

# Frost Rides Alone

## Horace McCoy

A SOMEWHAT PROLIFIC author of pulp stories, primarily for *Black Mask*, Horace McCoy (1897-1955) is mainly remembered for his dark, tragic, and occasionally violent novels, several of which have been made into notable films.

A memorable work of noir fiction and a classic film is *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), filmed in 1969 with Sydney Pollack as the director, which achieved its aim of illustrating the pain and hopelessness of the Great Depression, using a marathon dance contest as a metaphor, with the exhausting and pointless expenditure of energy for participants being analogous to the plight of the majority of Americans.

The film *The Turning Point* (1952), directed by William Dieterle, became the novel *Corruption City* in 1959; *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye* (1948) starred James Cagney and was directed by Gordon Douglas when it was filmed in 1950; *No Pockets In a Shroud* (1937) was filmed in France in 1975; and *Scalpel* (1952) was filmed the following year as *Bad for Each Other*, the screenplay co-written by McCoy and directed by Irving Rapper. The only one of McCoy's novels to have no film version is *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938), and McCoy's screenplay was published in 1978.

Captain Jerry Frost of the Texas (Air) Rangers made his debut in "Dirty Work" in *Black Mask* in September 1929; "Frost Rides Alone" was published in the March 1930 issue.

# Frost Rides Alone

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FROST FELT THAT HE and the woman were being followed, had been followed since they crossed the Border. As they emerged from the Plaza Madero and turned down the crooked street towards the Café Estrellita he became acutely aware that footsteps were proceeding in the same direction as himself and that the owner was trying to attract as little attention as possible.

To satisfy himself that he was not the victim of his own imagination, so often the case when he invaded old Mexico after nightfall, he halted briefly before a shop window, wherein baubles were exhibited, and whispered a caution to his companion. The moment they stopped the footfalls ceased. No one passed. Quite evidently someone was following.

Fully alive now, his nerves on edge, Frost spoke to his companion, and they walked on. In the distance he could see the lights of the Café Estrellita and outside the shadowy forms of customers at the sidewalk tables. Frost walked slowly, his ears strained, but did not look around. He was still being followed. Moreover, the number of steps behind him had increased. There were now two or three men. The street was narrow and the footsteps loud: overhead the stars blinked and from a hidden patio nearby there floated the dim tinkle of a guitar.

As the woman passed the dark, dank interiors she gave way to a swift rush of apprehension and took Frost's arm nervously. He leaned over and whispered: "Don't get excited, but I'd like to know if you can use a gun."

She moved her head closer. "I'm sort of jumpy," she apologized lamely, "but really, I can use a gun. Fact is—" her confidence returned—"I've got one." She patted her voluminous handbag. She went on lightly. "I haven't been a newspaper woman ten years without learning a few things."

Frost said, "Oh!" rather contritely, and steered her into the cafe without looking back at his pursuers.

La Estrellita was a little square room overcrowded with tables at which, outside and inside, sat perhaps half a hundred persons. The ceiling was almost obscured by cigarette smoke, and there was all the variety of noises commonly associated with Border joints. It was the hour when Algodon blazed with the specific intent of luring tourists, although the patronage here was now, as far as Frost determined in a hurried glance, mostly native.

At one end of the room was a bar at which two Mexicans were mixing drinks; behind them was the traditional frosted mirror and long rows of bottles. A square-shouldered, semi-bald man was busy plying a rag with what amounted to violence and one look at him left no doubt concerning his origin. He was one of those old-time American bartenders driven into Mexico by prohibition.

Glasses and spoons littered one end of the bar and near this end, on a raised platform, sat a quintet of native musicians languidly strumming their guitars. They simulated indifference, ennui, hoping to chisel a round of

drinks from a sympathetic tourist. The house was bare of sympathy.

Frost led his companion inside and half way to the table he had mentally selected he recognized the unmistakable form of Ranger Captain George Stuart. Frost slowly passed Stuart's table and said under his breath:

"Don't look up, George. Just get set. Hell's fixing to pop."

The only indication Stuart heard was an almost imperceptible movement of his fingers as he knocked the ashes off his cigarette. Twenty years on the Border had given him perfect control of all his faculties, had deadened his emotions.

Frost went to a table near the end of the bar and helped his companion into a chair. Then he sat down, facing the room and glanced at George Stuart.

There passed a look of understanding. Stuart crossed his legs and as he did so slid his six-gun inside his thigh by means of his elbow. At that moment three men came through the doorway, looked hurriedly about the room and walked to a table near Frost. As they sat down their chairs scraped and the sounds were audible above the maudlin talk and the soporific music.

The three of them were young, Mexican in cast of countenance, with sharp faces and narrow eyes—of a general type with which the Border, from end to end, teems: shrewd, crafty wastrels who will turn any sort of a trick for any sort of a price.

Frost ordered two bottles of beer from a waiter, and looked at his companion.

"I'm afraid," he said, striving to be unconcerned, "I've got you into a mess—and the only way out is straight ahead."

"You think," she asked, inclining her head slightly, "those men—"

"I don't know," Frost said. "But I've got a sweet hunch you're liable to get a good story before this party ends. There's a window directly behind you. If—if anything happens, get out and keep going."

"You talk," she said, "as if you regretted bringing me."

Frost eyed her. "I never have regrets," he said, "they're cowardly. Just the same it didn't look this foggy when we started. If we tried to get out now we'd never live to reach the street."

"As bad as that?" She was smiling and the smile annoyed Frost. He didn't answer. He thought her question was stupid. Hell, of course it was bad. She had no business here. But that was the way with the newspaper tribe—all of them. Especially women. They thought that their profession was protection. Helen Stevens, however, seemed more officious than any other Frost had known. Probably, he presumed, because she was to author a series about Hell's Stepsons for an indubitably important organization, the Manhattan Syndicate, Inc. But, even then, Frost told himself again, this time bitterly, she had no business here.

Few spots on the Border are safe for a woman after dark; Algodon was no spot for a woman at any time. But Helen Stevens had insisted and as the final persuasive force she had even brought a letter from the Adjutant-General. And here she was.

It looked bad.

The waiter returned with the bottles and two glasses. He poured the drinks, placed the bottles on a tray, and started away.

"Psst!" said Frost. "*Deja los botella.* "

The waiter turned, surprised. "*Como?*"

"*Deja los botella!*" Frost repeated, more sharply.

The waiter lifted his eyes as if invoking divine compassion on the fool before him; and put the empty bottles back on the table. He moved away, slightly puzzled; but no more so than the newspaper woman.

"How odd!" she observed.

"Not at all," Frost said. "I've got a lot of funny little habits like that." He didn't feel it necessary to tell her experience had taught him there was nothing comparable to the efficiency of a beer bottle at close quarters; or that he had a deep-seated hunch it would be at close quarters soon.

He took a sip from his glass and looked at his companion. Her face was unworried, lovely. He thought of that moment on route to La Estrellita when she had, momentarily frightened, touched his arm. Her face betrayed no fear now—nor anything that remotely approached fear. From the tranquillity of her demeanor she might have been sitting in the refinement of an opera loge instead of a Mexican dive where the air was charged with expectancy. Frost felt, irreverently, that if he, accustomed to tension, was slightly ill at ease, she, unaccustomed to anything of the sort, should at least have shared a portion of that discomfort. It mildly annoyed him that she didn't.

She reached for the glass with her long fingers and as she lifted it she drummed her fingers lightly against the stem. Out of the corner of his eye Frost saw one of the three men who had followed him lean over and whisper to his comrades. He also saw George

Stuart move forward in his chair, ready to get into action in a split second.

