

The FORTRESS in the FOOTHILLS!

By ROLAND HOWARD

In search of his uncle, Rex Armitage at last finds him in a fortress in the Mexican foothills—held in bondage by bandits!



THE FIRST CHAPTER

After the Raid

GLAD-HAND" ROGERS shut off the engine of his six-seater bullet-proof saloon and transferred his gaze from the Mexican plain to Rex Armitage, who was sitting beside him.

"You're plumb crazy," he declared. "I got the capital to start the swellest gamblin' joint in La Taza an' I'm offerin' you a partnership. Where's your grouch?"

Rex Armitage, fair-haired, grey-eyed and unmistakably English, grinned at the tough-looking American.

"I'm not grousing, 'Glad-Hand.' It's a handsome offer, and I appreciate it. But quite frankly, the gambling business and I don't get on well together."

"Too good for it, huh?" snapped the American, eyeing the young Englishman resentfully through his keen, narrow eyes. "But you warn't so good that you'd turn me down when I took you in tow an' fed you a week ago."

Rex Armitage frowned.

"I've told you I'm grateful, 'Glad-Hand.' If there's anything I can ever do——"

"You know what you can do already. Join me as my pardner in this gamblin' racket."

Rex shook his head.

"I'm sorry; but it can't be done."

"Then I'm through with you. Beat it!"

"Just what I'm going to do!" said the Englishman coolly. "There's a colt I've been watching grazing over there. He's

saddled—but his rider's missing. I hope to make up the deficiency. Will you shake before we part?"

But "Glad-Hand" was not living up to his name. He turned to the steering-wheel.

"I got no use for the down-an'-out that figures he's too good to be my pardner!" he said harshly. "Adios!"

"Good-bye!"

Rex jumped off the car as she began to move off. He stood for a few moments, watching her as she travelled towards the purple hills that bounded the parched plain. Then he turned his attention to the saddled horse that was grazing on a patch of sparse vegetation near by. He was sorry to lose the companionship of the adventurous young American smuggler who had found the country of his birth too hot for him; but the choice had been his and there was no sense in bewailing it.

The colt had sensed his approach, and was walking away, ears pricked.

Rex followed the animal cautiously, calming its fears with a quiet "Steady, boy!" until he was near enough to touch it. Then he put a foot into the stirrup, swung up into the saddle and gripped the reins.

The colt reared and bucked, trying to regain his liberty, but the struggle was brief, and soon Rex had him under control.

"Leave it to you, now, boy!" Rex said, loosening the rein when he had got the animal going at a good trot. "You've got the whole of Mexico before you. See what you can find!"

His eyes left the horizon, where they had been vainly searching for signs of human habitation, and rested for a moment on the saddle. And there they found something that caused him to utter a shout of amazement.

It was the printed name and address of the owner of the saddle:

"Arthur Ward, *El Alqueria Azul, cerca de La Taza.*"

"Uncle Arthur! By all that's wonderful!" breathed Rex.

He leaned over in the saddle and examined the inscription minutely. Then he sat upright again and stared across the burning plain.

Where was the owner of the colt? What had happened to old Arthur Ward, his English uncle whom he had roamed Mexico to find? Why should his horse, saddled for riding, be wandering alone in this wild and lawless country?

Rex made up his mind that he would give himself no rest until he had answered those questions.

He realised, with a start, that the horse had found its way to a rough track which led to the foothills, now noticeably nearer.

"Seems to me you've got a dim idea where we're going, old son!" he remarked. "Get up, then!"

He gave the colt a flick with the rein and the animal broke into a trot, which quickly became a hard gallop.

At that speed they covered the miles that still lay between them and the foothills, until the rising ground forced down the pace to a walk.

They reached the brow of the first series of hills that led upwards to the great plateau at the top.

Rex stared. In front of him lay an alqueria—a small farm—which had previously been hidden by the hill.

