
CHAPTER 1

COLONEL HENRY S. BRADEN was angry. He sat in his swivel-chair, fat forearms resting on his glass-topped desk, and pounded. A vein stood out like a rope across his wide forehead. Lanky Buck McKee, slouched in a chair, looked absently at the enlarged vein and wondered if it would not burst some day. His Mexican partner, squat Tortilla Joe, hunkered with his ox-like back to the wall, chewing on a cold *tortilla* and scowling.

"It's got to stop!" Colonel Henry S. Braden pounded on the open letter on his desk. "Here I send a construction crew into Mad River Basin—after I get the government's backing to build that irrigation project—and here I am, all crippled up——" He accidentally bumped the cast on his right leg against his desk. "Oh, my leg—the pain——"

Buck McKee rolled a cigarette. He stuck it between his thin lips, dug into a vest pocket for a match. He and Tortilla Joe had fought under Colonel Henry S. Braden in the Spanish-American war, now two years dead. They had seen similar explosive scenes on San Juan Hill, on Bataan. Underneath, the Colonel was a good man and good soldier, but sometimes his temper led him astray.

Tortilla Joe looked at Buck. "The colonel, he quiet down soon, Buck," he said. "Purty soon he run outa wind, no?"

Colonel Henry S. Braden stopped short in the middle of a curse. His large mouth hung suspended, his walrus moustaches bristling. "What was that statement, Tortilla Joe?" he demanded.

Tortilla Joe shrugged his massive shoulders. "I just say to Buck here that the weather, she ees too hot, no?"

Buck stretched out his right leg and stroked a match to life on his levis. He regarded the colonel over the jagged flame. "Let's get down to brass tacks, Colonel," he said. "Three days