rake warily, but smiled.

"I'm Pete Torlan," he said.

Rake grinned. "I'm Alan Rake."

There was a slight momentary change in Torlan's expression, as if someone had pinged him from behind with a pebble. But he recovered. "I've heard of you. You get in the papers, don't you? Down this way on business, Mr. Rake?"

Rake said: "Maybe. Is Warnbecker around?"

"Doesn't seem to be. Probably at the hotel in El Centro."

"You haven't seen him?"

Torlan shook his head. "Not since he left here early this evening. I went down to Mexicali. I can get the kind of a dinner I like there. It's only seven miles from here, you know."

"I want to go there sometime," Rake said. "Guess you don't get away from Imperial Valley much, do you?"

"Haven't been out of the valley for several months. I don't mind it. You get used to—"

"Mr. Torlan!" Someone was calling across the space from the office. "You're wanted on the phone! It's the police department in El Centro, sir!"

Torlan glanced sharply at Rake. "I'll be back soon," he said. "Make yourself at home."

ALAN RAKE watched Torlan hurry into the office. Near the end of the platform was a big water barrel. A tin mug hung on the spigot. Rake drew a mug of water. He made a face as he drank and said to the checker:

"What's in this stuff?"

Steve Ongar grinned. "Oatmeal."

"Oatmeal?"

"Yes, sir. We all drink lots of ice water on account of the heat. But this ice water, when you drink it every few minutes, is tough on the belly. So we throw oatmeal in the water. Makes it easier to digest or something."

"Where'd you get the ice, my boy?"

"We just rob the refrigerator cars. We take the ice out of the compartment at the end there."

Rake abruptly strolled away. He spent about five minutes walking about the shipping shed, glancing into refrigerator cars and peering into corners.

When he returned, he said: "What's the pile of papers for, son?"

Steve Ongar looked puzzled. "What papers?" he said.

"There's a stack of old newspapers down

on the ground by the end of the shed, near the tracks. Nothing queer about a bunch of old papers—if there's any reason for their being there."

"Don't know anything about it. Probably don't mean a thing."

"Maybe not." Glancing across at the office, Rake could see Torlan hanging up the receiver. He handed Steve Ongar a ten-dollar bill. "Have a few on me next time you hit Mexicali. Without oatmeal. When Torlan comes back out tell him Mr. Alan Rake had to get the hell away from here."

Back in the car, Rake told Slummer: "We better be leaving. Make it fast. Mexicali."

Slummer swerved that car around and in a few minutes they were back on the southbound highway, headed for Mexico.

Rake said suddenly: "Any Chinamen around here?"

"A few in El Centro and Calexico. Lots more across the line in Mexicali."

"Who's their top man?"

"You might call Hop Ling that," Slummer said. "Ling's been around a long time. Right over in Mexicali for maybe thirty years. He knows all the Chinks—and 'most everybody else. Runs a cafe."

"So I want to see Hop Ling."

Slummer said curiously: "You got a line?"

"Not much," said Rake. "A little something, maybe. Looks like a crazy setup. Keep your fingers close to your gun from now on." Rake peered out of the car as Slummer drove into a town. "This is Calexico, eh?"

Slummer said: "Sure. Calexico is on this side of the line, Mexicali on the other. Just the old ditch between 'em."

"I've heard about it. What's those cockeyed-looking buildings over there?"

"Cotton gins: They raise quite a bit of cotton, the other side of the line as well as this. It's hauled over here—"

"Hauled in trucks, eh?"

"In trucks," conceded Slummer. He said dryly: "Are you working on a murder case or

making a farm survey?"

"For all I know, cantaloupes and cotton might be a murderous combination, my boy."

Slummer swung past the Planters Hotel, then south across the international line. They passed the customs houses, one on each side. Mexicali's main stem was within a stone's throw of the line, and it welcomed them with much life and some light.

SLUMMER parked on the edge of the wide stretch across from the line of joints. Rake left him there, crossed and strolled along the main stem, glancing swiftly into doorways of roisterous resorts. Hop Ling's was a block farther west. Almost all the people were in the resorts, very few on the rough sidewalk. Most of the light was inside, too, almost none outside. The alley that Rake started to cross just before reaching Hop Ling's was the darkest spot in the stretch and Rake was halfway across it before he saw the girl.

But he couldn't miss her then. She moved away from the wall, into his path, as if she were faint.

Alan Rake said: "What's the matter, sugar?"

"I—I feel ill," she gasped. Even in the darkness Rake could see she was a sharp-featured beauty with very large dark eyes. "I—don't know—what's the matter."

"Want me to take you somewhere?" Rake offered politely.

"Would you?" she said.

Rake grinned and said: "Isn't that what you wanted?"

She turned her head up at him quickly, as if she wasn't sure what he meant. But Rake's face was inscrutable. He took her arm—a very small and shapely arm which was quite bare.

She said: "Thank you so much. This way, please."

They walked past Hop Ling's and turned south. In a few moments they were in the native section, behind the buildings along the main stem. There were no street lights, no

lights at all. There weren't even any streets where she took him, just a number of low tired-looking old hovels.