A single glance was sufficient to tell him that something was wrong. Articles of furniture were littered about on the veranda, windows were shattered, fresh bullet marks bespattered the walls, and a wisp of smoke from the charred embers of what had been a wooden outhouse gave evidence that the fire which had destroyed it had been of recent origin!

Rex reined in his colt. At the same moment a swarthy peon made his appearance through the open door of the farmhouse.

"Señor! De quien es ese caballo?" he asked excitedly, pointing to the colt.

"I found it wandering below in the plain," Rex answered in Spanish. "You know the owner?"

"Señor! You are Inglees!" the Mexican exclaimed joyfully. "Then you know my master—Señor Ward?"

"He is my uncle. Where is he?"

"Madre de Dios! That you should not arrive earlier! Señor, listen! You 'ave 'eard of Pedro Panza?"

Rex stared down grimly at the excited peon.

"You mean the bandit? I have heard of the scoundrel. Go on."

"This mornin' e attack!" said the Mexican with an expressive gesture. "We fight, but of what use? Panza enter—ees men take presonner my master, Señor Ward. Now—"

He pointed significantly to the frowning hills above. Rex regarded him with dilated eyes.

"They have made a prisoner of Señor Ward? For what purpose?"

The peon shrugged.

"Quién sabe, señor? I cannot tell."

Rex bit his lips. He had heard of Pedro Panza. Very few people in that part of Mexico had not heard of the outlaw who had brought death and desolation to many a small farm or scattered village.

"Then they have taken him to the hills?" he murmured. "Bueno! I will follow!"

The peon rolled his eyes.

"Señor, it is death—"

Rex smiled grimly.

"I do not expect to attack an outlaw band single-handed. I shall see how the land lies. Adios!"

He slapped the colt and started off again at a trot, leaving the Mexican staring after him with fear in his eyes.

A long and tiring journey followed over rugged land, rising, always rising, till great, beetling masses of rock before him seemed to cut off all prospect of further advance.

Rex struck a narrow track, leading under a veritable mountain of rock. His heart beat more quickly as he found that it led up through a gorge to a range of higher land.

The colt plodded on gamely to the top. They came out on to a ledge of rock overlooking the plain.

Rex looked upwards.

Too late, he saw a dark face peering at him from behind a boulder higher up the slope.

The red light of the setting sun gleamed for a moment on the barrel of a six-gun. There was a flash—the gun roared.

It was the colt that got the lead. Arthur Ward's gallant horse reared for a dizzy fraction of time. Rex found himself looking

downwards at the thousand-foot drop that lay beneath.

Then the colt hurtled over the top, and to Rex Armitage, earth and heaven flew 'round in a whirling kaleidoscope and the end seemed to have come.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Bandits' Lair I

REX came round from the nightmare to find himself clinging desperately to the lean trunk of a dwarf tree. It seemed ages since the bandit's shot had sent the colt to its doom. But time passes slowly on the borderline between life and death; in reality, not more than two seconds had elapsed.

His numbed brain hardly realised where he was or what had happened, at first. Then, as complete consciousness returned, he saw that he was only a few inches below the level of the rocky ledge from which he and the horse had fallen.

Rex could hardly repress a shudder. Below him, a sheer drop of a thousand feet. Above him, armed and merciless foes. The peon had spoken truly when he said that death lay up in the hills! But this was no time for gloomy reflection; action, cool and calculating, was what was wanted.

He had to get back to the ledge; and to do that with safety he could only wait for nightfall.

He held on grimly to the dwarf tree, concentrating his attention on the ledge and trying to forget the death-drop that was below him. For a time he was in an agony of fear lest the Mexican who had fired the shot should look over the edge to make sure that his work had been completed. But no one came; and, indeed, it was hardly to be wondered at that the would-be assassin had no suspicion of the miracle that had saved the life of his intended victim.

Mercifully, the red glow of the setting sun died away and the brief twilight was eclipsed by the darkness of night.