Helen Stevens was speaking in a dulcet voice. "Is this," she was saying, "typical of Border towns?"

"Is it possible," Frost countered, "that you are a stranger to Border towns?"

She laughed and her eyes beamed spiritedly. "Of course."

"In that case it's typical. Just the same," Frost went on, "I wish we hadn't come."

"Why?" she demanded. She seemed positively to be enjoying it. "I'm glad," she went on, rippling, "that I can see you against your proper background." She inclined her head. "Captain, I'm afraid you dramatize yourself fearfully."

For the second time in the past few minutes Frost was the victim of mixed emotions. She alternately stirred him and irritated him. Now he was in no mood for tea-room repartee.

"Please," he said, "let's not get personal." He contemplated that remark and decided it wasn't exactly what he wanted to say. It sounded flat. So he hurried on, "Miss Stevens, you mustn't get me wrong. Our men have been having a tough time along this river with an important gang. We are constantly expecting things to happen—anything. To you that may seem dramatic. But I am only cautious—" he lifted his eyes "—and thinking of you."

"You needn't," she said suddenly. "I'm all right."

Somehow he didn't quite think so. He was alarmed—rather definitely alarmed. Notwithstanding his attitude of indifference he

felt that something was going to happen before they got out of La Estrellita. He knew the signs. It was the sort of a prelude that always traveled along in the same slot. Never any change. Had he been alone he could have forced the issue. But he was not alone. There was a woman with him—a personal charge. That sort of cramped his style. Jerry Frost had been in the habit of meeting trouble half-way.

Three men had followed him. Why? Footpads intent on robbing a tourist? He dismissed that thought. They knew very well who he was— should have known—and even if they didn't, George Stuart was there. Every man, woman and child in Algodon knew the rock-ribbed Stuart. He was part and parcel of the Border country. Men who stalk American game along the Rio with a Ranger within the same walls are bent on a mission more sinister than robbery.

Did they think Frost had on his person the valuable black book he got from Flash Singleton in the little episode at Jamestown—the little black book the gangster had carried, giving names and information? He didn't know. But there was a voice within him—a small, still voice that roused him to the alert. It bred expectancy. Helen Stevens had thought, and said so, that this was theatricality. Frost smiled reflectively. She could think what she damn well pleased. He had no fault to find with his intuition. It had saved him too often.

"Do you think," she whispered, "any of the gang is here now?"

"No se," he shrugged. "They're everywhere."

"But I thought I'd read that Hell's Stepsons had broken it up."

He cast her what was intended to be a rueful grimace, but it hardly was that. "No," he

admitted, "we've made only a small dent in it. We've caught only the little fish."

She moved again, this time her body. She placed her hand on Frost's wrist and swayed her head a little. "I hope," she said suddenly and, he thought, softly, "you get the big ones!"

Frost felt she was animated by deep sincerity, and as quickly as his suspicions had mounted they disappeared. They might have been dissipated by the touch of her hand, by the proximity of her lovely face, by the faint smile on her lips; but dissipated they most assuredly were. Helen Stevens was a good-looking woman of the type which has been vaguely classified as a man's woman. It had been a long time since such a creature had been as close to him. He became poignantly and swiftly aware that he had been missing something.

He patted her hand gratefully, sighed like a silly schoolboy and said: "I hope so, too."

There was a scuffling sound from the front of the house and a man got up unsteadily. After an hour he had become aware that the orchestra was not functioning well.

*"Una cancion!"* he cried. *"Canta!"*

*"Si, si,"* came the chorus.

The musicians on the platform be-stirred themselves and stroked the strings with a little more life than they had previously evidenced. They played a few bars as a vamp and then lifted their voices in a plaintive rendering of *La Cucaracha*, camp song of that immortal renegade—Villa.

They finished and were rewarded with loud applause. It was to be expected. *La Cucaracha* is a sort of provincial national air. It brought back flashing memories of the

Chihuahua stable cleaner who later flung his defy in the teeth of the government: "*Que chico se me hace el mar para hacer un buche de agua* . . . I'll use the ocean to gargle!"

The lethargy in La Estrellita was falling away.

Frost looked at the table where the three men were sitting. They were, to him, plainly agitated.

Their heads bobbed excitedly, and one of them exchanged wise looks with the bartender. After that the bartender moved slowly down the rail with affected nonchalance. Frost pretended to be thoroughly immersed in his drink and his companion. But he was not too immersed in either.

Something was about to occur.

"Remember," he said aside to the woman, "the window is directly behind you. It looks like trouble is coming. Understand?"

"Perfectly," she said quietly. She reached for her bag, and opened it in her lap. Her hand slipped inside and closed about the butt of a gun. "Don't worry."

"I won't," he said. He meant it. The calmness and sureness of her decision relieved him. Again he admired her, found himself wondering what sort of a companion she would be in more agreeable surroundings.

One of the three Mexicans got up. The impression he meant to convey was drunkenness. Frost got no such impression.

He caught the eye of George Stuart and nodded. Stuart nodded likewise.

The Mexican started off between the tables, ostensibly intent on reaching the bar. He never got that far. He purposely stepped out of

the way to trip against Frost's foot, almost falling to the floor. He righted himself and poured out a volume of Spanish; swept the glasses from the table.

Here it was. The big blow-off. Here it was. Frost had been waiting, taut as a bow-string.

He leaped from his chair and put all his power into a short uppercut that landed flush on the Mexican's chin and sent him reeling ten feet away against a table.

"Beat it!" he said to the woman.

His right hand went to his hip after his gun and his left hand groped for the empty bottle. But he had lost a precious few seconds. He turned to find himself looking down the blue barrels of two pistols held in the hands of the remaining pursuers. It was too late to draw his own weapon.

The career of Jerry Frost might have ended on the spot had it not been for George Stuart. He had come from behind softly, but fast, and brought the butt of his gun down upon the head of one of the Mexicans. It was a terrific blow. The man groaned and fell to the floor. Stuart quickly threw his arms about the other's shoulders.

Frost availed himself of the lull to take a step backward and look for Helen Stevens. She was missing; and he had no time to speculate on where she was or how she got away. Through the door came five men, as tough looking as any Frost had ever seen. They were rushing forward recklessly, intent on but one purpose. Everybody in the room had risen by now, offering the quintet slight impediment.

Frost swung the beer bottle with all the force he could muster, and it crashed against the head of the man with whom Stuart was wrestling. The Mexican's cheek bone ripped

through the skin as if by magic, and blood poured down his face. He instantly grew limp; and Stuart let him slide to the floor.

An unseen hand pressed the switch and La Estrellita was swept into darkness.

A pistol cracked, light blue and scarlet, and the bullet whistled by Frost's head. Pandemonium arose. Frost stepped to one side; not a moment too soon. The pistol barked again. From the flash Frost deduced he had been in direct line of fire. If—

There was a stampede towards the door. Frost lashed out in the dark, heard a grunt, and lashed out again. A third time he swung the beer bottle; this time it shattered. Spanish blasphemy ascended. La Estrellita was an inferno. Tables and chairs rattled, glasses crashed, and a loud voice shouted:

*"Luz! Luz!"*

Someone was calling for lights and it struck Frost that the sensible thing to do now was retreat before the lights went up. So he shouted for Stuart to follow him, ducked quickly, and moved towards the window. His escape was made difficult by the cursing, wedging mob. Everybody was fighting to get outside. Frost lunged with his fists, and a blow banged against his jaw. He reeled, almost fell but came up swinging. Outside he could hear the shrill whistles of the police. The Mexican constabulary was calling, like no other police in the world, for order.

