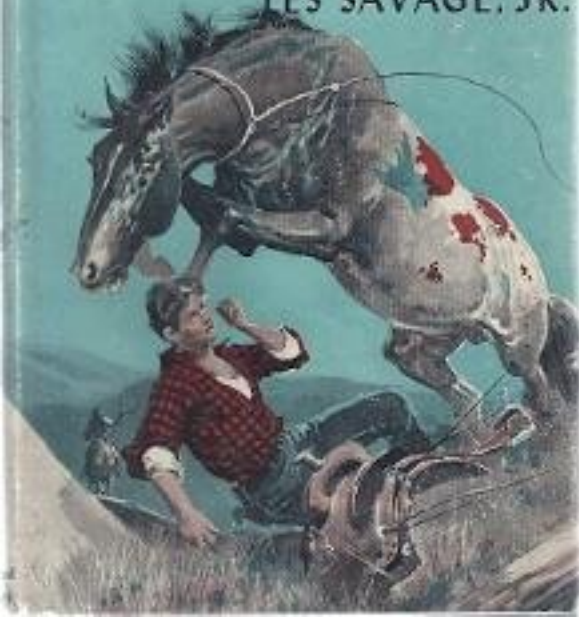
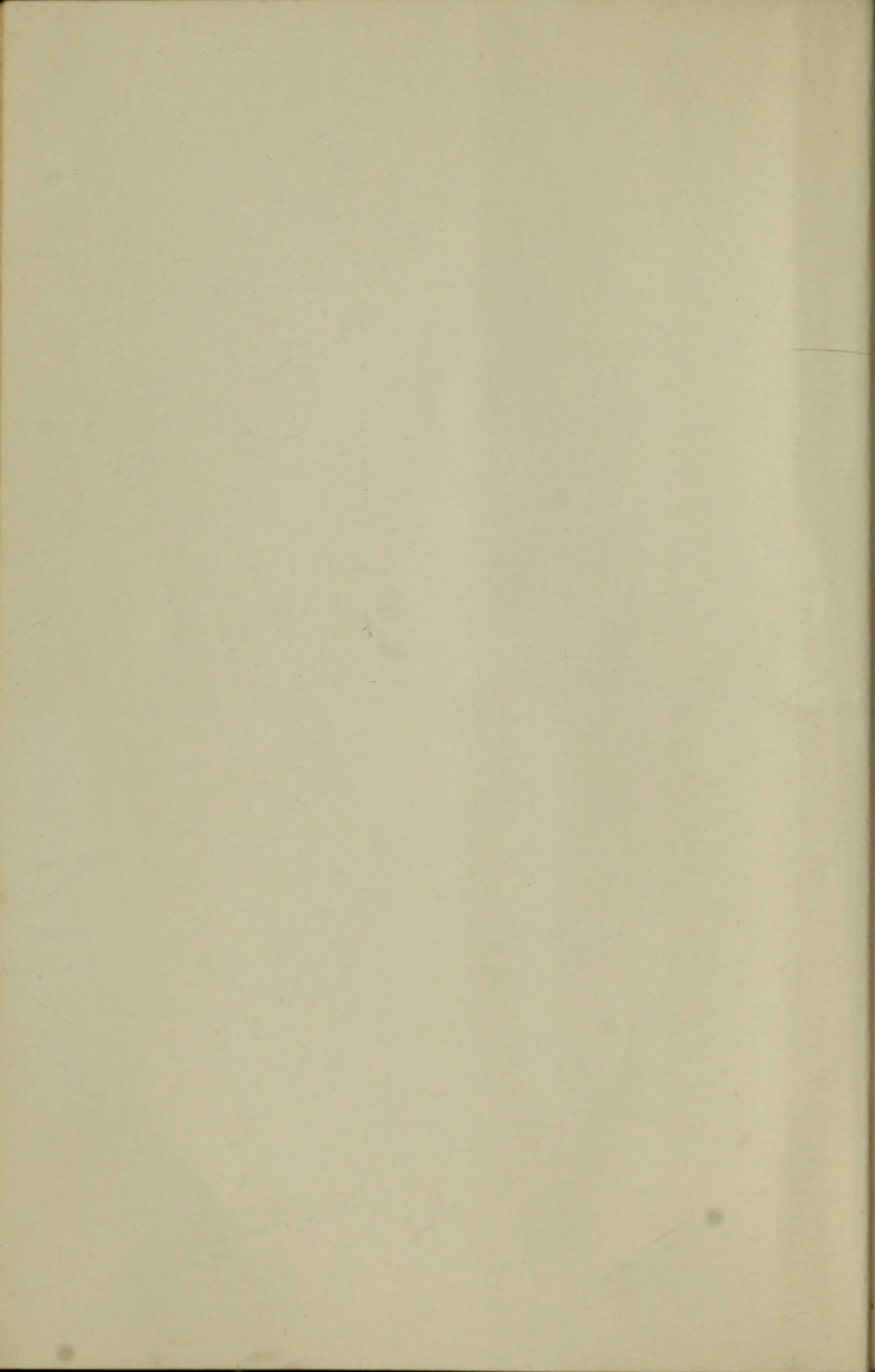


THE PHANTOM STALLION

LES SAVAGE, JR.





THE PHANTOM STALLION

By LES SAVAGE, D.

Illustrated by Gerald McLean

Good, Speed & Company

NEW YORK • 1923

Books by Les Savage, Jr.

TREASURE OF THE BRASADA

THE DOCTOR AT COFFIN GAP

THE HIDE RUSTLERS

SHADOW RIDERS OF THE YELLOWSTONE

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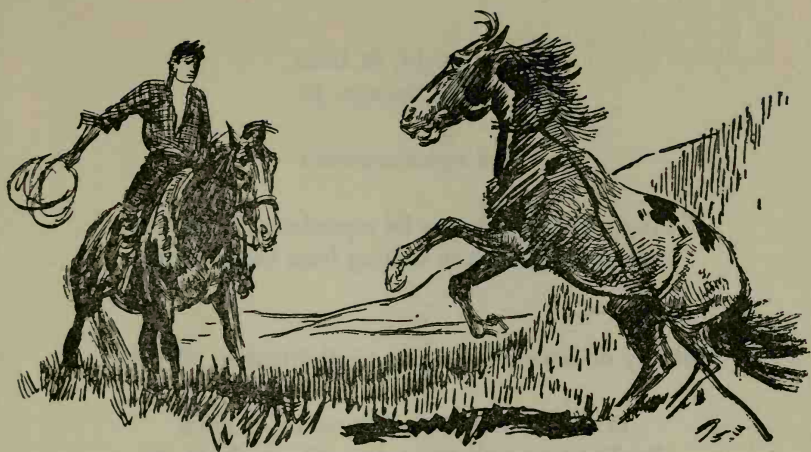
LAND OF THE LAWLESS

TERESA

SILVER STREET WOMAN

THE PHANTOM STALLION

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The Phantom Stallion

By LES SAVAGE, Jr.

Illustrated by Gerald McCann

iSa 924 p

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

NEW YORK • 1955

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TO UNCLE WALTER
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BOYS JUST LIKE EDDIE

US
M889182

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THE PHANTOM STALLION

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Chapter 1

WHEN EDDIE RIVERS saw the cut-under mountain wagon laboring up the grade and into the little Wyoming valley, he dropped his hay fork and ran as hard as he could to the creek bottoms behind the shack. He threw himself down into the chokecherry thicket. Panting, wide-eyed, he watched the woman draw the team to a halt before the shaggy, dog-run cabin. It was June Weatherby, the schoolmarm from Jackson. She stood up in the seat of the wagon and called:

"Jim—Calico Jim. Are you there?"

In a moment Eddie's tall, broad shouldered father appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Ma'am," he said, in his drawling voice. "Mostly."

"I've come to get Eddie," she said. "The Hembres are ready to take him into their home."

Eddie felt the bottom drop out of his stomach. This was what he had dreaded. This was what had kept him awake at night for the past weeks. This was what made him so miserable that he couldn't eat his breakfast. What right did they have to take him away from his father? He'd been closer than ever to Calico, since his mother had died five years before. Calico was all he had.

It was an untamed sort of life, running wild horses up here in the Wind Rivers with Calico. But it was a good life that could get into a boy's blood and make him fight like a hog-tied steer if somebody tried to take him away.

June Weatherby was getting out of the wagon now. She was a tall woman, awfully old, almost twenty-three. Her hair was blonde and piled high on top of her head. The wind kept flicking little curls out like it was trying to tear it free and drop it down over her shoulders. Her cheeks were whipped red as apples by the wind. Her eyes were so big and blue Eddie could see them sparkle even from this distance. He thought that she'd be almost as beautiful as his mother had been, if she wasn't a schoolmarm.

"It's no use trying to hide him now, Jim." Her voice came clear as a bell to Eddie on the thin mountain air. "This is the last time I'm coming up to get him. If he doesn't come with me now, I'll have to send the sheriff for him."

Jim came out of the doorway, smiling his shy sidelong smile that he always seemed to have around women. He was never shy with horses or men, gosh knows. He never tucked in his chin and looked up at them from under his sun-bleached eyebrows the way he did with Miss June, almost like he was afraid to meet her eyes. He never kept making little designs in the dust with the toe of his boot either, watching them more than he did her. It disgusted Eddie to see how polite and squelched he was in front of nothing more than a schoolmarm.

"Ma'am," Calico said, in his drawl so close to a chuckle, "I'm not hiding the boy. He just doesn't want to go. Anyhow, I don't see what all the fuss is about. I'm teaching him his three R's. Ask him, if you don't believe me. He's probably holed up out there in the bushes somewhere. If you wanted, you could turn him up soon enough."

June said, low-voiced, "It's not so simple as that, Calico. You know that education's more than learning the three R's. I was his mother's friend and I'm not going to stand by and see Cora Rivers' son raised like a wild boy. Eddie has to learn to live with people. Most of all, he needs the friendship, the association, of others his own age."

"At the expense of losing his father?" Calico asked. "I have to stay here, you know. It's where I make my living."

"You could come down and see him," June said.

"Once a week?" Calico asked. "I'd be a stranger, June. He may need other kids, but he needs a father worse."

June Weatherby was plainly exasperated. "We've gone over all this before, Calico. Each time you've out-talked me. But you won't this time. By law, every child has to attend school. And you're breaking that law by not letting Eddie go when he has the chance. The Hembres are willing to take him and you haven't the right to hold out any longer. Now don't make it bad all the way around. Please go out and find him for me."

For a minute Calico kept making designs with his foot. Then, head down, he turned and came out toward the hayfields. Eddie's heart sank. He knew he couldn't escape Calico. The man came ploughing through the stubbled hay. He was tall, immensely tall, and his hair was red and curly. He rarely ever grinned and yet he always seemed to be grinning. Maybe it was the way his sky-blue eyes kept twinkling and darting back and forth beneath his bushy red brows.



"Now, Eddie," he said. "You got to come with the lady. You don't want to cause her any more trouble."

Eddie felt sick as Jim's eyes dropped to the ground by the hay fork. There wasn't a better tracker in all Wyoming than Calico. Eddie was sunk for sure now. But the man's eyes twinkled as he raised them again. And, instead of following the tracks, he turned off toward the haystacks on the other side of the field. He picked up one of the hay forks and began jabbing viciously into the stacks.

"I know where you like to hide, you little devil," he shouted. "Come out of there or I'll jab this clear through you."

"Jim!" screamed June. "Stop it! You'll kill him."

Jim kept jabbing. "You want to find him, don't you? I know he's in there somewheres."

"Not that way," she cried. "Don't be foolish."

He threw the fork down disgustedly, shaking his head, and wandered aimlessly around among the haystacks, peering at them like a bear just out of his cave. Finally he went back to the schoolmarm.

"I can't find him. Boy's like a fox, when he takes to hiding."

Eddie saw June's yellow curls bob with the exasperated shake of her head. "You did this on purpose. I'm sick of playing blindman's bluff with you and that boy. You force me to do this, Calico. The next time I come up, it will be with the sheriff."

Eddie watched her climb back into the wagon and spin it around, its wheels kicking rocks and dirt angrily up against the side of the log house. Not until long after she was out of sight did he creep from his hiding place. He saw Calico in the corral out behind the cabin, saddling up his mule, Billygoat. He went up to the fence, peering through the bars at his father.

"Something the matter with your eyes?" Eddie said.

Calico smoothed out the saddle blanket without turning around. "Why?" he asked.

"Those tracks I left to the creek bottom was plain as day."

"Guess I better see the doctor," Calico said. "I couldn't see a thing."

Eddie felt a grin come to his freckled face. "Then you knew I wasn't really in those haystacks?"

"I did. But that schoolmarm didn't. Plum scared her to death, didn't it?"

Eddie couldn't help laughing. "I thought you were sick of all this. Thought you were going to send me back with Miss Weatherby the next time she came."

"Looking at her, I got to thinking what four walls do to a man. They say you turn purple and get big yellow spots all over your face if you stay inside too long. You wouldn't look good with yellow spots all over your face."

"Guess I wouldn't," Eddie agreed. "Where you bound to now?"

Calico grunted, lifting his heavy double-rigged saddle

onto the mule. "I figured it was about time I looked for that Appaloosa again. I could get five hundred dollars for a horse like that in Jackson, if he was gentled and trained right."

"Need a helper?"

"I could use one."

"That schoolmarm isn't so likely to be wandering around out in the Wind Rivers after a boy like me, is she?"

"I don't even think the sheriff could find you up there."

Eddie grinned again, broadly. "You got your helper."

Chapter 2

FOR TWO DAYS, Eddie and Calico Jim rode into the mountains. Calico was mounted on Billygoat, Eddie rode a black pony named Midnight, and led their pack horse. They flushed mule deer from the open glades, saw a lumbering black bear eating choke cherries beside a mountain stream, passed a band of moose grazing belly deep in swamps made by a beaver dam. Behind them the magnificent Tetons rose in towering snow-clad peaks. To the northeast loomed the rugged Continental Divide, its summits veiled in a delicate blue haze, the upper crags all bent in one direction like the banners of an army. And always, behind them, down at the bottom of the long timbered avenues through which they rose, the waters of Jackson Lake shimmered like sheet lightning under a bright sun.

Soon they were in the Appaloosa's country. Calico had been trying to trap this wild horse ever since he had sighted it two years before. But the animal was clever and wily, and

always escaped them. Finally, six months ago, Calico had built a trap at the head of a valley which overlooked one of the Appaloosa's favorite watering spots.

They had not tried to drive the horse into the trap then. The hated man-smell would have kept him from entering it. But now the smell had worn off. Eddie and Calico had not been near the valley since that time. The Appaloosa and his band would feel safe to return.

This was Calico's hope, as he scouted for fresh signs along the way. Near evening of the third day, he found tracks of a wild band heading northward. He could not be sure it was the one they wanted, but they were heading into the country where the trap stood, and Calico and Eddie followed.

They rose to the high ridges and started using the binoculars. Finally, near noon of the fourth day, Calico spotted something. He stepped off Billygoat, pulling him behind a ledge of rock and signaled Eddie to do the same. They stood there with the wind whipping through the manes of their horses and skittering gravel across the exposed ridge. Eddie saw interest tense Calico's big shoulders, deepen the laugh wrinkles about his blue eyes.

"We're in luck for sure, Jigger." He chuckled. "Take a gander."

Eddie held the glasses to his eyes. He was looking down into some of the wildest country in Wyoming—virgin timber that covered the shoulders of a mountain as black and matted as a beard, open parks that looked like jade pools, mountain meadows rippling with waist-high grass—all tumbling down beneath Eddie into the valley below. Finally he found the band of wild horses grazing peacefully in one of the lower meadows. There were duns, browns, flea-bit grays, blacks with the winter hair still making them shaggy. Then Eddie caught his breath. Up on a rock, muzzle raised, long mane whipping in the breeze, the lookout stallion stood outlined against the sky. His unusual coloring was enough



to make him stand out in a whole herd of animals. His chest and neck were a solid steel-blue, but that faded toward the rear into a pure white, like a creamy blanket draped over his back and rump. And on this blanket were daubed great red spots, as if some painter had carelessly splashed them there.

Calico had told Eddie that the Nez Perce Indians had originally bred these animals for war horses up in the Palouse country of Idaho. Eddie could well imagine this stallion riding into war, as he watched him standing there on the rock.

With his broad chest, his powerful legs, his gracefully arched neck, he looked all grace and muscle and windblown power. He was the kind of animal that came once in a horse-runner's life. The vivid, untamed spirit of him seemed to reach out and grab at the boy's heart. With the glasses still clamped to his eyes, Eddie tried to pronounce the name.

"Appalarchoo—Allarchooler—"

Calico tossed his head back and laughed. "Took me ten

years to learn how to say it, Jigger. When I was a kid, I used to call 'em Apples."

"That's a good name," Eddie said. "If we catch him, can I call him Apples?"

"Apples it is," Calico said. "But let's not start counting our chickens. We're lucky enough to spot him so soon, let alone catch him. You remember how many times he's escaped us before. Let's start drifting 'em toward that trap."

As Calico talked, his mule had been nuzzling his shoulder, as he always did. But it was only to get near the tobacco sack in Calico's shirt pocket. With a sly look, Billygoat wrinkled back his lips and caught the strings of the sack between his teeth. Calico felt the tug and slapped Billygoat's nose, jerking the sack from his mouth.

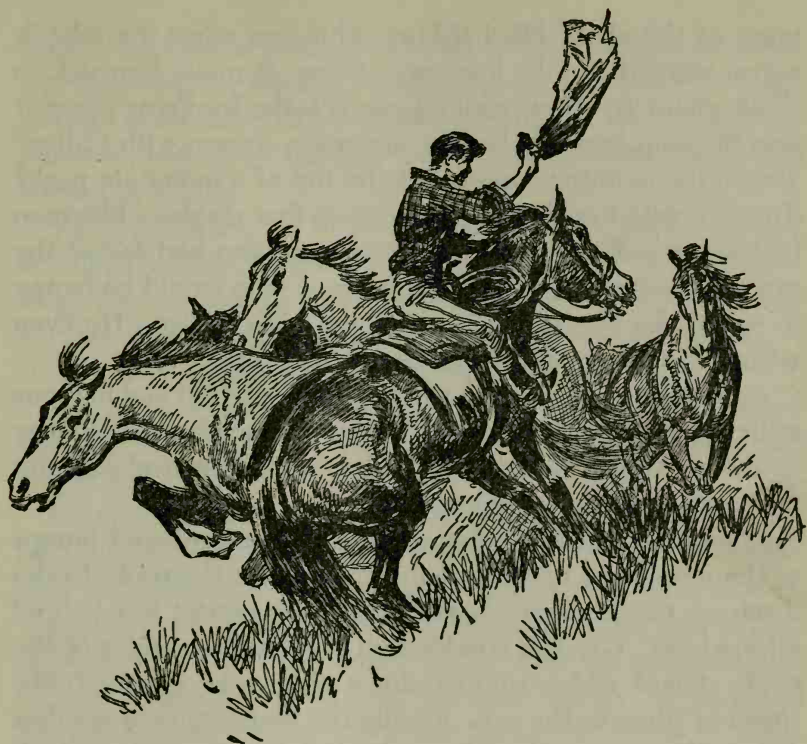
"I don't know where you got your taste for my makings," he said. "Sometime I'm going to let you eat it all and you'll get so sick you'll think you swallowed some loco weed."

Chuckling, Eddie mounted Midnight again. Calico tightened the girth on the mule and then swung aboard. Then they started moving unhurriedly downslope toward the horse herd.

Calico knew that a band of mustangs could be driven by a man in almost any direction he chose, if he did not press them too closely. The mere appearance of a rider on their left flank would turn them right, or upon their right would turn them left. But they would only drift, unless he tried to get too close.

As Eddie and Calico drew near, the stallion's head lifted, pink nostrils fluttering with their scent. Then he wheeled, catching sight of their movement in the trees. He bugled shrilly at his band.

Grazing heads popped up. Mares whinnied at their colts. The Appaloosa galloped down to herd them together and they started drifting up the canyon. Calico and Eddie followed on their rear until they reached a fork in the canyon.



The right fork would lead toward the trap. But the stallion started leading his band into the left.

Calico waved his arm at Eddie and the boy urged his mount up on the band's left flank. The startled horses wheeled wildly, kicking up rocks and dust, and headed for the other fork. They ran down the narrow gorge for a quarter mile, but gradually slowed down, as Eddie and Calico did not press them anymore. Finally they were drifting at a walk again. They stopped to graze here and there until the nervous leader circled back to nip at their heels and urge them on.

The tangy sweetness of balsam and pine was swept down the canyon by an afternoon breeze and the breathless excite-

ment of the chase filled Eddie. This was what the schoolmarm wanted to take him away from. It made him sick to think about it. How could June Weatherby know what it was to camp beside a boiling mountain stream with Calico? To see the morning sun explode on top of a mountain peak? To run a wild bunch through canyons that maybe white men had never seen before? Only someone who had tasted the raw wildness of the land could know. Eddie would be happy to spend the rest of his life up here with Calico. He even wished they never had to return to the cabin.

As the afternoon waned, the horses grew tired and nervous with the constant presence of the men. They became harder to drive. Calico and Eddie had to press them closer and watch their flanks more carefully.

The canyon was growing narrower. The timbered humps of the mountains cast black shadows across the trail. In the distance, the towering Garnet Peak was almost lost behind a blue haze. Glaciers sparkled on the north shoulder of the peak. Giant slides spilling down the rocks gleamed like rivers of silver in the sun. Finally the band came to another fork in the canyon, the left one leading into the valley which held the trap.

Calico moved onto the right flank of the herd, aiming to turn them into that fork. But the Appaloosa grew suspicious and wheeled to nip at the heels of his mares, trying to turn them the other way. Calico called to Eddie. The boy left his spot to join the man. Still the big stallion tried to break through them, shouldering against his band, circling back and forth, bugling angrily. The canyon echoed to the frightened whinnies and the clatter of hoofs on shale.

Then, through all the other sounds, came a thunderous gunshot.

The canyon seemed to rock with it. The echoes struck the walls and came back and multiplied until the place was ringing with a series of gigantic thunderclaps. The Appa-

loosa reared, eyes rolling wild and white in its head. Then he bugled again, shrilly, frantically, and wheeled to charge straight at Eddie. With a frantic whinnying, the whole band followed, racing by the boy in a stream of flying hoofs and whipping manes.

Vainly, Eddie tried to turn them, but they stampeded by heedlessly. Calico joined his son, both their animals running. He was staring up at the peaks above them. There was another shot, filling the canyon with its deafening echoes.

"Are they shooting at us?" Eddie shouted.

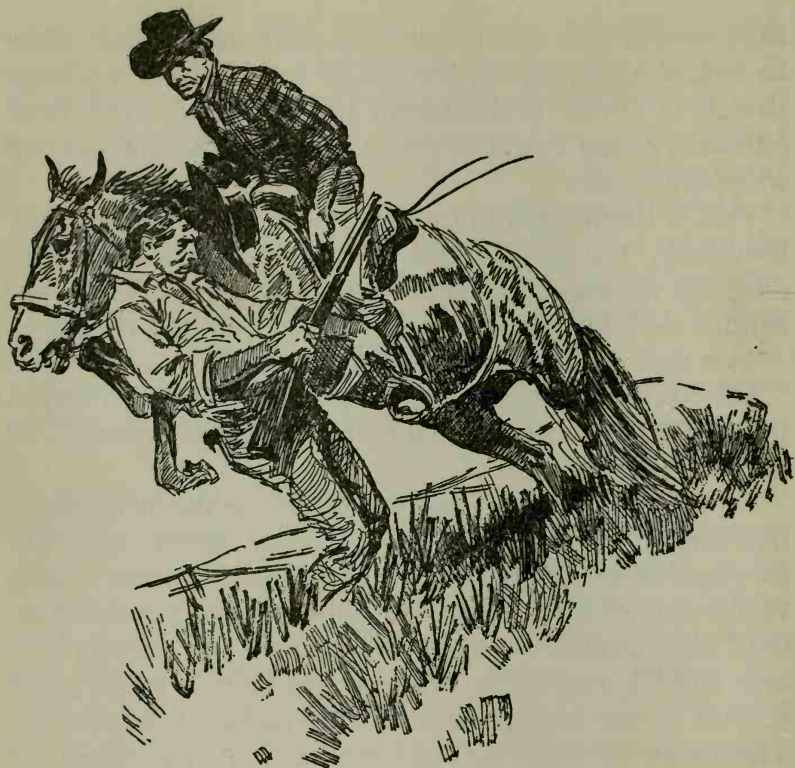
His voice was almost lost in all the noise. Calico turned to him. "I don't know. We'd better forget those horses and find cover."

He wheeled Billygoat and clambered up the steep slopes into timber. Eddie followed, breathlessly booting Midnight over rockslides and up steep creek banks. For some reason, Calico did not stop. He forced Billygoat higher and higher, until they reached the ridge. Here, with the animals lathered and laboring for breath, the man halted. Eddie could see that he was looking down into the timber ahead of them. There was movement through the trees. A man came into view. Eddie saw that he was still intent on the running horses at the bottom of the canyon, and had not seen Calico or the boy.

"It's Haskins," Calico snapped. "We can't let him get that Appaloosa, Jigger."

He started Billygoat off again, scrambling him down out of the talus. He reached timberline and plunged into the trees. Eddie tried to follow, praying that Midnight would not lose footing and fall. He saw Haskins again, still stalking through the trees, trying to get in another shot. He was a horse rancher from across Jackson Hole, a big surly man, black-haired and black-browed, dressed in age-whitened levis and basket-stamped boots.

He must have heard the crash of Billygoat coming through



the trees, for he wheeled about. When he saw Calico charging down on him, he jerked his rifle up to shoot. But Calico ran his mule into the man, knocking him aside, and then jumped off on him before he could use his gun.

The two men rolled down the slope locked together, smashing through buckbrush and red monkey grass, scraping against rocks. Eddie pulled Midnight to a stop and jumped off, running after them. In the thick timothy of the meadow, the two men came to a stop.

Calico tried to tear free but Haskins brought a knee up into his stomach. Calico rolled off with all the wind knocked out of him. Haskins lunged to his feet and scrambled back to where he had dropped the rifle. Eddie tried to reach the

gun before the man, but Haskins got there first. He scooped it up and wheeled around on one knee to shoot Calico just as the redheaded man started to rise.

But Eddie threw himself at Haskins, knocking the gun skyward as it went off. Then he caught the rifle barrel in both hands and tried to tear it free. But Haskins gave a jerk, pulling Eddie off his feet.

The boy still clung grimly to the gun, hugging the barrel in across his stomach with both hands. Haskins cursed and kicked him in the ribs. The pain blinded Eddie, but he refused to let go.

"You little devil!" Haskins muttered savagely, and started to kick Eddie in the face.

But Calico lunged in on the man, catching him by the shirt, swinging him around and hitting him across the jaw. Haskins straightened up, his face blank with shock, then he toppled over like a fallen tree. Calico towered over him, rubbing his knuckles and grinning wickedly.

"Easy as eating striped candy," he said. "Why don't you get up and let me do it again?"

Haskins rolled over dazedly, then sat up, holding his jaw. He looked at Calico's fist and made no attempt to rise.

Calico glared down at the man. "What are you shooting at that Appaloosa for? You won't see another horse like him in fifty years."

"I've been stalking that horse for three days now," Haskins said harshly. He got to his feet, dusting himself off with vicious slaps. "Some of those horses in that band are my stock. The stallion has enticed them away from my ranch and turned them wild." Blood rushed into Haskins' face as he thought about it. "The Appaloosa's a devil. He even gets 'em out of a pen somehow. I've lost three of my best mares to him this last month. If he keeps it up, I'll be ruined."

"Wait a minute," Calico said. "How long did you say you've been stalking him?"

"Three days ago he hit my ranch, run off a couple of my stallions and a good mare. I followed the tracks clear across Jackson Hole into these mountains. I lost 'em this morning but kept on going. Then I caught sight of him down in this canyon. Didn't even see you behind the band."

Calico frowned, then said, "But we've been following that horse a whole day, and the tracks didn't start down by Jackson Lake, the way they would if the band had come across Jackson Hole from your place. They started way south of the lake. They just wouldn't of had time to come across Jackson Hole, do all that traveling, and be up here by now."

Eddie saw Haskins frown a little, as if trying to figure it out. Then he shook his head. "I can't help it. I saw that Appaloosa taking my horses. He was just hitting timber when I shot at him. By the time I'd saddled up and got on his trail, I had to follow the tracks instead of him. It was the Appaloosa, Calico. I swear it."

Eddie didn't like Haskins, but he sounded like he was telling the truth. He could see his father thought so, too. He waited, shifting uncomfortably, until Calico spoke.

"I can't figure it out," he said. "No horse in the world could have made it over here that fast, especially driving a whole band with him."

"I told you he's a devil," Haskins said. "The quicker he's dead the better."

Calico shook his head. "Tell you what. The horse can't steal your animals, if somebody traps him and tames him. Give us another chance to capture him before you try to kill him."

The man studied Calico with sullen black eyes. Then he scratched at his stubble beard, grimacing. "All right," he said. "But if you don't get him this time, I'm coming out here again. I'll get him next time, Calico. I'll get him for good."

Chapter 3

THE GUNSHOTS had driven Apples to utter desperation. Even after he and his band were out of sight of the riders, even after the man-smell was no longer borne on the breeze, it seemed he could still hear the deafening crack of that gun. And hearing it, he tore along faster and faster, eyes protruding wildly from their sockets, muzzle foamy with lather, for the Appaloosa had once known man well.