With a mighty effort of his aching arms, Rex lifted himself upwards inch by inch, till his eyes were above the level of the top. He saw at once the flickering light of a camp

fire at the higher level from which the Mexican had fired his shot.

He released his left arm, got a hold on a piece of rock that projected from the ledge, then, slowly but surely, hauled himself up till, panting with relief, he was lying on the ledge once more.

"Thank heaven for that!" he breathed, as he crawled to the shelter of the rock-face. "And now to investigate!"

After a brief rest he went down on his stomach and began to worm his way up the narrow path towards the camp.

Soon he found the gorge widening and when, at last, he stopped within a stone's throw of the fire, he could see that the camp had been pitched in a circular patch of ground surrounded by rocks, forming a veritable fortress in the hills.

His eyes took in the details of the camp. What he saw caused his muscles to stiffen and his flesh to tingle. The horses were tethered to stakes driven into the grassy land on the outskirts. The bandits, an evil-looking crew, were sitting around the fire. Their leader—and Rex picked out without difficulty the sinister, crouching figure of the notorious Pedro Panza—was standing, whip in hand, near the bound figure of a grey-haired man that lay on the ground.

Rex knew his uncle at once. He had last seen him years before in England, but there was no mistaking the aggressive jaw and clean-cut face of Arthur Ward.

Rex listened.

The bandit chief was speaking.

"Señor Ward! To-night you get your last chance. There is oil on your land—comprende usted? I, Pedro Panza, must know also where this oil lies!"

Arthur Ward laughed.

"So you want to give up the business of cutting throats and become a respectable oil millionaire, Panza! I understand!"

Pedro Panza uttered a guttural exclamation.

"Caramba! You mak' joke of me! You shall learn, my friend, that this is no joke—so!"

He raised the whip to strike.

But before the blow could descend Rex's six-gun was raised.

The young Englishman fired. Next instant the whip had fallen to the ground and the bandit chief was screaming with rage and fear. The bullet had grazed his hand just sufficiently to draw blood.

The bandits were on their feet in a flash, yelling.

Rex, running like the wind in the shelter of the great boulders that lay about the fringes of the camp, flew half-way round the camp as they swarmed to the spot from which he had fired. Then, pausing for a brief instant, he fired again, and one of the Mexicans toppled over limply, with a wound in the leg.

Rex made a dive for the spot where the horses were tethered. Again he fired and again there was a howl from one of the evil gang.

Another breathless run and another successful shot.

By that time the camp was in an uproar. The Mexicans were running wildly in all directions, firing indiscriminately at the shadowy outskirts of the camp.

Rex had hoped desperately for a chance of setting his uncle free, but that was not to be. Pedro Panza had already taken the precaution of setting three men to stand on guard round the prisoner.

Nothing could be done without help; that much was certain. Where he could obtain help in this lawless land was a puzzling question to answer. Wherever it might be, he could not obtain it by remaining any longer in this camp, where capture would now be only a matter of minutes.

Rex felt that he had done all he could do for the moment. He could only hope that his reckless tactics had given the bandits an impression that a small army was watching their movements, and that that thought would restrain Pedro Panza from further aggression against Arthur Ward that night.

Having reached his decision, Rex returned boldly to the horses, loosened the best-looking steed under the very noses of the furious Mexicans who were looking for him, and gave it a flick with his hat.

The frightened animal bucked, then made a bolt for the dark country beyond the camp fire; but not before Rex had leaped on to its back, saddleless as it was.