She stopped at the door of one of them. Her hand held Rake's arm tightly. The warm air was alive with the rich perfume she carried.

She whispered: "This is it. Won't you come in?"

"You know I will."

Inside, she struck a match. On a ledge against the side of the wall was a thick white candle, held in its own grease. The girl touched the match to it. In the wavering yellowish light her face was pale, and her eyes were very black and brilliant. Her flimsy blue dress clung to a perfect figure.

One small table was jammed against the wall. Near the wall opposite was a chair. There was no other furniture. A closet door was open in one corner.

Alan Rake leaned against the table. He glanced at the one window. A blind had been nailed over it. The blind looked too large for the window. The girl sat in the chair and smiled at Rake. She didn't look faint any more, only alluring.

She said softly: "You're so kind. And so strong. Won't you come here?"

Rake's gaze was bland. He turned toward the closet, looked inside. It was very dusty. On the floor of the closet were an old shoe, a few old sox, some unidentifiable rags and three coat hangers, two of them broken.

He picked up the good coat hanger, draped some of the rags around the arms and put his own hat on top. He held it out then, inspecting it. He carried it at arm's length to the middle of the room.

"Not bad, eh?" he said.

Quick anxiety flashed on the girl's face. Rake was holding up the dressed coat hanger, between the candle and the window. The shadow thrown on the blind was an almost perfect reproduction of the top part of a man's figure.

"No," the girl said hurriedly, "but won't you—"

The rifle shot cut her short. The window blind moved a little, as if urged by a breeze.

Alan Rake moved the coat hanger down, slowly, then let it drop. The shadow on the blind looked like a man falling. Silently, Rake moved toward the door. He had an automatic in his hand.

He said quietly to the girl: "Better keep still, sugar." He stood against the wall, behind the door.

The girl seemed immovable, her eyes fixed on Rake. Her fingers were gripping the chair seat at her sides.

There was a slight rustling sound outside the door.

The girl's voice suddenly tore loose in a scream: "Don't come in! He's ready for you! He—he isn't shot! Go away!"

The rustling outside stopped and then became a scurrying sound. There was silence again.

Rake grinned genially. "Well, he's gone, sugar. You scared him off."

Color slowly crept back into the girl's face. She said boldly: "I guess I never did have you fooled, did I?"

"Sugar, you should have known better. The stuff you pulled on me was all very old. Anyhow, you didn't look the part. Your voice, sugar, was the voice of Sally the Farmer's Daughter, but your face was the face of Jezebel, or maybe Salome—not to mention the figure."

The girl got up and came toward him, smiling. "I like you," she said. "But I guess you've got no use for me now."

"Sugar," said Rake, "I think you're swell."

She came closer. "Then maybe we can be friends?"

"At a distance," Rake said. "In fact, at a considerable distance." He put his hat on again. "Thanks for putting me on the spot. It taught me something."

"But surely you'll stay awhile—"

“Not tonight, sugar.”

Alan Rake stepped out into the night and vanished into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER III

DESERT HIDEOUT

HOP LING'S cafe didn't look like much. It was the back end of Riley's saloon. There was a short counter, a half-dozen tables. The women were mostly dance hall girls. The men were 21-dealers, assorted patrons, a few derelicts, two Mexican soldiers and one Mexican policeman. Two Chinese boys waited on the tables. Hop Ling himself stood at the inner corner of the counter, gazing placidly over his establishment.

But there was that about Hop Ling that suggested that his domain was much greater than could be seen with the eye. He was short and very plump. His face was unwrinkled, bland. His eyes were merry and shrewd. His voice, as he replied to Alan Rake, was soft, and his English precise.

“Yes, I am Ling.”

Rake said abruptly: “Warnbecker is dead.”

It didn't seem to mean much to Hop Ling. He said: “The big man of business? I knew him a little. Too bad.”

“You know Warnbecker's man, Torlan?”

“Yes, as I know many others.”

“You saw Torlan this evening?”

“Yes, he came and ate dinner. Then he went away. That is all!”

“Did he speak with anyone here—confidentially?”

“It may be.”

“Who?”

Hop Ling hesitated. “Until I know more, I may not say.”

Rake gazed at Hop Ling speculatively. Then, with a small flourish, he took his hand out of his pocket. Crumpled in it was a square piece of black cloth. Hop Ling looked at the cloth. There was no apparent change in Hop

Ling's expression, yet even his immobility suggested that something had struck deep.

Rake said: “You know this?”

Hop Ling waved his hand gently. “A piece of cloth!” he said. “Why should I know it? Where you get it, Mr. Rake?”

“Warnbecker had it.”

Hop Ling's plump hands, resting on the counter, were quite motionless. For a little while he was silent. Then he spoke low: “This is poor place for talk, Mr. Rake. I know better one. You go outside. Wait on next corner, west. Boy come and show you way.”

“Okay, Ling.”

Alan Rake walked to the corner a hundred yards west. It was well away from the bright lights. Not far away was the west edge of town. Beyond, the desert lost itself in the distant hills of Baja California.

Presently a young Chinaman, very small, emerged from the shadows and whispered: “Please, this way.”