Born wild, he had been captured when still young and broken to the saddle. They had put something heavy and stiff on his back and burned his hip. They had jammed a cold piece of iron in his jaws that cut his mouth whenever they jerked on it, making him turn left or right at their will. He had escaped before they could make him a gelding, and had fought a roan stallion for the right to lead this band. Now, five years old, he had been running the wilds for three

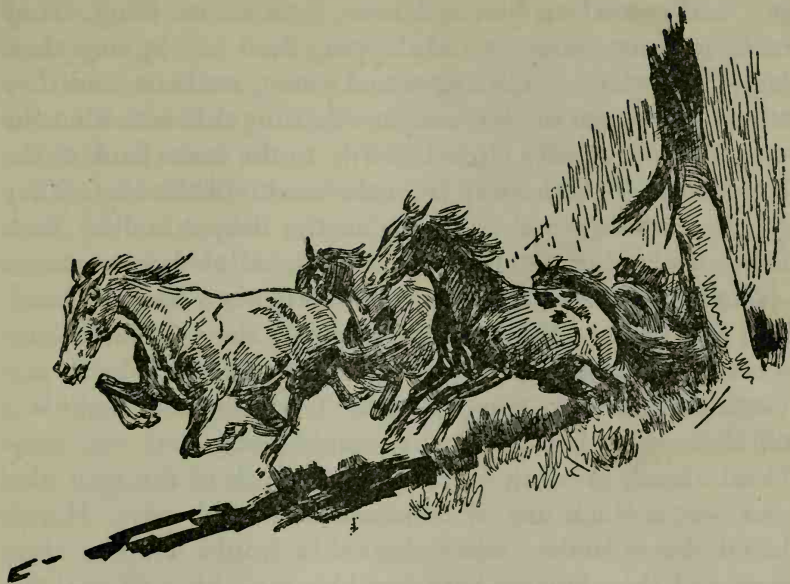
years. But the painful memories associated with men only added to his instinct of escape whenever he caught their hated scent.

On and on the band drifted, even deeper into the box canyon country. Apples ran with his mate, a pretty bay mare. Gradually the first terror receded. The pine scented air began to smell good again, free from that man taint. The wind ruffled his mane like a soothing hand. He crossed a springy carpet of pine needles, nipping playfully at the bay's heels. She turned to frolic with him, nuzzling his shoulder, nickering affectionately. They stopped to graze in the deep grass of a meadow, and all was peace again.

Sometimes, this companionship with the bay brought back memories, too. But they were not painful memories like those associated with man. They went farther, so dim they were like a dream. The stallion could recall running with another horse like this, frolicking across the high parks, drinking at the chill streams, grazing on the sweet grasses. That other horse had been the same color—blue across the chest, with the red-daubed white blanket over the hips. As Apples saw the mares in his band with their colts, he thought that perhaps it had been his own mother. But he couldn't be sure.

He herded his band on into pine-fringed foothills that twisted and turned until they tumbled off into the Wind Rivers. The river led them into a canyon where deep green pines clung to ledges high on the crimson walls and the sky was a turquoise strip above them.

They were deep within the canyon when a new scent joined the damp odors of granite and pine needles. Apples raised his head, pink nostrils twitching. Was it the man odor again? He felt panic running through him, and wheeled about, searching the shadows. Suddenly they appeared, far to the rear, riding the shallows of the river. He saw that it



was the same two who had followed him before. They must have picked up his trail again.

One was a tall redheaded man riding a grunting mule. The other was a boy on a black horse. There was something wild about the boy, with his Indian-black hair, his sunburned face. It seemed to touch the wildness in Apples, and hold him a moment, as if in some kinship. He had never felt this with a man before, and could not understand it. Then the man-smell was swept to him again. With a shrill whinney he turned and nipped at the bay's heels, startling his band into flight.

The river canyon twisted before them like a snake. Centuries of erosion had carved out spur canyons every few hundred yards. But Apples knew they offered no escape. They were box canyons, merely traps that led back a half mile or so and then came to an abrupt end, their walls so high and steep no four-footed animal could scale them.

As they reached the first one, he saw that the man and

boy had gained on him and were right on his flank. They came in close, shouting and slapping their hats against their legs. It frightened the mares and young stallions, and they tried to veer into the box canyon. Sensing that was what the men wanted, Apples circled swiftly to the inner flank of the band, turning them away from the mouth of the trap. They ran on, snorting and coughing in the dust raised by their flying heels. For a time they were ahead of their pursuers.

Then Apples saw the mouth of another box canyon ahead. The pair spurred their mounts closer to the wild band once more. The black-haired boy was at the rear of the herd, preventing them from turning back. The redheaded man was on their right flank, and they could not wheel that way. Dead ahead, growing out from the mouth of the spur canyon, was a thick line of tamarack and scrub pine. Horses hated dense timber where branches would whip at their eyes and the alligator bark would scrape hide off and the trunks would bump tender noses. The only opening it left was the mouth of the spur canyon, on their left flank. As the band approached the timber, they realized this, and started veering into that spur.

Again Apples sensed the trap. He tried to work onto the inside of his herd and turn them. But the mares and young colts were tiring now. They were driven to panic by the shouting figures pressing in on their tails and flank. They only knew that they had a choice between the hated timber dead ahead and the open mouth of the canyon. It was natural for them to choose the canyon.

If Apples had run wild all his life, he might have made the same choice. But a horse that had been caught and had escaped was twice as smart as a wild horse that had never known man. And as he saw how hard the men were trying to turn them into the spur canyon, he knew it was a trap.

With a sharp whinny, he threw himself against a mare,

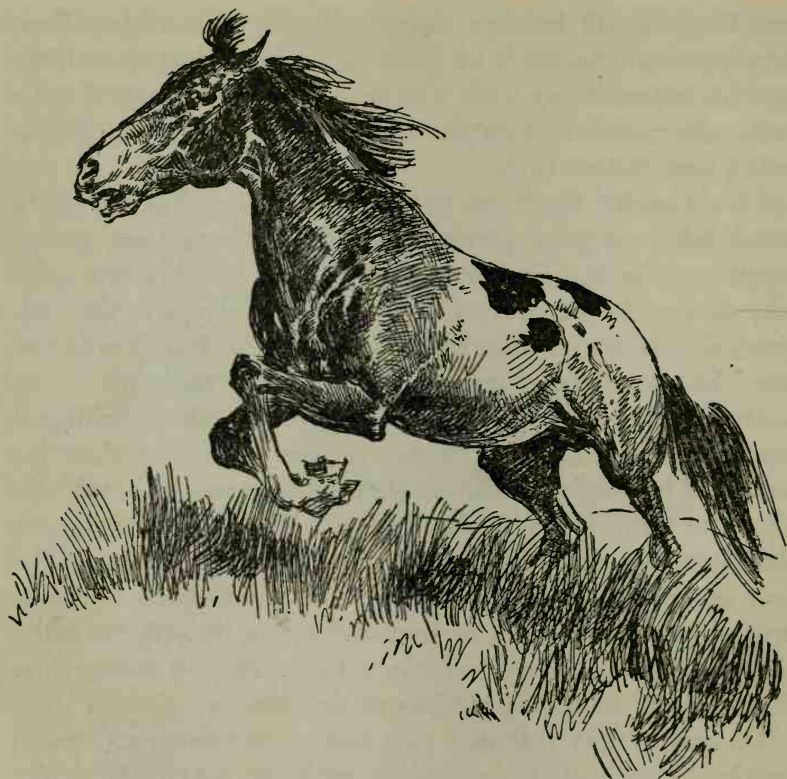
knocking her off balance, forcing her to turn aside. Then he nipped at the heels of the next horse, a young stallion, and he veered away with a squeal of pain. A pair of colts came afterward, and Apples reared up above them, frightening them into a turn.

This wheeled the band toward the timber. They tried to break before Apples' generalship. But he kept them going, nipping at heels, biting shoulders, running bodily into panicky mares that sought to turn back. Apples saw the red-headed man try to run across their front. But it was too late. The whole band ran squealing into the timber.

Matted undergrowth clawed at Apples. A branch whipped across his eyes, blinding him. Another one scraped at his hide and he bugled shrilly in pain. The crash of brush was all about him. When he finally broke into the open, he saw that his whole band had scattered through the timber. The only one close to him was the bay mare. He tried to round up the mares and colts as they came one by one from the timber. But the riders burst into the open and forced him to run again, with only the bay at his side.

On and on they galloped, past more spur canyons, through another stretch of dense timber, with the roar of the river always filling the canyon. Time and time again the riders tried to force the two wild horses into one of those spurs, only to be outmaneuvered by Apples. But he could see the bay was tiring. As twilight filled the gorge with a pearly haze, she began to stumble, whinnying pitifully in exhaustion.

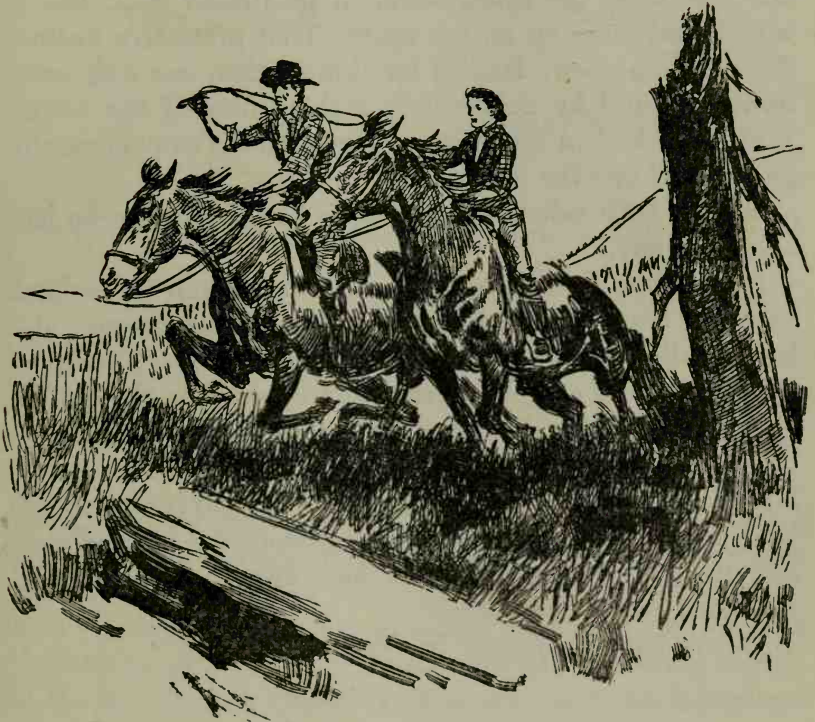
Apples sensed that they would capture her if she could not soon escape, and it roused an instinct within him as old as time. One of the stallion's main functions was the protection of his mares and colts. Apples had fought wolves to protect his band, had killed bobcats to keep them safe, had spent many a bloody afternoon in combat with other



stallions who wished his mares. And now he was facing a new enemy.

Perhaps it did not form in his mind the way it would have in a human's—the deliberate resolve that his mate should not know the pain of the branding iron, the agony of spurs, the cruel tug of the bit. But those memories were brought to him again, and filled him with the savage instinct to protect the bay.

They were approaching another spur canyon. The pursuers appeared out of the twilight again, their mounts also stumbling and lagging with exhaustion. They got on the bay's flank, driving her against Apples, trying to turn the



pair into the spur. Apples attempted to shoulder the bay out again, but the mare stumbled and almost fell.

The riders were crowding close, swinging their ropes. Apples knew what that meant. The redheaded man made a toss and the rope barely missed Apples' neck, sliding off his shoulder. The boy spurred in behind the bay, swinging

his rope. The mare squealed in panic and turned directly into the spur canyon. Apples veered to follow, nipping at her heels, trying to turn her back. But she was too weary, too panicked.

Desperately he lunged against her, biting her shoulder. With a hurt look in her eyes, she spun away. It took her beyond the men and past the canyon mouth. But Apples saw how close the riders were. If he turned back, too, it would lead them up on her again. That protective instinct flared in him anew. He had lured more than one wolf away from the band by deliberately making himself the target. With a last look at the mare, now beyond the canyon mouth, he wheeled into the canyon.

He saw both riders turn to follow him, and knew he had saved the bay.

It kept him from turning back, even though he realized he might have stepped into a trap. He led his pursuers at a heavy gallop up the twisting rock-walled gorge. Finally he reached the box end, where the walls towered on three sides, too steep to climb. He wheeled to face the enemy. His labored breathing made a husky roar in the narrow notch. His heaving flanks were shiny with sweat and his eyes were wild and savage. The riders appeared in the haze of dust and twilight, charging toward him, swinging their loops. He heard one of them shout:

"We've got him, Jigger! We've got him!"

Chapter 4

IT TOOK CALICO AND EDDIE three full days to get Apples back to the shack, roped and hobbled. Even so, he never stopped fighting. They turned him into a pen, and took a much needed sleep themselves. Calico was out doing chores when Eddie finally rolled out of his blankets. It was midmorning, with the powdery smell of dust and the sweet tang of curing meadow grass hanging thickly in the air. The boy grinned a good morning to his father and the two of them went over to the Appaloosa's pen.

The animal trotted around the inside of the fence, snorting defiantly at them. The power in the broad frame awed Eddie. The animal did not stand much over fifteen hands, but he had a broad chest and powerful rump, the muscles rippling beneath the silken skin like fat snakes.

"Look at the size of that throttle," Calico said. "He must

have some Arab in him. There's enough wind in there to run a week. We never would of caught him if he hadn't turned in the box canyon to save the mare."

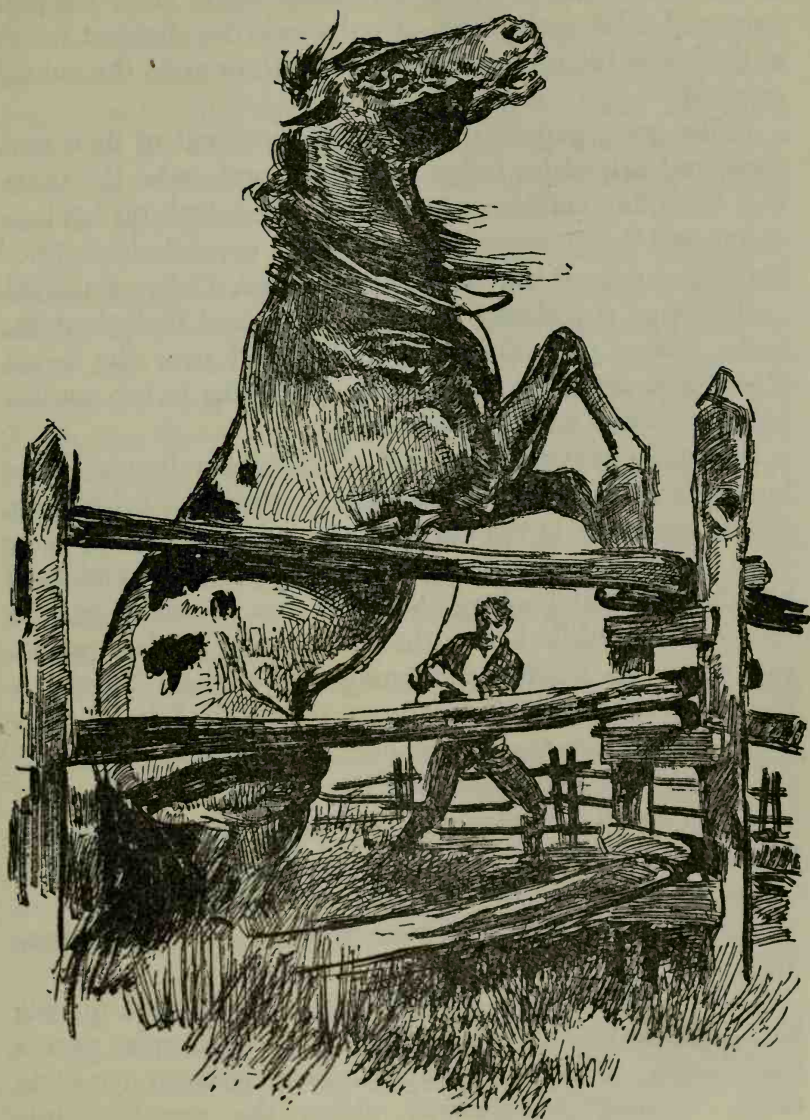
"We going to work him today?" Eddie asked hopefully.

"Might as well." Calico nodded. "See that brand on his hip? He's been caught once, just like I thought. It won't be like busting a wild bronc. But he'll probably buck a while anyway. He's got too much spirit to knuckle under without a fight."

They got their ropes and went into the pen after the horse. It took them some time to corner him and put a rope on his neck. Then Calico had to put him in a Scotch hobble, too, a hitch that doubled his left hind leg up and left him only three feet to stand on. He had to fall over a couple of times before he realized how helpless he was, and quit fighting. Then they cleared the big holding corral of horses and worked Apples into it. He started to buck and fight when they tried to put a saddle on, and he fell once more onto his side. They helped him up, and he stood quivering and snorting while they put the rig on. Then Calico looked into his mouth.

"Somebody put a bit on this horse too soon," he said. "I can still see the scars on the roof of his mouth. We'll start him with a hackamore."

The hackamore was a rope bridle with a big knot that tied beneath the jaw. It was what most horse breakers used in the beginning stages of training a horse. A wild bronc did not understand the signals used to make it turn and stop. In the beginning, there was naturally a lot of jerking and pulling on the reins to teach the horse. If a bit was used, this hard reining would cut a horse's mouth cruelly. With the hackamore, the mouth was saved. By pulling on the bridle ropes of the hackamore, the rider could press the knot into the tender flesh just beneath the jaw. The horse soon



learned that it could avoid this pain by turning or stopping as the rider wished. When the horse finally knew the signals, and a bit was put in, it only took the slightest touch of the bit on the tender roof of its mouth to make the animal respond.

Eddie got a pepper-and-salt hackamore out of their tack shed, and helped his father adjust the knot under the snorting, trembling stallion's jaw. Then Calico took off his bandanna and tied it across the Appaloosa's eyes. As he stepped back, an outraged bray broke the stillness. Calico chuckled.

"Billygoat is jealous," he said. He turned to look at the mule, whose ugly dish-face was shoved over the fence. "Don't you act like a baby just 'cause I like to top another bronc once in a while," he shouted.

The mule brayed again and all the other horses in the bigger corral began whinnying and snorting. Still chuckling, Calico put a toe in the stirrup and made a motion as if he were going to swing aboard. The Appaloosa braced itself but did not start bucking. Satisfied that he would be able to reach the saddle before the show started, Calico put his weight on the stirrup and swung into leather. The horse crowhopped, almost fell over again, then settled down, trembling. Calico gathered up the hackamore ropes.

"Take off the Scotch hobble, Jigger."

Breathless with excitement, Eddie undid the hobble, lowering the hind leg. Muscles bunched like fists across Apples' chest, but still the blindfold kept him from exploding.

"Now that bandanna." Calico grinned. "And jump back like a rabbit."

Eddie reached up to yank the blind off, jumped quickly back and ran for the fence. Even as he did, Apples gave a wild, bugling whinny and erupted. He started out in a high-roller, bucking straightaway across the corral. Eddie watched from behind the fence. He gripped the bars in a

frenzy of excitement, wincing every time the horse hit and Calico's body snapped with the shock.

The Appaloosa started to sunfish, twisting from side to side so far its belly flashed in the sun. Then it started weaving, never coming down in the same spot twice. The sharp hoofs cut the earth to ribbons and raised banners of yellow dust that swirled around the grunting, pitching Appaloosa and the yelling rider.

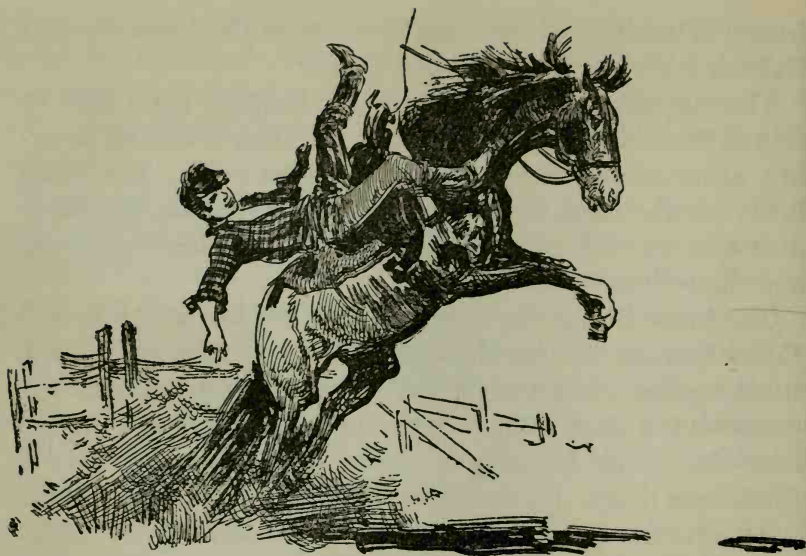
The horse hit for the clouds and Calico lost a stirrup and Eddie thought he was through. But he got his foot in the stirrup again before the stallion hit the ground, and took the shock with a slack body. Then Apples began pioneering all over the corral, bucking in circles and figure eights until Eddie was dizzy. He didn't see how Calico kept the saddle.

At last, the Appaloosa realized it couldn't unseat Calico with the fancy bucking and started bucking straightaway once more. Calico took each shock of landing with a body as slack as a dishrag. But it was beginning to tell on him. His face was loose with exhaustion and a painful grunt left him every time they hit.

Yellow ropes of lather furred the horse and his sweat-shiny flanks were heaving like bellows when he finally quit pitching and went into little crowhops around the corral. Even that ceased after one trip around, and he stood trembling and wheezing and beaten beneath Calico. Eddie ran in as his father dismounted. Calico leaned against the horse, his eyes closed, his face pinched with the beating he had taken. Then he opened his eyes and grinned feebly at Eddie.

"Wasn't I right, Jigger? You wouldn't beat a bronc this quick. Apples has a lot of fire but he's got sense, too. He remembers it wasn't any use to fight. We'd bust him sooner or later. How about topping him while he's still whittled down?"

Eddie gulped. "Me?"



"Why not? Broncs are part of the business. You've got to top one sooner or later. He may pitch a little and it'll give you the feel of things."

Eddie's stomach felt tight, cold sweat broke out on his hands. But it wasn't fear. It was merely excitement. He had dreamed of sitting this horse from the first time he had seen it. This was a dream come true.

He put his weight into one stirrup, testing the horse as Calico had. When the animal showed no signs of pitching, he swung aboard. But as soon as he touched the saddle, Apples dipped his head between his legs and hunted clouds. Eddie found himself sailing through the air.

The next moment he struck the ground. It seemed to rock the whole world. He turned over, squinting his eyes against the tears. It didn't seem to hurt so badly when he opened them and saw his father running toward him, grinning broadly.

"Take another dive like that and you'll break every bone in your body," Calico said. "You were stiff as a stick. You've got to make like you're a sack of oats. You drop that sack and watch what happens. It just spreads all over the ground and comes up laughing. How many times have I got to tell you?"

The boy rose, shaking his head groggily. "I know. I just keep forgetting."

His father came over and laid a big calloused hand on his shoulder. It felt warm through his shirt. "You've got a lot to learn about horses, Jigger. But if you come up grinning like that every time it knocks you, you've got the thing licked."

"Gosh, I hope so." Eddie stared ruefully at Apples, who had run to the other side of the corral. "How about me using spurs this time, Calico? I'm not the rider you are, remember."

Calico shook his head. "No, Eddie. One of the things that's made this horse spooky of us is somebody handling him rough. I think he's decent down under, and you don't need spurs for a decent bronc. Now, how about forking that leather again?"

Calico went after the stallion with his rope. Apples was too tired to fight much. The man cornered him and got the loop on his neck and held him while Eddie blindfolded him again. Then he mounted and settled himself firmly in the saddle. Calico walked down the rope, threw it off, and put his hand on the blindfold. The horse was quivering beneath Eddie.

"Set tight?" Calico asked.

The boy nodded, crawling inside. Calico tore the blindfold off and Apples dipped his head again. But this time Eddie was ready. One moment he was heading toward the

clouds, the next moment the world seemed to come up and hit him on the bottom. He was surprised to see he was still in the saddle. He didn't know how the horse was bucking, straightaway or pioneering or what. He only knew the corral spun around him. First he was looking at the ground, then at the sky. Something came up and hit him like a wet board, pounding his backsides. Then the wind was whistling past his ears.

Then it was over. He was still in the saddle, and Apples was cat-backing around the corral. He stopped that and broke into a trot. Flushed with victory, Eddie sat up straight in the saddle. His insides felt like jelly and his head was still spinning, but he tried not to show that as he trotted the Appaloosa around the corral. He had obviously been trained to rein before, for he responded to the slightest pressure of the hackamore knot under his jaw. Eddie needed only to touch the right side of his neck with a rein and give the smallest tug, and Apples turned left for him. Then he pulled back and the horse came to a stop before Calico. The laugh wrinkles deepened around the man's twinkling eyes.

"There you are, Jigger. Easy as eating striped candy. I'll bet you thought you were up there an hour."

"More like a year."

"It was only three seconds, and three bucks. But that's the way it is. You don't know where you are and you lose all sense of time. How about off-saddling now? I think he's had enough work for one day."

Eddie got down and began to uncinch the heavy, double-rigged bronc saddle. He set it down and turned back to the horse. Apples was blowing heavily and dripping lather, but showed no more fear of Eddie. The boy reached up to pat his neck. The horse started to pull away. Then, feeling the gentleness of the hand, he stopped and turned to touch Ed-



die's arm with an inquisitive nose. It was like velvet, soft and warm. And the light in the eyes was warm and liquid—like that of a dog adoring its master.

"Look at that," marveled Calico. "You've made a friend already, Jigger."

It struck Eddie suddenly that there was something special about this horse. He had never felt such a deep and certain

kinship with Midnight or the other animals he had ridden. As he reached up to twine his hand in the silken mane, a wagon rattled into view on the road. A man and a woman sat in the seat. Eddie stiffened as he saw the sunlight gleam on the woman's yellow hair and wink on the tin star pinned to the man's cowhide vest.

"It's the schoolmarm, bringing Sheriff Kinsale," Eddie said sharply.

He raised desperate eyes to Calico. But the man stared at the wagon with a confused frown on his face. The impulse to run gripped Eddie like a spasm. He stood rigidly by Apples, poised for flight, as the wagon pulled to a halt by the pen. June Weatherby sat straight and prim on the seat, spots of color glowing in her cheeks.

"We've come to take the boy back to town, Calico," she said. "If you try to stop us, the sheriff will serve a warrant on you for obstructing the law."

Calico did not answer. He shoved his hat back on his curly red hair. He stared confusedly at the ground, drawing little designs in the dirt with his boot toe. It riled Eddie once more to see how much the schoolmarm always embarrassed Calico. He turned toward the woman, saying hotly:

"I won't go along."

The sheriff wheezed as he climbed out of the wagon. He was a graying, paunchy man with a luxuriant beard and flowing mustaches in which he took great pride. He made a snoring sound when he spoke, and his breath fluttered the mustaches.

"Come on, now, Eddie. Don't make us any trouble. You need a home like the Hembres can give you."

The boy felt his hand tighten on Apples' mane. "I won't go."

"We've tried to be reasonable with you and Calico long

enough, Eddie." Impatient anger made the sheriff's voice rough. "Don't make me come in there after you."

Calico held out his hand. "Now hold on, Kinsale—"

"You keep out of this, Calico. You've been breaking the law, keeping this boy out of school. Your teaching him just isn't enough. I can put you in jail, if I have to. You coming, Eddie?"

The boy did not move, staring hot-eyed at Kinsale. The sheriff's face grew red. He let out a snoring breath again, fluttering his mustaches, and pulled open the gate. Eddie wheeled and ran across the corral. The sheriff followed, wheezing heavily. The horse saw him coming and reared up in a startled way, whinnying shrilly. Then the animal wheeled around Kinsale and ran for the open gate. Calico shouted and ran at him but it only startled Apples more. He shied away from Calico and dashed through the gate.

Horried, Eddie stood on the other side of the corral, watching the Appaloosa gallop down the road. A hundred yards from the pen, the horse halted and looked back for a moment, as if seeking Eddie. Then, almost reluctantly, he turned and galloped on into timber.

"You let him go," Eddie told Kinsale accusingly. "Calico said a horse like that comes once in a man's lifetime, and you let him go."

Still running toward Eddie, Kinsale wheezed, "I didn't mean to, Son. You can have another horse. Doggone it, you and this here hawse-runner make me more trouble than a whole passel of stage robbers. Come along, now—"

"No!" Eddie cried, and wheeled to duck through the bars. He ran like a deer across the hayfields, hearing Kinsale shout behind him, and then crashed through the chokecherry thickets into the creek bottom. Soundless tears of rage and loss were squeezed from his squinted eyes as he thought of

Apples being gone. He'd never go back with Kinsale now. Never!

He ran upstream until his heart was pounding and his lungs seemed ready to burst. Then he had to slow down. But he turned off through the thickets and dense scrub timber to a box canyon that only he and Calico knew about.

It was really no more than a deep gulch, the buckbrush across its mouth so thick a man would go right past without even knowing it was there. He scratched his face and ripped his shirt clawing through the brush. Then he scrambled to the dead end and sank to the earth there, exhausted, bleeding, defeated. The loss of Apples was like an ache in his chest and he hadn't wanted to cry so much since he was a baby. But he bit his lip to keep back the tears, trying to figure what was next.

He knew he couldn't go back to the cabin. Maybe the



sheriff would wait there for him to show up. But where else could he go? If he had a horse and some grub, he could have gone deeper into the mountains and hole up, like Calico said the train robbers always did when the posse was after





them. But he didn't have a horse or grub. He didn't have anything.

Night came down and the chill mountain air began to eat into his bones. He crouched against the dank earth, shivering, hungry. He had never felt so lonesome in his life.

As the moon began to rise, spilling yellow light down through the foliage, he heard a crackling along his back trail. Somebody was coming. Had the sheriff tracked him down? He flattened on the ground, eyes glued to the spot where the light filtered across the trail.

A mounted figure appeared, leading two other animals. Eddie's breath ran out in a great gasp of relief. He recognized his father's unmistakable silhouette. He called out, jumping to his feet. Calico pulled up and dismounted, chuckling deep in his chest, and everything was all right again.

"Figured you'd be up here in your hide-out, Jigger. The sheriff's left, but I've a notion he'll be back tomorrow, or some time soon." He paused, looking dubiously at Eddie. "Are you sure you don't want to go with him?"

Eddie said, "Why do you think I ran away?"

Calico shook his head helplessly. "You don't think I'm doing wrong, do you?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. "All I know is I couldn't stand being away from you."

A strange brightness came into Calico's eyes. He grinned and reached out to tousle Eddie's mop of hair. "I guess I feel the same way about you, Jigger. How can it be wrong for a man to want to keep his own son?" He looked off at the mountains. "Why don't we hit the trail? I've had enough of those busybodies for a while."