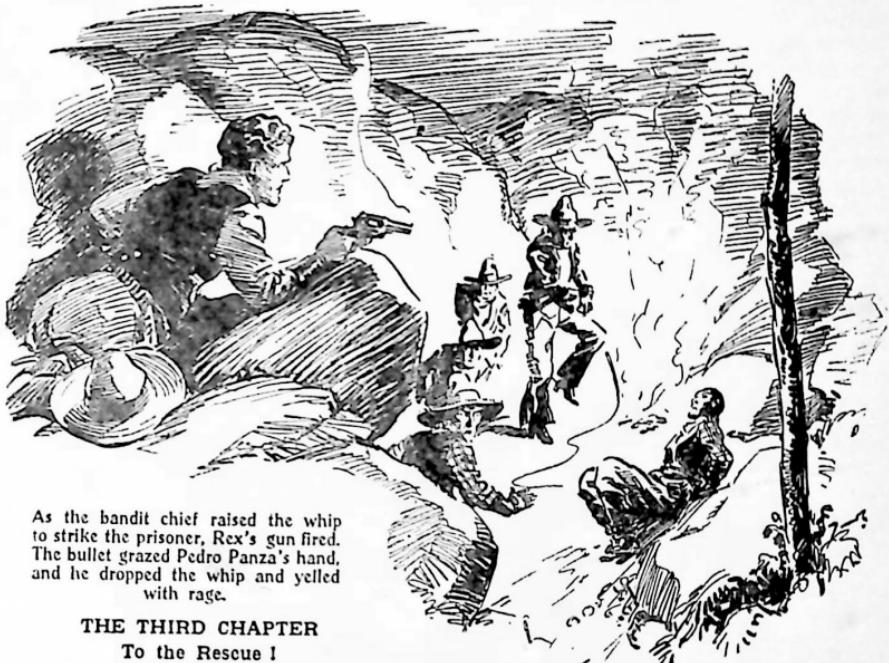
He heard a confused roar of voices behind him, and a score of shots rang out. But the bandits, fortunately, could not see their quarry in the blackness that was swallowing him up, and not a piece of lead found its mark.

With a furious clatter of hoofs on hard ground the horse galloped on, its human burden trying vainly to pierce the darkness before a false step sent them both plunging to destruction.

Lucky, indeed, that he had got the better of the argument when he did, for had the horse gone on they would have galloped straight on to the edge of a miniature precipice quite deep enough to have brought sudden death to horse and rider.

Rex mounted again and turned his steed's head to a slope which wound round the face of the rock to lower levels of ground.

As he came round the first projection he uttered an exclamation.



As the bandit chief raised the whip to strike the prisoner, Rex's gun fired. The bullet grazed Pedro Panza's hand, and he dropped the whip and yelled with rage.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

To the Rescue !

"STEADY ! Steady, boy, steady ! "

Rex felt himself quietening his terrified mount at last. Its gallop became less furious. Gradually it responded to its rider's soothing words and patting, till it slowed down to a trot and eventually stopped.

Rex dismounted and gave the horse a rest. And now the clouds which had been obscuring the sky began to thin out, and the coming of a dim starlight enabled him to take his bearings.

Below, almost down to the level of the plain, were the twinkling lights of a town, and though he had never seen that town before, he could see at once from the peculiar cup-shaped formation of the ground on which it was built that it was La Taza.

"The Cup—La Taza ! " said Rex thankfully. "Here's a chance, anyway ! "

La Taza ! The little Mexican town where "Glad-Hand" Rogers hoped to find fortune, if not fame, as proprietor of a gaming "joint" !

Eagerly now did the Englishman urge on his stolen steed down the broad path leading to the town. If only he could find "Glad-Hand" and his wonderful bullet-proof car! The local police, if any, were an unknown quantity; volunteers would probably prove to be spare-time bandits themselves. But with "Glad-Hand" Rogers and that car, Rex felt equal to a pitched battle with the combined forces of all the bandits in Mexico.

He reached level ground at last, and set the horse to a fast gallop for the remainder of the journey into the town.

Luck was with him, for a time at least, for he spotted the car in which he had spent one memorable week with Rogers, within a few minutes of his reaching the well-lit centre of La Taza.

But with that discovery the luck seemed to peter out. "Glad-Hand" was quickly found within the noisy hall of chance outside which he had parked the six-seater. But "Glad-Hand" was cold and distant, and listened to Rex's excited story with stony indifference.