Frost set his teeth and flailed his arms. And every time they went out they struck something. He dived forward and some of the mob went down before the force of his body. He got up and climbed over, carrying others in his mad march to the exit.

He wanted to shout at Stuart again to let him know where he was, but even in that chaos

of mind and flesh, Frost realized to cry out now would be to betray himself by his voice. So he fought his way slowly to the window.

He could see it as a rectangle of outside light a few feet ahead and he pushed and struggled and continued to swing. He thrilled to the power in his long arms and his fists ... a form loomed in front of him in clear silhouette and he started a blow from the floor. His fist crashed against the blurred vision that was a head; there was a smothered exclamation, and the man went down.

Frost shifted his arms and got his pistol, and as he came near the window he swung again and again; then of a sudden he became aware that his legs were not moving. They were imprisoned in a human vise.

He fell forward.

But he did not hit the floor. He fell on top of several squirming bodies; and realized he had been pulled down in the confusion. Fearful lest he be trampled, he yanked himself up again by means of somebody's coat and was thankful he still had his pistol. He came to his knees, then full up, and, finding he had sufficient space to move his legs, kicked lustily at the form on the floor. There was an oath.

He reached for the window, anchored his hand and pulled. He finally made it. He climbed up and literally fell into the night. With the first intake of air he thought of the woman and Stuart.

Where were they? Safe? There had been, he reflected, but two pistol shots. So far as he could determine neither had found a mark. Mexican marksmanship is notoriously, bad; their first love is the blade. And the blade is, generally, silent. Had? . . . The thought sent Frost into a rage. Still, Stuart was a veteran. He had been in hundreds of brawls . . . and yet. ...

Regardless of everything now, Frost lifted his voice:

"George! George!"

As if in answer to his reckless cry, George Stuart tumbled through the window.

"Thank God!" Frost panted. "Hurt?"

"Nope!" Laconically. Then: "You?"

"Bruised." Then: "George, I've got to find the woman!"

They moved quickly across the street. The melee in the cafe continued. The police were puffing at their whistles and occasionally shouting in an official voice that did no good; there was general discord.

"In the meantime," George said, "we're in a fine shape to stop a slug or two. Let's step on it."

They walked rapidly towards the international bridge.

Stuart said, "Who the hell was that dame?"

"A newspaper woman the Old Man sent down—but I'd rather not talk about it."

"I don't blame you," Stuart said. "You had a swell idea—bringing her to this town. She damn near got us messed up."

"I know that now. But it could have been worse." He went on quietly, "You saved my life, George."

George Stuart rubbed his chin reflectively and pretended he didn't hear.

"Where do you suppose she went?" he asked.

"I tried to tell her what was coming," Frost said. "If she was smart she went across."

They had gone so far now the sounds in La Estrellita were but murmurs. Overhead the stars blinked on; once in a while the Rangers caught the music of guitars as an indolent part of Algodon, impervious to the excitement, sang on.

"Know those yeggs who started the fight?" Stuart asked, matching the strides of the long-legged flyer.

"Never saw 'em before," Frost said. "I guess they were hired by the gang. I wonder," he mused, "where it'll all end?"

Stuart had no answer for that one. They walked along silently.

"I hope," Frost went on, as if to himself, "she got back okey. I sort of had the idea she could look out for herself."

"Well," put in Stuart truculently, "she had a swell opportunity of doing that little thing tonight."

"And she wasn't bad looking," Frost went on in the same tone.

"Yeh—I saw that, too."

At the international boundary they exchanged pleasantries they did not feel with the customs officials. Frost asked for the woman. The officers said they were sorry, but no woman had passed into the States. Frost stoutly insisted they must be mistaken; they insisted just as stoutly they could not be.

George Stuart was familiar with their technique. He said, "Well?" to Frost in such a tone his meaning was clear.



"A mess," Frost exploded—"a first-class mess. God," he breathed, "if anything's happened . . . Well," resolutely, "I can't go back without her. That much is a cinch."

Stuart lighted a cigarette and said, "Anything you say, Jerry. Wanna take a look at La Estrellita?" thus leaving the plan of action to the flyer.

"It's not a question of wanting to, George. But the Old Man sent her—"

"Sure." Stuart turned to the officials and requested, with a trace of belligerence, that if the woman who had crossed with Frost returned she be detained. He then divested himself of certain pertinent remarks. "Jerry—you're the biggest damn fool I ever saw. You know how you stand around here," and, having unburdened himself, he again became the fighting man with a terse, "Hell, let's go!"

And with no more than that they swung back to La Estrellita, whence they had so recently and so narrowly escaped with their lives.

The café had quieted somewhat when they returned. Stuart and Frost made their way inside. A few patrons had come back (a great many had never left), but many of the tables were over-turned and everywhere there were unmistakable signs of the fight, notwithstanding the expeditious work of the café's ubiquitous emergency corps. The five-man Mexican orchestra was back on the platform playing in the same listless fashion which forever characterizes their music. This was a bland lot of musicians. A brawl, a pistol fight, a knife duel—nothing to them. Every night was just another night.

Their hands on their hips, the Rangers stood inside the door of the café and returned glare for glare. There were low murmurs of recognition as they entered.

They summoned the proprietor.

"I know this guy Rasaplo," Stuart said. "Lemme do all the talking."

Rasaplo waddled up solicitously, portly after the vogue of Mexican café owners, with long mustachios and sagging jowls that could be either fierce or cherubic. At this moment he chose for them to be cherubic. He rubbed his hands as if Frost and Stuart were patron saints who had stepped from their *nichos*, and smiled broadly.

"Señors," he said, "I am sorry—vair sorry." He looked from one face to the other, seeking some indication of official forgiveness. There was none. The Rangers stared at him and through him. Rasaplo quailed somewhat.

"Now lissen," Stuart said, his voice steely. "The *capitan* here brought a woman with him—*la mujer Americana*. *Ella desvaneca*—disappeared. *Sabe* what that means?"

Rasaplo's eyes widened in surprise. His whole person registered consternation. Great actors, those fellows. Rasaplo lifted his hands in horror.

"*Imposible!*" he managed. "Never in La Estrellita. Never! La Estrellita ees—"

"Yeh," Stuart cut in; "I know that speech backwards! La Estrellita is a little nursery where mommas leave their children." He clucked heatedly. "Nix on that patriotism stuff, Rasaplo! Your dump ain't no different from any of the others along this creek. Now get this— the woman disappeared in here tonight—and she's got to be found. Tell me something before I—"

"But," Rasaplo wheezed, "I am in the back room when a gun go boom! and the place get dark. I know no more."

Stuart looked at Frost and nodded. "Well, in that case," he began, his meaning clear, "I guess we'll—"

Rasaplo said quickly, "Mebbe Pete know. Pete always know." He went briskly to the bar and engaged a bartender in conversation. He was the one Frost had seen moving down the rail before the lights went out. From the way the patrons eyed the scene the Rangers could tell they still were annoyed at having their evening interrupted. They were content, however, merely to stare.

But the bartender was mystified, too. There was no misinterpreting his gestures. He didn't know how the fight started, and he didn't remember any woman. All he knew was that after the lights went on again several natives were carried out, semi-conscious.

Rasaplo darted a swift look around, leaned over the bar a little farther, and something changed hands. Stuart and Frost both saw it at the same time. They went forward.

"Gimme that!" Stuart commanded.

Rasaplo grinned abashed, and handed over a letter. "They give it to the boy to mail," he said. "I do not know anything."