Chapter 5

CALICO AND EDDIE went deeper into the mountains that night and made their camp. The next morning they backtracked to pick up the Appaloosa's sign. Calico found the hoofprints on the wagon road near the shack and followed them into the mountains. The trail was cold but he did not have much trouble uncovering it that day. Both Eddie and Calico were surprised that it led them out of the Wind Rivers, across Jackson Hole, and into the Snake Mountains. It was not a wandering trail. The horse seemed to be traveling with some definite goal in mind. Calico could not figure it out.

They crossed South Park where the waterfowl rose from swamps with a muffled whirring and birds chattered in the cattails. They left the park and crossed Snake River, climbing the trail to the Narrows. The gorge below them was

filled with the hollow boom of the rapids, and the water was whipped to a sudsy foam by the sharp rocks. The two riders rose higher, through towering peaks and ridges, and finally reached a windswept ridge that looked down into a round green valley. White barns and a log house lay like toy blocks a thousand feet below. Corrals looked like a pattern of jackstraws dropped haphazardly on the tawny earth.

"Haskins' ranch," Calico said, taking his binoculars out for a look. "That bunch of broke horses in his corrals does look smaller than the last time I was here. He had a big red bay he was really proud of. I don't see it down there."

He handed the four-power binoculars to Eddie, and the boy searched the corrals in vain for the red horse. Finally he shook his head, and Calico said:

"Haskins was telling the truth about some wild one stealing his best horses, then." He frowned, scratching his stubble beard. "I still don't see how it could of been Apples. No horse could of reached the Wind Rivers from here in that short a time, not even traveling alone."

"Maybe it was another wild stallion."

Calico shook his head. "Haskins swore it was an Appaloosa. If there was another Appaloosa in this section, we'd know it, Jigger. And so would Haskins. No two Appaloosas are colored exactly the same. The spots are dabbed on different, or the shape of the rump white's different, or the chest color is bay instead of blue. If you saw another one, you'd know it wasn't Apples in a second."

"Then either it was Apples that Haskins saw, or Haskins was lying."

"He'd have no reason to lie. He may be a rough one, but he's too good a horseman to kill Apples for nothing." Calico shook his head again, helplessly. "We're up against a mystery, Jigger. Maybe we'll find the answer over here in the Snakes."

They reached another loop of the Snake and lost Apples' tracks in the marshy bottoms. Calico hunted until nightfall but failed to find where they led out. Finally, with the light gone, they had to give up and make camp. Eddie tried not to show his disappointment. He was so tired every muscle in his body ached. But he would have ridden the rest of the night, if it meant they would find Apples. He unsaddled the animals, hobbled them and turned them out to graze. Calico had already lit the fire, started the coffee, and was making biscuits in the top of the sack. After dinner the night seemed to press in against them. The only sound was the chirping of crickets in the deep meadow grass or the far-off snort of Midnight.

It was lonely and a little spooky and Eddie was glad for the fire and his father. After a while, Billygoat wandered in and nuzzled Calico's shirt front, trying to pull out his tobacco sack. Calico brushed him absently away, not even speaking to him.

"Thinking about Apples?" Eddie asked.

"No," Calico said. "About you." He was silent a while, sitting cross-legged before the dying fire, staring off into the black shadows beneath the towering pines. Finally, he said, "Sometimes I think maybe June's right about a kid needing a home like the Hembres' and an education. Look at me. I was an orphan. I had to start cleaning out stables for a living when I was ten. I got something of an education, but not enough to go very far. Horses are all I know. Got nothing but a few head of scroungy broncs, an old shack, and one dirty shirt to my name. Never make more than tobacco money, sometimes not even that. I've got no right to hold you down to that."

Eddie sat up straight with surprise. "But I like it, Calico. I don't ever want anything else."

"You're too young to want it now, Jigger. But when you're

my age, you might begin to realize what you've missed. Then it's too late."

"Now you're talking like June Weatherby."

"Maybe I am. But it's only one side of me talking. The other side wants to keep you." He glanced at Eddie, then looked quickly away, as if embarrassed. His voice sounded husky. "Nobody wants to give up his own son."

"Gee, Calico. I never knew it was like that. I thought you was plum set on making me a horse-runner."

Calico shook his head. "I don't know which way to turn. Sometimes I feel I'm doing you wrong by keeping you away from school like this. But I can't seem to give you up, when it comes right down to it. Be mighty lonesome up here without you, Jigger." He glanced at Eddie again, then rose with a gruff chuckle, slapping at his buckskin breeches. "Well, that's something we can't settle tonight, anyway. How about rolling in?"

Before Eddie could answer, Billygoat tossed his ugly head and snorted. Calico wheeled around, staring at a spot between two lodgepole pines. A man appeared in the circle of firelight. He was a tall Indian with a porcupine roach in his hair that made him look even taller. He was wrapped in a matted buffalo robe worked in yellow and red quills. At his waist, dangling from a belt, was a beaver-pelt medicine bag, in which he carried his tobacco and powder and lead and such. The only part of his body showing was his bare ankles, shining like old pennies in the fire glow. His face was as empty of expression as a mahogany mask. His black eyes glittered at Calico.

"Howdy," Calico said. "Throw in and have some chuck-away."

The Indian looked at the coffee pot for a long time. Eddie felt the skin crawl down the back of his neck. Did the man understand English? He didn't move. Eddie began peering

around at the black shadows. Maybe there were more Indians out there, just waiting to shoot or something. He felt the perspiration break out on his palms. Then the Indian sat down, so abruptly it made Eddie jump. Calico poured some more water in the pot and dumped a handful of coffee after it, kicking a new chunk of wood into the dying fire. Then he got out some more bacon to fry. The Indian licked his lips and threw back his robe, exposing a brawny, copper chest.

"What tribe?" Calico asked.

"Hunkpapa Sioux," the Indian said.

Right after he spoke, he gave a jump and slapped at his medicine bag, looking around. Eddie couldn't see anything behind the man except the mule, standing with his rump toward the Indian. He was complacently gnawing on the bark of a juniper.

"It's just old Billygoat having his supper." Calico grinned. "Leave him there long enough and he'll have that tree stripped, head to toe."

The Indian settled down again. Calico went on frying the bacon and asked him if he'd seen an Appaloosa around anywhere. The Indian nodded solemnly.

"Spotted horse. Over in Piute Canyon. Bad Medicine. Indian stay away. Big Devil."

"Big Devil?" Calico asked. "You can't mean the Appaloosa."

The Indian nodded again. "Same horse. Bad Medicine. You chase?"

"That's the one we're after, all right."

"That's why he got to Piute Canyon. Him born there. Always go there when men chase—"

The Indian broke off, slapping at his medicine bag and jumping a second time, looking around behind him. Again, all Eddie could see was the mule, still chewing on the bark.

Muttering, the Indian settled back. The coffee was boiling, and Calico poured him a cup.

"Let me get this straight," Calico said. "You say this Appaloosa is bad medicine—"

"Heap bad medicine. Like ghost. Steal Indian horse. Kill Indian horse. Kill Indian man."

Calico let his breath out in a long whistle. "Killed a man?"

The Indian nodded solemnly. "Man-killer. Ghost horse. All Indian stay away. You stay away—"

"He's crazy," Eddie said, unable to contain himself any longer. "He can't be talking about Apples. That horse wouldn't kill anybody."

Calico shook his head. "Seems to know what he's talking about, Jigger. And he sure means the Appaloosa. I hate to believe it, but it ties in with what Haskins said."

As he finished, there was a ripping sound. The Indian jumped to his feet, grabbing once more at his medicine bag. But this time it was gone. Eddie spotted part of the swarthy beaver-pelt extending from either side of Billygoat's mouth. When the Indian saw the mule chewing on his bag, he gave a shout and yanked a wicked-looking knife from his belt, lunging for Billygoat. Calico snaked a long leg out and tripped the Indian and he fell flat on his face. He rolled over and came to his feet again, wheeling toward Calico.

"Watch out!" Eddie shouted. "He's going for you, Calico."

To Eddie's surprise, Calico held his hands up in front of him and backed away, laughing. "Look out now," he told the Indian. "Billygoat didn't mean any harm. He just hankered after that tobacco in your medicine bag. Tell you what. How about this turnip in repayment?" He took his big gold watch from his pocket, holding it out to the Indian. "My grandpa give it to me. Tell the time of day even after the sun's down."

The Indian stopped, gaping at the watch glittering in the firelight. "No sun?"

"All night long, tells time. And ticks. Listen to that noise. Better'n crickets."

Intrigued, the Indian leaned forward to listen. The anger left his face. He accepted the watch, frowning at it. He held it to his ear. Then he shook it. Then he looked at it and grinned. He put his knife away and gathered his robe about him and sat down to drink his coffee. Then he ate the bacon, listening to the watch and grinning and nodding at Calico. When he was finished, he stood up again and the grin faded. He looked toward the east.

"Piute Canyon. Devil horse. You stay away."

Ceremoniously, he wrapped the robe about him and strode into the night. Eddie stared after him. There was a lump in his throat. He didn't want to believe that about Apples. He looked pleadingly at his father. Calico stirred the fire, shaking his head.

"Please . . ."

"All right," Calico said gruffly. "We'll see for ourselves."

All next morning the man and boy rode toward Piute Canyon. It was wild country. They sought the high slopes, and the timber beneath them looked black as a beard on the land. Woodchucks heckled them from rocks and Billygoat brayed right back. The booming of the wind through the pines sounded like distant cannons sometimes. Finally, they reached a ridge overlooking a narrow gorge that Calico said was the Canyon. The ridge became the edge of a cliff and they followed it until they came to a shelving trail slanting steeply into the notch.

Grazing on a slope far below them was a band of horses. And sure enough, high up on a rock stood the sentinel stal-

lion, an Appaloosa. His chest shone like blue steel in the bright sun and the red spots on his white rump were as bright as wet paint. Calico turned to look questioningly at Eddie.

"You still want to do it?"

The boy's heart was pounding with excitement. "We can't go back now. We've got to get him."

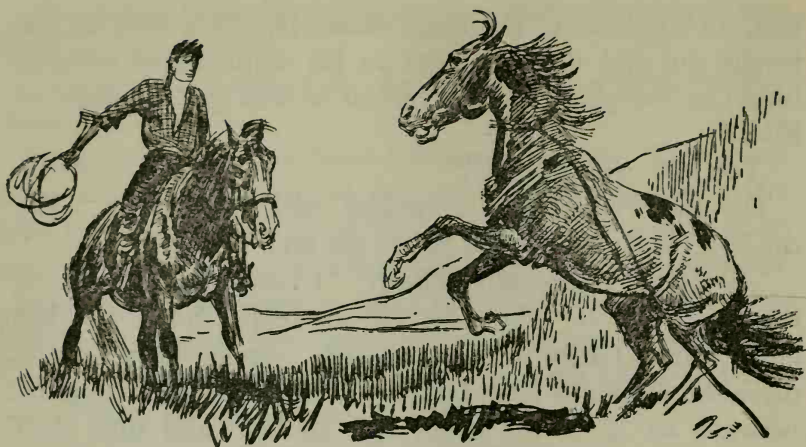
"All right," Calico said soberly. "I know this canyon. It runs back a mile. The sides get so steep a horse couldn't climb them. I'll go to the other side, you stay here. We'll drive the horses in from both ends and have them trapped between us. Give me about half an hour and then start down that trail yonder. But remember this, Jigger. Don't you try and get that Appaloosa. Just work him into the notch easy and he won't try to get past you. Wait for me to come. Savvy?"

Eddie grinned happily. "I savvy."

The man nodded and turned on down the cliff, disappearing back in the trees. Eddie waited impatiently until he thought the half hour was up, then started down the steep, shelving trail. It made him dizzy to look down from such a height at first, but he got over it. He left the cliff and rode out onto the slopes, getting closer to the herd. It seemed to him that Apples looked different, somehow. He seemed jumpier, more suspicious, moving restlessly on the rock and sniffing the air. Then Eddie grinned wryly. After that long chase, anybody would be jumpy.

As he drew closer, Eddie saw a big red bay among the mares and colts. Haskins' horse. He didn't want to believe it, but there it was, right before his eyes. But that didn't mean Apples was the killer. Maybe the red bay had just joined him of his own free will.

Eddie wound down over the sage-covered slopes, slipping



up on the flank of the herd before they caught his scent. When they saw him, they fled down the hill toward the gorge. The stallion nervously circled their rear, head up, taking in everything he could. Eddie waited a little before he slipped up on the other flank. He didn't want to rush them but just keep them going. A few of them got away, but the bulk of the band, including the Appaloosa, was finally herded into the gorge. They began running ahead of him now, in a great flurry of dust and squeals and flashing hoofs. Then they disappeared around a bend. For a moment Eddie thought he'd lost them. But he had ridden on only five or ten minutes when the Appaloosa appeared, coming back. His heavy ears lay flat, his magnificent body seemed fired with smoldering fury as he raced along.

Eddie knew what had happened. The band had met Calico and he'd let the others through but had blocked the Appaloosa. Excitement mounted in Eddie. The Appaloosa stopped when he saw the boy. Eddie saw Calico's rope trailing from the animal's neck. His father had apparently roped

him and then lost his rope. Eddie knew if he could only get his hands on it he would have the horse. Suddenly, as if reading his mind, the stallion gave a shrill whinny and wheeled away, running back into the gorge. The next moment he disappeared around a bend.

But Eddie knew that the horse would meet Calico and turn back again.

Pushing back his hat, Eddie scratched his head the way Calico did when he was trying to figure out something. And, sure enough, it worked. He thought of a plan to catch Apples. He took off his jacket, his hat, his bandanna, the blankets from his saddle, even his boots, and strewed them across the bottom of the gorge. He knew that the man-smell on them would spook the wild horse and keep him from going through. All Eddie had to do now was get hold of the free end of the rope when Apples stopped and snub it around a tree. That was all.

Eddie quickly hitched his horse in the timber, then ran in his stocking feet to an outcropping of buckbrush that grew out into the trail. He heard the thud of hoofs and knew the stallion was coming back. The animal flashed past him. Then he stopped abruptly, rearing up, in front of the clothes, nostrils flaring at the hated man-smell. The rope was dragging from his neck, the free end only a few feet from Eddie. The boy jumped out into the trail, grabbing up the rope before the horse could wheel. Then he ran back around the tree with it, winding it twice about the trunk. The stallion twisted and lunged, trying to get free. But the stout rope held him, the slipknot digging into his neck every time he pulled back. He fought with much more savagery than Eddie remembered in Apples, squealing and bugling, pawing and kicking, biting at the rope. At last he seemed to realize he was beaten. He stood with his head down,

dripping lather and blood-flecked foam, quivering all over.

Eddie drew a long breath. He wished Apples hadn't fought him so hard but now the stallion was broken for keeps. And wouldn't it be swell if he could be aboard the horse when his father came up? Calico'd be mighty proud of him then. Eyes shining, he ran and got his boots and put them on. Then he went back and unsaddled his own horse, lugging the gear back to the Appaloosa.

But the stallion wouldn't let him come near. Baring his teeth, he lashed the air with thrashing forefeet.

"Listen, Apples," Eddie pleaded, taking a step forward. "I'm not going to hurt you. We're friends—remember?"

The stallion screamed and reared up. Then he came down and wheeled on the boy. His whole body trembled with fury. There was a strange glare in his little deep-set eyes. That look sent a chill down Eddie's spine. He'd never seen that cold, crafty expression in Apples' eyes before. And Apples hadn't kept his ears flat against his head all the time either.

The puzzle grew in Eddie's mind as he spoke in soft cajoling words and tried to get the saddle on the animal's back. When nothing he said or did soothed the Appaloosa, Eddie began to get mad. He ran to get his own rope. It took him three throws to catch the Appaloosa's hind leg. Then he walked toward the horse, keeping the rope tight all the time so the animal was stretched between the two lines. When he got near enough, he snaked the rope around the horse's other hind leg with a quick throw, drawing the two hind legs together so he couldn't kick. He hobbled them that way, tying the knot as Calico had taught him so it could be released by a quick tug on the rope. The horse was hobbled so tight that if he tried to move he would fall over. He stood quivering and snorting, the muscles twitching all over his

body, as Eddie lifted the heavy saddle on. He cinched it up and then made a war bridle from his lead rope. Then he untied the rope on the stallion's neck. Still the hobble kept him from moving.

"Now, Apples, when I get on you, you'll remember me well enough. You won't be scared at all. I'll bet you won't even buck."

The horse grew rigid as stone when Eddie put his toe to the stirrup. There was a wild, savage look to his eyes that scared the boy, but he swung up anyway. The stallion remained dead still, all his muscles standing out taut. Eddie frowned, wondering how Apples could forget him so soon. Had Sheriff Kinsale frightened the horse that much? He reached down to give the rope a tug that would release the hobble.

As soon as the hind feet were released the Appaloosa gave a savage scream and exploded. Eddie was taken by surprise. He barely managed to keep from flying off. The horse hit the ground with all four legs like ramrods. Eddie tried to take the grinding shock with a slack body, as Calico had taught him.

But it still seemed to shatter the world right inside his head. He felt the horse switch ends and blindly clawed for the saddle horn. The animal started pioneering. He jerked Eddie's body back and forth in the saddle, slamming him against the seat one minute and tearing him out of leather the next. Then the boy felt the stallion rear up on his hind legs. He thought the animal would stop and come down. But he didn't. Higher and higher he rose. This was the trick of the killer horse, to fall back on his rider and crush him. Eddie knew if he didn't tumble off now, he would be caught beneath a thousand pounds of bone and muscle.

With a wild shout, he kicked free of the stirrups and

rolled off. He tried to hit slack as a sack of oats, the way Calico had told him to do. It did seem to take some of the shock out. He rolled over, expecting to see the horse running away.

But the Appaloosa was coming back at him. Lying on one elbow, he saw the stallion wheeling and charging down on him, eyes blazing with murder. Eddie tried to get up, shouting:

"No, Apples! You aren't that kind of a horse—"

The animal didn't halt. Eddie was still on one knee when the stallion reared above him in all his savagery, eyes glistening red with hate, deadly hoofs flashing. There was a blinding explosion of pain, a shattering blow against the boy's left arm. Eddie heard himself cry out in agony.

"No, Apples!" he shouted at the stallion again. "You aren't that kind of a horse. You can't be—"

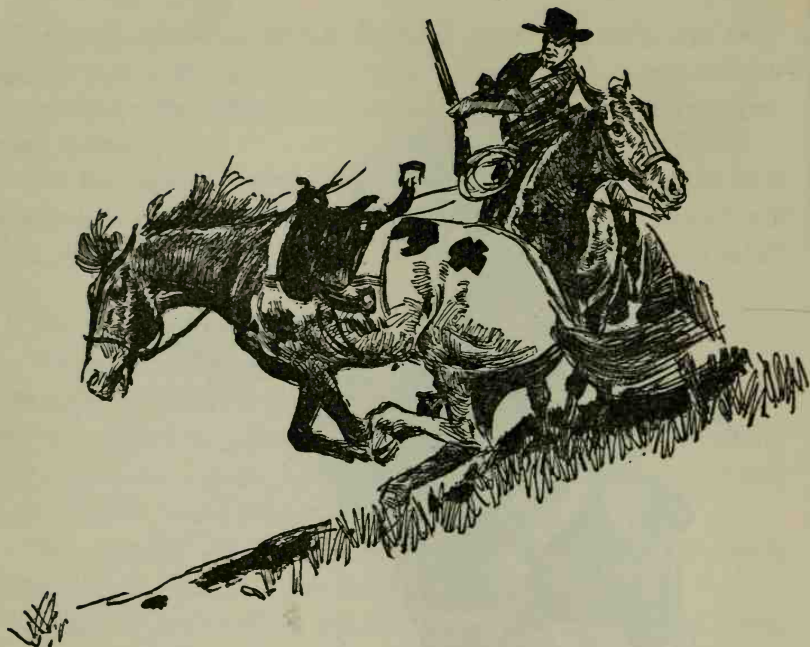
Dimly he realized he was on the ground and rolled over, sobbing with the pain in his arm. The animal had wheeled and was starting back. The ears lay flat. The eyes held a cold stony glare, far more terrifying than the blazing hatred of a moment before. Eddie's heart stopped beating as the Appaloosa reared above him again. This time he couldn't defend himself, he knew.

At that instant a rider flashed into his vision, charging out of the gorge and knocking the stallion aside. Vaguely, Eddie saw that it was Calico on his mule. The Appaloosa staggered back, then wheeled, and lunged in at the mule. Billygoat dodged the deadly charge, whirling as the horse wheeled again, rearing up, bugling wildly. Calico was tugging his Winchester free as he reined the mule around.

"No!" Eddie gasped. "Don't shoot him—"

"It's the only thing that'll stop him, Jigger," Calico shouted. "He's crazy—"





The horse charged again before Calico could cock his gun. Billygoat waited until the last minute, then dodged aside, braying raucously. The stallion ran by. Calico cocked the Winchester and fired wildly. It was a snap shot, and missed the horse.

But Eddie saw the sudden change in the Appaloosa. The horse wheeled around. The rage and hatred in his little eyes were turned to utter fear. With a shrill whinny, he whirled and ran up the canyon. Eddie sank back, weak and dizzy with pain.

Calico stopped Billygoat and jumped off, running to his son. "It was all my fault, Jigger," he said. "I should've come up sooner. I kept holding back, thinking we could get him quiet-like by moving in slow. It looks like your left arm's broke. You hurt anywhere else?"

Eddie gritted his teeth. "All over. But I guess my arm's the only place that's broken."

Calico pulled out his bandanna, wadded it up and shoved it into his son's mouth. "Bite down on that. I'm going to splint that arm. Then we'll take you back to Jackson." He squatted back on his hunkers a moment and looked up the canyon, taking a deep, shaken breath. "I guess this ends it, doesn't it, Jigger?"

Eddie felt a sharp fear stab at him. "What do you mean?"

"I hate to say it, Eddie, but we can't have that horse. Haskins and the Indian were right. No animal would act that way unless he was a man-killer."

Chapter 6

IT TOOK CALICO AND EDDIE three days to get back to Jackson. It was a nightmare for the boy, with his arm hurting him so much. A couple of times he passed out and his father had to hold him on the horse as they rode. On the afternoon of the third day, when they reached town, Eddie was so sick he could hardly see the row of false-fronted buildings that lined the main street. He dimly heard the voices of men, the stamp of cowponies at hitchracks, the creak of a big hay wagon passing them. Then they came to Doc Purcell's office, in the second story of the bank. Calico stepped down and tied their mounts. When he lifted up his arms to help his son down, everything went black again for the boy, and he fell against his father.

When Eddie came to again, he was lying on a table. His arm was throbbing like fury. He saw that there was a new

splint on it, instead of Calico's old bandanna tied around a couple of willow sticks. The doc must have reset it, then, and put all those white bandages on. The boy looked up to see a round red face bending over him, full of concern. It was Doc Purcell, a little on the sawed-off side, so dignified in his frocktail coat that he reminded Eddie of a bantam rooster all puffed up with his own importance. But Calico had said that this was just to hide a heart as big as a wagon wheel.

"He has come to," Doc Purcell announced.

Calico came toward the table and bent over his son. His face looked sort of drawn and pale. "Better, Jigger?" he asked.

"He'll be all right," Dr. Purcell said. "Most of his pain came from the jolting on that long ride. I suggest you put him to bed immediately, Calico."

At that moment the door opened and somebody came in—a somebody with yellow hair and a pretty flushed face. The schoolmarm, feeding off her range again! Eddie felt sick all over. Why couldn't she leave them alone, anyhow?

"I saw you come into town through the schoolhouse window," she said in a breathless voice. "What's the matter with Eddie?"

Calico gulped. He took off his hat and whistled on it with his breath. Then he explained haltingly what had happened, all the time working his hat around between his hands. When he had finished, June Weatherby burst out indignantly, her blue eyes snapping:

"I told you that was no life for the boy. See what it has brought him now?"

"It wasn't his fault," Eddie blurted, gritting his teeth against the pain. "I ran away from the sheriff myself."

"I don't care," June declared, her pretty pink face puck-

ered with anxiety. "Calico had no right to take a boy your age out into the wilderness after those savage beasts."

Calico asked wryly, "Ma'am, what do you know about boys? He's ten times more of a man than any town boy his age."

June flushed. "Are you a man when you smell like a goat and can't write your own name?" she demanded scornfully.

Calico lowered his head and started to draw designs on the floor with the toe of his boot. "Meaning me?" he asked, in an abashed way.

Dr. Purcell chuckled. "I guess she put you in your place, Calico."

"It doesn't matter," June said. "The main thing is we've got Eddie here now, and he can't run away in that shape. If he must stay in bed, we might as well move him to the Hembre house. They were ready to take him when he ran off into the hills the last time."

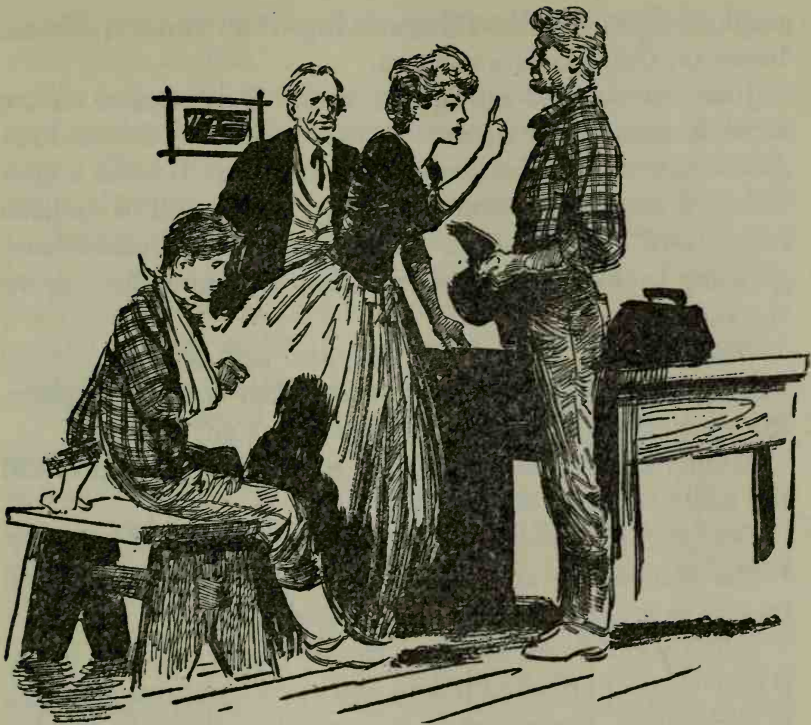
"I'm not going," Eddie stated flatly.

Calico turned and leaned over his son.

"Maybe she's right, Jigger," he said. "Maybe the time's come for you to have a little better life than I can give you. Clean clothes, good home-cooked meals—all that kind of thing." He tried to grin, and patted Eddie's leg. "You aren't filling out very good on that bacon and beans we eat out at the shack."

Calico straightened and looked at June. Eddie noticed that the two didn't seem to be as mad at each other as they ought. There was a funny flushed look to her face and her eyes were shining. For a minute, Calico was meeting her eyes more squarely than he ever had before. Then suddenly he dropped his gaze and began working his hat between his hands again.

"I got to ramble now, Eddie," he said. His voice sounded strange and husky. "You understand how it is. I couldn't



take you back to the shack in that shape. A man like me isn't any good at nursing. Needs a woman's touch. I'll come down to see you as often as I can. You understand, don't you?"

He grasped his son's shoulder, but Eddie pulled away, turning his head aside. He couldn't help but feel that his father was deserting him. He didn't want to stay here. They were all strangers to him. It would be like a prison after the wild, free life he had lived. He heard Calico leave and dropped his head sickly.

Too weak to resist, Eddie let June and the doctor help him out to the buggy standing in front of the office. In heart-broken silence he rode along, propped up between them,

until they came to the Hembre's big white two-story frame house on the outskirts of town.

June got out and ran up the walk. She knocked on the front door and after a minute a man opened it. It was Ezra Hembre, owner of the livery stable in town. He was a middle-aged man, heavy-boned and big, with a ruff of grizzled hair above a ruddy face. The two talked in undertones, glancing back at the buggy, then they both came back down the walk.

"Hello, there, Eddie," Mr. Hembre said heartily. "Glad you decided to come. We sure need a boy around the place. Ma's got Polly Jane to help her but I ain't got nobody."

Eddie didn't know what to say, so he just ducked his head the way his father did and kept quiet.

Doc Purcell climbed out and went around the buggy. Eddie glanced up and saw them all looking at him. "Can you make it alone, Eddie?" June asked anxiously.

Eddie nodded and managed to step down. His legs felt as if they weren't attached to him and everything was swinging in a big circle. But somehow he made it up the walk, leaning on Ezra Hembre's brawny arm.

A woman opened the front door of the big white house. She was plump and motherly. Her bare arms were powdered with flour up to her elbows and the scent of cinnamon and cloves and cooking apples floated out to meet them. Ezra Hembre helped Eddie forward.

"Here's Eddie, Ma, come to live with us," he said. "He got stomped by a wild stallion and needs to rest up a bit. When he gets well, he's going to help us around the place and show Polly Jane more about horses."

Eddie took off his old beat-up sombrero as Ma Hembre smiled at him. Then she gathered him into her arms. "We've wanted you a long time, Eddie," she said with a warm smile.

"You'll have your own room and tomorrow we'll buy you some other clothes."

For a moment it was so much like it had been with his own mother that Eddie forgot how much he wanted to escape. Then Pa Hembre helped him climb up the stairs, while Ma went ahead to turn down the bed. They took him to the big room at the end of the hall and sat him on the bed. While Pa Hembre got one of his nightshirts for Eddie, June and the doctor told him good-bye.

"You're going to be all right here," the schoolmarm said. "And if there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

He tried to scowl at her, but they had all been so nice to him he couldn't do that. He just thanked her with a gulp and a nod of his head. When they were gone, Hembre came back in and helped Eddie get out of his clothes and into the nightshirt. After Eddie was under the covers, the man grinned down at him.

"Ma's gone down to fix you some soup now. We'll send Polly Jane up with it. You must have seen her once in a while when you was in town with Calico. She's only a year younger than you, Eddie. She can ride as good as a cow-puncher already, but she'd sure love to talk with a kid that's topped wild broncs."

As Hembre went out, Eddie groaned to himself. A girl was coming—and him like this! A moment later he heard quick steps on the stairs and the door opened. Eddie slid down under the covers, a hot blush mounting his thin face.