"Nix!" was his only comment when Rex had finished.

Rex regarded the American almost incredulously. That he would decline to help when he heard what was on had not occurred to Rex, who did not know how deeply his refusal of the proffered partnership in the gaming "joint" had offended his late ally.

"But you don't understand—can't!" exclaimed Rex. "Surely you'll join in this scrap? There's an Englishman up there—a white man, my uncle—held prisoner by those dago cut-throats! You're not going to allow that?"

"I guess you had your chance to make a pardner of me!" was "Glad-Hand's" curt retort. "You turned it down, an' if you reckon you're gonna get me to help you now because you're in trouble, you're just crazy! Git it!"

"I'll 'git' all right, but you're coming with me!" said Rex, whipping out his gun and pressing it into the other's side. "Stick 'em up!"

"Hey, what's this?" asked the startled

American. "Listen, buddy! If you think you can pull this stuff on me—"

"This gun's fully loaded and I'm desperate! Put up your hands and step it out, before I plug you!" ground out Rex. "Now!"

Rogers made a move for his pocket, but the jerk of the muzzle of Rex's gun made him change his mind.

His hands went up. Simultaneously, there was a wild scramble from the surrounding patrons of the gaming-hall to escape as they realised that guns were out. Somebody fired a shot; the lights were suddenly extinguished. Yells and curses and the din of falling chairs and tables filled the air.

Rex almost instinctively dived for his opponent's gun, and gripped it just a fraction of a second before "Glad-Hand" got there.

"Too late!" snapped Rex. "Keep your hands up. And march!"

The American grunted and marched, his late colleague's gun pressed firmly against him all the time.

They passed out of the darkened hall, through the swing-doors, and on to the street, where "Glad-Hand" Rogers' car still waited. The owner of the bullet-proof saloon climbed sullenly into the driver's seat, and Rex sat in the rear.

"Now drive out of the town," Rex ordered. "Keep to the road that goes to the hills. I'll show you the way as we go along."

"Glad-Hand" pressed the self-starter and the big car glided off, quickly leaving far behind the excited crowd which was now streaming out of the gaming-hall.

Soon they were roaring up the rough road leading to the hills. Rex continued to sit in the rear, gun held ready for emergencies.

Dawn was breaking as they reached the spot where Rex had first dismounted after his wild ride away from the bandits' camp. In the grey light Rex saw an attentive figure silhouetted against the sky. He half-rose, with an excited exclamation.

"The peon! Stop the car!"

The American brought the car to a standstill, and the waiting man, whom Rex had recognised as the peon he had left on Arthur Ward's alqueria, came running forward.

"Señor! You 'ave return!" he cried.
"You mus' lose no time!"

"You followed me, then?" asked Rex, opening one of the doors.

The Mexican nodded.

"Si, señor! I watch you shootin' at Pedro Panza's camp. I wait after an' leesten. I 'ear Pedro Panza tell Señor Ward to-day he flog heem till 'e geeve up what 'e call the secret of the oil. At dawn Pedro Panza begin!"

"Jump in!" commanded Rex.

"Glad-Hand" faced round in his seat.

"What's the dope this greaser's givin' you?" he asked. "Does he mean that dirty hoodlum Panza's gonna give a white man the works?"

"Just that! Are you still standing out?"

"Glad-Hand" suddenly grinned a huge grin.

"Say, what d'you take me for? I felt a

bit sore over you, buddy; but now we've come to the point, I'd sure bust if I didn't horn in on it. Gimme back my gat!"

Rex thumped his late partner on the back. He knew by "Glad-Hand's" tone that he was safe in handing over the gun again.

"Sounds more like the man I thought you were!" he said. "Here's your gun. Now drive like blazes!"

"Okay!"

And the big car started up again with a roar.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

Beating the Bandits!

As they neared Pedro Panza's natural fortress in the foothills, a puff of smoke shot out from behind one of the great boulders, and the sharp "ping!" of a bullet sounded against the top of the windscreen.