The letter was addressed to Captain Jerry Frost, Gentry, Texas, and there was a two-cent U.S. stamp in the corner. Frost ripped it open. A note on the back of a menu. It said:

*"Thanks, Captain, for the woman."*

It was written in that peculiar, flamboyant foreign style. Frost fingered it blankly and held it up for Stuart to see. Stuart said to Rasaplo: "Where's the waiter who got this?"

Rasaplo summoned a sleek servitor, who eyed Stuart and Frost with an expression that can only be called baleful.

"Who gave you this?" Frost held up the letter.

The waiter shrugged his shoulders to say he couldn't remember all the patrons; but made no answer.

"Who gave you this?" Frost repeated.

"I no remember," he said. "A man—" as if that would help.

Rasaplo inserted his broad bulk into the scene to give his employee whatever protection he could muster. "He know nothing," he said. "He get the letter and boom! the place go dark. Mebbe we get *miedo*—and no mail letter. But—" His voice, colorless, trailed off.

Stuart gestured disgustedly to Frost. For the time being they knew they were against a blank wall. Trying to elicit criminal information from some Mexicans can be—in some instances, is—nothing short of impossible. Indeed, some of them are so clumsy in trying to remain innocent they incriminate themselves.

The Rangers knew they could do no more; and, too, they were chancing further trouble by remaining in La Estrellita.

"Come on, let's go see the cops." On the way-out Stuart went on: "But don't expect too much of the law here. It's quite probably the rottenest force in the world. Maybe, though—"

They went around the corner to the police station, and Frost soon learned that Stuart had properly classified the Algodon police. They said they hadn't the faintest idea what happened to the woman; moreover, they gave the impression, and it was true, that they weren't in the least interested. They were

without the slightest degree of enthusiasm, and raised their brows superciliously to convey the thought that if the Rangers couldn't look out for their own women they shouldn't expect anyone else to.

Stuart said to Frost: "I'd like to sock this gang in the jaw."

Frost nodded abstractedly. He wasn't particularly concerned with that. It was the woman. His last hope, for the present, had fled. She had been his responsibility, his personal charge, and to return to Gentry without her likely would cause complications. She could be one of a thousand places. He rephrased Stuart's words: he had been a damn fool.

And the Old Man. He'd raise hell. Well, what the hell? He'd just have to raise it, that was all. There wasn't anything they could do about it now. Anyway, it was partly his fault. He'd never brought her over if the Old Man hadn't written that letter. "Let her have a look at Algodon by night," he had said. The exact words. Let her have a look by night...Well, she'd had one.

Frost damned his thoughts and turned to Stuart. "Should I have kept her there and taken a chance?" he asked. "Didn't I do the right thing when I told her to get out?"

"Sure," said Stuart broadly, consolingly. Under his breath he rasped: "I'd like to sock this gang in the nose!"

Back at the boundary the Customs officers said no woman had passed since Frost and Stuart were last there, and the Rangers swore roundly and stamped across the bridge. There were headed for the police department in Gentry.

Fifteen minutes later the telegraph wires of the Border country were humming a message, soon to be broadcast over the nation:

**KIDNAPED IN ALGADON, MEXICO, ON THE NIGHT OF FEBRUARY ELEVENTH: WOMAN ANSWERING TO NAME OF HELEN STEVENS, REPRESENTATIVE OF MANHATTAN NEWSPAPER SYNDICATE OF NEW YORK CITY. ABOUT FIVE FEET FIVE INCHES, HUNDRED TEN POUNDS, LIGHT BROWN HAIR, BLUE EYES, TEETH UNMARKED, WEARING BROWN COAT AND SKIRT, FLAT-HEELED TWO-TONE SHOES. NOTIFY TEXAS AIR RANGERS, CAPTAIN JERRY FROST GENTRY, TEXAS.**

Stuart and Frost then went to the barracks of Hell's Stepsons and dived into bed. George Stuart, again exhibiting remarkable mental control, went immediately to sleep.

Not so Frost. He rolled, pitched, tossed and fretted at his impotence.

Within seventy-two hours the Manhattan Syndicate, Inc., of New York City, had taken official cognizance of the disappearance of one of its representatives by bringing the matter to the attention of the ranking officer of the sovereign State of Texas. Powerfully allied, as are all important syndicates, it lost no time in applying all the pressure at its command.

Messages were exchanged and the austere Mexican government moved, as a gesture of courtesy, a detachment of *rurales* into Algodon. Nobody, of course, expected them to achieve results.

Helen Stevens had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed her.

Yet the law, tank-like in its motion, rumbled on.

The spotlight was fixed on Hell's Stepsons, and its glare was not favorable. The spectacular work done in the past was forgotten.

On the fourth day after her disappearance there was a conference within the great, gilt-domed state capitol at Austin, in the inner office of the governor's suite. There were three men there: the Great Man himself, the Adjutant-General and Captain Frost.

"It is unfortunate," the Governor was saying; "most unfortunate." He was tapping his glasses against his chin: a dignified patriarch, product of the expansive state he represented—rugged, sincere and honest.

"Yes," the Adjutant-General agreed. He was commander of that crack constabulary, the Texas Rangers, the personification of the ideals of that brigade. Big and gaunt he was; you knew at a glance, the sort of an official who would, if needs be, climb into the saddle himself and take the trail.

"The woman," the Governor went on, "is well connected. We cannot, in any event, let up in the search."

"But, sir," mildly demurred the Adjutant-General, "we *are* trying. I feel," he went on, "somewhat responsible in a personal sense. I insisted Captain Frost take her across."

"No," Frost said quickly; "the fault was mine."

"Well," the Governor declared, "whose fault it was is beside the point. We have got to do something at once."

"They're a tough lot," Frost mused. He spread his hands on the desk. He was, for obvious reasons, highly uncomfortable. "Gentlemen," he said, "I agree that we are

being made to look bad. But what else can we do?"

"It has been my experience," said the Adjutant-General, "that this gang never strikes blindly. There always is a motive back of every crime. What was it in this case? Why did they kidnap Helen Stevens? Revenge? Hardly. Ransom?" He shook his head. "No—something else. Some reason we don't know yet."

Frost nodded. "If I had the slightest idea where she was," he said, "I'd go get her—no matter where that happened to be."

Silence.

Then the Governor said, "Perhaps we ought to ask for a bigger appropriation for the Ranger force. Increase them. Move some of them south." He looked sagacious. "The only bad feature about movement like that is the publicity. Our opponents always construe that as inefficiency. It gives them something to talk about. I dislike having this case noised around."

"Well," Frost said bluntly, "the only way to keep it in the family is to let me have a crack at it alone."

Then the unbelievable happened. The immense, carved door swung open noiselessly, and the Governor's secretary entered.

"I'm sorry, sir," he addressed the Great Man, "but I've a message for Captain Frost."

"For me?" Frost asked.

"Yes, sir—forwarded from Gentry."

The Governor said: "Come in, Leavell, come in."

The secretary walked to Captain Frost and handed him the message. Frost made no

move to open it until the secretary had departed.

"May I—"

"Certainly," said the Governor.

A deep silence fell. Frost read the message without even a blink of the eye and passed it over the desk to the Governor.

He put on his glasses and read aloud:

**COAST GUARD CUTTER FORTY-NINE  
SIGHTED RUM-RUNNER CATHERINE  
B LONGITUDE NINETY-SEVEN EAST  
LATITUDE TWENTY-SEVEN NEAR  
BROWNSVILLE WITH WOMAN  
ABOARD ANSWERING DESCRIPTION  
STEVENS STOP CUTTER  
OUTDISTANCED STOP RUM BOAT  
ONE OF FORMER AL THOMAS  
FLEET.**

**O'Neill.**

The Governor removed his glasses and tapped them against his chin again. The Adjutant-General looked at Frost. Frost looked out the window.