"Hello, Eddie. I guess you don't remember me. I'm Polly Jane."

He looked around to see a girl standing beside the bed holding a tray with a bowl of steaming soup on it. She was willow-slim, her face a deep tan and her curly brown hair was streaked yellow by the sun. She was wearing a plaid shirt and levis tucked into small scuffed boots.

Eddie turned his head away. The smell of the soup made his mouth water but he wasn't having any while that darned girl was here. He waited silently while she set the bowl on the small table beside the bed.

"Roll out, Eddie, roll out while it's hot," Polly Jane said, rattling the spoon against the tin tray like a dinner gong.

"No, thanks," Eddie muttered glumly. "Don't want any."

When she just stood there, he darted a furtive look at her from the corner of his eye. She was shoving her hair back with an uncertain gesture and there was a worried expression on her face. It made him feel kind of rude. Blushing, he sat up in bed. "Well, I might have a little," he said gruffly, to hide his embarrassment. "Sure smells good."

Smiling, she put the tray down on the bed in front of him. "I really waited to hear about how you broke your arm," she said in a breathless voice. "Pa says you were breaking a wild stallion. Aren't you sort of young for that, Eddie?"

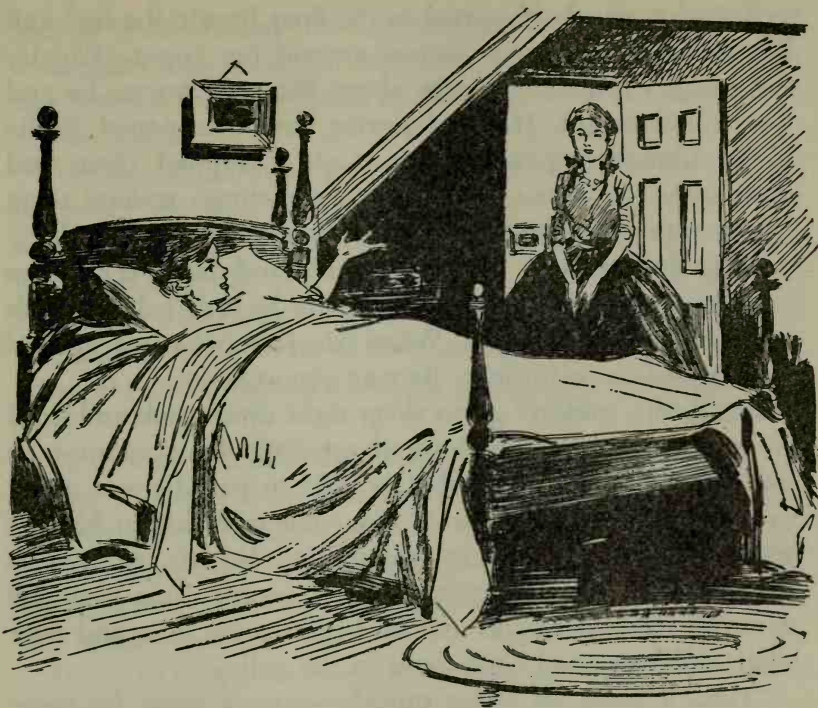
"Naw," he said. "I've been busting horses ever since I can remember."

"But not this kind," she insisted. "Pa says you must have the makings of a real top hand to stay on him as long as you did."

"He wasn't so bad," Eddie said. "It took me a little time to get my wood on him but once I hit the kack and got my toes in the oxbows, I stuck tight as a cocklebur. If he hadn't started windmilling, I never would have sunned my moccasins."

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" Polly Jane laughed. "I thought I knew cow-talk but that comes from too far out on the range for me. What's wood and what's a kack?"

He grinned self-consciously. "Wood and kack's the same thing—a saddle."



"And oxbows are stirrups," she said. "But what's wind-milling?"

"That's when a horse swaps ends completely, right up in the air. And you sure know what sunning your moccasins is."

Her chuckle was like the gurgle of a little creek. "I guess that must be falling off."

When he nodded, Polly Jane asked him more about Apples and before he knew it he was telling her all he knew about the horse. How for several years Calico had been seeing the Appaloosa in the Wind Rivers. How at last they'd been able to trap him. How strangely he'd acted, so gentle and willing the first time they'd caught him, so wild and savage the second.

Round-eyed, she dropped to the floor beside the bed and listened with her arms clasped around her knees. Eagerly she begged for other stories about the wild horses he and Calico had caught. Hardly knowing how it happened, Eddie found himself explaining how Calico trapped them and sometimes sold them to the army, sometimes trained them for cowhorses, selling them to outlying ranches for thirty or forty dollars each. She sat so quiet and drank it all in so admiringly that Eddie found suddenly he didn't dislike girls as much as he'd thought. When Ma Hembre came up and said he had to go to sleep, he was almost sorry.

But Eddie couldn't go to sleep right away, sick and tired as he was. He kept thinking about Polly Jane, wanting to like her, but determined that no filly in pigtails was going to make a town sissy out of him. He told this to himself again and again, scowling ferociously. No, sir, as soon as he was able, he was going to run away. This took his thoughts back to Apples and he began going over and over what had happened back there in the valley.

"There's gotta be some mistake—there's gotta be some mistake," he kept muttering, unable to believe that the beautiful horse was really a killer. "I must've done something wrong. I can't understand it."

An early morning sun slanted through the window when Eddie woke up. For a moment he lay there, relishing the comfortable bed. He'd never known one could be so soft. It was like sleeping on a cloud. Then he shook his head angrily. He couldn't let them break his resolve. Maybe the bunks up at Calico's were a little harder, but at least you didn't have to be afraid to touch them for fear you'd get them dirty. Then the door opened and Polly Jane came in with a bowl of hot mush and a mug of milk on a tray. She had a blue polka-dot dress on this morning and she'd tied red ribbons on her pigtails. He remembered to scowl.

Maybe she'd tricked him into talking to her last night but it wouldn't happen again. She didn't seem to notice, though. She just put the tray down on the table and sat on the foot of the bed.

"We get all kinds of stories about your father down here in town," she said. "Does he really get drunk every night and go around chasing the bears?" Eddie frowned at her, biting his lip to keep from answering. How could they get such crazy ideas about Calico? But she went right on. "Did he really break a bottle of corn whiskey on that man's head when the man wouldn't let him play the piano in his bare feet?"

That was too much. Eddie couldn't keep quiet any longer. "It isn't true!" he explained indignantly. "I never saw my father drunk. Those are just crazy stories they cook up about anybody that's different. Just 'cause he lives out there alone and maybe gets tired of wearing his boots once in a while—"

She gave that little gurgling chuckle again. "He does have a mule called Billygoat, doesn't he?"

"Well," he said, "I guess so."

"Why is the mule named that? Does he have horns and a beard?"

"No," Eddie answered defensively. "He just eats everything he can get his teeth into. He likes tobacco most of all. Once he almost made an Indian massacre us by stealing the fellow's tobacco. My father had to give the Indian his granddaddy's watch to quiet him down."

This made her laugh outright and he couldn't help laughing, too. Looking back, it really was funny, though at the time Calico'd been just about ready to shoot Billygoat for his greediness. Quickly Polly Jane asked Eddie to tell her more stories about Billygoat. Before he remembered that he wasn't going to talk to her, he found himself telling her more about the mule. They were both still laughing when

she told him to eat his mush before it got cold. He'd finished the whole bowl before he realized how she'd tricked him into it. But then he couldn't be mad at her because things looked different to a man on a full stomach. He was really sorry when she got up and said, "I'd like to stay and hear some more about Billygoat but I've got to start to school."

He watched her through the window as she went out the front door and joined a big curly-haired, loudmouthed boy, who stuck out his chest like a pouter pigeon and showed off for her by walking along the fence. Eddie downed a twinge of jealousy. He tried to tell himself he didn't care. But he couldn't help wondering who the boy was.

Eddie was surprised how fast the next few days passed. Polly Jane brought up his meals and read to him in the afternoon—about places like India and China and a country named Arabia where the Arabian horses came from. He'd never heard of that and got her to read to him about it again and again. Sometimes for hours on end he'd forget about his father, about running away. Then he'd remember again and feel guilty, vowing that when he was strong enough, he'd escape.

In a few days Eddie was able to get up. He stayed around the house with his arm in a sling, or went down to the livery stable with Ezra Hembre in the morning. The Hembres had given him some new jeans and a plaid shirt to wear. They had tried to make him wear shoes, too, instead of the moccasins Calico had made for him. But he would not go that far, and stubbornly refused to put on the heavy brogans. June Weatherby dropped in every day. They were all so nice that Eddie couldn't stay resentful. He talked with them and he could see that they thought he was resigned to his fate. But down underneath, he was just waiting for the time when he'd be strong enough to leave.

It was several weeks before the doctor took the splint and bandages off, and said that in a couple more days Eddie would be well enough to go to school.

School! It made Eddie sick inside. He'd heard his father talk about it. They made you sit on a wooden seat that flattened you out behind so much you couldn't fork a horse any more. They cramped your fingers around a slate pencil till they got so bent you couldn't hold a rope. Time you got out, you could spell Mississippi and do sums and write a lot of big words but what good would that do you when you went to get a riding job at some ranch?

Eddie just couldn't stay around for that. He knew that if he was going, it had to be tonight. That evening, when the Hembres were all asleep, he got up and dressed in his old clothes. He sneaked downstairs, took half a loaf of bread and a couple of apples, put them in a sack, and went out the door. The chill spring night made him shiver. For a moment all the warmth and kindness of the household rushed over him and he almost wanted to go back. Then he shook his head stubbornly and pulled his hat tight over his eyes like Calico always did when there was a tough job of work to do. Nothing was going to keep him from his father any longer. Nothing!



Chapter 7

ALL THAT NIGHT Eddie trudged along across meadow and foothill land. At dawn he got a hitch in a farmer's wagon that took him to the foot of the Wind Rivers trail. It was ten miles up the trail to his shack. He reached it early in the afternoon, stumbling from exhaustion, his arm aching, his head throbbing like a drum. But Calico wasn't there. Eddie realized that his father must be out running some more wild horses. Weary and discouraged, he threw himself on the bunk and fell asleep. He woke up with the owls hooting and didn't even know what time of night it was. He tried to cook himself some supper but the biscuits wouldn't rise and he burned the bacon. He ate it anyway and went back to sleep.

His aching arm woke him at daybreak and he got up and went outside. Midnight and a couple of other horses were

in the pen. It was hard to saddle up with only one arm but Eddie finally got the rigging aboard. Putting some biscuits and jerked beef into the saddlebags and lashing the blanket roll behind the cantle, he started off in search of Calico. He knew his father would be working one of the horse traps in the Wind Rivers.

Eddie reached the first trap in the afternoon. It was one he had helped Calico build a year ago. But there was no fresh sign around it, and Eddie rode on. Night found him high in the mountains. He hobbled his horse and made camp, eating cold meat and biscuits and drinking icy water from a stream. It was chilly and the fire didn't seem to warm him. A wolf began howling on some distant ridge, and the small rustlings of the night filled the forest. It seemed powerful dark and cold and a fearful loneliness began to fill the boy. For the first time, he realized what a big job he had tackled.

He had been through a lot of this country, but never alone. He began to think of Indians and bears and mountain lions. Then he set his jaw grimly, kicking more wood into the fire. He couldn't return now. He'd rather be scalped by an Indian than have them put him in that school.

Despite his grim resolve, Eddie did not get to sleep for a long time. When he did, he was troubled by bad dreams. He started off at dawn the next morning, forcing himself on.

He found another trap near noon, but it had not been used either. Leaving it, he rode into a country of sharp rock faces that gleamed like ice in the blazing sun. They seemed to glitter at him everywhere he looked and pretty soon his vision began to play tricks on him. He was drenched in perspiration and he got so dizzy he almost fell off. Finally he dismounted, leaning against his horse. His arm throbbed unmercifully and he felt sick all over. He sought shade and tried to eat, but had little appetite.

After a while he forced himself on, swaying in the saddle. He found a shadowed canyon and the coolness made him feel better. But he realized he had lost his way. He knew a moment of panic. Then he clenched his teeth, forcing himself to be calm. He sought a ridge and surveyed the surrounding country until he found a familiar landmark. It guided him to a broad valley in which another of their traps was built. It was almost dusk now, and he hoped and prayed his father would be at this one. But he wasn't.

Eddie spent another miserable night, shivering in the mountain chill, awakened a dozen times by strange sounds that made him lie stiff in the blankets, waiting for a bear to jump him or an Indian to start hollering. But nothing happened.

He ate the last of his food for breakfast, and knew he was done for if he didn't find Calico soon.

In the afternoon Eddie topped a ridge that overlooked another section they often used to trap the horses. It was a deep canyon with many favorite watering places for the wild animals. Eddie rode the ridge, stopping to peer down at each shadowed pool as it appeared below him. He was about to give up when he finally saw the thin smoke of a campfire. Turning down the steep slope, he came into sight of a tall, redheaded figure squatting over the fire. With a whoop, he booted Midnight down through the trees.

Calico turned as Eddie rode out of the timber. For a minute he just sat there, jaw hanging. Then he jumped up and came running. "Jigger!" he yelled.

Eddie kicked Midnight's flanks and rode up to his father. "Howdy," he muttered sheepishly. "Thought you might be hankering for a little company."

"I sure am." Calico helped the boy down and over into the shade. He sounded jubilant and his face wore a broad grin. "Leaving you swiped the silver lining off my cloud,

Jigger. But how in tarnation did you make it through all this rough country, the fix you're in?"

Eddie leaned back against the rock, wiping his hand over his wet forehead. "I dunno," he said shakily, "unless I just wanted to be with you so bad nothing would stop me."

Calico sobered. "I don't know if I can let you stay or not," he said dubiously, dropping down beside the boy. "We've gotten into enough trouble already. The sheriff might really put me in jail this time."

"But, Calico," Eddie pleaded, "you don't know how terrible it was down in town. I got big purple spots all over my face from being inside four walls so long. And there was a terrible little girl at the Hembre house that made me eat mush and soup and all that dude stuff."

It looked like a grin that was tugging at Calico's mouth before he turned away. He got up and walked over to where Billygoat was hobbled, fumbling absently at the mule's mane. Billygoat turned his head, wrinkling his lips back off his teeth, and tried to get the familiar tobacco sack. Calico cuffed him affectionately, shaking his head.

"Sulphur and molasses, Jigger. I should send you back. But I can't. Not when you went through all this just to get to me again."

Eddie settled back against the rock, completely happy at last. They stayed there the rest of that day and the night, to rest the boy, and then started looking for horses the next morning. Before dawn they rode to the ridge and moved farther down, waiting for horses to appear at the water holes Calico had not tainted with his man-smell. His father told Eddie he was after horses the army would buy. Their demands were rigid. They wanted animals of one solid color, under sixteen hands, close-coupled and flat-backed.

Just after sunrise, a band appeared at the water hole. Calico and Eddie flushed them and drove them down the

canyon. They spotted a gray and a couple of bays that would fit the army's requirements. Gradually they cut the other horses away, allowing them to escape over ridges and down side canyons, until only the three they wanted remained ahead. Then they dropped back, allowing the trio to slow down, not pressing them. They drove them easily, guiding them in the direction they wanted by merely appearing on their flanks or at their rear. Soon they reached a broad canyon and turned northward in its bottom timber. Eddie recognized familiar surroundings. There was a trap at the head of the canyon, he knew. They had built it for the Appaloosa over six months ago. It was the one they had been heading Apples for when Haskins had shot at him. Eddie felt a stirring of excitement. Had it been long enough since that time? This was favorite country for the Appaloosa. Was there any chance that he would have forgotten the frightening experience by now, would have drifted back to his watering places?

As Eddie was wondering, Calico pulled up and stepped off his mule, hunkering down. Eddie saw fresh prints in the dirt, too many to be made by the three horses they were driving. Calico looked up suddenly, as if thinking the same thing that was in his son's mind. He saw the strained, hopeful expression on the boy's face, and shook his head.

"Don't get your hopes up, Jigger. I doubt if the Appaloosa would come back so soon. Even if he did, it wouldn't do us any good. I told you that. We can't use a killer."

Eddie's face grew somber as Calico mounted again. It seemed to rob him of all the pleasure of being back with his father. He followed him gloomily on up the canyon. They saw the three horses top a low spur ridge ahead and hurried after them. Calico topped the ridge ahead of Eddie. The boy saw him pull Billygoat in sharply, reaching for his

binoculars. He was staring through them at something in the valley beyond when Eddie reached him. Eddie saw that the three horses they were following had stopped. Beyond them, milling suspiciously about the trap which surrounded the water hole, was a new band of horses. Eddie didn't need the binoculars to recognize the leader, even at this distance. It was a big horse, with a blue chest and a white rump, dabbled with vivid red spots. It was Apples!

Calico sent one dark look at Eddie, then kicked Billygoat into a gallop down the slope. He quartered between the three horses they had been following, cutting them off from the other band. Eddie dropped the rope of the pack horses he had been leading and raced after Calico. He saw that his father was driving the three horses away from the trap.

"Get up at their head," Calico called. "I'm not letting them get mixed in with that other bunch. We're liable to lose them if that devil gets hold of them."

"Look," Eddie called, "we could drive them all in the trap. They're right up in the wings—"

"Don't be crazy!" Calico shouted. "You know how smart that Appaloosa is. He'd get away and take these horses with him."

"Please, let's give Apples one more chance. Maybe something was wrong before. Maybe there was a burr under his saddle or something—"

Calico reined in close, shouting angrily. "He's a killer, Eddie. I've seen 'em before. That blank crazy look in their eyes, the way they move like a tiger. There isn't any use trying to trap him. Now you do as I say. I'm not losing these horses, too."

The three animals had been driven up the slope into timber. They were scrambling for a ridge, squealing and snorting, and Calico pushed Billygoat after them. Eddie lagged behind, looking down into the valley at Apples and

his band. They were milling nervously around the pen. Apples had trotted free, staring up at the slope. Eddie stopped completely, gripped by the wild beauty of the animal.

The sound of Calico chasing the other horses faded up the slope and died completely. Eddie was in the timber, and invisible to the Appaloosa now. The wind blew against his face, and he realized it would not have carried his scent to the horses. Perhaps he had been too far away for the Appaloosa to see him, also. The horse would think it was merely some other animal, then.

That must have been the case, for Eddie saw the band quieting down, saw the Appaloosa at last turn back, sniffing cautiously at the trap again. The fence extended out into wings from the gate, their ends wide apart, gradually narrowing down until they reached the gate. This formed a funnel that would head the horses right through the gate, once they were between the wings. Eddie felt a tense excitement fill him as he saw the horses drifting nearer and nearer to the gate. He looked up in the direction in which Calico had gone. He had passed over the ridge now. And Eddie knew that for once in his life he was going to disobey his father.

Chapter 8

APPLES WAS STILL BOTHERED and suspicious. He had not been able to identify the noise on the slope down the canyon. His eyes were not as keen as his scent, and he had been able to make out only the blurred motion of some animals among the trees. He kept sniffing the wind, but could smell nothing dangerous.

The rest of his band was pressing forward. They had run most of the day without coming across a stream and were frantic with thirst. But Apples kept nipping at their heels, shouldering them back. Something was bothering him and he was unwilling to let them go to water yet.

They had often seen fallen trees in the forest, and it was what the wings of the trap looked like to them. But Apples had known the corrals and fences of men, and the fences of the trap bore a suspicious resemblance to these.

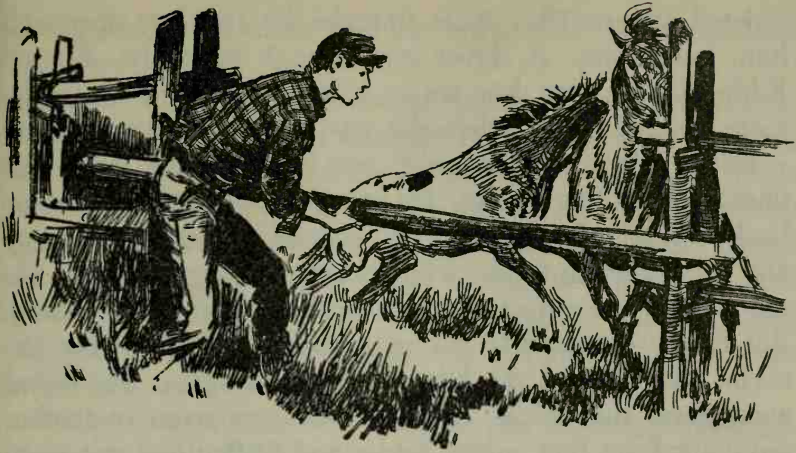
Yet he could not be sure. There was no man-smell on the poles, only the scent of dead wood and decay.

The bay mare rubbed against him affectionately, telling him with her snorts and whinnies how wonderful it was to have him back again with the band. After his escape from Calico's cabin, he had searched all their favorite watering places in the Wind Rivers. Finally he had found his band, running under the leadership of a younger stallion. It had not been much of a battle for Apples to regain his leadership, as the other horse was young and inexperienced.

The horses of his band were now snorting and fiddling all about him, striving to get by and reach the water. As there was no more noise from the canyon, he allowed them to pass. They bunched up in the narrow opening and then spread out beyond, running knee-deep into the water. He waited until they had all drunk, acting as lookout. He circled the strangely fallen logs that looked so much like the man-made corrals, sniffing the air, watching the dark wall of timber. The band began drifting back out, water dripping from their muzzles, and sought the sweet graze near by. When they were all finished, Apples went in for his drink, the bay mare following. He lowered his head to the cool water and sucked it in greedily. Then he heard a snorting and whinnying run through the band, and raised his head.

They had begun to run before the sudden appearance of a horseman who had ridden out from the trees. Apples rushed for the narrow opening in the fence. But the trees stood near the trap and the rider reached the opening first.

Apples saw that it was a human, now, and wheeled around, galloping down the fence, seeking another way out. But there was no other way. He wheeled back, snorting defiance. The human had dismounted and dropped a log across the opening, cutting the stallion off from all escape.



He stood with his rump against the fence, quivering and snorting. The bay mare shouldered against him, whinnying in fright.

Then Apples saw that it was the black-haired boy, coming toward him. He was surprised that he felt none of the fright, the hatred, the impulse to escape that usually came with the presence of men. He could remember no pain with this youth—only kindness, a soft friendly voice and hands filled with gentleness. He heard the boy speak.

“Now, Apples, you know me. It’s Eddie. You aren’t going to act the way you did last time. Something was wrong then. You were sick or something. You aren’t a killer. My father must be mistaken. Your eyes aren’t cold and crazy. They look as soft and drippy as his eyes do when he looks at that schoolmarm. You don’t even seem jumpy as you did that time.”

The habit of escape surged up once more and made Apples run down the fence. But he stopped again, looking back at the boy. Eddie had turned and was coming toward him, that soothing voice going on and on. Somehow it

quieted the stallion. This time he let the boy approach him, touch him. A shiver ran through his body. But all Eddie did was pat him softly, grinning at him. Even the mare quieted down, when she saw no harm came to them.

Eddie left them, stooping out between the bars, and unsaddled his black horse. He brought the saddle and a rope back in. Again Apples was torn between his desire for escape and his attraction to this wild and strangely gentle boy. He ran around the corral a couple of times, the mare trailing. But finally he came to a stop again, snorting, pawing the earth. He allowed the boy to approach again. He sidled away from the saddle. But he could not even remember any pain from that, when Eddie and Calico had put it on before. And the boy was still talking, gently, softly. He swung the saddle up. Apples snorted, sidled away. But the fence trapped him, and the saddle didn't seem so heavy anyway.

He allowed Eddie to cinch it up, and put the hackamore on his snout. When the boy mounted, Apples started to cat-back around the corral. But he didn't start really bucking. There seemed no cause for that. Nothing hurt him. The boy's weight felt familiar now. At last he stopped and stood still, snorting disdainfully to show that he was merely putting up with it, he could get rid of all this if he really wanted to. Eddie drew in a deep breath, patting his neck.

"Good boy, good boy."

Apples liked the warmth of the boy's hand on his neck, liked to hear the voice speaking to him. He saw the mare cowering in a corner of the corral, staring in a puzzled way at him. He snorted and whinnied, trying to tell her it really wasn't so bad at all. Then he saw the redheaded man riding down out of the timber and shouting at the boy.

"Get off that horse, Jigger. Have we got to ride that trail all over again?"

"Apples isn't a killer," the boy answered. "He remembers me. Just watch."

Apples felt the hackamore laid against his neck, and turned aside obediently to the familiar signal. Then its pressure changed and he turned the other way. The boy's heels touched his flanks and he broke into a trot. Then the boy pulled in the rope and there was pressure against the tender spot beneath Apples' jaw. The horse knew it would hurt if the boy pulled any harder, and stopped. The man had reached the fence, and sat his ugly old mule in an amazed way, shoving his hat back on his head.

"Sulphur and molasses! I never saw anything like that. I was all ready to clip your horns, thinking they'd got too much spread. But it looks like I was wrong."

"I told you," Eddie said, grinning broadly. "Apples isn't a killer. He was just sick that day or something. We can take him home with us, can't we?"

Calico cinched at his pants. "We'll try it. But I'll be worried as a frog waiting for rain in Arizona till we're sure you're right."

Chapter 9

CALICO ROPED THE BAY MARE and put her on a lead line with Midnight and the pack horses. He led all these horses, leaving Eddie free to ride Apples back. The boy's injured arm ached from the roping and saddling he'd done with his other arm. But he was so happy and proud he hardly felt it. He knew he'd give a lot more than that to be on the Appaloosa.

They started back to Calico's shack, crossing the meadow and seeking a trail that led them through balsam and spruce that shone like silver against the dense green background of lodgepole pines. Ahead of them the mountains were a gigantic panorama of tumbled slopes and shadowy gorges. They climbed a rock littered incline. Calico hauled Billy-goat out of a patch of lupine he wanted to stop and graze in. Eddie had been so excited at getting Apples back that he'd forgotten the three army horses until now. He asked his

father about them. Calico said he'd let them escape so he could come back and see what had happened to Eddie. The boy was genuinely sorry. But Calico said that if it was true about Apples, he was worth a dozen army horses.

Apples was as bridle-wise as Billygoat, and Eddie took the lead, guiding the horse proudly across a windswept ridge and down into a thick stand of tamarack. But the bay mare was balky, jerking on the rope and spooking at the rustle of a woodchuck in the brush. Billygoat turned disgustedly back toward her, peeling his lips comically off his long yellow teeth and emitting a raucous heehaw.

Then, suddenly, Calico pulled the mule to a halt. He was looking up through a stand of cinnamon-barked trees, where a jay scolded somewhere high in the branches. The sun slanted down through the timber and painted the needle-matted ground with broad yellow stripes. Into one of these stripes rode Haskins, on a huge dappled mare. He wore a plaid wool shirt and blue jeans, filmed with the dust of a long ride. There was a black beard stubble three or four days old matting his jowls. His red-rimmed eyes looked as if he had lost a lot of sleep. They danced with anger when they settled on Apples. He had a rifle across the horn of his saddle. He kept it pointed at the Appaloosa as he kicked the gray into a heavy trot down the slope.

"Git off that devil, Kid. I'm going to blow his brisket out right now."

With a touch of his reins, Calico spun Billygoat in between Apples and the oncoming man. "You want to remember the last time you tried to use that rifle, Haskins."

The man hauled his horse down five feet from Calico. His bushy brows collided over his hard black eyes. His heavy jowls turned red as turkey wattles beneath their bristly beard stubble.

"Look here, Calico," he said, "two days ago that Appaloosa stole two of my best mares right out of my corral.

He gnawed the rawhide lashings off the corral poles and pushed them down so the mares could get out—”

“No horse is that smart,” Calico said.

“This horse is. It scares me sometimes, how smart he is. And he wasn’t satisfied with that. He enticed one of my prime stallions into an upper meadow and killed him. It’s the last time that devil gets away with it. I’ve been tracking him for two days and two nights and I’m going to kill him.”

Calico looked at the ground. “You aren’t following tracks now.”

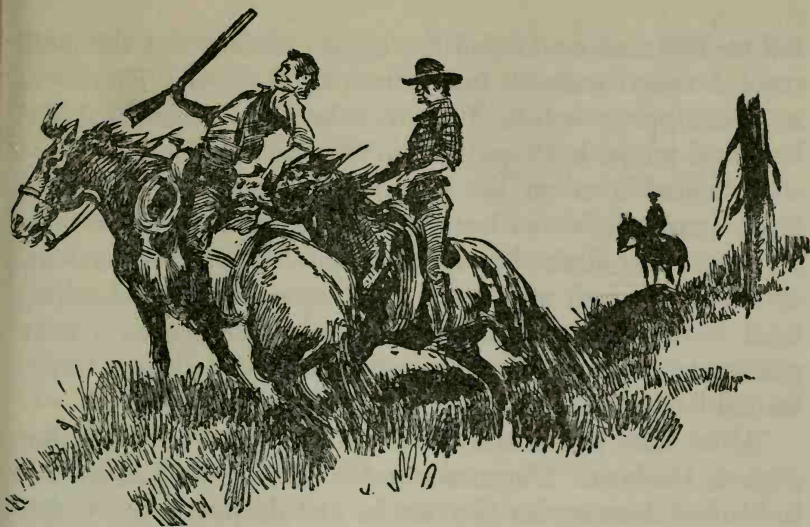
“I lost them in a creek about an hour ago. But he was heading due east with them two mares and I kept going till I topped a ridge and saw you.”

“He had a whole band when we caught him.”

“Then he must have picked them up over here,” Haskins said. “I know it was him. Three nights ago I saw him in my upper pastures and shot at him. Only thing in the world he’s afraid of is a gun. I missed him, but I thought I’d chased him away. Next morning I found my best stud dead up on that same hill.” Haskins tried to wheel around Calico, jerking the gun toward Eddie. “If you don’t get off him, Kid, I’ll shoot him out from under you.”

Calico reined Billygoat aside until the mule bumped into Haskins’ horse, blocking the man off. “Your story doesn’t hang together any more than it did last time,” Calico said. “If he had wings, that Appaloosa couldn’t of gotten over here from your ranch that fast.”

Haskins jerked angrily away as Billygoat took a nip at his hip. “It had to be the same horse, Calico. There ain’t another Appaloosa in these mountains. Even if there was, you know there wouldn’t be two of ’em marked just alike. The spots was exactly the same. That chest color slanted back over his barrel the same. His tail just touched his hocks that way. It’s this horse and I’m goin’ to—” He broke



off, slapping at Billygoat's snout as the mule sought to nuzzle his hip again. "What ails that animal?" he demanded angrily.