Rake followed him. They went south again, turned along an alley, some distance to the rear of Hop Ling's cafe, then into a door and up narrow stairs. A door on a dark landing was opened. Rake walked into a room. There was a heavily shaded lamp on the huge carved table in the middle of the room, but no other light. The walls were in darkness. There were two chairs in the center, one on each side of the table. Rake sat on one of them.

In the far wall a door opened and closed. Hop Ling was in the room. He advanced quietly, sat in the chair opposite Rake. Hop Ling's eyes were still shrewd, but not merry. Beyond their blankness there seemed to be a deep seriousness.

He said: “Mr. Rake, I am sorry to treat friend like this.”

“The treatment is okay,” said Rake.

Hop Ling moved a forefinger under the table. With an abrupt brilliant the walls of the room lighted. Three young Chinamen were standing motionless against the wall, each at a different spot. Hop Ling's finger moved again.

The wall lights went out. "They are all armed," Ling said regretfully.

ALAN RAKE leaned across the table. "I'm just interested in what you know about a piece of black cloth, Ling. That's all."

"Strange," murmured Hop Ling. "And I want to know what you know about it."

"I've told you all I know. Warnbecker had it."

"What did *he* know about it?"

"I don't know what he knew. Maybe not so much."

"Where did he get it, Mr. Rake?"

"He said one of his men found it."

Hop Ling paused in silent contemplation. His gaze seemed fixed on the juncture of the wall with the ceiling. Presently he said, without looking at Rake: "Soo said he would use U. S. mail."

"Sounds like a Chinese jingle to me. What about Soo?"

But Hop Ling, apparently, had said all he intended. He looked at Rake sadly. "It is too bad. Much better if you talk. You tell me so little—"

"You're not doing me much good, either. Sorry. I can't wait around. I'll be going. By the way, can you raise five grand?"

"For good cause, yes," said Hop Ling. He got up slowly, smiled at the darkened walls and said: "We will let Mr. Rake go."

Rake strode toward the door. It opened before he reached it. At the threshold he turned and grinned grimly at Hop Ling. "Thanks," he said. "Call you later."

Slummer was waiting for him in the car. He was not alone. The man with him was young, big and bony. His blond hair was long and well oiled. He was well dressed.

"This is Bill Fench," Slummer told Rake. "Bill's drinking some and figures I should join him."

Fench grinned at Rake. He said: "You, too. You're a pal of Slummer's. We're all pals together. We can all go in the Owl and heave a

few—"

"Swell," Rake said promptly.

They got out of the car and Fench led the way to the Owl. They found room at the hundred-foot bar and ordered. Rake turned to Fench.

"You know this country pretty good, eh?"

"Been around here five years. I know all the—"

"Did you know Warnbecker?"

"Warnbecker?" Fench gulped his whisky. "Heard of him, sure. Rich monkey. Didn't know him very good. I never mixed with the cantaloupes. Been hauling cotton, mostly. From Mexico, across the line into Calexico. What's about Warnbecker?"

"He's dead."

"Dead? Ain't that somep'n? Have another drink."

Rake said: "Okay. So you haven't been up beyond Calexico much? Not up around El Centro?"

Fench leered. "Hell, no. Nothing up there for me. I work mostly on this side and have my fun here, too."

"Working now?"

"Just got off the job a few hours ago. Was down to the ranch, ten miles out from here, for the last coupla days."

Rake said: "Have another, my boy." He put money on the bar. "Got to go now. See you sometime."

Fench was disappointed. "Going? Hell, can't you—"

"Up to a place called Lebber," said Rake.

HE nodded to Slummer and they left Fench leaning moodily against the bar. In a few moments they were headed back over the international ditch, into Calexico.

"Lucky we ran into Fench," Rake said.

"Fench? He drives a truck mostly. He's good company, but—oh, I dunno."

"I feel the same way," said Rake. "He's part phony."

"Phony?"

“Well, for one thing he was faking that drunk act.”

Slummer was suddenly interested. “You mean Fench has something to do with this setup?”

“Maybe working for Hop Ling. The Chinaman could’ve taken me right along from the cafe to that room I went to. But he handled it in a roundabout way—maybe so he could tip Fench off.”

“So old Hop Ling is mixed up in bumping Warnbecker, huh?”

Rake said: “I didn’t say that.”

“I wouldn’t care if he was. Ling is a good guy. Maybe he ain’t always lawful, but he’s free with his dough in when a guy needs it. When he has anyone bumped off his reasons are okay.”

Rake peered along the northbound highway. He said: “Is it easy to get out of this valley—without being caught?”

“If you figure on making it outa here to some other part of the country,” Slummer warned, “it’s no cinch. It never is in desert country is like this. You’d have to take the highway, train or plane, and all of ‘em are easy for the law to watch.”

“So I thought.” Rake grinned. “And so I won’t try. Warnbecker said something about a guy named Curver. You said Curver was one of Warnbecker’s ranchers. Where’s his place?”

“Not far. It’s the ranch nearest the shipping shed.”

“We’ll go there first. What kind of a guy is Curver?”

“Swell if you treat him right. Tough if you do him dirt.”