"I sort of thought so," he soliloquized.

"Al Thomas," mused the Governor. "Who is that?"

"A gunman killed in a plane smash a couple of months ago after a dogfight with Hell's Stepsons," Frost replied. "His men seem to be carrying on."

"Cutter outdistanced," the Governor went on. "I wonder how—"

"Please, sir," Frost put in. He was on his feet now. Hours of inactivity, of recrimination, of criticism, rushed to a climax which crystallized his attitude. "Please, sir—I'd like to

play this alone. Single-handed. It started mine and—" his voice was grim—"I'd like it to finish the same way. I don't want any help."

"But, Captain—" he began.

"Of course, Jerry," said the Adjutant-General in a placating voice. "You can't go streaking off like this!"

Frost raised his hand. His face was in a cast of resolve. "Please," he said again, firmly. He looked at the Adjutant-General and the Adjutant-General understood. "I've got to go it alone."

The Governor nodded; Frost saluted and went out.

As the door closed the Adjutant-General smiled and offered an observation to his chief. "I'd hate like hell to have him after me."

Coast Guard Cutter Forty-Nine's base was at Corpus Christi, and it was towards there that Frost turned when he hopped off from Austin. He was at Cuero in fifty minutes, stopping only long enough to wire Jimmy O'Neill that he was on his way and to notify Hans Traub he again was temporarily in command of the Air Rangers.

"I'm riding alone on the Stevens case," he telegraphed.

Two hours and fifty minutes after he had circled the dome of the state capitol, he dipped into the airport at Corpus Christi and taxied his battle plane into a hangar. He got O'Neill on the phone at the government docks.

"Coming right over, Jimmy."

"Great," said O'Neill. "Ox Clay is here. You'll like him."

Frost did like Ox Clay. That name ought to awaken memories of sporting page devotees because Ox Clay was pretty well known back in '21 and '22 when he was ripping football lines to shreds for the Middies: little, square-jawed, built like a bullet, and innumerable laugh wrinkles around his eyes. "Hello, Jerry," he greeted the flyer. "I've heard so damn much about you I feel as if we're old friends."

"You're no stranger yourself." Frost returned. He said to O'Neill: "Well, Jimmy, I've just left one of those high and mighty conferences. Believe you me, Missus Frost's young son has got to do something and do it pronto. "What's it all about?"

"Ox can tell you more than I can, Jerry. He was riding Forty-Nine himself."

"I'll say I was," Clay retorted with a grimace. "And the way that baby slipped away from Forty-Nine was nobody's business. We took a couple of shots—it wasn't good target practice. We only scared her faster."

"What about the woman?"

"I was getting to that. It's that Stevens skirt—no two ways about it. They let us get pretty close—and then kidded us by pulling away. But nobody can tell me I didn't see her during those first few minutes—brown suit, brown hair—"

"Right!" said Frost. "Sounds like my little playmate. What about the boat?"

"Well, she used to belong to the Singleton outfit. Name's the *Catherine B*. Lately taken over by Thomas, and then his gang got it when you fellows rubbed him out. She's the prize of the Gulf, can store about three thousand cases and make close to forty knots. We've never got her because she's fast and then there are hundreds of little coves along the

coast she ducks in when trouble appears. When we saw her she was heading to sea."

"We've got plenty of dope on that outfit," O'Neill said. "But so far it hasn't done us any good. We know they load on the stuff at Tampico, Vera Cruz and God knows where else—and about a hundred miles out they transfer it to the launches."

"I see," Frost said. "The launches don't dare get out farther than that?"

"Exactly," Clay put in. "They work close to the Mexican side. There must be five hundred coves between here and the Laguna de la Madre."

"If we could grab the *Catherine B*" O'Neill said; "we'd stop a lot of the smuggling. What's your idea about this, Jerry?"

"Well, I'm going to have a look for her," Frost said quietly.

They thought he was kidding.

"Bring your bathing suit?" Clay asked.

"I'm serious," Frost said.

"Really?" Incredulously.

"Hell, yes, Why not? I'll get pontoons and try to take her. She can't outrun my boat."

"It'd be suicide," said Clay, shaking his head.

Frost laughed. "Lissen, Ox—I admit it may seem funny to you, but it doesn't to me. Besides, I've *got* to do it. How am I going to know when I see her?"

"Easy," said Clay. "Brass taffrails. She's ebony black all over but for her taffrails. You can see 'em rain or shine. She carries one funnel,

looks perfect alow and aloft, has a heavy stern and her cutwater and bow lines are as pretty as I ever saw."

Frost laughed. "I don't get that conversation," he said. "But I did understand about the brass. I don't guess I can miss her."

"You can't," O'Neill said.

"Definitely made up your mind to go it alone?" asked Clay.

"Yep. Would it be possible for me to requisition silencers?"

Ox Clay swung open a drawer and took out two pistols fitted with longish muzzles. "Presto!" he said. He handed them to Frost. "I'll let you use mine."

Frost stared at them curiously. "This," he said, "is the first time I ever saw a silencer. Are they apt to jam?"

Clay grinned. "The first shots will be all right. After that you gamble. Hope they'll do you, Jerry. They're my contribution to your success."

Frost took an automatic out of his hip-holster and one from under his chamois jacket. He said: "I'll trade for the time being. Now one thing more and I'll blow a bugle over your grave. Will you phone Roland at the field that I'm on my way and be sure and be in."

"I'll phone, but don't think that gang on the *Catherine B* will be a pushover. It's a tough mob."

"I know." Frost shook hands with each of them. "Well," he said; "so long."

"So long. Good luck."

"Thanks."

He sheathed his pistols and walked out. Ox Clay looked at Jimmy O'Neill.

"Lotsa guts," he observed.

"You said it!"

Major Oliver Roland, commander of the flying field at Corpus Christi was a stout admirer of Jerry Frost personally and professionally, being a veteran airman himself, but he thought Frost's plan to take the air in an effort to locate the kidnaped woman was a wild idea.

"It's all wet," as he put it.

Frost said no.

"Ridiculous—and dangerous."

"Neither," Frost retorted crisply. "I can't afford to think of either one."

"You ought to." Sternly: "Just because you've had a lot of success along the Border you think you're invulnerable. That makes you cocky and breeds overconfidence. You mustn't get that way."

Roland's tone was firm, but inoffensive, and Frost grinned. "I'm not overconfident. I've got good reasons not to be." He was thinking of that time not so long ago when he escaped in an enemy plane, to think he had the world by the tail on a down-hill pull, and was promptly shot down by his companions. "I'm not overconfident," he repeated. "But I am curious—curious as hell. It's up to me to get that woman—and with your help I intend to!"

Oliver Roland knew flyers. He looked into Frost's eyes—clear. He looked at his mouth—tight. He looked at his chin—square under pressure of the jaws. He decided the young man knew what he was doing.

"Very well," he surrendered. "Want a flying boat?"

"Nope, pontoons. Just pontoons. Will you fit me?"

Roland nodded. "On the condition that you forget where you got 'em."

"My memory's awful," Frost smiled.

It required little more than two hours to fit the pontoons and service the ship; and then the silver-winged bird cascaded through the Gulf of Mexico, left the water in a stream of fume, and turned its eager wings southward.

That bird was a fighting ship of the Texas Rangers, carried two thousand rounds of ammunition, a veteran pilot who had a brace of silencer-equipped pistols, and, what was infinitely more important, a stout heart.