"Nothing tobacco won't fix." Calico grinned.

"What's tobacco got to do with it? You're too good a horseman to protect a killer, Calico. I heard what he did to the boy the last time. You're a fool to let the kid get on that horse."

"It's the way Eddie wants it," Calico said. "You promised us you'd give us a chance to catch the Appaloosa. We've got him now and you can't go back on your word."

Haskins was purple with rage. "I didn't say I'd sit around and let him kill my best studs while you was chasing him. Get out of my way."

He tried to swing around Calico once more, jerking up the rifle. For an instant he got its muzzle past Calico, pointed at Apples. Eddie's whole body went rigid in anticipation of the deafening shot. But Haskins had made the mistake of putting his hip within range of Billygoat again.

Before the man could pull the trigger, Eddie saw the mule reach forward with his long snout, teeth bared. There was a great ripping sound. Haskins was jerked backward and his horse jumped. It spilled him from the saddle.

He rolled over on the ground, clapping a hand to his hip. A great hole had been torn from the seat of his pants and the white flesh showed through. Then Eddie saw the ends of the cloth and a tobacco tag on a string hanging from either side of Billygoat's mouth. There was a complacent triumph on his ugly face as he chewed it up. Calico leaned back in the saddle and roared with laughter.

"After this, you better keep your tobacco in your shirt pocket, Haskins." The man snarled in rage and scrambled to his feet, lunging for the rifle he had dropped. But Calico thumped his heels against Billygoat's flanks, jumping the mule to the gun ahead of the other man. Haskins stopped, still holding his hip, staring at Billygoat dubiously. Chuckling, Calico said, "You better give up now, Haskins. I seen a lot of tough gents in my time, but I never did hear of one coming to a shoot-out with no seat to his pants."

Haskins began to tremble with rage. But Billygoat was standing over the rifle, long yellow teeth bared in his comical gesture, as if he'd just love to take another bite at the man. Finally, Haskins wheeled and hiked over to where his spooked horse had run. He mounted with an angry grunt and turned to face Calico.

"You win this time. But mark my word, one day I'll kill that mule as well as that Appaloosa."

After their meeting with Haskins, it was a two-days' ride before Calico and Eddie reached their cabin. They turned Apples and the bay into the pen with the other horses and went in to have supper. They were both dog-tired. Calico fixed them something to eat, and over the meal began

puzzling again about Apples. He just couldn't believe the horse could make it from Haskins' ranch in such a short time. Haskins had started two nights before he had seen Eddie and Calico, yet they had seen signs of the horse all that one day before they met the man. That left the stallion only one day to travel the whole distance. Such a trip would have been impossible. Even if, by some stretch of the imagination, the horse had made it, he would have shown signs of such a grueling run. His hoofs would have been sore, his body rimed with dried lather, his eyes feverish. Apples had showed none of that. He had been fat and prime and rested when they first came upon him.

Finally, Calico shook his head, unable to solve the mystery, and started talking about what they would do with the animal. If he displayed no more signs of viciousness, they could gentle him and polish him and turn him into a regular show horse that would bring maybe five hundred dollars from the right buyer.

Eddie felt his heart sink. He realized he had been mistaken in thinking of the horse in terms of his own animal. Yet he couldn't help it. He had kept his faith in Apples when Calico had given up, had captured him, had ridden him all the way back. The spirit and beauty of the Appaloosa had gotten under his skin. But it was more than that. Somehow he felt they belonged together. The very way the stallion acted toward him showed that. He had never felt such a deep kinship toward Midnight, or any other horse. He knew he wanted the Appaloosa more than anything else in life.

But he knew, too, how badly Calico needed the money. Eddie had given his father a bad year, causing him so much trouble with running from the sheriff and the broken arm and everything else, that Calico hadn't had much time to run his mustangs. Now he'd even given up those three army

horses to go back and see what had happened to Eddie. The money from Apples was the only thing that would tide him over the winter.

It was a bitter sacrifice for Eddie to make. But he kept his mouth shut as Calico went on with his glowing plans for training the horse. They washed the tin plates and cups and rolled into their blankets. As tired as he was, Eddie could not go right to sleep. His mind was too filled with the defeat of losing Apples again, after going through so much to get him.

It was some time in the middle of the night that Eddie came awake. He lay there a moment, wondering if he had dreamed of the sound. Then he saw Calico climb out, slip into his pants and boots, and shuffle to the door. Puzzled, he put on his own pants, his worn moccasins, and followed his father.

A cold wind blew down off the snow-capped mountains as they stepped softly out the door of the shack. Eddie shivered and hugged himself. Then he forgot the cold and stood there staring. Apples had gotten out! He was running up and down the outside of the fence, snorting and prancing, eyes rolling wild and crazy in the white moonlight. The mare was running excitedly up and down the fence on the inside. Behind her the other horses were snorting and running and bunching up in the shadows beneath the shed roof.

"We'll have to get Apples back in before he runs off," Calico muttered. "You sneak around and open the gate, Eddie. I'll try and drive Apples through it."

Eddie nodded. Making the most of the cover offered by the shack and the sheds, he crept toward the corral. He knew the slightest of noises might startle Apples away. The other horses were stirring nervously in the deep shadows

beneath the shed and trotting up and down the far fence. But the only ones he could see clearly were the bay mare, on the inside of the fence nearest him, and the Appaloosa, running up and down on the outside.

He reached the corner of the corral and waited until they had run up to the far side. Then he darted around to the gate. It was still fastened. How had the Appaloosa gotten out? He couldn't understand it.

But the bay and the stallion were turning and would see him in the next instant. He had to get the gate open so his father could drive the Appaloosa back in. He unfastened it, started to pull it aside. Calico had circled through the trees, and appeared from their shadowy cover, running toward the upper end of the corral. This startled the Appaloosa. He wheeled and ran blindly toward Eddie. The boy jerked the gate wide and then ran out to the side. It blocked the stallion from veering away from the corral. His only escape from the two humans was now through the gate.

He halted, wheeling around. But Calico was on his tail, waving his arms and calling. It made the stallion turn back. At the same moment there was a loud whinny from within the corral. One of the horses milling around on the far side charged for the opening. Before Eddie could reach the gate and get it closed, the animal plunged through. He stared blankly at the horse. It was an Appaloosa, too!

Eddie stopped in his tracks. For a moment the two Appaloosas were very close together, on the outside of the pen. He couldn't tell them apart. The bright moonlight showed their markings to be exactly alike. The shape of the chest color, the placing of spots on the white rump, the length and thickness of the mane and tail—all of these were identical.

"Pop!" Eddie cried blankly. "Which one is Apples?"

Calico had stopped, too, in complete surprise. He shook his head, then shouted, "It's crazy, Jigger, but the one from

inside the pen must be Apples. They must be twin brothers. It don't happen but once in a million times, but they must be twin Appaloosas."

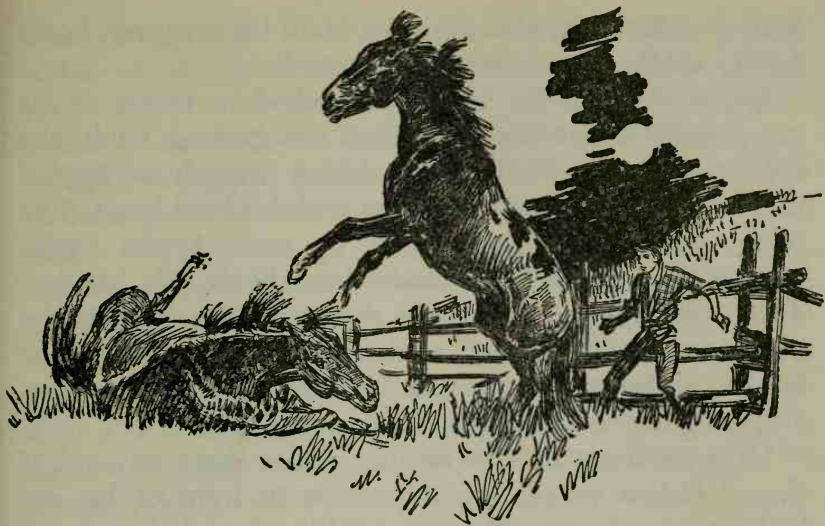
Even as he spoke, the Appaloosa from within the pen had veered away from the other horse and was heading for the timber. But the bay mare had come out the gate and was following him. The second Appaloosa ran toward her, trying to cut her off. Apples saw that and wheeled around, biting savagely at the other stallion, which veered away, snorting in surprise. Apples shouldered against the red mare, driving her toward the trees.

But once more the other Appaloosa got around on her flank, nipped at her heels, and turned her away. The mare ran back to the pasture fence and halted, unable to go farther. Apples wheeled around and raced for her, reaching the mare before the other Appaloosa could. He stood with his legs braced, snorting in angry defiance. The other horse circled back and forth as if looking for an opening. Suddenly he stopped. For one brief moment all three animals remained sharp-etched against the sky, long manes ruffling in the wind, eyes white and wild, nostrils red as blood in the moonlight. They made a strange and savagely beautiful sight. Eddie started running toward them.

"We can get them now!" he shouted. "They're played out."

"Stay away, Eddie," Calico called sharply. "They always stop like that before a battle. I think they're going to fight over that mare."

Eddie pulled up, staring at the stallions in cold panic. Calico was right. The two Appaloosas reared up and were moving toward each other on their hind hoofs. Their mouths were open and their eyes glittered like balls of fire. Then they came together and the shock of it seemed to jolt the



earth. Viciously they lashed out at each other with their razor-keen hoofs and snatched at whatever part they could reach with their powerful jaws. They fought with maniacal abandon. They cast their whole immense weight upon one another, their glittering teeth slipping loose from the hide to click together with the loud report of a gun.

Apples was the first to go down. But as the other stallion reared to trample him, Eddie ran in. With Calico screaming at him to stop, the boy threw himself wildly against the strange stallion. He knocked the animal off balance long enough for Apples to gain his feet again. Then the other stallion turned on Eddie and a flashing hoof knocked the boy back against the fence.

Too dazed to move for a minute, Eddie watched the frenzied animal rush Apples. There was a wild snorting and squealing. Dust boiled yellow as buckskin against the moon. For a while Eddie couldn't tell which was which as the pair whirled and kicked and bit at each other. Then he saw the

strange stallion rise above Apples in all his savagery, hoofs flailing wildly, eyes shining red with hate.

Apples dodged the hoofs and rushed in to rip at his antagonist's belly. Bleeding from the gashing teeth, the strange stallion twisted around, biting savagely at Apples' rump. The latter tried to kick out with his hind hoofs. The other evaded that and reared up over Apples again, flailing at him with those deadly front hoofs. He knocked Apples off balance, driving him down. Apples rolled in the dust, broad belly exposed to those deadly hoofs, sharp as knives. Eddie staggered to his feet, trying to rush in again.

"He's going to kill Apples!" he screamed.

"And you'll get killed with him, if you don't stay out of there," Calico yelled, running across in front of his son and catching him by the arm. Eddie struggled to break free but Calico held him. Panting, sobbing, he watched while Apples fought to move from beneath those deadly hoofs. At last, Apples managed to fend them off by using his own flailing legs, and rolled away. Bleeding and snorting, he scrambled to his feet. Yellow froth dripped from his muzzle. His eyes were bloodshot and protruding from his head. His sides were heaving so hard Eddie was afraid they would burst.

"His legs are wobbling like rubber," Calico said. "He can't stand this much longer."

"Get a gun!" Eddie panted. "That stallion's the killer Haskins has been after. He's the one that broke my arm—not Apples. We can't let him kill Apples."

Calico nodded. "You promise you won't run in there, if I go to the cabin?"

"I promise." Then the boy tore free from his father, running toward the house. "I'll get it myself. I can't let him kill Apples."

He heard the horses squealing and snorting behind him,

heard the ground shake with the awful impact of their bodies as he ran through the door. He grabbed Calico's .45/70 Winchester from the corner, praying it was loaded. But as he ran back out he heard his father shouting.

"Hold it, Jigger. Apples has got him now. All he's got to do is go in there and tromp the stallion's head to sawdust."

Eddie stopped just outside the doorway, the rifle gripped in his hands. He saw that it was the strange stallion who was rolling on the ground now, hoofs flailing, and Apples who was lunging in. But something was the matter. Apples' feint above the stallion's head was only a halfhearted one. As the prostrate animal kicked at his conqueror with his forefeet, Apples veered away.

"Run in there, you fool!" Calico shouted. "All you've got to do is step on his head."

The strange stallion rolled back the other way and tried to scramble to his feet. Apples wheeled around, biting at his haunches, preventing him from rising. The other horse kicked wildly, squealing like a stuck pig, and tried to roll in the other direction.

"Now you got him!" Calico shouted. "Stomp on him!"

Eddie felt his heart leap into his throat as he saw Apples lunge in and rear up above the rolling horse. But in the last instant the strange stallion rolled back toward Apples. Screaming in savage rage, he bit at Apples' forelegs. He missed and his teeth snapped together with a gunshot report. But Apples dropped back anyway, a strange wild look in his eyes.

"You fool!" Calico groaned. "You let him scare you off."

The downed stallion used the chance to regain his feet and lunged wildly at his adversary. Apples veered away, looking over his shoulder like a dog that has been kicked.

"Don't turn yellow on us," Calico shouted.

As if responding to Calico's voice, Apples wheeled to meet his opponent. But it was too late. The stallion crashed into him broadside, knocking Apples off his feet. Then he reared above him and came down with a wild whinny. There was a scream of pain, a crunching sound as one of the stallion's front hoofs struck Apples' flailing hind leg. Eddie began running toward them, cocking the gun. Apples tried to roll over but the stallion came down on him again, cutting through hide and flesh with his deadly hoofs.

Eddie knew that the stallion was going to kill Apples this time. The animal had that same crazy look in his eyes he'd had when he trampled Eddie. He was screaming with the same insane fury. The gun was too heavy for Eddie to lift to his shoulder. He fired from the hip, on the run. In the darkness and confusion he knew that he had missed. But the shocking sound made the strange stallion wheel toward him. He fired again. The horse reared up with a wild scream and then wheeled. For a moment Eddie thought he was going to charge down on him. Before he could fire a third time, however, the animal turned and ran into the timber.

Eddie dropped the rifle and ran to Apples. The horse was lying on his side and could not rise. The bay mare kept circling around, veering toward the timber then darting back, as if unable to leave without Apples. Calico came up and knelt beside the horse.

"That devil!" he muttered, with a harshness in his voice Eddie had seldom heard before. Then he looked up at his son. "Maybe you'd better go back and pick up that gun, Jigger. His leg's cut up terrible. It might as well be broken."

"Please," Eddie said, with tears in his eyes, "you can't kill him—not Apples."

"You know they can't do anything with a horse when his leg's ruined."

"He can be healed," Eddie pleaded.

Calico shook his head. "I don't think it can be done. And what if it could? You wouldn't want this horse."

"What do you mean?" Eddie asked.

"You wouldn't want a horse without any heart in him. You saw what happened out there. This horse hasn't got any courage. He's yellow!"

Chapter 10

*B*OTH HASKINS AND CALICO JIM had called that other Appaloosa a devil. And that was what he looked like, running in the wind, his teeth shining bone-white in the moonlight, his eyes cold and deadly. He was still quivering with rage and the fear of those shocking gunshots. It was the one thing in the world he feared. There was still a scar on his hip from the bullet that had hit him long ago. Haskins had shot him three years before when he'd been stealing one of the man's mares. It had only wounded him and he'd escaped. But he could still feel the burning pain of the bullet whenever a gun went off, and it sent him wild with panic.

He finally stopped on a ridge, looking back down into the valley. In the bright moonlight, he could see the cabin and the corrals, the tiny figures of Calico Jim and Eddie

crouched over the fallen horse. He had been following them for two days now, ever since he had caught sight of them in the Wind River Mountains. It was just after they had captured Apples. Eddie had been riding the Appaloosa, and Calico Jim had been leading the bay mare.

Devil had been herding the two mares he had stolen from Haskins, but had left them immediately. They did not compare with the bay. She was a mare whose beauty and spirit made her a thing sought by any stallion that saw her. Devil had twice given chase before, but she had eluded him each time. Now he was determined to capture her.

He had followed Eddie and Calico home, waiting until nightfall, then approaching the cabin. He had an almost human cunning. It had enabled him to free Haskins' mares by gnawing loose the rawhide lashings that held the corral poles to the upright post. But he had been given no time to do that on Calico's corral before the man and the boy appeared.

He wondered now if he had killed the other Appaloosa. He was a veteran of many battles, but this was a special triumph for him. He had fought with Apples before, over mares, and had stolen several from his band. His memory of Apples, however, seemed to go back even farther than that.

Devil seemed to recall days long ago, when they had played together as colts. They had run with a mother and father who bore the same coloring as they—the white blanket over the rump, daubed with vivid red spots.

Once, during the battle, this sense of kinship had come to Devil so strongly that he had almost stopped fighting. But the killer instincts which all his contacts with man had developed were too strong. They had blotted out his dim feeling of belonging in some way to the other Appaloosa. He had come for the mare. That was all he knew. He would

kill the other Appaloosa to get her, as he had killed other stallions who had stood in his way.

He knew the mare was free now. She was somewhere down in the timber between this ridge and the cabin. Fear of the gun kept him from going back. He worked up and down the ridge with a fierce impatience until he finally saw her, picking her way daintily up the hillside. She kept stopping to look over her shoulder as if reluctant to leave the other Appaloosa. It angered him. He began to move toward her, struck again by her beauty. The ripple of muscle under the silken hide of her shoulder, the graceful arch of her neck, the aristocratic flare of her pink nostrils, all excited him as no other mare had ever excited him before. It drove him down after her.

When she saw him coming she gave a shrill whinny of fear and dove back down the hill, a bright bronze flash among the trees.

Devil ran after her, leaping from ledge to ledge, racing along steep ridges. Then he pulled up short, a crafty light gleaming in his eyes. He'd let her think she was getting away. She'd slow up then and make it easier for him to circle around and come out below her. He swung to the left and started weaving down through the trees. He could hear the mare crashing blindly through them, trying to escape him. He kept track of her by the noise. He raced faster and faster down the side of the running horse.

Finally, as he was worrying about getting so close to Calico's shack, the thunder of her hoofs died down and stopped. Devil's ears flattened, his eyes began to glitter. Snorting at every jump, he leaped out at her from behind a sheltering tree, nipping at her heels, crowding her back up the steep hillside.

Whinnying wildly, the mare plunged upward. Reaching a flat covered by a wedge of aspens, she ran across it, head-

ing for the trees. Devil knew she might escape him if they got mixed up in the timber. His powerful haunches took him in great leaps over the sage-covered ground. And then he was in front of her, blocking her off.

Eyes rolling white with panic, flanks lathered with sweat, she wheeled and struck out in the other direction. But Devil was an old hand at this. At full speed he circled after her, running back and forth across her flank, herding her relentlessly back up the hill. Gradually her frenzy of fear gave way to weariness. Only her utter desperation kept her going. The mare moved slower and slower, stumbling now and then, dripping with sweat. Devil knew she was near the point of exhaustion.

Dusk had fallen before the mare gave up. Sides heaving, she stopped in a growth of scrubby tamarack. As Devil came up to her, she made no move to fight. Her head was bowed and she was trembling all over.

He halted beside her, snorting in triumph. He was tired, too, his flanks covered with dirty yellow lather. But he herded her on again, allowing her to walk now, moving slowly through the night. They stopped to browse, and near dawn found water. He was heading back toward the country in which he had left the two mares he had stolen from Haskins. When the first rays of the sun reddened the sky, he caught their scent and began to follow it. He rose to a high ridge, pushing the bay before him, and stopped to survey the country below.

Finally, he saw something which brought a hot snort of anger from him. A black-bearded, heavy-set man on a gray horse was driving the two mares westward toward Jackson Hole. Devil recognized him as Haskins, his old enemy.

Despite the fact that he had gotten the bay, he still wanted those other two. He pushed the bay ahead, down the ridge, until he was directly above Haskins. He saw that

the man was approaching a shelving cliff which overhung a river far below. He followed farther until the cliff became a steep slope, falling off into the rock-studded shallows of the river. He knew a man on horseback would be lost on such a steep and rocky dropoff. He nipped at the weary mare's heels, forcing her down through the pines toward the man. Haskins was herding the other two mares along in the open, chuckling huskily.

"Git on there, you two broomtails. This is one time that devil don't outsmart me."

Eyes smoldering, Devil drove the bay right to the edge of timber, then gave her a nip that made her bolt into the open. He followed at a dead run. Haskins wheeled in the saddle, mouth gaping in surprise. Devil drove against the man's gray horse with his shoulder, knocking the animal off balance.

Fighting to keep erect, the gray stumbled over the edge of the dropoff. Devil saw his feet go out from beneath him, saw Haskins pitched from the saddle. Then the Appaloosa wheeled and ran after the mares, driving the bay and the other two into a bunch and herding them on down the edge of the steep slope. It finally tapered off into the river and he drove them across through the rocky shallows. He emerged on the other side, splashing and snorting, and ran them into timber, up a slope to a ridge.

He would drive them across Jackson Hole and into the Snake Mountains, into Piute Canyon. It was where he and Apples had been born, where they had run as twin colts. Sooner or later they had always returned there, when hounded by man. It was a hidden, twisting gorge, with so many spur canyons running off into the steep mountains that it would be almost impossible for a man to trap them.

With the mares running across the ridge and down the



opposite slope, the Appaloosa stopped for a backward look. He saw that Haskins' gray horse had tumbled all the way down the slope and into the river. He had apparently been unhurt, and was just regaining his feet, shaking off the water in a fine spray. The man had crawled back to the top of the dropoff and was standing with his face toward the Appaloosa, shaking his fist in rage.

The horse raised his head and bugled in triumph. There was something evil about his silhouette stamped blackly against the sky. Calico and Haskins had named him well.

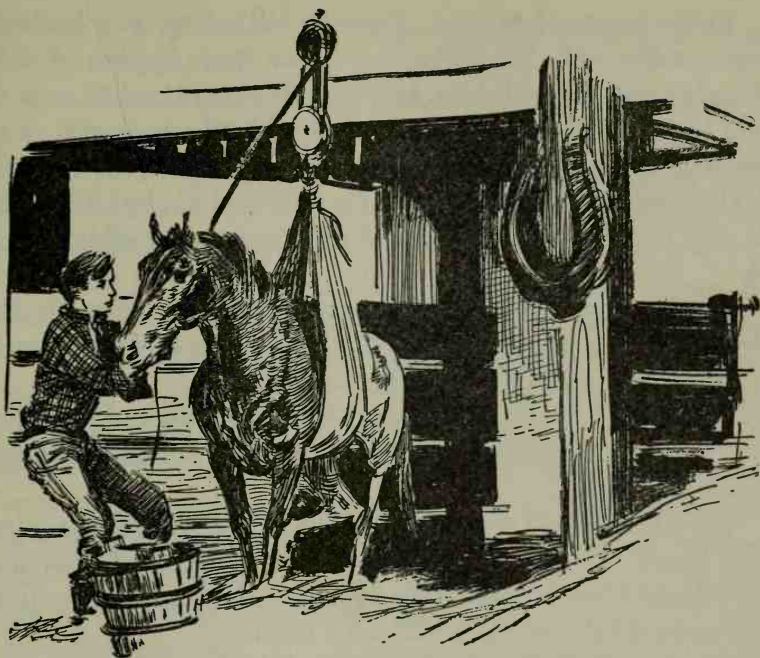
Devil!

Chapter 11

THAT NIGHT WAS a bad one for Eddie. He didn't know how long he pleaded with his father to let Apples live. He pulled out every argument he could think of but Calico kept hesitating, looking toward the pen and shaking his head. The raw chilling fear of losing his horse drove Eddie nearly frantic. It was all he could do to keep from bawling like a baby. But at last his father looked at him, a smile softening his lean face.

"Sulphur and molasses!" he said. "If you're that set on it, let's get going. Go get a tarp and we'll rig up a sling."

They laid the canvas tarp on the ground beside the dazed horse, pulled him onto it, then moved the animal into the shed by dragging the tarp across the ground with him on it. Once they had him lifted in the sling, Eddie offered to ride to town for Doc Purcell, who acted as veterinary for the



community when the need arose. But Calico told him he'd better go instead.

"You just stay here and look after the horse," Calico said. "It won't hurt if you get a little sleep either. There's nothing much you can do till Doc Purcell gets here."

But sleep was farthest from Eddie's thoughts. Eyes wide, shoulders hunched, he watched beside the still half-conscious Apples as the night dragged on. The only sounds were the wind in the timber and sometimes a faint moan from the stallion. Whenever he heard this, Eddie got up from where he sat against the wall and put his arms around the horse's neck. Apples never moved. Except for the warmth coming from his body, he might have been dead. It made Eddie shiver with fright. Was there nothing he could do? What if Doc Purcell wouldn't come? What if the doc thought it was foolish, too?

Eddie lost track of time. Once he fell asleep with his back against the wall, but woke at a groan from Apples. A wild fear beating through him, he jumped up and rushed over to the horse. As he began rubbing the bloody neck and murmuring softly under his breath, Apples turned his head and laid it against the boy's arm. Thrilled and happy, Eddie let it stay like that until his arm didn't have any feeling left in it.

As the first light of dawn came creeping through the cracks, Eddie heard hoofbeats stop in front of the shack. Then Calico and Doc Purcell came in.

"Th-thanks for coming, Doc," Eddie stammered, wondering if the man would make fun of him for holding a horse's head like that.

But Doc Purcell was too busy looking at Apples to notice. His round red face looked tired and his frocktail coat was powdered with the dust from his long ride. But his eyes held the same kind look they had with Eddie.

The boy waited with his insides all hollow while the doctor examined Apples. Anxiously he watched while the man rolled back the Appaloosa's eyelids, felt of his legs, listened to his heartbeats. A wave of uneasiness swept over him at the slow way the doctor turned.

"The horse is done for, Eddie," Doc Purcell said soberly, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder.

"But, Doc—"

"Just as well face it, Boy." Doc Purcell's voice sounded husky. "Even if he did get better, I doubt if Calico'd let you go anywhere on him. It wouldn't be safe."

The boy felt as though he couldn't breathe. He stood there staring at Apples, with his powerful legs and deep chest. His beautiful proud head was turned a little way toward Eddie, as if for help. Let them shoot a horse like that?

"Couldn't I try and cure him, Doc?" Eddie asked. The

anxiety in him made his voice go high like a girl's. "If I took all the care of him?"

Doc Purcell smiled ruefully. "This horse means a lot to you, doesn't he, Eddie? I'd like to say 'yes' but it wouldn't be any use. His leg muscles are torn up too badly. If it did heal, he'd likely never walk on it. You may as well let Calico put him out of his misery."

Eddie's face whitened. He caught the doctor's arm, his voice frantic. "Don't do it, Doc, please. Pa Hembre said he saved a horse that had hurt its leg. It couldn't do any heavy work, but Polly Jane could ride it. He said it could be done once in a while. What if this was that once? You wouldn't have any right to kill Apples without giving him a chance. He's the most beautiful animal I ever saw. The most beautiful animal any of us ever saw. I never wanted any horse so bad." Eddie turned to Calico, pleading. "I promise I'll take care of him, Pop. You won't have to do a thing. I'll feed him and nurse him. I'll rig a bunk in the shed beside him. We won't bother you a smidgin. All we ask is just a chance—"

"Hold on, Jigger, hold on," Calico said. He chuckled gruffly to hide the emotion in his voice. "If you want it that bad, who could refuse you? Give it a try, Doc. We can't lose anything."

Dr. Purcell pursed his lips, then nodded slowly. "All right. But I think you're both in for a big disappointment."

The next few weeks were the hardest Eddie had ever spent. At first he was apprehensive that the sheriff or the schoolmarm would come to get him again. But it was summer and his only hope lay in the fact that they would have no reason to take him down into town until school opened in the fall. Even so, he ran and hid at any sign of a stranger

approaching the cabin. More than anything in the world, he wanted a chance to nurse Apples back to health.

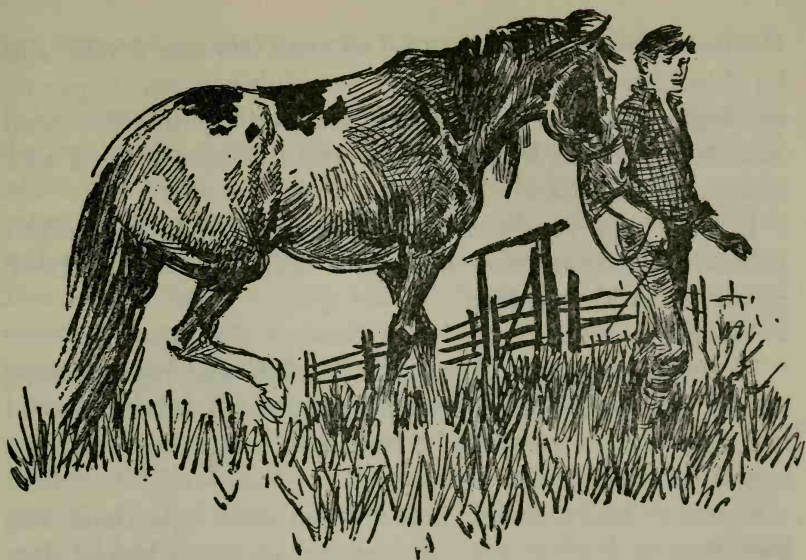
He tended the stallion carefully from morning until night, staying alone with him when his father went out on another horse-running expedition. Calico let him sell one of the horses they had trapped for enough money to buy grain. Every day he went up into the high meadows to cut the sweet mountain grasses for Apples, finding patches of gramma and alfalfa in the deep and shadowed coulees where the summer sun had not begun to cure it. And all the while he was looking forward with a mixture of eagerness and dread for the time when they would take the splint off.

Doc Purcell came out on purpose to do it, around noon one blistering hot day. Apples was still in the sling they had rigged up on pulleys with ropes and strips of an old blanket for the straps. The doctor removed the bandages and wooden slats which had held the leg immovable for so long.