“And Curver thought Warnbecker did him dirt, eh?”

“That’s the talk, anyway.” Slummer swung the car into a dirt road. In a minute he stopped. A hundred yards beyond, a large shed and a couple of smaller ones were ablaze with light, the ends of the sheds wide open. Bare-bodied men were still busy, crate-making,

sorting, packing. Slummer said: “Curver’s the guy in the shirt.”

Rake walked rapidly toward the big shed. The man in the shirt saw him. He was a slender sinewy man whose movements were nervous. He had gleaming gray eyes in a lean face, eyes that were alert and suspicious, yet direct and unafraid.

Rake said abruptly: “Mr. Curver, I suppose you know what happened to Warnbecker?”

“Someone phoned out awhile ago,” Curver growled.

“Too bad, eh?” Rake prompted.

“It’s great,” snapped Curver.

“Okay, if you feel that way. You go into El Centro often?”

“Several times a day.”

“Even in the busy season?”

Curver seemed exasperated. “In any old season. My wife is ill in El Centro. She’s ill—bedridden. I go in to see her several times a day, business or no business, Warnbecker or no Warnbecker.”

Rake’s eyes gleamed. He said, not unkindly: “Friend, I’ll bet your alibi is wearing awful short pants.”

“What the devil do I care about an alibi?”

“Just a guess.” Rake suddenly whipped out the square of black silk cloth. “Remember this?”

Curver stared at the cloth. He peered at Rake again. He said: “You look smart enough, but your line of talk is nuts.”

“Good.” Rake thrust the cloth back in his pocket. “If I were you, I’d start building an alibi—”

A car roared in from the road and came to a dusty stop a few yards away from them. Its headlights flooded them with light. Rake recognized the two men who got out; the two officers from El Centro, Cline and Lagos.

Rake said to Curver: “I didn’t want to see ‘em, either.”

The officers scrutinized Rake as intently as they did Curver. And Cline said: “Thought

you were going to stay out of this, Mr. Rake?"

"Just looking into farming prospects," Rake said. "Cotton and cantaloupes." Rake grinned. "You figure now that maybe I've been working with Curver all the time, eh?"

CLINE didn't seem to like that. He turned quickly to Curver. "Well, I guess everybody knows you've been sore enough to kill Warnbecker."

"I certainly have," exploded Curver. "He robbed me on last year's crop, and I couldn't get away from him this year because he had my place tied on contract. He practically made a pauper out of me—and made it impossible for me to give Jean—my wife, the—" Curver seemed suddenly to break down.

Cline said: "Sure. But murder is murder. You got an alibi?"

"Probably not," Curver said bitterly.

Lagos put in: "Another thing, Curver. Looks like the killing was done with a rifle. Not many rifles around here—almost all small arms. You got a rifle, ain't you?"

"I have."

"Let's see it."

"This way," Curver said.

He first went over to a shed and got a box, then led them to a small house. It was over a hundred yards from the nearest shed. It had three rooms, but not a stick of furniture in them. Curver took them into one of the rooms, stood on his box, reached up to a high shelf. He brought his hand down empty, a look of amazement on his face.

Alan Rake said: "It's gone, eh?"

Curver was speechless. And Cline said: "Sure it's gone. Curver couldn't bring it back here after shooting Warnbecker. He's ditched it somewhere."

"Nuts," said Curver.

Lagos moved closer. "You'll come to El Centro, Curver."

Curver shrugged.

Lagos said disapprovingly to Rake: "Maybe better if you went back to your hotel

and stayed there."

"Okay, boy. See you later." Rake started away, turned back, spoke to Curver. "You don't use this house at all, eh?"

"No," said Curver. "Moved everything to El Centro when my wife took sick."

Rake nodded and strode away to the car. He said: "Slummer, the coppers want me back in town. Get going. I want to come back here after they leave."

They roared down the highway. Then Slummer swerved off into the desert and stopped in a depression. He switched off the lights.

"They won't see us here," Slummer said. "It's a hell of a country, but not bad to hide in. They're after Curver, huh?"

"They got him."

"Curver's a good guy," argued Slummer. "But *somebody* bumped Warnbecker."

"Right, my boy. Well, I reached El Centro just a few hours ago. Since then I've met several people—you, Warnbecker, young Steve Ongar, Pete Torlan, Hop Ling, Bill Fench, and now Curver."

"You mean one of that bunch bumped Warnbecker?"

"Maybe so."

Slummer said moodily: "Maybe I done it. I'm kinda absent-minded and you never can tell—"

"What do you think of this, boy?" Alan Rake again popped out the square of black silk cloth.

Slummer stared at the cloth. "Looks like a Chinese stickup man's hide-rag. Something to cover the face."

Rake chuckled. "It looks like it. But *is* it?"

"I wouldn't know. And then again, maybe it could be used to shine your shoes, or put around your neck on a cold night, or you could wrap your lunch in it."

"You may be coming close," Rake said. He put the cloth away again. "The coppers should be gone from the Curver place. Take a different road in, if you can."