Jerry Frost was riding alone. He climbed to fifteen thousand feet better to deaden the roar of his motor, and swung down the jagged coast line. The Gulf lay beneath, a somber expanse as far as his eyes could see, its surface rippling with whitecaps: long, thin, broken lines like the foreground of an etching. Far down the lanes he could see the funnels of a boat which seemed to hang on the edge of the world, so slowly did it move.

The coast line was dotted with innumerable coves and the waves rolled against them to be broken into effervescence. Frost reflected that Ox Clay had been entirely correct. There were so many of these serrated sanctuaries which afforded natural shelter for the lawless they could well defy the maps. No cartographer possibly could have marked them all.

Frost rocketed down the coast line for a hundred miles and then veered over the Gulf in

a wider flight. Already he had come to realize that finding the *Catherine B* out here was no sinecure for a young man who wanted action. There was, however, one consoling thought: he, at least, was in the air with a definite objective.

The *Catherine B* had been seen in Longitude 97 east and Latitude 27. He consulted the map on his board. That would be, as near as he could roughly estimate, fifty miles out of the Laguna de la Madre in a line with Rockport and Vera Cruz. Of course, she wouldn't be there now. But she had started—and there was a reason why. It was not, manifestly, chance. She was on her way to keep a rendezvous.

Frost kept cudgeling his brain seeking a motive for the kidnaping of Helen Stevens. It probably was the least remunerative thing the gang could have done. What could they hope to gain? Didn't they know they would only attract official attention? And that the less attention they attracted the more success would attend their missions?

It seemed, to Frost, inconsistent, imbecilic. But—they had her. He couldn't very well get away from that—they had her. And it was up to him.

It seemed simple. "Two and two," he said to his instrument board; "make four."

A long way out from the Mexican coast his eyes were caught by a tiny boat that was slipping through the water, leaving a long wake, and he deduced she must be running all of thirty knots.

Even from his height he knew the speed was unusual. His heart jumped. He came as close as he dared and maneuvered to get the sun on her. He looked closely. No brass reflection. A rumrunner, but, now, inconsequential. Frost was not interested.



He rolled back closer to the coast and maintained his vigil for thirty more minutes. Then he looked down and was surprised to see another boat. Bang, like that. He had been looking away for only a moment and when he gazed below the boat was there.

He thought probably the lowering sun was playing tricks on him, so he stared intently. No mistake. A boat. Speeding southwest; occasionally outlined against wide swells. If the first launch he saw was speeding there was no adjective for this one. She was, comparatively, doing more than that. And she looked capacious and businesslike now that he could see well. Worth investigating.

He turned the nose of his ship up and climbed. Over to the left was a perfect cirro-cumulus formation which invited him with its natural protection, and he went for it. As he took a gap in the fleece his eyes caught a reflection.

Brass!

The *Catherine B*!

He offered a silent prayer for the cloud bank and took a hurried compass reading. The course the boat was holding was in a straight line with Galveston. The big traffic route! But it could dare. It could show its stern to ninety-nine out of a hundred. . . .

Frost knew it would be fatal to attempt a landing now. Too much light yet. Something might happen. He thought about that rather sharply. An unknown grave in the Gulf was not appealing. That was the way Nungesser and Coli went. And Pedlar. And Erwin. Poor old Bill. There was a tug at Frost's throat. He had gone through many a dogfight with the Dallas ace. . . .

No, Frost knew, he couldn't go down now. Must wait. Hang back and wait for the

dark. A big gamble then. A big gamble. Now it would be death.

He guessed the dusk was less than an hour away, but it was a bad guess. It was eighty minutes away and they were the longest eighty minutes Frost ever spent. Occasionally he stole through a rift in the bank to check his quarry to make sure it was within range. The *Catherine B* had now reduced its speed and was drifting idly: quite plainly at its trysting place.

Frost was forcibly struck by the profundity of the situation. Below was a rum boat a hundred miles at sea; above was a formation of clouds which concealed an eagle of justice. Soon that mass of clouds would part to disgorge a winged courier of the law. Why did those clouds happen—just happen to be there? Providence? Frost went off into an endless speculation about the omnipotence of the Creator.

And he found time to breathe a cautious prayer. Cautious because he had never done so openly. It struck him as cowardly. So he prayed quietly and cautiously.

He had decided to go down now in a few-minutes.

The sun reached the end of the world, slid off the rim, and reached with long, tenuous fingers for a final hold, missed and fell into the lap of night. Frost was constantly amazed at the swiftness of the sunset; had always been amazed. Yet it is a source of indefinable joy to airmen to see the sun sink from the sky, for at fifteen thousand feet you seem pretty close to the heart of things. Frost probably always would be stirred by such manifestations, no matter how exigent the conditions under which he viewed them. They mildly disquieted him; made him wish he had been an artist.

"Hell," he said to his instrument board, "you're only a lousy airman. Get your head back into this cockpit!"

Night slipped up and five minutes later it was dark. Frost dropped out of the cloud bank among, it seemed, the fledgling stars which were timidly trying their wings, and looked for the *Catherine B*. The Gulf had lost the blackness so apparent in the sunlight and now had become opaque to a faint luminosity. A wayward light flickered below on deck. The light revealed the boat Frost had come to take—and he had determined to take it. Bellerophon felt the same way about the Chimaera.

Frost took off his gauntlet and slipped the silencer-equipped .38 into the seat beside him. Its touch comforted him, reassured him. Of a sudden he picked it up and pulled the trigger. No other sound broke above the throttled humming of the motor.

"Hot stuff!" he said to the sky. To the instrument board he said: "Well, here we go!"

He fell into a glide and kicked his switch off. It was his farewell to the air. Dropping fifteen thousand feet his motor would get cold, too cold to start again in an emergency. But, he told himself, there must be no emergency.

A quarter of a mile back he nosed up into a sort of drift, timing the distance with that weird sense all good flyers possess. And his landing was a tribute to long years of feeling his air. The premium he collected was munificent—his life. To have failed meant death.

The *Catherine B*, on the spot of its meeting, drooled in a wide circle, and as the little battle plane slowly moved by the stern, Frost could plainly read her markings:

## CATHERINE B GALVESTON

Frost kicked his rudder bar around and turned in towards the boat. He flattened out against its sides when he saw a spurt of flame and heard the crash of the report. The man shot from the rail amidships. Frost leveled his gun and fired. Then he quickly threw his anchor rope over the rail. There had been no far-carrying report from his gun, but the man dropped. He was out on the wing in a moment, over the rail in another, and had tied his ship off with a loop knot.

Attracted by the explosion, a husky fellow shoved half his bulk through the wheelhouse door and Frost saw him level his gun. The Ranger shot from the hip; the man collapsed in the door and rolled on deck. He never knew what had hit him. Frost ran forward.

There was a scuffling sound aft and a man's head and shoulders appeared. He seemed to rise out of nowhere. But he was cautious, had come to investigate what he thought was a shot.

Frost tensed his muscles and gripped his pistol. He pressed himself close to the skylights as the man stepped out gingerly and came towards the wheel-house. He was roughly dressed. He had nearly reached Frost's side, when he stopped suddenly and sucked in his breath in a swift intake. He had seen the plane.

In a flash Frost was beside him. He rammed the gun into his ribs.

"One crack and off goes your head! Get down flat!"

Silently, the man obeyed. He stretched out an arm's length from the second man who had been shot.

Frost said tensely: "That guy is dead. You didn't hear my gun go off because it's got a

silencer, see? Now answer my questions and answer 'em quick!"

"All right," the man grunted.

"How many on this tub?"

"Six."

"One of them a woman?"

"Two women."

"Two!"