"They've seen us!" exclaimed Rex. "Will

The bandits rushed forward as the car stopped at the stake, but Rex and Rogers held them off while the peon slashed at the cords that bound Rex's uncle.



you chance it and go right ahead?"

"You bet your sweet life!" chuckled "Glad-Hand." "This, buddy, is right where I live! Is there another exit from their dump besides the way we've arrived?"

"There is. It's dangerous——"

"I guess it may be more dangerous to reverse amongst this crush! Well, here we are, boys! Looks like they're getting ready to welcome us!"

The American was right. In the bandits' camp, which was now but a hundred yards away, a welcome was being hurriedly prepared for the unexpected visitors.

The welcome took the form of guns and revolvers. A regular fusillade was being directed at the car now, and it was evident from the Mexicans' excited gesticulations that they were filled with astonishment to find their bullets taking no effect.

"Glad-Hand" accelerated, and drove at hair-raising speed right into the centre of the fortress.

"Show 'em we're here, buddy!" he yelled, above the roar of the engine.

Rex nodded, and lowered the window sufficiently to enable him to use his six-gun. A moment later he was blazing away.

The bandits, howling with fear, scattered in all directions as the car bore down on them. As they ran, Rex's bullets rained among them and several dropped, wounded. Rex, who had no taste for killing, even with murderous bandits as victims, fired deliberately at their legs, hoping thereby to bring them down without inflicting vital damage.

"Glad-Hand" slowed down and pointed suddenly to a space between two great columns of rock.

"I guess that's our hombre tied to the pea-stick!" he snapped, lowering the window by the driver's seat and beginning to use his gun on the enemy. "What we gonna do? Get him?"

Rex looked in the direction his colleague had indicated. His eyes lighted up as he recognised the man tied to the stake as his uncle, Arthur Ward.

"That's our man!" he said, with a nod. "What's more, that's our way out! Listen! You drive right over to that stake, while I

keep the beggars on the run. When we reach him, we can both do a bit of gunning while our Mexican friend here opens the nearest door and cuts him loose. How's that?"

"Fine! Are you game, son?"

"Si, si!" responded the Mexican, producing a knife from his belt and joining Rex at the door.

"Glad-Hand" dropped his gun and released the clutch and the car rolled over the bumpy ground towards the captive.

Simultaneously, several of the bandits, headed by Pedro Panza himself, came running from the shelter of some boulders to get to the prisoner before the rescuers could carry out their intention.

They met almost to the second at the stake. There was a roar of guns from both sides—but it was the bandits who suffered.

Rex, throwing caution to the winds now that the decisive moment had come, flung open the door. The peon's hand flashed out and he slashed wildly down at the cord that bound Ward, while Rex and Rogers fired to cover him.

The bandits, terrified by their failure to penetrate the car and get at its occupants, fled for cover again. In a matter of seconds they were out of danger behind the rocks, and once more training their guns on the raiders. But in those few seconds Arthur Ward was freed.

The peon grabbed him almost bodily and hauled him into the car. A bullet seared his arm as he did so and another buried itself in the frame of the door.

Then the prisoner was lying on the floor of the car and Rex had slammed the door shut again.

"Full speed ahead!" he sang out.

The great car started off again down the steep pass up which Rex had crawled the previous night on his way to the bandits' fortress.

But the danger was not yet over. As they reached the ledge where Rex's horse had fallen over the precipice and almost carried its rider to destruction, a dark shadow hurtled through the air before them.

There was a crash, and "Glad-Hand"

jammed on the brakes just in time to avoid colliding with a huge boulder. Pedro Panza's men, from a vantage-point on higher ground, had blocked the way!

Rex and Rogers stared at that boulder for a second or two, almost stunned by the realisation that they could not advance another yard.

Then "Glad-Hand" turned round in his seat and pointed to the rear of the car.