CHAPTER IV

THE DUST CLUE

SLUMMER parked in an almost grassless field. The sky, star-crowded but moonless, made little light for Alan Rake as he plodded toward Curver's small house. The officers had gone with Curver. The door was not locked and Rake went in. The rays of his flashlight stabbed at thick coats of desert dust clinging to walls and ledges.

Rake went to the shelf on which Curver had searched for his rifle. The shelf was high, close to the ceiling. Curver had left the box below it and Rake stood on it. The shelf was as dust-laden as everything else. Obviously, the dust had been disturbed where the rifle had been removed.

Another depression in the dust interested Rake. It might have been made by an arm. The smaller smudges just beyond could have been made by fingers. But the impression was quite small, not half the size of Rake's arm.

Rake got off the box and wandered into another room. This had been the kitchen. The plumbing in the walls was exposed. Rake sprayed the floor with his flashlight. Plenty of dust. The dust here, however, had been stirred and streaked about. The streaking had been done some time before, perhaps two to four days, Rake thought. Done by someone milling about. Anxiously, perhaps.

An outside door opened on the rear of the house. Rake quietly opened it, peered out. Some distance beyond was a rough building. Rake judged it to be a cookhouse.

Alan Rake stepped out. He walked slowly toward the cookhouse. Apparently he was unobserved. He made leisurely sweeps of light over the ground with his flash. And he trod deliberately, as if testing the soil. Presently he stopped.

The ground here was slightly yielding. Rake bent and scrutinized it closely. Prodded it with his finger. Then he went on a little

further. Without the flashlight he would have stumbled into an open trench. The trench was about four feet deep and five feet long. The bottom was littered with refuse from the cookhouse. Just a garbage pit.

From where he stood, Rake could look through the grayish gauze that made most of the side of the cookhouse. A man was inside, pottering about—no doubt a cook. Rake strode to the cookhouse and went in. Anyone watching from outside could have seen Rake's barrel-like silhouette, could have observed him talking, the cook answering, could have seen Rake's hand meeting the cook's—as if he were handing him money.

Then Rake came out, crossed rapidly to the car.

He said to Slummer: "Back to Warnbecker's shipping shed, boy. Fast."

Slummer said: "So you found something, huh?"

"Evidence enough on Curver's place to hang someone."

Slummer wagged his head and said: "I kinda liked Curver. He's had a dirty deal."

"Like him myself," Rake said. "Forgot to tell you that I met a lady in Mexicali."

"There ain't no ladies in Mexicali," said Slummer.

ALAN RAKE smiled. "Anyhow, I like 'em," he said comfortably. "They might put me on the spot, but that's okay. This one looked swell." He made a detailed description of her while Slummer listened intently, and added: "You know her?"

Slummer said: "I know 'em all. I couldn't miss on that one. Her name's Edna."

"Edna what?"

"Just Edna. She showed up in these parts three seasons ago. Just taking care of herself in a general way."

"Did she know any man around?" Rake asked.

"Well, at first she hitched to young Steve Ongar!"

Alan Rake said: "Ah!"

"I guess Edna kinda liked Steve's looks. But he didn't have much dough, so the next season she was off him and had another pal."

"Who?"

"Fench, the truck driver. Fench could always get his hands on extra dough. So it was Fench."

"So now Fench—"

"Not now," Slummer cut in. "Anyhow, it don't look that way. Looks like she graduated. She chums with Pete Torlan now!"

Rake said: "Ah! And now I suppose Pete Torlan is the big boss since Warnbecker's out. Even little Edna would have a motive for drilling Warnbecker!"

"By gum, that's right!"

Rake grinned. "I gather that Edna is even more ambitious."

"You gather right. She's been playing around with Torlan, but she's been seen around with old Warnbecker himself a few times!"

"What a gal! And Warnbecker's a family man!"

"Sure. Wife and about seven kids. The family never come down here, though. They live up around Beverly Hills, I think."

"So maybe the wife had something to do with it!"

Slummer groaned. "You do the figuring. All I know is what I see and hear. The dame has been pals with Ongar and Fench and Torlan and even Warnbecker. Make what you can of it."

He stopped the car against the Warnbecker shipping shed. It was well after midnight and there wasn't much activity. A few truckers were stretched out on the platform, resting. Rake glanced around. The young checker, Steve Ongar, wasn't in sight. The big man of the outfit, Pete Torlan, was sitting on the edge of the platform, alone.

Rake spoke to Slummer in an undertone. "I'm going to talk to Torlan. Then I'm going into the office to use the phone. While I'm in

the office, you keep Torlan busy."

He walked over to Torlan. Smirking, Torlan said: "Still prodding around, Mr. Rake?"

"Thought I'd like to talk to Steve Ongar again."

"Steve? Oh, he's gone. Got in his old Ford and drove away!"

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. I came out of the office awhile ago and Steve called to me. He said he was very anxious to get away for a few hours. So I told him I'd handle it myself and he could run along." Torlan smirked again. "Maybe the boy was spoofing me. Probably just wanted to run down to Mexicali for a few drinks. But he's a good lad, so I don't mind."

"Nice of you," murmured Rake. "No idea where he went?"

"None."