Frost thought that over.

"What's this boat doing out here?"

"Meeting the *Mermaid* at midnight."

"Liquor?"

"Yep."

"Well, I'll have to give you the works to get you out of the way," Frost said grimly. He meant it. The man knew he meant it. The game had gone too far to take chances.

"I'm a Texas Ranger."

"I know," was the answer. "We been expecting you. But not like this. You're Frost."

"Expecting me?" Frost thought probably he hadn't heard aright.

"Sure. Catherine said you'd come."

"Who's Catherine?"

Flash's girl."

Frost rolled his tongue against his cheek. "Singleton?"

"Yep."

"I didn't know he had a girl."

"I'll say he had."

Frost hesitated, his mind in a turmoil. The man misconstrued the silence.

"You ain't gonna kill me?" he pleaded. "I'll do anything—"

"Okey," Frost said offhand. "Go over there and call the crew up here. And remember that I've killed two of this crew—and you'll be number three if you make a false move. I'll slug you right through the back of your head. Get up!"

The man walked to the poop ladder, Frost a step behind.

"Hey—Hans!" he yelled through his cupped hands.

Shortly there was a mumble from below.

"Come above and bring Marcelle with you. Hurry!"

Two men climbed out on deck and stood beside the ladder. They hardly were up before Frost stepped out from behind the man and leveled his gun. "Get up in a hurry!" he barked.

They slowly complied.

"Now," Frost went on tensely, "unless you do exactly as I say I'll kill you!"

He looked at the man called Hans. "Throw your gun away!"

The light was feeble, but Frost could see the man scowl. He made no move to comply; he merely grunted.

"Get that gun overboard!"

Still the man said nothing. One of those hard-boiled seamen.

*Put-t!*

The flame leaped from Frost's gun; there was a muttered oath and the man grabbed his shoulder and moaned, "I'm hit! I'm hit!"

"Get that gun overboard! The next time you stop it with your head!"

There was no mistaking the command now. Frost disliked to shoot the man, but this was no time to quibble. They must be impressed with his determination.

The man groaned and threw his gun overboard with the arm that was still serviceable.

"Get that hand back in the air! And you— throw that gun over! Now yours!"

The men discarded their pistols. Frost lined them up and backed them towards the hatch. "Unbatten it!" he commanded.

They did.

"Pile in!"

"What?"

"Pile in!"

"But, we'll—"

*"In there!"*

The wounded man called Hans was the last one down. The others aided him. They disappeared below the top, and Frost wrestled the hatch and battened it down as if heading for the open sea. Then he retrieved his pistol and

moved to the wheelhouse. The man who lay on deck had been shot through the mouth, and evidently was a first officer. Frost noticed the wheel was chained, so he dragged the body against the skylights and went to the foredeck where he had glimpsed the first sailor.

He had pitched forward on his face, his gun at his feet. Before Frost stooped to inspect him, he kicked the gun across the deck into the water. Then he tugged the man over, saw he, too, was dead, and came back to the after companion. The night now had come on full. The stars were gleaming and a pale moon glowed off the starboard.

Frost went down the steps slowly. He walked along the passage and heard sounds of music, struggling to free itself of the confinement and get into the air. He could sense the struggle. He paused at the cabin door and listened. An electric gramophone. Someone evidently was unworried. He rapped on the door.

It opened and he thrust his foot inside. He pried it open with his leg and entered, his gun drawn.

He faced a woman—and gasped.

"You!"

"You!"

His companion of La Estrellita!

Here—in full panoply, arrayed like a queen; against a background of luxury. For a moment he was nonplussed. A lot had happened. This was the crowning blow. He gradually recovered, and thought about the awkward picture he presented there with his pistol drawn.

"Miss Stevens," he coughed, embarrassed. "Er—"

"How do you do, Captain?" she said. "Sit down." Frost did so. "Do you find it helps the effect when you visit a young lady with drawn revolver?"

Frost grinned. "Well, I hardly expected to find you like this. I thought—"

"Yes," she beamed; "they are good to me, aren't they?"

She nonchalantly moved across the cabin to a wall telephone. He thought that rather an odd thing for a prisoner to do—telephone. That simple act brought the pieces of the puzzle together with a click. Frost had just been told there were two women on board. One he expected to find a prisoner—Helen Stevens. But this woman was no prisoner—

Catherine!

With pent-up fury he leaped from his chair and was beside her before she could get an answer. He snatched the telephone out of her hand and replaced it. He faced her, flushing with anger.

"Get away!" he said. "And I hope it won't be necessary for me to kill you!"

She lifted her face in a half sneer. "Well," she said, moving in a swagger, "how long do you think you can get away with this high-handed stuff?"

"Don't make me laugh," Frost said.

There was the sound of a knock on a door in another wall than that by which he had entered.

"Who's in there?" he demanded.

"Find out for yourself," she snapped.

"I will," he said. He observed her with something not unlike admiration. "So you're Catherine, eh?" He was a little taken aback.

Disappointed. Once he had had an adventure with her. Men do not easily forget such things. Now it all came back in a rush . . . her indifference to the danger in La Estrellita . . . the tapping of her fingers on the glass was a signal. . . .

He glared: "You tried to trap me, didn't you? Tried to get me killed?"

She laughed. "Why not? You bumped off the only man I ever loved, and for that I'm going to *get* you, Frost. What a pity those saps didn't kill you that night in Algodon!"

"Yes," he mused; "what a pity! You know— you're a damned attractive woman to be mixed up with a rotten gang like this."

"I'm going to stay mixed. You can't bluff me, Frost. I don't scare worth a damn."

"Maybe you don't. Oh, by the way; I neglected to tell you I locked three of your thugs in the hold. Also," this casually, "I had to bump off a couple of 'em. Now who's the woman in the other room?"

"Nobody. That is—"

"Get that door open, or I'll tear it down!"

She got up sullenly and unlocked the narrow door. Through it another woman stumbled, her hair disheveled, her clothes wrinkled, her face worried. She saw Frost and stopped short.

"It's all right," Frost said reassuringly, "I'm a policeman. Who are you?"

"I'm—"

"Don't you talk!" came the swift interruption. "This bum means no good." She tried to reach the woman's side, but Frost intervened.

"Never mind her," he said. "I'm Frost of the Rangers."

"Oh! Frost!" she murmured the words. "I'm Helen Stevens. I've been a prisoner for a week."

"Huh! Are you a newspaper woman?"

"Yes."

Frost grinned broadly, spread his legs and said: "Well, sit down, ladies, and get comfortable. This ought to be good."

Then it was that Frost observed both women were about the same height and build, and that the genuine Helen Stevens wore a brown ensemble similar to the one worn by his companion that night in La Estrellita. He began to see the light.

"A week ago," said Helen Stevens, "I was kidnaped in Jamestown, drugged and brought here. I don't know why. I never had an enemy in my life."

"There's no puzzle there," Frost said. "This jane here is the ex-sweetheart of an ex-racketeer who was allied with the Black Ship gang and bumped off by Hell's Stepsons. She wanted revenge on me; the way to get that was remove you and assume your identity." He smiled appreciatively. "That right, Mrs. Singleton?"

"You go to hell!"

"So," mused Helen Stevens, slightly more at ease, "you're Captain Frost. I was on

my way to see you—had a letter from the Adjutant-General. It was stolen with my luggage!"

"I got it," Frost grinned. "You'll learn after a while that this is a high-powered gang you're dealing with."

Helen Stevens was surveying the broad figure of Jerry Frost, remembering tales of his prowess in the skies of France and in the jungles of Latin America—*El Beneficio* they called him then—surveying him in frank admiration.