They lowered the sling slightly, putting some of the animal's weight on the injured leg. But it would not hold him up and he almost fell. They hauled him a little higher in the sling, the leg hanging uselessly while he put all his weight on the other three.

The doctor shook his head. "I hate to say it, Eddie, but that horse isn't worth a plugged nickel."

Eddie refused to give up. Every day after that, with Calico's help, they lowered the sling a bit, encouraging a little more weight on the bad leg. Each morning before dawn, when the wind was still cold from the glaciers, Eddie spent long hours massaging the injured leg, rubbing hot tallow and neat's-foot oil in, wrapping it in heated blankets to restore the unused muscles. And each day he lowered the sling a little, forcing the horse, for a few minutes at a time, to put more and more weight on the leg. Then came the day when he lowered the sling completely.



It was a big defeat, because Apples stood on three legs, and would not put any weight on the fourth. Eddie led him into the corral, but still Apples would hobble about on only three legs. Finally Eddie got the idea of tying a Scotch hobble on the left hind leg. It was a hitch that ran over the horse's rump and allowed the boy to pull the hind hoof off the ground whenever he wished.

Then he started leading the stallion around the corral again. He pulled on the Scotch hobble every few feet. It jerked the hind hoof up for an instant, forcing Apples to put his weight on the weak front leg for just a touch. At first it almost buckled beneath him. But soon he learned how to put as little weight as possible against it, stepping gingerly onto the bad leg whenever Eddie pulled his rear leg up.

Working patiently, day after day, Eddie finally had the horse using his lame leg. Then he took off the Scotch hobble, and Apples limped around the corral on all four. It was a definite triumph for Eddie. He rewarded the stallion with an extra pint of corn that night.

Over dinner, Calico admitted what an advance it was. But he shook his head. "I wish you wouldn't get your hopes up too high, Eddie. Even if he is walking again, what good will it do you? A horse without any courage is like a sack without any bottom."

Eddie shook his head stubbornly. "I can't believe he's yellow. Something else made him keep from killing Devil when he had the chance."

"What?"

"I don't know," Eddie said. "But I was right before, wasn't I? I knew Apples wasn't a killer. I didn't know at the time that there were twins, but I just knew Apples couldn't be a killer."

Calico shook his head. "I admit you were right then. But this time we both saw it. Apples turned like a kicked dog. He had two chances to kill Devil and he let the horse scare him off."

"He isn't yellow," Eddie insisted stubbornly. "I know it."

Autumn came, with the dryness of August still making the air thin and brittle. The sky had a buttery color from the forest fires high in the Wind Rivers. A cottony silence lay over the land, with only the infrequent chatter of saucy magpies to break it. Apples was still limping, but his leg seemed to be getting stronger. At last Eddie thought it was time to try mounting the horse.

With Calico watching, he led Apples to the fence, put a bridle on him. Then he climbed to the top bar, so the jolt of swinging aboard would not unbalance the animal, and eased himself onto Apples' back.

At first the stallion refused to budge. But Eddie nudged him gently with moccasined heels, talking softly into his ear. "Come on now, Apples. You got this far. Nobody believed we could do it, but you got this far. You can walk alone. You can sure walk with me on top. I don't weigh so much.

Just ease out on that leg and you won't have a bobble, you'll see . . ."

The horse's ears began to twitch. He looked around at the boy, as if for reassurance. Eddie grinned and patted his neck, still talking. Finally, as if persuaded by the gentle voice, Apples took a tentative step. He almost stumbled, and quickly shifted his weight. But Eddie urged him on. The second time the step was stronger. In a moment they were moving slowly around the corral. The horse still limped heavily, but Eddie felt a triumph flush his face.

Calico shook his head wonderingly. "You sure don't ever know which way a dill pickle's going to squirt. I never thought I'd see this day. But you got a long way to go, Jigger. One quick turn could make him spill and break your neck. I couldn't ever trust a horse like that cantering over open country."

This did not dim Eddie's triumph. Day after day he walked the horse around the corral. The limp seemed to get better, and one day he decided to try riding into the meadows above the cabin. He took an easy trail, circling away and coming back toward the shack through the pines. He was so busy watching his horse that he had reached the edge of timber before he heard the voices. He pulled up so sharply Apples stumbled. It was Calico talking with June Weatherby outside the cabin.

Her bright hair flew like a battle flag in the wind and an angry flame burned in her blue eyes. "You owe a duty to Eddie's mother as well as to him," she said. "You know it was Cora's dearest wish that he should be educated. She even talked about the plans you'd made to have her live in town during the winter so he could go to school."

Calico's head was lowered and his face was flushed. "We were doing better then, June. I thought I could afford to

send them to town. It wouldn't have been like having him stay with strangers."

"The Hembres will treat him like their own son, Jim." She drew closer. "I saw how you looked at the Hembre house when Eddie broke his arm that time. You were comparing it with your shack here. You were thinking about the clean sheets and the home-cooked meals and the other children to play with."

Calico frowned. "I guess I was. But that isn't everything in life."

"Of course it isn't. He needs the love and companionship you've given him. But there comes a time when he needs more. Do you want him to be a horse-runner all his life?"

"What's wrong with that? It's a good clean life. With breaks, a man can make as much of himself as he could in any other business."

"In other words, you aren't even giving Eddie a chance to make his own choice. You're going to keep him from seeing the outside world or learning anything, so that even if he wanted to be something else, he couldn't because all he knows is how to chase wild horses."

That seemed to strike home. Calico's head came up and color dyed his cheeks. Eddie had a sinking feeling. June Weatherby stepped closer, her voice lowering.

"I can see it has been bothering you, Calico. You know you don't have any right to keep him from a chance like this. You've been thinking about it every night. You've been remembering what his mother wanted for him and what you promised her. I don't believe your conscience will let you keep him up here much longer."

Chapter 12

AFTER JUNE HAD LEFT, Calico went back into the cabin and slammed the door. Eddie watched anxiously a moment, his heart, that had been soaring so triumphantly, dropping like a stone. Slowly he put Apples away and followed his father inside.

He found Calico cooking dinner in moody silence. There were no queries as to how Eddie had come out with Apples nor any easy small talk. First Calico burned the bread. Jerking it smoking from the oven, he muttered some disgusted comment about this food not being fit for a boy. Then, eating dinner, he stopped every third or fourth mouthful and stared at the table. Seeing him that way, knowing that he was thinking about what June Weatherby had said, Eddie finally blurted out that he had overheard the discussion. Calico banged his fork down. He got up and turned and walked across the room, facing the wall.

"You're thinking about what she said," Eddie muttered. "You're going to send me down there."

"No, I'm not," Calico said. He turned around, scowling at Eddie from under bushy red brows. "How do you feel about it?"

"You know how I feel," Eddie said. "As long as you want me, I'll stay here."

"As long as I want you," Calico echoed, almost as if he were speaking to himself. "Yes," he said. "I guess that's it."

"What's it?"

Calico shook his head angrily. "Nothing. Let's not talk about it any more. It makes me mad to talk about it."

The time passed slowly for Eddie after that. He kept out of Calico's way as much as he could. He worked long hours with Apples, slowly, carefully, until he got the horse to the point where he could trot a little. The boy would have been perfectly happy, if only Calico had acted differently. The man's lean brown face was getting a tighter look day by day and his voice held a brittle edge. Eddie wondered if his father was remembering that it was nearly time for school to begin.

The days crawled by. The tension and the waiting began to weigh on Eddie until he almost wished something would happen. Frost yellowed the aspens. Snow fell on the lower ridges. Coyotes began to howl dismally about the cold winter ahead. The sound filled Eddie with a deep loneliness, sitting at supper with the silent stranger his father had become. For the first time the mountains seemed mysterious and frightening. He shivered, choking on a burned biscuit, wishing Calico would talk to him. But Calico, sitting moodily across the table, was always staring into his cup.

"Is he thinking about what Miss Weatherby said?" Eddie asked himself. "Is he thinking maybe he ought to send me down to the Hembres?" The boy didn't know. He only

knew something was terribly wrong. Finally, unable to stay still any longer, he'd get up and clear the dishes away. And afterwards, he'd lie awake for a long time in his bunk, staring out at the twinkling stars, half-sick with worry.

Then one day something did happen. Eddie was out cutting hay in the high meadows behind the shack when he saw the sheriff pull up. Eddie stopped dead, terror seizing him. For a moment it was so still he could hear the rumbling voice of the sheriff talking to his father in front of the cabin. Anger swept over Eddie at the sound. He cinched up his belt, starting down to get Apples. He'd taken a couple of steps when he drew up short. No, he would be seen. Better just leg it out of here as fast as he could.

Hot blood pounding through his head, Eddie plunged into the brush behind the meadow. At first, he scrambled wildly through the brambles and dense thickets, regardless of the noise he made or the trail he was leaving. Then he made himself slow down. Fighting his panic, he moved more quietly, slipping across an open glade with the stealth of a lynx, using every tree and rock for cover.

Presently he struck a game trail and followed it to his favorite hiding place, the dead-end canyon known only to Calico and himself. No one could ever find him there unless he knew the place.

Panting, Eddie sank down on a boulder. Was he really safe? He had come on an impulse and out of habit. But now he began to wonder, dropping his head into his hands. He remembered how strangely his father had been acting and how much effect the schoolmarm's words seemed to have on him.

A rattle of brush brought Eddie to his feet. He listened, not wanting to believe it. But the sound came again. His father wouldn't make that much noise. He was a woodsman.

The boy's eyes darted to the rock walls. They were too steep to climb. He was trapped!

Then Sheriff Kinsale pushed his way free of the clawing brush, wheezing like a walrus through his luxuriant, handle-bar mustache. He stopped, frowning uncomfortably at Eddie.

"Now, Boy," he said. "I don't like this any more'n you do. You'll come peaceable, won't you?"

Eddie's shoulders sagged. He knew the sheriff wouldn't have found him unless Calico had told about this spot. He was right, then. His father had betrayed him.

"I'll come," he said huskily. "I haven't got any reason to stay around here any longer."

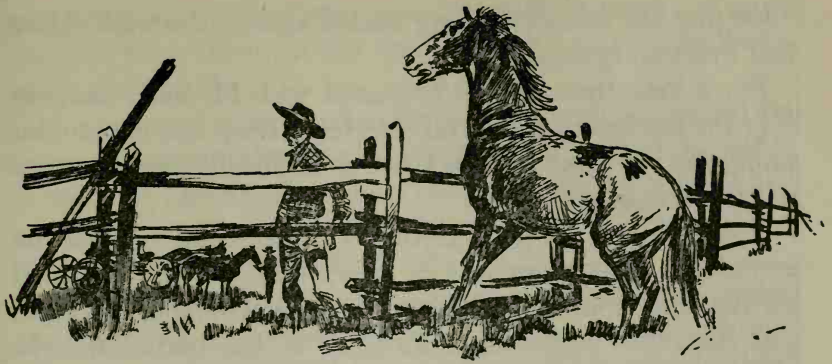
Later that afternoon, Apples stood peering dejectedly out of the pen, wondering why Eddie didn't come to see him. He felt lonesome and strangely uneasy. Where was the boy? He'd never been this late before.

Suddenly Eddie appeared from the brush at the edge of the meadow. Apples' heart leaped and he started forward, only to stop uncertainly. Why was Eddie walking like that, head all bent over until his dark hair hid his face? There was a big heavy man walking behind the boy. They reached the wagon and stopped. Eddie looked over his shoulder at Apples. There were tears in his eyes. The heavy man glanced at Calico, who was standing stiffly beside the cabin. Then the man looked at Apples, and blew uncomfortably at his mustache and said in a wheezing voice:

"Well, if you want to say good-bye to him, Eddie, I guess I can wait five minutes."

Eddie turned to look at his father. Calico held out his hand, started to say something. Eddie's face grew tight and set.

"You don't need to say anything," he said. "You didn't



have to send the sheriff after me, neither. If you wanted me to go, all you had to do was ask."

Without waiting to hear what his father would answer, Eddie went over to the horse. "I've got to go, Apples," he said, stroking the animal's neck with a shaking hand. "I'd like to take you with me but I'm afraid your leg wouldn't stand up under that long trip. Maybe after a few weeks, when it's really healed up, I'll come back and get you."

Apples began to whinny and paw the ground as the boy finally turned away and walked back to the wagon, biting his lip to keep from crying.

Again Calico tried to speak. "Eddie," he finally managed, "you understand how it is. I just couldn't keep you here any longer. I had to give you a chance to be something better than a tramp horse-runner."

Eddie didn't answer. He just climbed stiffly into the wagon and sat stiffly waiting for the sheriff to follow. The latter looked helplessly at Calico, then clambered into the wagon.

Apples watched the wagon roll away. Where were they taking Eddie? Calico was watching, too, a bitter expression on his lean face. Then he turned and went inside. Apples heard him muttering, and then a great crash came, like

some piece of furniture being hurled against the wall. After that everything was quiet.

For a long time Apples remained with his head hanging over the top bar of the corral. He felt a deep loneliness. But surely the boy would be back before nightfall. He had never left for long before.

Apples began to pace restlessly, looking off toward the mountains. The mare was up there somewhere. It turned his attention in another direction. He remembered the fight, and the other Appaloosa. Memory of the battle brought back a fragmentary feeling of the fear he'd known before Devil's flashing hoofs and sharp teeth.

It would be difficult to determine whether that was why Apples had been unable to kill the other animal when he had the chance. Was he really afraid? Or was it a sense of the kinship he had known when he had been reared beside the other horse that looked so much like him? In that moment of conquest, looking down at Devil, had he again been reminded of the time when they had run together in the green meadows, played together in the cool streams, eaten the tender bluegrass side by side. Was that what had stopped Apples, or was he really a coward?

The strange uncertainty was still stirring in the stallion when Calico appeared once more. The man shuffled moodily into the corral. He filled the grain fan, as if to pour it into the feed troughs. Then he set it down, forgetting it completely, staring off toward the mountains. The horses began to whinny. Calico looked up in surprise.

"Yeah," he said, absently. "I guess you're thirsty."

He walked out the gate, letting it shut behind him, and shambled to the well. He pumped a half-bucket of water. Then he stood there, hand on the pump handle, staring off down the road in the direction the wagon had taken.

Apparently forgetting the water, as he had the grain, he

wandered back toward the cabin, stopping a couple of more times to stare off down the road. Finally, shaking his head, he shuffled inside.

Hungry and thirsty, the horses bunched up along the fence, whinnying, looking longingly at the water. A couple of them pushed Apples against the gate. His leg got pinched beneath the gate and the post. The gate swung open a little. Had Calico forgotten to latch it?

Apples poked his nose in the gap, pushing the gate wider. Then he forced himself through. Another horse followed him. As Apples realized he was free, all his wild instincts took over. Tossing his head, he whinnied shrilly and ran for timber.

He halted at the trees, looking back. The thought of Eddie had stopped him. In all the world, Eddie was the only human who had been kind to him. How lonely he would be without the boy. He remembered the long hours Eddie had spent with him while his leg was healing. It was as if he could hear the friendly voice again, making the pain so much easier to bear, as it talked on through the long nights—as if he could feel the gentle hands, rubbing the soothing oil into his leg. And the companionship they had known during the long, hot days of fading summer, while Eddie was helping him to walk again. Loneliness for the boy struck through him, turned him back.

Just then Calico appeared at the door of the shack. When he saw the horses out of the pen, he shouted and began to run after Apples. It sent a streak of fear through the stallion. Again his wild instincts took possession, and he turned to flee.

He ran with the wind blowing his mane and the syrupy odor of heated pitch in his nostrils. He headed automatically for his old range, over in the Snakes. He headed for Piute Canyon, where he had run as a colt, where he always

headed when hounded by man. Would the bay mare be there? They had returned many times to the sanctuary, and she had probably gone there when she had escaped from the men.

He could not run long, for his leg began to ache. He slowed down to a trot, then a walk. The leg throbbed and hurt from the unaccustomed exercise. He had to stop and rest, grazing through the cured mountain grasses, drinking at creeks. When he started once more his leg still hurt, and he was limping badly. He thought of the boy again. More than anything else, he wished Eddie was with him.

Chapter 13

IHE RUGGED snow-capped summits of the Tetons looked as if they had caught fire when Eddie woke the next morning. For a moment he lay there, watching the mountains change color with the rising sun, drowsily enjoying the soft mattress and clean sheets. He had to admit that this was better than a bunk. And was he hungry! He smiled, sniffing the coffee and bacon on the air. There'd be fluffy biscuits, too, and eggs and stewed peaches like there had been when he was here the last time. Golly, would he dig into them!

Then Eddie stiffened. He remembered why he was here. Calico didn't want him around any more. Bitterness darkened his eyes. And there was that constant ache of longing for Apples. What good was a soft bed or a nice breakfast beside these? He had to go to school, too!

Eddie wondered desperately what school would be like. He'd never had a book nor been inside a schoolhouse. He didn't know the first thing about reading or spelling. He thought about it all the time he was dressing in the new clothes Ma Hembre had bought him, the white shirt and wool pants, the clumsy brogans, heavy as buckets of coal, that squeaked when he walked. If only he could wear his old moccasins, he groaned to himself. What would he do if the kids laughed at him?

He had about made up his mind to duck out the window when Ma Hembre called from the foot of the stairs that breakfast was ready. He heard Polly's clear voice answer from her room down the hall. Then she was running lightly past his door.

"Come on, Eddie," she said. "We'll be late for school."

With sudden shyness, he waited until he couldn't hear her footsteps any more. Then, reluctantly, he started out the door. He needed school, he thought, about like he needed two heads.

The kitchen was just as he remembered it, the bare floor white from lots of scrubbing, the red-checked tablecloth a bright spot of color in the room. His wind-burned face tightened under his long black hair and he dropped silently into his chair. They were all smiling at him but he couldn't bring himself to smile back. He saw Pa Hembre's eyes grow sober and Polly stir unhappily. He heard Ma Hembre's anxious sigh as she took the biscuits from the oven. Then she smiled, catching his eye.

"It's a fine morning, Eddie," she said. "You being here makes it better yet. We want you to feel this is your home."

Eddie fidgetted with his spoon. He didn't know how to answer. He stared at her sweet, motherly face, touched with the morning sun, and his heart began to thud. It always did

that when he looked at her. She brought back thoughts of his real mother.

"That's right," Pa Hembre said heartily. "And you'll feel more at home yet when you get to know the boys and girls at school."

"I'd rather not go to school," Eddie said thinly. "I won't fit in."

Pa Hembre stared. "Not fit in?" Eddie caught his frowning glance at Ma.

Stubbornly Eddie said, "I'm getting pretty old."

Ma Hembre came over and put her hand on his shoulder. "You're not too old. Any boy who can catch wild horses can do fine with spelling and arithmetic. Won't you do it to please me, Son?"

A tremor ran across Eddie's bitter young face. Ma Hembre's hand on his shoulder almost broke down his resolve. He blinked hard. He was dimly aware of Polly stepping on his toe and clearing her throat. From the head of the table he noticed Pa Hembre staring at him, genial face settling into stern lines. Grimly he wished they'd all let him alone but he knew they wouldn't. He muttered:

"I—I don't need schooling."

"Eddie," Pa Hembre said sharply, "this stubbornness won't get you anywhere. You're going to school and that's final. Eat your breakfast now so you can get started."

Eddie felt Ma's fingers tense. Polly's bright eyes pleaded with him across the table. Slowly he picked up his spoon, knowing he was licked.

"All right," he gulped. "I'd rather fight a grizzly, any day, but I'll go, if that's what you want."

The schoolhouse was a good ten minutes' walk from the Hembres'. Eddie started out with Polly, right after breakfast, the girl chattering and laughing and telling him all



about the kids he would meet. A block down the street they came upon the same black-haired boy Eddie had seen from the window the first time he had come to the Hembres'.

"This is Dan Kinsale, Eddie," Polly said. "He's the sheriff's boy."

Eddie knew he shouldn't dislike Dan Kinsale for being the sheriff's son. Or dislike the sheriff either. After all, the man had only been doing his duty, bringing him in. But it wasn't any use. He found his fingers knotting into fists, felt a flush come to his face. He didn't even want to talk to this fellow.

Dan Kinsale seemed unaware of the anger seething inside Eddie. Swinging his books by a strap in one hand, he sent a sidelong grin at him. Casually, he jumped to the rail fence

and walked along, holding his hands out to balance himself. It was an obvious challenge and Eddie couldn't ignore it. He climbed up and started following Dan. But the brogans made him clumsy. He wasn't used to them. Suddenly he missed his footing and fell off. He hit the ground with a thud that shook his whole body. Dan Kinsale jumped off lightly, grinning at him.

Eddie got to his feet, face scarlet. He knew he was acting like a fool, a little kid, yet somehow he couldn't take such humiliation in front of Polly Jane. Despite himself, he said "Bet I can beat you to the corner."

Dan looked surprised. Then he grinned again and started to run. Eddie followed, catching up. For a moment he was in the lead and held it. Then his feet got to dragging in the heavy shoes. Try as he would, he couldn't get up any real speed. The curly-haired boy beat him to the corner easily and stood there waiting for him.

"That wasn't very hard," Dan taunted. "What'll we do now?"

Helplessly, Eddie glanced at Polly. More than anything he wanted her to be proud of him. But what could he do in these shoes?

At that moment June Weatherby appeared in the doorway of the schoolhouse and rang the bell. Polly started across the street toward the teacher but Eddie hesitated. The sight of the schoolmarm, looking untroubled and lovely in her pink flowered dress, was like a blow to the stomach. If it hadn't been for her, he'd still be out with Calico. His heart thumped harder and he half-turned to run. Then Polly called and he knew it was too late.

"Come on, Eddie," she said. "I'll go in with you."

Like a roped calf, he started after her, dragging back with every step. Then they were inside and all at once he found

himself the target for dozens of inquisitive eyes. Coloring hotly, he glanced around the packed schoolroom.

A titter ran through the older children. He looked at the blackboard filled with nice even writing and remembered his own careless scrawl. A few of the kids he knew, the rest he didn't. His glance returned to June Weatherby, who was standing behind the big desk up in front.

"Take that empty seat in the front row, Eddie," she said, smiling at him.

Again that titter ran through the back of the room. Eddie knew why. Only the littlest children were sitting in front. He felt a stab of anger at the schoolmarm.

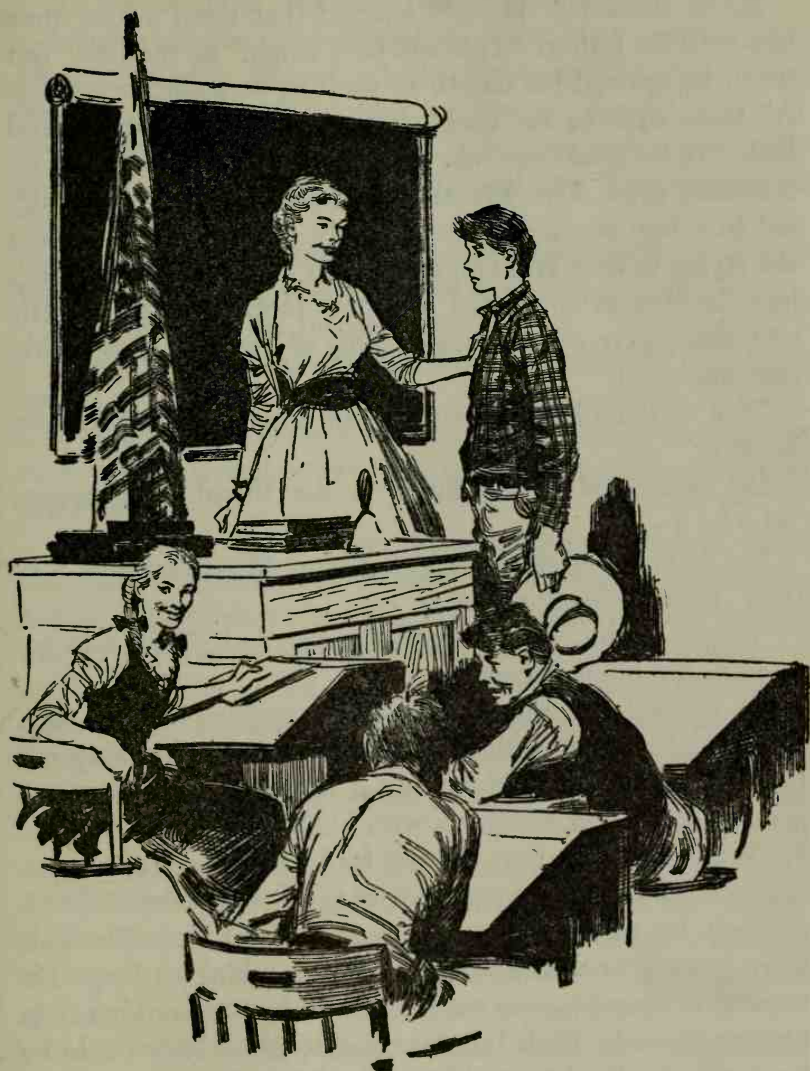
"There'll be no more of that," she said, looking around at the tittering children. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes flashed. "As you can see, it is the only vacant seat left. Now if you'll come up here, Eddie, I'll give you your books."

Eddie clumped up the aisle, shoes squeaking at every step, and took the books she handed him, a geography, an arithmetic and a history book. He had studied the same books in his father's cabin. But knowing the lessons wasn't everything. He'd never recited them to a roomful of unfriendly kids before. He turned around and slid into the empty front seat. It was far too small for him and his feet stuck way out. They looked big as a house. The scrubbed little boys and girls on either side looked soberly at his feet, then back at his face.

"Can't I switch with somebody?" Eddie looked around desperately. "It's too little."

"I'd like to let you," the teacher said ruefully, "but you'll have to stay there for now."

"All right, Ma'am," Eddie mumbled. Vainly he tried to shove further down in his seat. In the back of the room the titters grew to guffaws. June Weatherby rapped sharply for order, then picked up a piece of paper. "The first word



on the spelling list for the eighth grade today is 'Mississippi.' Eddie, will you spell it for us?"

Eddie stood up. He had learned that word a long time ago with his father. "This will be a cinch," he thought. But when he opened his mouth to spell it, no sound came out. All those eyes on his back! It made him turn around and look. All he could see was faces, eyes, ears—grinning faces, watching eyes. Dan Kinsale was making some kind of signal to a boy across the room. Polly was frowning—or was she trying to keep from giggling? His long black hair swung into his eyes as he shifted from one foot to the other. His new shoes gave a loud squeak. One of the little girls beside him snickered.

"Try and think," the teacher said kindly. "I'm sure you know it."

He swallowed a big lump in his throat. He began, "M - I - S -"

The lump came again, gagging him. Was there one S or two? He couldn't remember.

"Please, Eddie," June Weatherby pleaded. "I have to get on with the other classes."

He opened his mouth. Somebody giggled behind him. He looked around. One of the little girls was sticking out her tongue at him. Behind her a boy was grimacing and making some kind of signals with his hands. All those eyes! He knew they were just waiting for him to make a mistake. He would be the laughing stock of the whole school. One S or two? He swallowed again, moistened his lips. The kids were getting tired and restless, he was taking so long. He wanted to keep his eyes straight ahead but he couldn't help looking around. Their faces seemed to blur. How could he be so afraid? He'd topped Devil, hadn't he?

"Eddie—Eddie," the teacher said impatiently, regretting

that she had ever made the mistake of starting this. But she must go through with it now.

He began again. "M-i-" His voice cracked.

Laughter broke out behind him. He turned around, eyes blazing angrily, fists clenched. Then he looked at June Weatherby. Why didn't she let him sit down? Couldn't she see how mixed up he was? If he were only home with his father, he could get it straightened out. This was worse than Indian torture.

June Weatherby rapped her ruler on her desk to silence the class. "I'll give you one more chance," she said.

Eddie cleared his throat. "M—"

"Yeah," Dan Kinsale muttered under his breath. "M as in mule."

It wasn't loud enough for the teacher to hear but the class caught it and a wave of shrill laughter swept around the room.

The teacher clapped her hands together several times but they wouldn't stop. At last she turned to Eddie. He couldn't hear what she said, but he understood what she meant. Wooden-faced, he squeezed back into his seat.

The laughter ended in sudden silence and Eddie heard June Weatherby sigh unhappily. "Now who will volunteer to spell the word?" she asked quietly. The curly-haired boy's hand shot up and she nodded toward him. "Dan wants to try it."

Dan stood up and spelled it in a loud clear voice.

"Correct!" June Weatherby said—but she did not smile.

Dan flashed Eddie a triumphant grin. Eddie stared back at him, a tight look coming over his face. He wondered grimly how Dan would look trying to top Devil.

After what seemed like a million years, June Weatherby rang the bell for recess. As the children slammed down their books and jumped up, she motioned for Eddie to wait.

Stony-faced, he remained in his seat, looking past her when she started down the aisle.

She stopped beside him with a little rustle of her flowered skirts. He got a whiff of something that smelled like lilacs. "I'm sorry I had to seat you with the littlest children," she said. "But it *was* the only vacant seat. If I showed you any special privileges, and asked somebody else to take that place, it would only make things worse. Will you believe me, Eddie?"

The bitterness deepened in the boy's dark eyes. That sugary voice! She was trying hard to make him think she was his friend. But he knew better.

"I'm not going to stay with the babies," he muttered.

He saw her stiffen. "You won't be much of a man if you don't stick it out, Eddie," she said. Then her voice turned pleading again and she put her hand on his shoulder. "I'll have a seat built right away, Eddie, with your own class. The children will soon forget you're new, when you get over being so shy. Then you'll be accepted as one of them. I realize now that I never should have called on you right away like that, when you were feeling so strange. I thought it would make you feel as though you belonged. I'm sorry, Eddie. . . . Will we try again—together?"

Eddie looked up at her standing there so pretty and pink-cheeked and earnest, and, in spite of his deep hurt, some strange impulse made him want to believe her.

"O.K., Ma'am," he said. "I'll try."

"Good," she said briskly. "Now maybe if you take this recess to study your lesson, you'll do better tomorrow."

He tried to do as she said but he couldn't concentrate. When she rang the bell and the other children trooped back in, he was still staring blankly at the first page of the geography. The rest of the day was a painful repetition of the morning, though the teacher did not again call on him to

recite. It seemed like a lifetime before class was finally dismissed. Eddie saw the pupils stampede for the door, scooping up bats and gloves from where they'd heaped them at the rear of the room. Polly came to Eddie.