Rake merely nodded and started toward the office. As he did so, Slummer got out of the car and engaged Torlan in conversation. Torlan seemed pleasant enough to Slummer, but kept a vigilant eye on Rake. He watched through the distant office window. He could see Rake ask an office worker for permission to use a phone in the corner of the office, out of earshot of the men remaining at their desks. He could see Rake holding the instrument against his chest, talking, talking, talking.

He could see Rake hang up, call another number, talk again.

But Slummer was doing well, too. He was talking to Torlan, and Torlan could do nothing but sit and listen to Slummer—and watch Rake through the office window.

Then Rake was through talking and he came out and made quick strides back to the shipping shed.

Cunning gleamed in Torlan's sharp eyes. He said: "You got your party, Mr. Rake?"

"I always get my party, Mr. Torlan."

"Seemed to me you called long distance, Mr. Rake."

"Mexicali is long distance, Mr. Torlan."

Rake grinned affably. "I was talking to a Chinaman."

Torlan said: "Chinamen don't talk."

Alan Rake lighted a cigarette. There was an evil cheerfulness in his eye. "*Some* Chinamen don't talk," he corrected.

SLUMMER seemed to understand that Alan Rake was in a hurry, and he made a dash for the car. He had the engine running as Rake eased in beside him and said: "Calexico. Make it fast, my boy." The car was ramming through the dust of the road like a fast ship nosing through a stormy sea. Rake went on: "Calexico. The lady Edna has a secret place there. A small house with green shutters. A little west of town. So they tell me."

"So who tells you?"

"My friend Hop Ling."

"Didn't know he was your friend. Didn't know he'd talk."

Alan Rake said: "I figured there might be just one thing that would make Ling talk. I had to make sure of something first. I did—and he did."

"Something about that black cloth, huh?"

"In a way, yes."

Slummer, his face set in gloomy impassivity, waited for Rake to talk about it. But Rake added nothing. So presently Slummer said: "Edna's got a place in Calexico, huh? I didn't know that. You want to talk to her?"

"I want to talk to Steve Ongar. He's gone from his post. I don't need Lydia Lovelorn to tell me what could pull him away from his job. He probably thinks maybe the lady wants him back."

"Didn't you make two phone calls?"

"Sure. I called Hop Ling. Also the coppers at El Centro."

On the outskirts of Calexico, Slummer turned west and circled outlying blocks, looking for a house with green shutters.

"That looks like it just ahead," he said presently.

"Right. Go beyond and park out of sight."

Houses were rare in this section. Not far beyond the house, on the other side of the road was a neglected barn. Slummer drove into it.

Rake said: "It's lucky young lads still insist on primping when they go see a lady. Steve's old Ford isn't around yet. The lad stopped to make himself pretty for Edna."

"But he won't be long."

"Not long. You stay close here, boy. Don't do anything unless you see Torlan. If you see Torlan, watch him."

Alan Rake moved away in the direction of the house. He kept in the shadows, out of sight of wary eyes, and scouted around for two or three minutes. The green shutters covered the front windows. At the back, the window blind was drawn full down. Some forty feet behind the house, in a direct line, was a car shelter, open at both ends. Rake could see the nose of a car—not an old Ford—in the darkness of the shelter.

At the front door, Rake found no bell. He tapped on the glass. The door swished open. Edna was smiling at him.

The smile died and she looked distressed and uncertain. Rake pushed in and noiselessly closed the door. Edna gasped. Rake took her arm and led her into a room off the tiny hall. The room was dark. But beyond was an open doorway into a lighted kitchen, at the rear of the house. Edna, it appeared, was alone in the house.

Edna protested: "You have no right to break in on me."

"Thought you liked me," Rake jibed her gently.

"But what do you want?"

Rake sat down and motioned to the girl to do the same. "I'll just sit here with you, sugar."

Her face clouded angrily. She was standing in a crouch, as if ready to spring at him. "You get out!"

"That's no way to talk to me, sugar. You know I like you."

Edna screwed up her lips savagely. The lips gradually straightened out, then twisted up at the end until they became a smile. Her voice softened.

“You could be right, at that. And you know I like you. It didn’t take me any time at all to fall for you.”

She started toward him. Rake grinned pleasantly and moved his hand. There was a gun in it. He waved the gun and said: “Stay on your side, sugar. And keep your voice down. I won’t be so easy this time.”

CHAPTER V

LADY DOUBLE-CROSS

IT WAS ten minutes before someone tapped on the front door. Edna sprang to her feet. Rake was up fast, too, and by her side. They went out to the hall where the girl hesitated. Rake nudged her with the gun. He stood behind her as she opened the door. In the faint starlight, young Steve Ongar’s face beamed. He was shaved and spruced up, and he was inside before he saw Rake.

“This guy just barged in, darling,” Edna gasped.

Steve flushed. “What’s the idea?” he demanded angrily. “You got no right—”

“Save it, boy,” Rake said. “Just waltz on in.”

Steve saw Rake’s gun and they went back to the living room. Rake had them both sit on one side of the room while he sat on the other, facing them.

Steve blurted: “I don’t like this. What’s your game?”

“Just resting.”