"Why in tarnation didn't I think of 'em

we'll see," said "Glad-Hand." "That little stone there ain't fallen straight. Won't take a lot of shiftin', I guess; but we can't go for it till they're all around us, or one of 'em might shoot from a kinder favourable position. Sit tight."

They waited. They hadn't long to wait before they saw that Pedro Panza's men were closing round them, ready for a charge.

Nearer and nearer came the creeping, slithering figures of the bandits.

In quick succession "Glad-Hand" Rogers flung the tear-gas bombs into the midst of the advancing bandits. The attack stopped abruptly, and Pedro Panza's men reeled about, helpless.



before ! " he yelled. " Pull up those cushions, buddy ! I got a whole heap of tear-gas bombs underneath ! "

Rex tore up the cushions. Underneath, sure enough, was a box containing half a dozen sinister-looking cylinders which were obviously bombs of some kind.

"Here they are," Rex said. "Though how they're going to help us escape——"

"Wait till those greasers get around an'

Suddenly there was a shout of command, and the pass became alive with Mexicans racing towards the car.

"Now ! " said "Glad-Hand."

He opened the door and flung one of the bombs, then another, and a third.

Three explosions sounded in quick succession. "Glad-Hand" waited for a few moments, then he leaped out of the car.

Rex uttered a cry of horror, fully expecting to see him drop before a rain of bullets.

But the American knew his tear-gas. The bandits' advance had suddenly stopped, guns were falling out of their hands unheeded, and Pedro Panza's men were reeling about as though drunk, weeping copiously as the gas did its work.

Not a shot rang out. The bandits, temporarily blinded, seemed to have lost interest in all things but their own eyes. Meanwhile, the American who had so effectively routed them was running to the boulder, slipping goggles over his eyes as he went.

He fell on his knees as he reached the great stone, put a broad shoulder under a projecting point, and lifted with all his strength.

The boulder was imperfectly balanced. The anxious spectators saw, with relief, that it shifted—slowly, very slowly at first, then more easily, till suddenly the great weight of it heeled over, wobbled on the edge of the drop for a second, then disappeared from view over the side.

They heard a distinct crash as it landed below. Rex could not repress a howl of joy.

"Quick!" he shouted.

"Glad-Hand" Rogers did not need the injunction. He was returning to the car with all the speed his long legs could command.

"Now you're gonna see some drivin'!" he grinned, as he took the wheel again. "Sit back an' wait for the thrills."

He started the car, and they bumped away down the steep pass at a pace calculated to give heart-failure to the most hardened race-track enthusiast.

But if "Glad-Hand" expected his passengers to be thrilled, he was booked for a disappointment. In comparison with the thrills they had had already, the drive back to the

Alqueria Azul seemed like a cab drive in Mexico City.

"So that cut-throat was after oil! It is true, then, uncle, that there's oil on your land?"

Rex Armitage was the speaker. He and his uncle and "Glad-Hand" Rogers were sitting on the veranda of the farmhouse a couple of days later. It looked very peaceful in the hot afternoon sunshine—a vivid contrast to the bullet-raked habitation Rex had first seen.

Arthur Ward nodded in reply to the question.

"There is. And I fully intended that it should remain there. I came to Mexico on the oil game, and I've seen the bloodshed that followed many a strike of oil. I've got beyond it, boys, and it was my idea to live my days here in peace. But Pedro Panza has made a difference."

"You mean you're gonna shift to healthier parts?" suggested "Glad-Hand."

Arthur Ward's jaw set grimly.

"Not at all. I mean I'm going to develop this as an oil-field and make a fight of it with that scoundrel who wanted to take it over my dead body. What's more, I want you boys to be my partners in the venture. What do you say?"

"Why, uncle, that's great of you!" said Rex jubilantly. "But, 'Glad-Hand,' what about you?"

"Glad-Hand" grinned.

"Think there'll be any more up-and-a-downers with the greasers?" he asked.

"Plenty!"

"Okay, then!"

And the new partnership was sealed with a triangular handshake.