"We're choosing up sides for baseball, Eddie," she said. "Will you be on my team?"

He almost groaned. Baseball was something else he knew nothing about. But he realized she'd think he was afraid to face the kids if he refused. He went with her onto the field. She explained to him that there weren't enough boys the right age in town to make two full teams, so some of the girls and even the younger children were included. Already the boys and girls were taking their places.

Dan Kinsale had a ball in one hand and was swinging his arms in the center of the diamond. Polly explained to Eddie that he was on the pitcher's mound. Polly's team had won first up and they ranged themselves on the log that was used for a bench. A boy named Tom Brady took his place before the catcher and Dan began to pitch. Tom let the first one go by and Polly said it was a ball, low and outside. On the second pitch, Tom hit a grounder past the pitcher and beat the ball to first base.

As the game went on, Polly explained about flies and fouls, loaded bases and home runs. Eddie tried to follow, but it was a new language to him and he didn't understand half of what she was talking about. When Ray Sawyer hit a home run, the whole team leaped to their feet, shouting and yelling. But Eddie couldn't quite join in the excitement.

Then it was his turn at bat. It felt awkward in his hands and he didn't know how to stand. Polly tried to give him some advice but he still felt strange and out of place at the plate.

He saw Dan make the pitch and took a wild swing at the

ball when it whizzed past. He missed it completely, heard it whack into the catcher's mitt behind.

"Wait'll they're strikes," somebody shouted. "You couldn't have reached that with a ten-foot pole."

Eddie settled himself flat-footed in the dirt, jaw clenched. The second pitch came and it looked wide. But just before the ball reached him it curved in, passing his waist three feet away. Too late he realized he should have swung.

"Strike two," Dan Kinsale shouted. He laughed at Eddie. "Maybe you need some specs, new kid."

Eddie felt his face grow red. The kids were snickering and whispering behind him, just as they had in school. He wiped moist hands on the bat. This time he'd hit it or die trying. The ball came sizzling through the air. He started his swing. At the last moment it took that curve. He tried to duck but it was high and inside. It cracked him on the head. The world seemed to tip. He saw flashing lights and skyrockets. He staggered backward and fell heavily.

Dazedly he heard the children running toward him. Dan Kinsale was first to reach him, catching him under the arms and helping him to his feet.

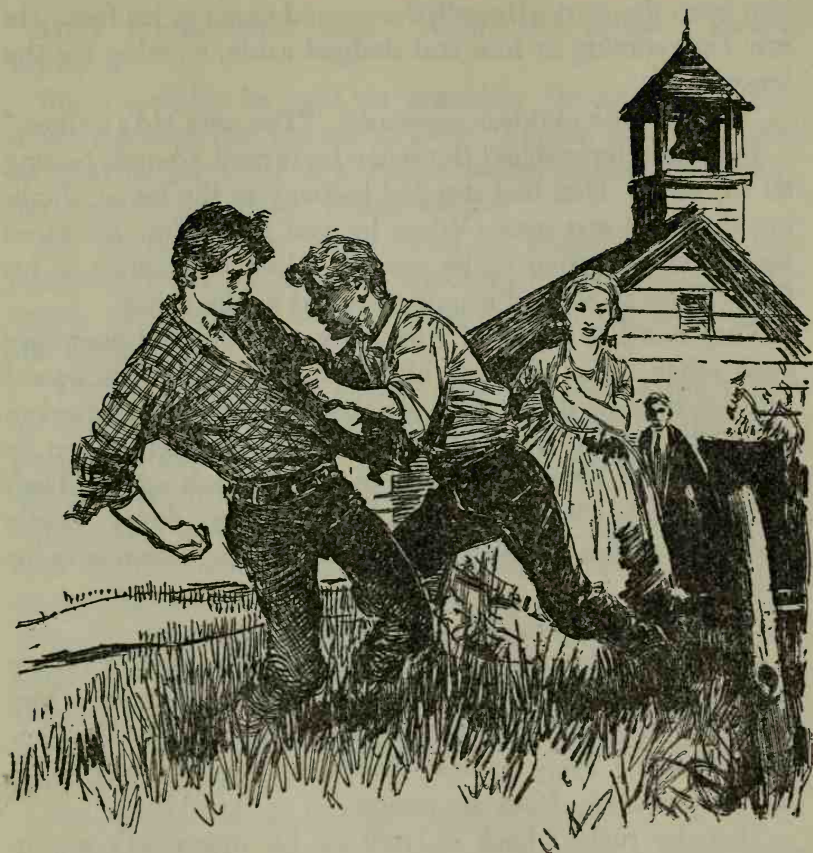
"Gee, Eddie, I didn't mean to hit you—"

Eddie's eyes wouldn't focus as he tried to rise. It gave him a warped vision of Dan's face. It looked as though he was grinning. It brought rage boiling to the surface, all the frustration and bitterness that had been building up in Eddie through the day. He tried to tear free of Dan, shouting:

"You did that on purpose!"

One of his flailing arms hit Dan in the chin, knocking him backward. Eddie saw anger rush into Dan's face and the boy lunged at him. One of his wildly swinging fists struck Eddie on the side of the head.

Eddie stumbled backward, trying to keep his feet. But



his clumsy brogans tripped him and he fell. He rolled over and scrambled up. He rushed Dan and they grappled, hitting at each other, trying for a hold that would spill the other. Once more Eddie couldn't move his feet fast enough and a sudden shift of Dan's weight upset him. Lying there in the dirt, he heard the kids yell encouragement and advice to Dan. "Sock him, Dan. Give him one for me—" Then Polly's voice rose clear and high above the clamor.

"Eddie!" she cried. "It's your shoes stopping you."

Suddenly he knew she was right. His shoes had hindered

him from the start. He rolled over and came to his feet. He saw Dan coming at him and dodged aside, running for the fence.

"Yellow!" the children screamed. "The new kid's yellow."

But when he reached the fence he turned around, tearing off his shoes. Dan had stopped halfway to the fence, thinking the fight was over. When he saw Eddie toss his shoes aside and straighten up he paused, a look of surprise on his face. Then he started running toward Eddie again.

They met like a pair of wild horses, yelling and pounding each other. One of Dan's blows knocked Eddie backward but this time he didn't trip. He danced aside and ducked in under the flailing arm and hit Dan in the stomach. Then he grappled and hit his opponent in the stomach again. Then he hit him in the face. That knocked Dan down. Eddie stood above him, panting, his long hair falling down over his eyes.

"Get up and fight," he ordered.

Dan rolled over and Eddie let him get to his feet before rushing in. Dan caught the first blow on an upflung arm and ducked under, swinging for Eddie's stomach. But the brogans were not there to slow Eddie and trip him any more. He jumped away from the punch.

Then he rushed back in, striking his opponent's unprotected face and knocking him down again. Dan rolled over, dazed. His nose was bloody and he was blinking his eyes. He started to rise. He looked up at Eddie, standing over him, waiting to knock him down again, and sank back. The shouting children fell silent. Seeing the battle was over, Eddie turned and walked out of the schoolyard.

"Eddie!" Polly cried. "Come back."

He turned toward her, without stopping. "I'm going back to wild horses. They treat each other better'n you do." He ran down the street.

Polly started after him. "Wait!" she called. "Please, Eddie—"

For a moment he paid no attention. On and on he ran, down the road that led out of town. Apples, at least, would be glad to see him. But Polly's footsteps kept following, her voice kept calling, "Eddie—wait—"

He began to slow down, then he stopped. When she caught up with him, she was panting hard and could hardly speak. She grabbed his arm so he couldn't get away while she gasped out:

"You've got to stay, Eddie. Beating Dan Kinsale isn't all there is to it. Your real fight is learning to live with people. If you run away from that, you're just as big a coward as if you'd run away from Dan."

He didn't look at her. He kept his head turned away and took his time answering. But he didn't miss the worried, disappointed look that had come over her face. He squirmed uneasily. He'd expected her to admire him for whipping Dan; now he realized his staying meant more to her than the fight. It sounded like the same thing his father had tried to tell him, only he hadn't quite understood it then and he didn't now.

"But the kids don't like me," he said tightly.

"How can they like you," she asked, with a sober little smile, "if you don't give them a chance to know you?"

Eddie swallowed hard. Somehow he wanted her to admire him. Suddenly his whipping Dan Kinsale didn't mean much to him either. He scuffed his toes in the dirt. "All right," he said. "I'll stay."

Chapter 14

EDDIE DIDN'T TALK MUCH, going to school with Polly the next morning. He held his shoulders straight under his clean checked shirt, but his hands were cold with nervousness. At the first corner they met Dan Kinsale. The big boy looked at them sullenly, then stalked off. Set-faced, Eddie clumped on. His eyes never left the school up ahead that looked grim as a prison, even when other children appeared from houses along the way and joined Dan. He could hear them talking in low tones to each other and knew it was about him. He felt his face begin to get red.

"Don't pay any attention," Polly said softly. "They're just—well, sort of confused. They aren't sure how they feel about you yet."

Eddie started to say something, then shut his mouth hard.

"Besides," Polly continued eagerly, "if they aren't with you a hundred per cent, they aren't against you either, like they were yesterday. Just wait a few days, Eddie. They'll all be your friends. You'll see."

Eddie nodded. He didn't agree with Polly but a bargain was a bargain. He'd go through with this somehow.

The schoolmarm was standing in the door when they came up. She smiled at Eddie and motioned him inside. Once more he found himself the center of dozens of curious eyes as he walked to his seat in the front row. He felt a throbbing in his ears. Grimly, he squeezed himself into the little seat.

The first lesson was in eighth grade geography. June Weatherby rapped on the big globe of the world with her pencil and asked, "Dan Kinsale—what is the capital of Tennessee?"

Silence. Eddie looked around. His eyes met Dan's. The other boy frowned and turned his head. So Dan missed questions, too! Knowing that steadied Eddie. He squared around in his seat. Impulsively his hand shot up.

"Well, Eddie?" The teacher looked a little surprised.

Eddie flushed. Gosh, didn't she believe he knew anything? He was so put out at this reflection on his father's teaching that he hardly noticed how quiet the room had grown.

"The capital of Tennessee is Nashville," he said.

"Splendid." The teacher sounded very pleased. "Now the capital of Virginia—"

He could feel those eyes boring into his back and he wavered. Then he saw Polly smiling encouragement at him and suddenly remembered. "Richmond," he answered.

After that, it was easier. His confidence grew and he managed to answer all June Weatherby's questions, although

they kept getting tougher. Finally she asked him to bound Algeria. Her face wore a kind of dazed, yet hopeful look, as if she were giving him a chance to prove himself, although she didn't expect him to. The question upset Eddie momentarily, but again he rallied. He forgot the teacher, the staring children, even staunch Polly Jane. He only remembered his father, reading aloud to him by the light of a kerosene lamp—

"Algeria's a French colony in North Africa," Eddie said slowly. "The Mediterranean's on the north, Tunis on the east, Morocco on the west and the Sahara's on the south."

A buzz of whispers broke the silence of the room. The teacher held up her hand and the room grew still again. "Well," she said, smiling ruefully, "after that, maybe you'd better change seats with Dan."

Eddie felt a glow of triumph. It was the thing he'd like best of all, with Polly there to see. He started to get up. Then he saw Polly looking at him, and the expression on her face stopped him. She was watching him intently, as if waiting for something. But she wasn't smiling at all; she seemed to take no share in his triumph.

Somehow it made him remember what she had said the day before, about learning to live with people. He looked back at Dan. The boy's face was red and he was squirming in his seat and avoiding the eyes of the other kids. It made Eddie realize what a humiliation this would be to the boy.

Soberly Eddie settled back into the seat, shaking his head. "Maybe I know a little about geography, but my arithmetic's not much better than a first grader's. I'd better stay here till I brush up on that."

June Weatherby looked puzzled. But Eddie saw that Polly was smiling now. And then the schoolmarm smiled,

too, as if she understood. "Maybe we can get that other seat built by tomorrow," she said.

As the children trooped out of the schoolhouse at recess, Dan came up to Eddie. His face was red and he had a funny self-conscious expression. Eddie's heart began to thump. It looked as though Dan was going to make a friendly gesture—maybe thank him for not taking that seat in the back of the room.

But Dan didn't speak, after all. He just shifted from one foot to the other, staring down at the ground. Then he turned away.

"A friend!" Eddie thought bitterly. "He was probably going to jump me for answering those questions when he couldn't. Then he lost his nerve." He turned away, too, only in the other direction. He walked fast, just wanting to get away as far as he could, no matter where. Bleakly, he decided there was no way to get along with these kids. What else had there been to do *but* answer those questions?

At the corner of the schoolhouse a couple of boys hailed him. They were lanky, sandy-haired Tom Brady and chunky, smiling Ray Sawyer. They had laughed loudest of all when Eddie was trying to spell 'Mississippi.'

"Sorry, fellows," Eddie said grimly. "No more laughs. Try some place else."

Tom Brady cleared his throat and began slapping a baseball nervously into his catcher's mitt. "Gosh, Eddie," he said, "we didn't mean anything yesterday. We're always laughing at somebody. You'll find that out when you've been here longer."

Eddie didn't say anything. He just waited, staring at the two boys woodenly. At last Ray Sawyer blurted out, "Want to come over to the diamond and hit some flies for

us? A good fighter like you is sure to be a whizz at baseball, with a little practice."

"Yeah, come on," Tom urged. "We thought we'd start you with batting."

"Nope," Eddie said shortly. "Not interested." He saw what they were up to. Just wanted him out there so they could poke more fun at him.

Tom Brady frowned. "O.K.," he said disgustedly. "Come on, Ray. We're just wasting time." He started off, drawing the chunky boy with him.

Just then Polly Jane ran over, curls bobbing. "I thought you kids were going to practice baseball," she said anxiously. "What's the matter?"

"Eddie's not interested," Tom said flatly.

Polly Jane studied Eddie a moment. "Why not?" she asked. "Don't you feel up to it?"

Eddie looked at her a long time, realizing this was another test. Finally, he nodded grimly. "Let's go."

Reluctantly, Eddie followed the trio to the diamond. His ears burned at the memory of the other game. "I suppose they'll give me the works this time," he told himself.

To his surprise, Tom spoke encouragingly. "You've got strong wrists," he said. "That's important to a hitter." Eddie felt a faint glow of pleasure. "Give him the bat, Ray. We'll let Polly catch and you pitch."

Eddie gingerly took the bat, as Tom trotted out into center field. At once a crowd began to gather. Painfully aware of their curious stares, Eddie took an awkward stance.

"You're standing wrong to begin with," Tom told him. "Point your left shoulder at the pitcher. Move your hands closer together. Relax."

Tom pulled the ball back to his chest, kicked out his leg and hurled the ball like a regular veteran. Eddie swung.

The ball plopped into Polly's mitt. Eddie stared blankly at her. She grinned back.

"Try again. And next time keep your eye on the ball. Don't watch the pitcher."

She returned the ball to Ray and again he pitched. This time Eddie watched the ball. Again he swung. Again it plopped into Polly's mitt.

"You're still not relaxed," Tom said. "Swing with your whole body. Not just your arms."

Eddie was conscious of the other boys and girls watching him. Twice more Ray pitched the ball. Then on the third one, Eddie's bat connected. It popped feebly out toward first base and one of the boys ran in to make the catch. At the same time, however, a shout went up from the children. Polly jumped up and down, pounding Eddie on the shoulders. "You did it!" she cried. "You did it!"

Dan Kinsale was standing out near second base with three or four of the other boys. "Bob caught the ball," he shouted. "The new kid's out. Let somebody else bat."

"We're not even playing," Tom shouted at him. "What's the difference if he's out? He hit the ball, didn't he?"

Eddie just stood there holding the bat, unable to believe he'd hit the ball at all. But as he heard Tom and Polly defend him, he realized how he'd misjudged them. They hadn't brought him out here to make fun of him—and he'd hit the ball. How could such a little thing seem like such a major achievement? He felt almost as proud as if he'd topped the worst bronc of them all!

Eddie's life fell quickly into a new pattern. Mornings he rose, had breakfast, walked to school with Polly. Here he did his lessons and played baseball during recess and after school. Saturdays he helped Pa Hembre at the livery stable and did chores about the yard.

Though they didn't fight again, and Eddie tried his best to feel friendly toward Dan, there was still a gap between the two boys. Very soon Eddie had found out that baseball was Dan's obsession. The curly-headed boy would rather play the game than eat, and hoped to be a professional some day. Perhaps this was what made him work his ill-assorted squad of boys and girls so hard. It seemed to Eddie that Dan expected more out of the younger kids than they could give. Almost every day he heard grumbling and complaints from the boys on Dan's team. They were calling him the slave driver, and the tension was showing in their playing. Polly's team had always been the underdog. But now, with Eddie getting better and better, they were beginning to win games.

This seemed to make Dan grimmer than ever, and more than once he had hot arguments with his basemen or outfielders that ended with one of the boys walking off the field in anger.

Eddie talked to Polly about it on the way home one day.

"It's funny," he said. "When I first came I didn't notice how Dan drove them."

"It wasn't so bad then," she told him. "He's changing."

"What's doing it?"

"Don't you know?" she asked. He glanced at her blankly, to see a wise smile on her face. When he didn't answer, she said quietly, "You."

His eyes widened. "Me?"

"Don't you remember the chip you had on your shoulder when you first came here? You thought everybody was against you—Dan most of all, because he was the sheriff's son."

He nodded. "I guess you're right. But he had a chip on his shoulder, too. He still has."

"That's the point. He's always been the leader among us

kids. I think from the beginning he was afraid you'd take that away from him."

"But I'm just a green country kid—"

"Who could break wild horses and bound Algeria," Polly said. "And now you're getting better than any of us at baseball. Dan isn't jealous or mean, Eddie. Not really. You just got off wrong with him from the start. Like when you thought he hit you on purpose with that curve ball. I'm sure he didn't."

"I know that now," he said. "But I've tried to change, Polly. I've tried to meet him halfway. I could have taken his seat and made him sit with the little kids that time."

"And he started to thank you for it, but he lost his nerve at the last minute," she said. "That proves he wants to be decent, Eddie."

He shook his head. "I wish I could straighten it out."

She smiled wisely. "You'll find a way."

Next afternoon Eddie joined the others at baseball practice. Polly was first up and on Dan's second pitch she hit a pop fly between second and third. But Dolan, the short-stop, ran in to make the easy catch. At the last instant his foot struck a rough piece of ground and he stumbled and almost fell, missing the ball. He recovered quickly and scooped it up, making the throw to first. But Polly was already on the bag.

"I thought I told you to pick up your feet," Dan shouted at Bud. "That's the third error in two days."

"I couldn't help it," Bud said. "I tripped—"

"Then maybe you better go to the bench till you get some eyes in your toes," Dan said angrily.

A moan went up from the others on his team and the second baseman called plaintively, "Dan, we're shorthanded as it is. We can't bench Bud, with Eddie coming up."

That seemed to make Dan even angrier. "Go on to the bench," he shouted at Bud. "You won't have to worry about Eddie."

Eddie was already at the plate, and he watched Bud Dolan walk dejectedly off the field. But he knew it would only make Dan madder to say anything, and Dan would just take it out on the others in his team. Dan's face was red as he wound up. It looked like a strike, right across the plate. But Eddie knew Dan's wicked curve now, and waited until the last instant. The ball seemed to take a bounce in mid-air, five feet out from the plate. Only then did he swing at it.

The bat connected solidly, with a loud crack. Dazedly, Eddie watched the ball soar over Dan's head, over the whole yard, then clear over the roof of the schoolhouse.

"It's a homer," Ray Sawyer yelled. "Run, Eddie! Run!"

Eddie saw Polly darting excitedly for second. At a fast lope he followed her around the bags, while the center fielder circled the schoolhouse after the ball. When Eddie crossed home plate his whole team was waiting there for him. He was the center of a shouting, yelling crowd, pounding him on the back. The ball had not been recovered yet and even some of Dan's team came in to congratulate Eddie. When the excitement had died down and the girls and boys began to drift back to their places, Tom Brady and Eddie were left alone for a moment. Tom was Dan's third baseman.

"That's the farthest any of us ever hit a ball, Eddie," he said. "Even Dan." He stared at his glove, thumping his fist into the pocket, looking uncomfortable. Then he glanced at Dan, and in a low voice said, "We've been talking about it quite a while now. This sort of decides it."

"Decides what?" Eddie asked.

"Dan's just been getting too hard on us lately. We've

decided to elect a new captain. You're the best player of all. I know Polly'd let you go, if it meant being captain of the main team . . ."

Captain! For a moment Eddie felt a surge of excitement. This was what he had been working toward all the time, only half knowing it. The final recognition. The final proof that he was accepted by the kids. Nobody could say he didn't belong now.

He even wished his father were here to see. How proud he would be. How proud Polly would be. He wanted to go right over and tell her. Eddie Rivers, captain—

Then his whirl of excited thoughts stopped. He saw Dan, standing alone on the pitcher's mound. He was watching them closely, black brows twisted in a frown.

"Does Dan know about this?" Eddie asked.

"He overheard us talking about it yesterday," Tom said.

No wonder he's been so jumpy, Eddie thought. Somehow it reminded him of a stallion he had once seen after it had been defeated in battle over the right to rule the herd. He remembered how sorry he had been for the animal. It had been forced to leave the herd and go off alone while a younger, stronger stallion took over the leadership.

Somehow this was just like that. It would be the final blow to Dan's pride. Fear of losing the leadership was what had made him so ornery lately, what had made him drive his team so hard. Polly had said he wasn't like that at all, before Eddie came.

Eddie looked back at Tom Brady. He was confused now. He grinned uncomfortably. "Let's talk about it later, Tom. Your center fielder's got the ball."

"Sure, Eddie." Tom grinned. "But just remember. We're all for you."

Polly's team got another run before they were put out. As Eddie walked to his position at shortstop he was still

wrestling with his decision. Right now, he wanted to be captain more than anything else in the world. But he knew it would only widen the gap between himself and Dan, would probably ruin whatever chance he had left of be-friending the boy.

"What's the difference?" he thought. "Dan sure hasn't gone out of his way to make friends with me. If he wanted to bury the hatchet, he could have done it a long time ago. I've got just as much right to be captain as he has."

Tom Brady was first up. Polly's first pitch was a ball, low and outside. On the second one Tom connected—a pop fly floating right above shortstop, such an easy catch that even Tom slowed down in his run to first, thinking it was all over.

But as Eddie waited to make the catch, Dan's face seemed to come between him and the ball, hurt, lost, confused.

And when the ball hit Eddie's fingers they were slack. It bounced out of his mitt onto the ground. He heard a dismal groan go up from his teammates and he looked at the ball, shaking his head in helpless anger at his mistake. Or had it been a mistake?

The second man up hit a hot grounder. It was the second baseman's ball and could have been a double play, with Tom Brady coming off first. But Eddie was still thinking about Dan and ran for the ball automatically. He collided with the second baseman and they both tumbled to the ground with the ball bounding between them. An outfielder got it but there was nobody on second to tag Tom. All the fielder could do was throw to third to keep Tom on second.

The second baseman got to his feet, brushing angrily at his dusty clothes, frowning. "You trying to be a grand-stander, Eddie?" he demanded.

Eddie rose, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. Guess I was thinking about something else."

He limped back to his position. He could see Tom Brady looking at him, a disappointed expression on his face. It tightened Polly up and she walked the next man. Dan was up then. With three men on, everybody was tense. Dan rubbed his foot on the ground, changed grips on the bat, glanced at Eddie. That same expression was on his face. He didn't look tough or mean at all. Just nervous and maybe a little scared. Maybe the same way Eddie had looked that first day at school—friendless, alone, wanting friends, yet going around with a chip on his shoulder because he didn't know how to make them.

The first pitch. A ball, high and outside.

Dan let it go, licked his lips, stared moodily at the plate. Eddie wiped the moisture off his hands.

The second pitch. Dan swung, connected. A grounder, past the pitcher and between second and third. Before he knew what he was doing Eddie scooped it up. But in that last minute, with memory of Dan's face before him, he knew what he had to do.

Instead of throwing home, he turned and made an excited heave to first, throwing ten feet to the right of the bag. The baseman made a wild lunge to get the ball but it whizzed past him and went out toward the road. With everybody howling and yelling, Dan followed his teammates around the bases.

The first baseman didn't get to the ball until all three runners had crossed home ahead of Dan. And the throw to home didn't get there until Dan was over the plate and safe. Dan's whole team crowded around him, yelling and whooping and pounding him on the back. He was the hero of the hour and forgotten was all the tension and quarreling of earlier in the day. When it had died down, Dan

grinned broadly and told Bud Dolan he could come off the bench and take his rightful turn at bat.

Through it all, Eddie stood dejectedly in the infield, pounding his mitt and looking at the ground. He wondered if he had done right. Would his own team hate him now? He saw Ray Sawyer coming over from third. And the second baseman was walking toward him. He was going to get it now.

Ray put his arm over Eddie's shoulder. "That's O.K., Eddie. We all have our bad days."

"Sure," the second baseman said. "You just got excited."

Eddie felt a warmth run through him. "Thanks," he said huskily. "I guess I've got a lot to learn yet."

The game went on. But the play seemed to take the heart out of Polly's team. Dan's team got seven more runs before they struck out. As Dan's team walked out into the field Tom Brady halted a moment beside Eddie.

"What happened?" he asked. "I never saw anybody lose his head so bad."

Eddie nodded, looking at the ground. "I guess I'm just not sure of myself yet, Tom. Maybe you jumped the gun about making me captain. It looked like I was getting good but it was just beginner's luck."

"Maybe you're right," Tom said awkwardly. "Maybe we better wait a while."

"Sure I'm right," Eddie said. "It'll be a long time before I'm as good as the captain you've got now."

Dan's team held the lead his play had given him, so that the game finished with a score of twenty to seven. In the dusk, the teams broke up and started home. Polly joined Eddie. She glanced at him in a troubled way. He didn't know exactly how to feel. Should he try to explain? Before

he could speak he heard somebody behind them and turned to see Dan Kinsale.

The boy joined them hesitantly. He was red-faced, embarrassed looking. It was the same expression he'd had when he'd seemed about to thank Eddie for not making him change seats. And at the last instant, Eddie thought he was going to lose his nerve again. But he didn't.

"Hi," he said, awkwardly.

"Hi," Polly said. "It's been a long time since you walked home with us."

"I guess so." Dan walked by the fence, looking at the ground. He grimaced. "I guess I've been sort of tough on my kids, haven't I?"

"They know how you love the game," Polly said.

"It's more than that," Dan said. He sent a sidelong glance at Eddie. Then, with an embarrassed grin, he put his hand on Eddie's shoulder. "Don't feel bad about those fumbles, Eddie. Anybody could've made 'em. You just need a little more practice."

"I wish I could throw like you," Eddie said.

"That's one thing I can't teach him," Polly said.

Dan's grin broadened. "Why don't you come out early tomorrow. I'll give you some tips."

Eddie felt a glow come to his face, in the dusk. "Thanks, Dan," he said. His voice sounded husky. "I sure need some help."

They were at Dan's house now. His grin grew embarrassed again. "Well," he said awkwardly, "be seeing you."

Polly and Eddie walked on through the growing darkness. At last she turned. Her eyes had a strange shine to them. "You had that pop fly right in your hands."

"Slippery fingers."

"You could have made that throw to first with your eyes closed."

"My eyes *have* been closed . . . until now."

"They wanted you to be captain, didn't they?" she asked.

"I guess so."

"It meant a lot to you."

"It meant more to Dan."

"You're right," she said. "He isn't so afraid of you, now that he's sure you won't take his place." She nodded knowingly. "I thought you'd find a way."

"You aren't mad at me?" he asked, wondering.

"There are a lot of things more important than a baseball game, Eddie."

He smiled into the dusk. "I know that for sure now, Polly."

Chapter 15

THE SECOND FRIDAY in November was Eddie's birthday. He hadn't told anybody, yet he thought about it, off and on, all day. Always before, there had been some little gift from his father on the breakfast table. Its absence this morning had left him with a queer lonesome feeling.

Just before school was dismissed that afternoon June Weatherby came over and put his copybook down on his desk. "Will you please stay and copy your history lesson over, Eddie?" she asked. "I couldn't read some of it." She smiled at him a little.

"All right, Miss Weatherby," Eddie said. Inside he felt put out with himself for agreeing so readily. Lately he'd found himself doing this more and more. Was he getting to be a softy?

The schoolmarm rang the bell and the other children jumped up with a cheerful banging of books and clattering of feet. Stifling a sigh, Eddie turned to a fresh page in his copybook and began to write. For half an hour he toiled, being careful to form clear round letters. When he had finished he took it up to the schoolmarm. She glanced at the first page and smiled approvingly.

"That's a big improvement, Eddie. You did it with good grace, too. You've changed a lot. Your father will be pleased."

Eddie tried to smile back, thinking how little she knew about things. His father didn't care about him much one way or another. Hadn't he forgotten his own son's birthday? And he didn't even have Apples to make a fuss over him any more. Eddie turned and left, walking slowly out the door and across the empty schoolyard. He wondered vaguely why everybody had gone home so early but the thought soon passed in the wave of homesickness he was feeling.

A wind had sprung up. There was a smell of winter in it, coming down off the mountains. It made him think harder than ever about his father. Bits of their life together flitted through his mind. Riding a mountain trail in the freshness of the early morning. Lying beside a campfire watching the stars, while his father pointed them out and named them. June Weatherby coming with the sheriff while he hid in the haystack. He remembered his father jabbing the hay for him, pretending he couldn't find him. But most of all, he remembered the day his father sent him away, standing so tall and grim outside their cabin.

Eddie walked on slowly, staring at the ground. A tumbleweed rolled past him, driven by a sudden gust. He felt the wind's chill fingers rumpling his hair and tugging at his sweater, but he hardly noticed. He was thinking how miserable he'd been that day he left his father, how lonely since.

And yet—he liked it here, too! In a sudden flash of understanding he had to admit it. There was something about having friends his own age, about going to school with them and coming back to a well-ordered home that satisfied another part of him. Gradually, out of his confusion, one idea emerged. He needed them both. They were both a natural part of life. Yet how could that ever be? His father had to stay where he could make a living. And anyhow, he didn't want his—

“Oh, forget it!” he thought. “What's the good? I'd better get along home and see if there's something Ma Hembre wants me to do.