"I think," Frost said, "it would be wise to get going. This boat has got a date I'd rather not keep. First, I'm afraid we'll have to tie up the hellcat."

The hellcat got to her feet, her eyes burning with passionate hatred, and leaped at Frost. She landed in his lap and they both went over backwards with the chair. His pistol rattled on the hardwood floor.

"Get that gun!" he yelled, a moment before she clawed at his face. She interposed a few choice oaths, and hammered Frost about the ears with her fists. They squirmed on the floor inelegantly until he managed to get a hammer-lock on her arm. She swore and cried out in pain.

"Pipe down and I'll let you go!" Frost said. "Otherwise I'll break it off." His eyes fell on the silk cord knotted around port hole draperies and he said to Helen Stevens, "Get that cord."

She untied it and brought it to him. Frost slipped it around the woman's wrists and tied her hands behind her. Then he took off his belt and strapped it tightly around her ankles. To complete the job he took out his handkerchief and crammed it in her mouth.

"Now," he said; "I need a bandage."

Helen Stevens did not hesitate. She lifted her dress, revealed a sheeny knee and a silk petticoat. She ripped it, jerked off a strip and handed it to Frost.

"Great stuff!" he said. "I'm beginning to think you'll do!"

"You're damned right I'll do!" she admitted.

Frost tied the gag and then stepped back to inspect his craftsmanship. Apart from the woman's squirming, and nobody has ever invented a way to stop that, he had to confess it was very good.

"Not bad for a beginner," he observed.

The woman grunted and her eyes flashed. Frost picked her up and deposited her, none too carefully, on a lounge. He whispered in her ear: "Now we're going up to take the wheel." She grunted again, and in a fit of temper wriggled to the floor with a bang.

Frost looked at her loftily. "All right, baby—suit yourself."

Helen Stevens handed him his pistol and said: "Don't you think it would be wise to use the radio and let somebody know where we are?"

Frost slanted his head from side to side as if he had known her a century; decided she, too, was a fluffy bit of femininity. His light mood was sharpened by his success. "Another great idea," he said. "Let's have a look."

They came on deck together, he holding her hand. It was, like the night, warm and soft—he remembered snatches of books and stories he'd read about women . . . regal poise . . . generations of aristocrats to produce one like this . . . long lashes . . . and full red lips. . . . He even tried to recall some poetry.

He looked at her suddenly as if he knew she had read his thoughts. He was blushing. . . . She laughed. He laughed too—not knowing what else to do.

They entered the wheelhouse of the *Catherine B* as she rose on a long swell, poised herself, and settled into the valley of the Gulf. It was dark and quiet, only a light glowed from the compass box; Frost found the switch and pulled it. A light sprang into life at the top of the pilothouse.

On one side was the wireless and without further ado Frost seated himself and cut on the switch. The motor hummed, tiny sparks glowed, and he adjusted the head set. He tapped out a message hurriedly. Presently there was a light cracking sound in the headphone and he bent over his task. He finished and sat up.

"They're on their way," he said.

He took a look at the binnacle and moved to the chart table. "Now to figure out which way to go," he remarked. "I'd hate to wind up in Cuba." He studied the chart for a few silent minutes. Then he moved the wheel and unchained it. "Look," he said, "think you can hold this wheel on one-eighteen when I get her on that course?"

"Sure," she said, still the adventuress.

"I'll have a look around," Frost said. He went to the side of the box and yanked at the control. From somewhere in the boat's depth a bell tinkled. It slowly gained speed. Frost spun the wheel and held her circling until she was on the course he had determined upon as most likely to intercept the cutter he had summoned. Frost reached into his shoulder-holster and took out his other pistol. He laid it on the table beside her. "That's a .38," he said; "fitted with a

silencer. And it's ready to blast." She nodded and he went out.

Frost noted that the *Catherine B* was holding steady at about half speed. He went to the rail and unloosed the rope that anchored his plane, snubbed it along the rail and finally tied it off the stern. Then he walked for'ard and went below through the fo'csle.

Helen Stevens, left alone on as weird an adventure as any newspaper woman ever had, gripped the wheel, her teeth clenched, and stared into that disk of white light that held the magic number, 118, wavering across a red line.

Some time later Frost emerged from the shadows of the deck-house and came forward into the wheelhouse wearing a wide smile.

"We're all alone but for the engineer," he said. "Now I'll take charge of that." He took the wheel, and she stood beside him and shivered.

"You might as well get comfortable," he said.

"I'm all right," she said. "I think this is a good time to begin that belated interview. Born?"

"Yes?"

She laughed. "Where?"

"I'd rather talk about you," Frost said. "How long are you going to be around Texas?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"How long it takes to get this story."

"In that case—" he smiled.

And she smiled.

They probably would have been talking yet had not a siren sounded off the port side some two hours later. Frost rang the signal for power off and went out of the wheelhouse.

"Ahoy, there!"

"Who's there?"

"U.S. Coast Guard!"

"Okey! This is Frost—Texas Rangers!"

The cutter pulled up alongside, its fenders bumped and they lashed on. Half a dozen huskies vaulted the rails. The leader shifted his pistol to his right hand and came forward fast. Frost could see in the half-light he was some sort of an officer.

"Frost?"

"Right!"

"I'm Al Bennett." They shook hands. "We picked up your message. I radioed Clay in Corpus that I'd located you."

Thanks," said Frost. "Can you send a man over to take the wheel? I've got somebody in there who's just about washed up."

"Sure," said Bennett. "Bucko—on the wheel!"

The man saluted smartly and preceded Frost and Bennett into the wheelhouse.

"Miss Stevens this is Mr. Bennett, of the Coast Guard." Bennett nodded his head. "So you're the little girl who's been leading us such a merry chase?"



"I'm afraid so," she said. She took Frost's arm.

"Bennett, there's three of the crew in the hold—one winged. For'ard there's a man dead and beside the sky-light there's another one in the same fix. There is a woman below I had to tie up."

Bennett looked at him, his eyes wide.

"Say," he said, "is it possible you took this baby all alone?"

"It was a cinch." Lightly.

"Yeh? Well. I don't mind telling you the whole Coast Guard has been trying to land this bark for weeks."

"Will you," asked Frost, disregarding the praise, "see that we get into port okey?"

"You bet." He went to the door and spoke to the crew who had come over in the recent boarding. "Pass the word along for the cutter to shove off. You men stay aboard with me. We're going to Corpus." He came back to the wheel.

"We'll go below," Frost said. "Er—"

"Sure," said Bennett, grinning.

"Business," Frost went on. "She's getting—"

"Sure—"

But Frost, self-conscious, refused to let Bennett be diplomatic. Helen Stevens finally had

to rush to the rescue. "I'm interviewing him," she explained.

Bennett laughed, full. "That's okey with me, Miss," he said. "But you'd better shove off. Ox Clay and Jimmy O'Neill are on their way out here."

Frost and the woman walked out—close together.

The moment they disappeared Bennett turned to the man at the wheel and said: "Ever hear of anything like it?"

"Beats me."

Bennett looked aft at the shadowy form that rose and fell behind like a phantom. It was Frost's battle plane.

"I guess," said Bennett, soberly, "a guy has got to be a little goofy to try something like this. It wouldn't work once in a hundred times. They must be right about that guy, Frost. I've read of those one-man cyclones, but I never saw one before."

"You said it," contributed the man at the wheel.

The *Catherine B*, in the firm hands of the Coast Guard, slipped on towards Corpus Christi with a grim greyhound of the Gulf for a convoy, and another on the way.

In four hours they would be in port.