It was still dark in the room, with no more light than edged through the doorway from the kitchen. They sat silent for several minutes. The girl, especially, was getting uneasy.

Presently Edna snapped: “Get me a drink, Steve. I can’t stand this. I want a—”

“Sure,” said Steve. “Where?”

“In the kitchen, of course. There’s stuff in the ice box. Get one for Mr. Rake, too.”

“I wouldn’t go in there, Steve,” Rake said.

“Why the devil shouldn’t I?” Steve raged.

He lunged toward the kitchen. He was going fast and was halfway across the kitchen before Rake, behind him, could catch up. Rake stuck out an arm, grabbed Steve by the pants and yanked.

Steve pitched back and down.

At the same moment a rifle cracked out back. The blind fluttered and there was a hole in it. Plaster in the inside wall showered down. Edna started to scream, but Rake stepped back and clapped a hand over her mouth, pinioned her arms.

Steve started to get up and Rake said sharply to him: “Crawl over this way. Don’t show your shadow on that blind.” He watched while Steve obeyed, and as soon as the young man stood by him he went on: “You didn’t believe sugar would put you on the spot, did you? You thought maybe she wasn’t too good, but she would never do a thing like that. You know now, eh?”

It was obvious that Steve knew now. He wasn’t scared. He was mad, disgusted. He didn’t say anything.

Rake fastened a handkerchief over the girl’s face. He said: “The lad that fired is out back. Chances are he won’t come in unless the girl signals him. I’m going after him. Keep a grip on fair Edna.”

Steve said grimly: “Sure.” He grabbed the girl’s arms.

Rake slipped out of the front door. He sped away from the house, cut across the lot, came out behind the car shelter. Toward the front of the shelter was the outline of a man. The man had a rifle in his hand. He was watching the house, intently.

Swiftly, Rake moved along the side of the car. The man turned abruptly, but Rake was on him. The skulker was bringing the rifle around. With his left, Rake cracked down on the man’s right wrist and the rifle dropped

limp into the dust.

The man groaned and tried to sit up. Rake reached down, took him by the shirt and hauled him to his feet. He left the rifle where it had fallen. He jolted his automatic in the man's back and walked him to the back door, told him to get in. The man opened the door. They walked into the kitchen.

Rake said: "Here's the lad that killed Warnbecker."

Steve Ongar's throat rattled a little as he said: "Fench!"

RAKE said: "Couldn't be anyone else. Warnbecker didn't get plugged until just as he was about to tell me his story. That could mean only that the guy who plugged him had been away and couldn't get to him any sooner. Everybody else in the case had been right around him all the time.

"Fench had been down at a ranch below the line for a couple of days and had just got back. Someone knew that Warnbecker was contacting me and told Edna. Edna met Fench as he was going through Mexicali and told him. Fench and Edna drove on through, stopped at Curver's ranch, hooked Curver's rifle, drove on to El Centro and plugged Warnbecker."

"Edna went with him?"

"Sure. She helped, too. He couldn't have reached the rifle on the shelf in Curver's house. So he lifted her up and she got it. She left the marks of her arm and fingers in the dust."

"But why?" said Steve. "Why?"

Rake said: "I think you already know a little, boy."

"Well, maybe a little."

"Sure. But, on account of you were still wacky about the girl, you didn't want to admit it—even to yourself. It's a queer little yarn about a nice old Chinaman named Soo who had plenty of dough. Soo was in Mexico, but he yearned to get into this country. The only way to do that was to get smuggled in.

"Our friend, Hop Ling, knows all about such things. There was a man on this side who Ling was in contact with. Ling worked through the contact man. Mr. Contact Man worked with Fench—through Edna. That kept Mr. Contact Man in the clear.

"The scheme was this. Soo got on Fench's truck, under the load, below the line. Fench drove him across to Calexico. That was easy. The hard part was to get him out of the desert country, since from there on the federal men are very watchful. So in Calexico, probably near the cotton gin there, Fench unloaded Soo. That is where Steve here picked him up. Right, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. I didn't know what it was all about. All I knew was that I was to pick up a man there and take him along to Curver's place. Might have been a cantaloupe picker, for all I knew. He was a little guy. He had something over his face, but in getting into my car his face became exposed and I saw he was a Chinaman."

Rake said: "The idea was to take him to Curver's ranch and watch a chance to get him aboard a night cantaloupe train. The boys at the shipping shed take lots of ice out of the refrigerator compartments at the end of the cars. Enough ice could be taken out of an end to make room for Soo. For protection, he could put a bunch of newspapers over the ice left in. In a few hours he would be out of the valley. The only trouble was that Soo had plenty of dough on him." Rake whisked out the square of black silk cloth. "You really did see this, boy?"

"Yes, sir," said Steve Ongar. "The little old Chinaman was a good sport. He gave me an extra ten-spot when I got him to Curver's old house. There is where I saw that cloth. He had all his money wrapped up in it!"

"Sure. Soo was a good sport with Fench, too. That was what settled his fate. Fench saw all the money in the cloth and wanted it. So later he went to Curver's old house, where the Chinaman was waiting, and took his dough.

Some Chinamen don't talk—the dead ones. The others will talk if there's a good reason. Hop Ling talked to me when I told him where I'd found Soo buried. He was pretty sore about it, in an oriental sort of way. You see, there was something about that cloth that nobody knew."

FENCH was sagging in a chair, still listless. But he jerked his head up to listen. The girl was listening, too. Steve looked over her shoulder and said:

"What about that cloth?"

Rake said: "When Soo reached his destination, he was to simply mail the cloth back to Ling as evidence that he had arrived safely. A nice little Chinese touch."

"Slick," said Steve. "Well, I got curious about the Chinaman the night after I took him to Curver's place and ran over there. It was late at night, after work. Nobody was around. I couldn't see any sign of the Chinaman. Then, just outside the kitchen door, I found that cloth. I recognized it and it worried me. Next morning I spilled the works to Mr. Warnbecker."

Rake said: "And Warnbecker was worried, too. He figured Curver was trying to get him mixed up with the law. Serious stuff, smuggling Chinamen. He was afraid to call in the law because he had got himself tangled up with darling Edna: So he sent for me."

"But Fench couldn't be in it alone," Steve Ongar said. "There was—"

The window smashed again. It smashed several times. In a few seconds there wasn't much left of it. The shots from the back of the house sounded like a small war. Alan Rake knocked Steve over against the wall. The girl went with Steve.

The only one hit was Fench. He got up at the first shot, and the second one took him. He was down on the floor now, bleeding generously at the chest.

The shooting stopped suddenly.

Silence. Then commotion somewhere back

of the house. There was also a commotion at the front door, which broke open. Officer Cline of El Centro rushed in. Cline looked at Alan Rake and at Fench on the floor and at Edna and Steve.

Rake said: "Someone out back shot Fench."

Cline nodded. "The shooting started just as we got here. Lagos went around back to see about it."

"You looked into that place on Curver's ranch?" asked Rake.

"Yeah. They made a graveyard out of a partly filled garbage pit. The little old Chinaman was in there."

The back door opened. Lagos came in with Slummer. Between Lagos and Slummer was Pete Torlan. Torlan looked wild-eyed and very dusty, as if someone had been kneading him into the dirt.

Rake said: "Good work, boy."

Slummer's grin was reluctant and fleeting. He said: "Well. I seen him show up. I caught up with him just about the time he was popping at the window. Then the copper came."

Cline was still puzzled and so was Lagos. Cline said: "I don't get all this yet."

"You will," Rake told him. "There was a scheme to smuggle the Chinaman you found. Fench robbed the Chinaman and murdered him. Fench also killed Warnbecker to keep him from starting an investigation. Fench tried to put me on the spot in Mexicali. He was afraid of what Steve might spill—and so was Torlan. So tonight he tried to put Steve on the spot, too. I brought Fench in here and then Torlan showed up. Torlan got a load of what was going on, so he grabbed the rifle and blasted at all of us."

"So Torlan was in it," said Cline.

"Pete Torlan was the good old mastermind. He did everything indirectly, though. He kept in touch with Fench—and maybe with others—through Edna. That was what started the talk that Edna was romancing

with Torlan. It wasn't romance. Just business. Edna was still playing with Fench. Right, sugar?"

THE girl was weeping. She didn't like looking at Fench, on the floor. Yet she didn't seem so very unhappy. She smiled at Rake through the tears and whispered: "Yes."

"Probably no one but Torlan was close enough to Warnbecker to know he had wired me. And Torlan was the most likely man to know where Curver kept his rifle."

Cline looked at Lagos. Lagos said, "Well, I guess we can get this all fixed up at headquarters."

"All right, boys," Rake said. "I've got to make a trip across to Mexicali. See you in El Centro in an hour or so."

He motioned to Slummer and they started out. As Rake passed the girl she looked up long enough to say in a low voice: "I still like you."

Rake said: "Behave yourself, sugar. See you later."

Out in the car, Slummer looked at Rake queerly. "I still don't see where you're coming out of this thing," he said. "Where's that five grand you were going to make?"

Rake said: "Hop Ling told me that the grieving relatives of old Soo would gladly pay that much to avenge Soo's murder. So we're

going to Mexicali. Hop Ling will pay in cash. That's another nice Chinese touch."

Slummer had turned the car into Second Street. He said: "So you'll have five grand to take along with you, huh?"

"No," said Rake. "I've got to take that dough back up to El Centro."

"Good gravy! Why?"

"So that I can go Edna's bail!"

Slummer swung the car south, toward the little customs houses on the line. He seemed almost startled. He said: "Say, you ain't gone and fallen for that dame, huh?"

Alan Rake was silent for a moment. He stared somberly across the international ditch at the nearing lights of Mexicali. Then he said: "I wouldn't say that, boy. As soon as I've liberated that beautiful female rascal, I'll be leaving for the north where Mrs. Alan Rake will receive me with brisk words. She is very different from Edna. She makes me stick to business."

Slummer looked relieved. "So how about Edna?"

"Edna? Why, some day she'll get away and marry a guy in a service station and he'll make her change her ways." Alan Rake, inclining his head in a gesture of sadness, added: "And I'm not so sure that it's a good idea."