But it looked as if neither Ma Hembre nor Polly was home when he finally turned in at the gate. The shades were drawn and everything was quiet. Dully, he opened the front door and stepped inside. The darkness and stillness made him feel lonelier than ever. Dejectedly, he started toward the stairs. I'll go and change into my old levis and get at that woodpile, he thought. Then suddenly he heard a muffled giggle. The next instant the window shades snapped up. He wheeled, dazzled by the sudden light.

“Happy birthday, Eddie!” shouted a dozen voices.

In the wild hubbub of laughs and shouts that followed, Eddie stood there, staring around. Girls and boys were popping up from behind the sofa, the chairs, and the big old square grand piano in the corner. Eddie grinned sheepishly. He knew now why the schoolmarm had kept him after school and why the schoolyard had emptied so early. To Eddie, who'd left things as usual when he went to school that morning, and who had never attended a party, all this was pretty hard to take in. The room was decorated with gay streamers of colored paper and great boughs covered with yellow autumn leaves. What looked like borrowed chairs stood in a row. A donkey, cut out of black paper

and minus a tail, was pinned to a sheet stretched along one wall. A kitchen broom stood beside it, evidently part of some game. Through the double doors opening into the dining room, Eddie saw June Weatherby and Ma Hembre putting food on the table. He blinked disbelievingly. Was all this for him?

"Welcome to your birthday party, Eddie!" Polly cried, eyes dancing with excitement.

Everybody whistled and cheered. Eddie felt his throat choke up. "G-gosh!" he stammered. "I didn't think anybody knew."

Suddenly a tall man rose from a chair in the corner. Pop! Eddie started to rush into his father's arms, speechless with happiness. Then he stopped dead. I'm too big for that, he thought, feeling like a fool. A battle began inside him. He wanted to forget the past, to know again the closeness and warmth he'd had with his father before—and he wasn't sure he ever could. For weeks now he'd been living with a sense of betrayal. It made him suspicious of his father. Was there something behind this visit here today? He stood there helplessly, not knowing what to do or say, a tall overgrown boy with a tense dark face and unhappy brown eyes. Then his father solved things by picking up something that leaned against his chair. It was a new bat.

"Happy birthday, Eddie!" He smiled, holding it out.

Eddie took the bat stiffly. "Thanks," he mumbled.

"That's all right, Eddie," Calico said. He waited as though expecting his son to say something more. Only Eddie couldn't think of anything. He heard the children moving impatiently behind him and for just a second he saw a tired old look settle down over his father's smiling face. I'm not showing up very well, he thought. Guess Pop's not so pleased with me, after all. Then it came to him what to

say, and he wondered fiercely why he hadn't thought of it in the first place.

"How's Apples?" he blurted out. "Did you ride him down?"

Calico shook his head. "Apples is a little off his feed."

"What's the matter?" Eddie asked anxiously.

"Nothing much. His leg's fine. Don't you worry, Son."

Eddie had a sick feeling his father wasn't giving him a straight answer. Why? He could think of no reason. His doubt and suspicion flared up again. Yet why should his father deceive him about Apples? Sooner or later he would be bound to know, if anything serious was wrong. And standing there, seeing the smile on his father's face, it almost seemed that Calico was glad to see him. Why had he come to the party, if he hadn't wanted to? Then there was the swell new bat—

Someone nudged Eddie. He turned mechanically to see June Weatherby standing between the dining room doors. Her cheeks were pink, her lips smiling.

"All right, Children," she said gaily. "The party has officially started. How about singing, *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow*, to Eddie, then we'll eat, and play games. Afterwards, you older ones might like to square-dance. But we'd better start or Eddie's father won't be able to stay for it all."

Polly played the accompaniment on the old square piano, with the schoolmarm's sweet soprano leading them high and clear. The whole group joined in as if they meant every word. A lump rose in Eddie's throat. Was this really happening to him—Eddie Rivers—who'd hated school and had a fight the very first day? A warm sense of belonging filled him, a kind of happiness he'd never dreamed of feeling since leaving home.

As the song ended, everybody made a rush for the dining room. Eddie and his father were left alone in the middle

of the parlor. Eddie studied Calico anxiously from the tail of his eye. He wanted to tell him all the things he had thought about on his way home but he didn't know how to start.

"Come on, Eddie," Polly called.

"And hurry, for gosh sakes!" Tom Brady groaned. "We're starving."

Eddie turned. He guessed he wouldn't try and explain, after all. It would sound kind of silly. His father was happy with things like they were. You could tell by the big smile on his face. He hasn't really missed me, Eddie thought.

Blushing and stumbling, Eddie made his way to the head of the table. He sat down to a burst of whistling and cheering. After that he didn't try to speak confidentially to his father, though Calico sat right next to him.

If Eddie hadn't been so unhappy, he would have gotten great pleasure out of the chicken sandwiches and potato salad piled high on his paper plate, and the steaming mug of hot chocolate standing beside it. But somehow he couldn't eat much. His eyes kept turning to his father, who was laughing and joking and having a wonderful time. Then he choked and couldn't swallow anything.

At last Ma Hembre went to the kitchen and brought back a big white cake with fourteen tiny lighted pink candles on it. She bustled forward and set it down in front of Eddie with a beaming smile.

"You're to cut it, Eddie," she said, in her kindly way. "But first try and blow the candles out all at one time. If you do, you get your wish."

The room grew quiet. Eddie drew a deep breath and blew. As the last candle flickered out he shut his eyes tight. "Let everything come out right for Pop and me," he thought. Deep in his heart he believed his wish was foolish. The

lonesomeness and the belief that his father didn't want him had become part of him.

When the cake was cut and eaten, June Weatherby took charge. First they played a game especially for the younger children called Musical Chairs. Eddie was bashful and hung back. But the others kept after him and before long he was taking part as happily as anybody. Yet when he bumped into his father during the rush and scramble, his pleasure in the fun faded suddenly. For Calico said, "Excuse me," in a polite voice, as if Eddie were a stranger.

After playing Tin Tin, Come In, another children's game which involved the broom, they pinned the tail on the donkey, then cleared the room for a square-dance. June Weatherby asked Calico to do the calling and sat down at the piano. Soon her fingers were flying over the keyboard in a lively tune that made Eddie want to tap his feet. But he had never danced in his life before and lingered shyly in a corner. The others came and got him, though, and pulled him along into the dance. When he stepped on their toes and missed the calls, they just laughed. And pretty soon he got the hang of it. Caught up in the contagion of high spirits and comradeship, he stepped it off with the best of them.

"Swing your partners," Calico called, "gents to the left, ladies to the right—"

Eddie's eyes turned to his father, standing up on a kitchen chair, clapping his hands. In Eddie's confused mind it looked like his father had never been so full of fun.

Then the music stopped and everybody except Eddie crowded around Calico, joking and laughing. But Calico didn't seem to miss Eddie at all. He was too busy poking Tom Brady playfully in the ribs and feeling the muscle on Ray Sawyer's arm. Blindly, Eddie turned and slipped out into the hall.

Suddenly light footsteps came hurrying after him. Then he felt a gentle hand on his arm. "What's wrong, Eddie?" June Weatherby asked. "You don't seem to be having much fun. Is it because your father's acting as if nothing's wrong between you? He's just pretending, Eddie."

"I don't think so," Eddie said miserably. "He laughs and jokes and—" His voice broke.

"He doesn't want to spoil the party," June Weatherby broke in earnestly. She drew the boy around toward her. "Look, Eddie. You don't really think your father betrayed you, do you? Don't you see it was the only way he could get you to come down here?"

He stood there, looking into her level eyes, not saying anything. All his worry and confusion seemed to leave him. It's true, he thought, wonderingly. I should have figured it out for myself.

Maybe he had figured it out. Maybe an understanding of it all had been coming together piece by piece during these last weeks, but pride and humiliation and bitterness had kept him from seeing it clearly. It had taken this day to bring it all into focus.

June Weatherby smiled. "You do see, don't you, Eddie? Now go and tell Calico before he leaves." She gave the boy a little push.

Calico had found his hat and was saying good-bye to Ma Hembre.

"I'll walk out front with you, Pop," Eddie said. "I've got something to tell you."

"Won't the others miss you?" his father said, in that stiff polite way. "The party isn't over yet."

"The schoolmarm will fix things," Eddie said.

Calico nodded and led the way through the hall and out onto the front porch. Here the two stood for a moment in silence.

Then Eddie squared around, facing his father. There was nothing in the world but the tall lean man in the high-crowned hat. The mechanical smile was gone from his face now. It was lined and tired looking, and there was a shine to his eyes, almost like tears.

Eddie suddenly realized how he'd misjudged his father. All that laughing and joking during the party had only been to cover up what was really inside. Calico had wanted to say so many things, too, just like Eddie, and had been unable to. They were both cut out of the same block. And this realization suddenly freed Eddie, breaking the dam of his pride. All the words he'd wanted to say poured out. He told his father how he thought he'd been betrayed, how lonely he'd been. How he'd hated school and fought the very first day.

"But now it's different," Eddie said. "You had to do it that way, and you were right. I'm willing to stay and finish, if that's what you want."

Calico put his hand on Eddie's shoulder, gripping it tightly. The haggard lines were gone from his face, but that brightness was still in his eyes. His voice seemed to tremble.

"Aren't we a couple of fools? If you hadn't said that I might have gone away without telling you how I feel. I thought you were still sore at me. I thought maybe I'd done the wrong thing, after all. But now it's going to work out, Eddie. You can stay here and have a dad too. I got a bid for horses from the army that'll give me enough to buy the old Tolliver place on the edge of town. In a few months we'll be together again.

Eddie could hardly believe his ears. My wish came true, he thought dazedly. He was all choked up again and he couldn't say what he wanted to. But this time he didn't have to. They understood each other. His father's grip

on his shoulder relaxed. "I've got to go now," Calico said.

Eddie accompanied his father to the corral behind the house where Midnight was hitched. They said their good-byes and Calico stepped reluctantly into the saddle. He smiled down at Eddie. But just before he turned the horse away, a troubled look came into his eyes.

As Eddie watched his father ride away, he felt his newfound happiness fade. Had Pop been thinking about the same thing he had in that last moment. What was really wrong with Apples?

Chapter 16

EDDIE HAD PLANNED TO WAIT until Christmas vacation to visit his father. But the question of Apples burned in his mind ceaselessly after his birthday. Finally, he could stand it no longer. Thanksgiving was coming up and he would have four days off from school. Eddie told the Hembres he wanted to be with his father that week end. Ma Hembre wanted him to stay with them for Thanksgiving, but Pa Hembre must have seen the ferment in Eddie, for he agreed to let the boy go.

They wanted to drive Eddie up in the wagon, but he wouldn't take them away from their Thanksgiving dinner. He had traveled the trail often and knew it well, and finally convinced them it would be safe for him to go alone. Pa let Eddie ride the big Hembre mare and early Thursday morning the boy bid them all good-bye and started out on the long, familiar ride.

Ma Hembre had packed him a lunch and he was so eager to reach the cabin that he ate in the saddle. Early in the afternoon he topped a rise and saw the well-remembered building with its pattern of pole corrals and pens. Excitedly he thumped heels into the big mare and loped her down the road. But as he pulled up by the pens he saw that Billy-goat was not in sight. That meant his father was off running horses. And Apples. Where was Apples?

Frantically, Eddie circled the pens, looking vainly in the black shadows of the sheds, the stalls. Finally, at the corner of the last corral, he stopped. He had to admit it. Apples was gone!

He understood now what had made his father answer him so strangely at his birthday party. The Appaloosa had been gone even then—had gotten away somehow—and Pop had not mentioned it, knowing what a blow it would be to Eddie, hoping to find Apples before Eddie came to the cabin.

And that's where his father was now—out hunting the horse.

Moodily, Eddie stared into the corrals, trying to decide what to do. Midnight was in the pen with another pair of horses. Eddie felt sorry that in his anxiety over Apples he had neglected his old pony. He went inside and Midnight trotted to him, nickering happily. He put an arm over the satiny neck, stroking it, while Midnight nuzzled him.

He couldn't just stay here, waiting, while his father was out hunting Apples. He had to help somehow.

He tried to think where Pop would be hunting. At last he remembered the Indian he and his father had met in the Snakes, and what the man had said. The Appaloosa had been born in Piute Canyon, always returned there when men chased him. The Indian had been talking about Devil, then. But if the horses were twins, that went for Apples,

too. If he'd been born there, perhaps he too went back when he sought a real hideaway.

Eddie grew excited again with the possibility that he was right. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to start planning. Grimly he set about gathering all the portable food in the shack, extra clothes, blankets. He put the pack on one of the spare horses, then saddled Midnight. He took the old Winchester, too, lashing it beneath his left stirrup leather. He turned the Hembre mare in with the one remaining horse, saw that they had enough feed and water for several days, closed up the cabin. Then he mounted and started into the mountains.

On every side the russet mantle of autumn lay across the shadowed canyons and stained the hillsides with vivid hues. The bright red and gold of frostbitten chokecherry made a crimson splash along the edges of the trail. The leaves of the mountain ash shimmered like silver in the last of the sunlight. But there was a hint of chill, of dampness on the air, that told Eddie there was snow somewhere ahead.

With night, the boy made camp, staked out Midnight and the pack horse, built his fire, cooked his meal. The darkness was full of strange, frightening sounds. Somewhere far off a wolf howled. Even with his exhaustion, it was hard to sleep.

He crossed south of Jackson Lake the next day and rose into the Snakes. The shaggy heads of the mountains were shrouded in haze. He knew that meant storm, up ahead of him, in the higher peaks. It grew colder as he crossed the river and rose through the passes. He sought familiar landmarks and was able to follow them pretty well. Toward afternoon, however, he reached the haze. It closed about him like a heavy mist. He kept riding but he couldn't see

anything. Finally he stopped, unable to decide where he was. The panic began to rise in him as he realized he was lost.

He got himself under control again. In the mountains, when you were lost, it was a good rule to keep going down. He turned his horse off on a steep slope and reached a valley and followed along it. The mist thinned, and he saw, stretched out ahead of him, the jackstraw pattern of corrals and a house. Maybe they could tell him where he was. He rode up to the door, dismounted, and knocked. In a moment it was opened. Haskins stood there.

Eddie gaped at him in surprise. He hadn't realized this was the man's ranch. Always before he had seen it from above, and it looked so different up close.

"I—I'm hunting Apples," Eddie gulped. "I figured you could tell me the way to Piute Canyon."

Haskins scratched his bristly black beard, shaking his head in wonderment. "This is getting crazy. Calico was by here this morning. He was hunting Apples, too."

"Calico?" Eddie echoed.

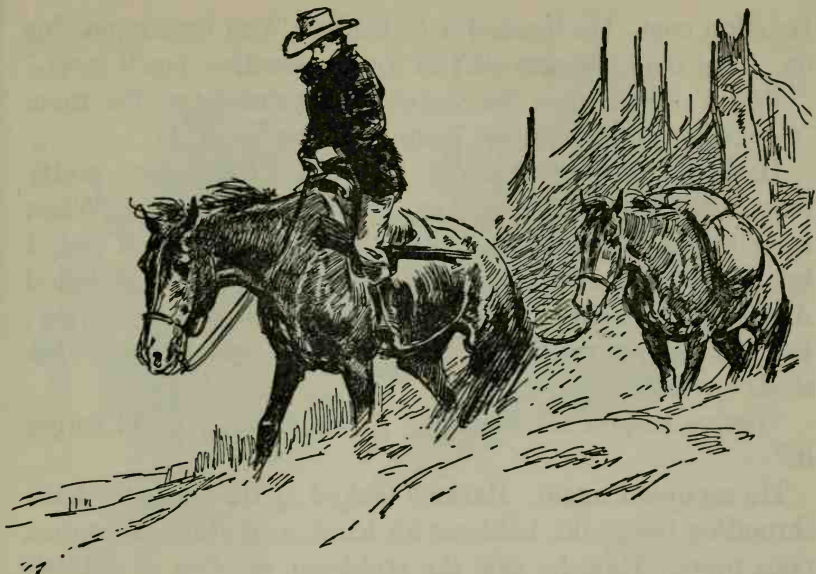
"Yeah. He said Apples got loose that day they took you down to town. Calico wanted to find him before your birthday, so he could take him to you, but he couldn't do it. He's been through here half a dozen times, trying to pick up Apples' trail."

"Which way was he headed this time," Eddie asked hurriedly.

"You can't go on in this weather, Son. There's a storm brewing up above."

Eddie caught his arm. "I've got to go. Pop and Apples are all I've got in the world. If you won't tell me which way he went, I'll go on anyway."

Haskins frowned, finally shook his head. "You're a stubborn little cuss. I guess if you got this far alone, you can



take care of yourself all right. Calico thought that sooner or later Apples would drift back to Piute Canyon, where he was born. This time Calico was on a fresh trail, and it was heading in that direction. He said he thought it was the wolves driving Apples back to his old stamping ground."

"Wolves?"

Haskins nodded. "A whole pack of 'em, according to the tracks Calico was following. They'll tail Apples till this storm busts. When he's beaten by the wind and the snow till he's too tired to run, they'll pull him down."

Eddie tugged his arm. "Which way? Which way?"

"You follow this valley north to Jackson Creek. Stay with the creek till you reach headwaters. That's Loon Lake. Piute Canyon begins on its north side."

The boy wheeled back to his horse.

"Hold it a minute." Haskins' voice stopped him. The man turned back inside, came out a moment later with a shaggy

bearskin coat. He handed it to Eddie. "You better put this on. That denim jacket ain't fit for the weather you'll meet."

Eddie slipped into the warm coat, grinning at the man. "Gee, you're sure different from last time."

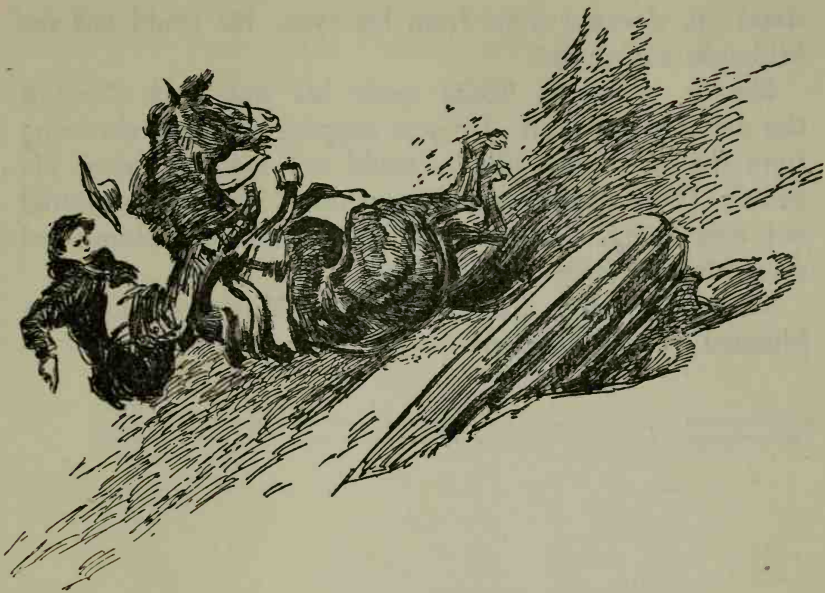
Haskins grinned sheepishly. "I guess I have acted pretty mean. But Calico told me them Appaloosas are twins. When I realized I'd been blaming Apples for what Devil did, I felt like a fool. If it hadn't been for you, I would of killed Apples a couple of times. I wish I could help you now. But if I left my ranch, Devil might come in and take what studs are left."

"You've helped me enough," Eddie said. "I won't forget it."

He mounted again. Haskins looked at the ominous haze shrouding the peaks, held out his hand, as if about to protest once more. Then he saw the stubborn, set line of Eddie's face, and dropped his hand, wordlessly. The boy giggered Midnight forward, pulling the reluctant pack horse behind.

Eddie followed the valley upward until it became a pass, filled with the lonely howl of the wind. Already that wind was beginning to carry feathery flakes of snow against him. The fir and pine gave way to the tamarack and twisted juniper of higher altitudes. A mountain sheep appeared on a ledge far above, its curving horns outlined against the sky. In a darkening day, Eddie found Jackson Creek. The trail following its bank became a ledge, slippery with ice. The chill wind buffeted the boy, eating through the thick coat until he was shivering constantly. It made him think of Apples, somewhere ahead, hounded by those wolves.

Eddie had lost all track of time when he reached the lake. The wind was a gale now, whipping snow against him in a smothering curtain. Eyes squinted against it, he followed the shore of the lake until he reached the mouth of a canyon lying between two steep ridges of the mountain.



He drove Midnight into the canyon, hoping against hope that he would sight Apples ahead before the storm closed down completely. The howl of the wind deafened him, snow whipped against him in gusts so strong it almost tore him from the saddle. He could not see ten feet ahead. He felt the trail rise beneath him again, another ledge. Then Midnight stumbled.

Eddie tried to pull him up. But the horse had slipped on the icy edge of the shelving trail. He fought to stay erect for an instant. Then Eddie felt the horse toppling over, felt himself pitched from the saddle.

He struck the cushiony snow, sank deep. Choking, gasping, he began to fight like a wolf in a trap. Panic knotted his stomach. His heart beat a fierce tattoo against his ribs. Then his feet struck something solid. It was bare rock, beneath the snow. He followed the spine of it out of the drift and

stood up, slewing snow from his eyes. He could not see Midnight anywhere.

Slowly, painfully, Eddie made his way back through the drifts to the trail. He was sopping wet and shivering from the cold. But still he could not see the horse. He called. There was no answering whinny. The storm blotted out everything. Eddie's heart sank, and he remembered something his father had told him.

The surest way a man can kill himself is to get lost in a blizzard without his horse.

Chapter 17

WHEN CALICO JIM reached the bottom of Piute Canyon, he halted Billygoat and his pack horse. The storm buffeted at him, howling like a hundred devils. If he hadn't lost the wolf trail, he would have reached here yesterday.

The wolves had chased Apples into a spur canyon on the other side of the lake. Following their trail late the afternoon before, Calico had lost the tracks in the hard rock slopes of the canyon. It had taken him until night to find it again. Unable to follow it by dark, he had been forced to camp. In the morning, the tracks had led him up the steep side of the spur canyon, across a mesa, and down into Piute Canyon. Already the storm had been building. Before the snow blotted out everything, Calico had been able to see that the wolves were still hanging on, driving Apples, waiting to pull him down.

But now the snow was falling so thickly that Calico couldn't see ten feet ahead, much less find any tracks on the ground. The best he could do was push blindly on into the canyon, hoping that Apples would stay on the bottom. If the stallion took another trail up to the ridges or the mesatops, he would lose him completely. But even that was a faint hope, for he was already more than a day behind the Appaloosa. Those wolves might have already pulled him down.

Calico knew what a blow the loss of the horse would be to Eddie. He felt a deep sense of betraying the boy by letting Apples in for this. It was what drove him on into the canyon, against his own better judgment. A man was a fool not to seek shelter in this storm. But he knew he wouldn't be able to face Eddie again if Apples were killed.

The wind fought Calico savagely. It shifted back and forth. It dealt him quick blows from the flank, like a cougar teasing its prey. Then it howled about his head like a wolf pack. Then it ripped at his coat like a grizzly trying to tear him to ribbons.

Suddenly he seemed to see movement ahead. He pulled Billygoat up sharp, blinking his eyes. Had he imagined it? He wiped snow from his eyes with a soggy sleeve. There it was again. He put his heels into Billygoat's flanks. The mule grunted disgustedly and plunged on through a deep drift.

Then Calico could see that the movement was an animal—a horse! He pushed Billygoat harder, the pack horse coming heavily behind. The animal ahead took shape and color.

"Apples!" Calico shouted. "Apples—"

Then he stopped, for he could see the animal clearly now. It wasn't Apples. It was the Appaloosa's mate, the bay mare, floundering toward him in the drifts.

"Sulphur and molasses!" Calico exclaimed. "How did you get here?"

A mile up Piute Canyon, Devil was throwing a fit. It was back in a sheltered cutoff, where he had driven his band to escape the main force of the storm. He was circling them, kicking up snow like a plough, as he sought the bay mare. A young stallion tried to drift away, and Devil nipped at his heels. The young horse jumped back with a whinny of pain. Devil ran on around the band, snorting in rage.

Where was that mare? She had been with the band a few minutes ago. She had been with them for two days now. Devil had brought her across Jackson Hole with the two mares he had stolen from Haskins, and had joined his main band here in Piute Canyon. They had been on a high meadow yesterday, when they heard the wolves. They had seen Apples go by, in the canyon below, stumbling and limping, followed by the sinister shadows of the wolves.

The bay mare had tried to escape then, apparently wanting to help Apples. But Devil had prevented it, herding her back into the band on every attempt. He had kept close watch on her all that night and this morning, until the storm had blown up. Then he had driven his band for the shelter of this cutoff.

He stopped circling them, realizing at last that she was not among the band. What would draw her away? Apples again? Could the other Appaloosa have evaded the wolves and come back into Piute Canyon? Had the mare caught his scent on the wind, or heard his whinny during a lull in the storm?

It angered Devil beyond caution. He had gone through too much getting that mare to lose her now. She could not have gotten far away. Knowing fear of the storm would



keep the rest of his band here, he turned out of the cutoff into the main canyon.

As soon as he left the sheltering jaws of the cutoff, the fury of the storm caught him up. The howl of the wind deafened him. The blown snow blinded him. He sunk belly deep in some of the drifts. He sought the shelter of an overhanging cliff and stood quiet, snorting, blinking his eyes.

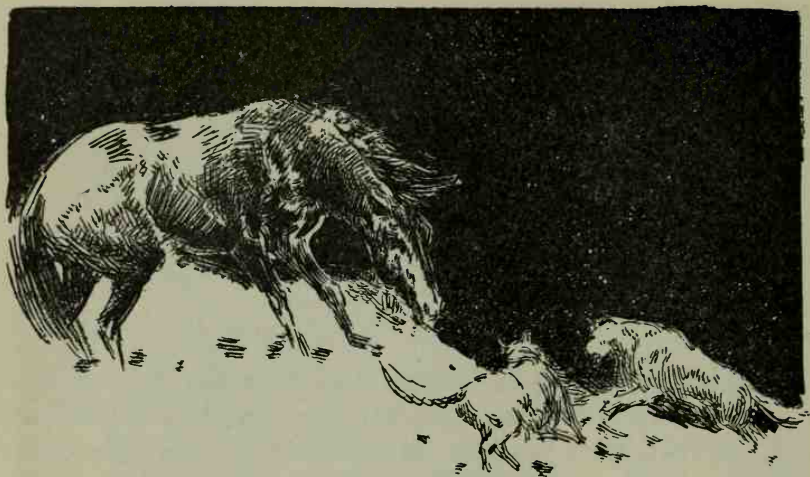
Getting his directions again, he ploughed once more into the snow.

Then, plunging through a drift, he came into a sheltered spot where the dense timber had guarded the ground from the snow. It was powdered across the rock faces here only inches deep. He stopped short. On the other side of the shelter, huddled in a crevice of rocks, was a human! Devil strained to see more clearly. It was the black-haired boy, Eddie.

Apples was in Piute Canyon, too. The day before, the wolves had chased him through the canyon and out into the rugged mountains beyond. But he had returned, for even then, he had been failing. The constant flight had worn him down. He knew that he could not go much farther. It was the age-old instinct of self-preservation which had caused him to make a great circle through the mountains and come back to the canyon where he had been born, because he had known his first safety here. His mother and father had protected him from just such menaces as these wolves. It was natural that he should wish to make his last stand here.

It had not all been running. Many times he stopped with his back against a cliff or a great rock, snorting in defiance. Sometimes the wolves had tried to attack. But he had sent more than one of them back with a deep wound from his sharp teeth or a broken leg from his deadly hoofs. Now, he knew, he would soon make his last stand. They saw how beaten down he was by the storm. Struggling through the deep drifts had sapped the last of his strength. He was numb with cold and stumbling with exhaustion, and their next attack would be the final one.

Without knowing it, Apples passed the cutoff where Devil had left his band. He floundered on through knee-deep snow. With half-blind eyes he made out the dim flut-



tering shapes of the wolves on his flanks. There was a lull in the wind, and a long howl took its place. He saw a rocky slope rising from the fog of windblown snow ahead of him. That was as good a place as any to make his last stand. There was a big rock he could stand against to protect his rear. They would have to come at him from the front, and he could go down fighting.

But as Apples neared the rock, he stopped. Was that a wolf? That big shape ahead of him? It couldn't be. He stumbled on for a couple more steps. It was a horse. An Appaloosa! Devil!

Apples stopped short, in surprise. There was a human approaching the horse. It was the black-haired boy. It was Eddie!

Too exhausted to understand the situation right away, Apples watched as Eddie staggered up to Devil, talking to him in a low voice.

"Apples," Eddie said, "it's me. Can't you see? It's Eddie. I've come to help you." He was approaching Devil, hand outstretched. "I've come to take you back."

Devil stood rigid, pink nostrils flared, a crazy look in his eyes. As Apples finally realized what Eddie meant to do, he let out a shrill whinny and started stumbling toward the boy. But the storm sounds blotted out his warning. Eddie walked right up to Devil, grinning confidently now, reaching out to pat his neck.

"I knew you'd remember me, Apples. We're going to be together now, you and me. I—"

As the boy touched him, Devil let out a wild scream and reared up. One of his flailing hoofs struck Eddie's chest, knocking him to the ground. Devil reared above the prostrate figure, eyes rolling crazily in his head, that killer scream rising above the howl of the wind again. Floundering toward them, Apples saw that Eddie was too dazed by the first blow to move. In another instant the boy would be trampled to death.

Forgotten were the wolves. Forgotten was Apples' exhaustion. He lunged forward with a challenging whinny. His bad leg buckled and he almost fell. But he gave a vast lunge with his powerful haunches. It threw him against Devil just as the other Appaloosa came down.

The blow knocked Devil aside. His lashing forehoofs missed Eddie's head by inches. He recovered himself and wheeled, with a raging squeal, to charge at this added foe.

Apples dodged aside clumsily, snapping at Devil's throat as the horse went by. He missed and his teeth popped like a gunshot.

Devil wheeled again, and for an instant the battle stopped. The two animals faced each other like statues, in that utter stillness which always precedes a fight to the death between two stallions. Eddie groaned and rolled over. Apparently he was remembering the other fight, for he came to one knee, shaking his head, crying out:

"Apples, don't—he'll kill you—"

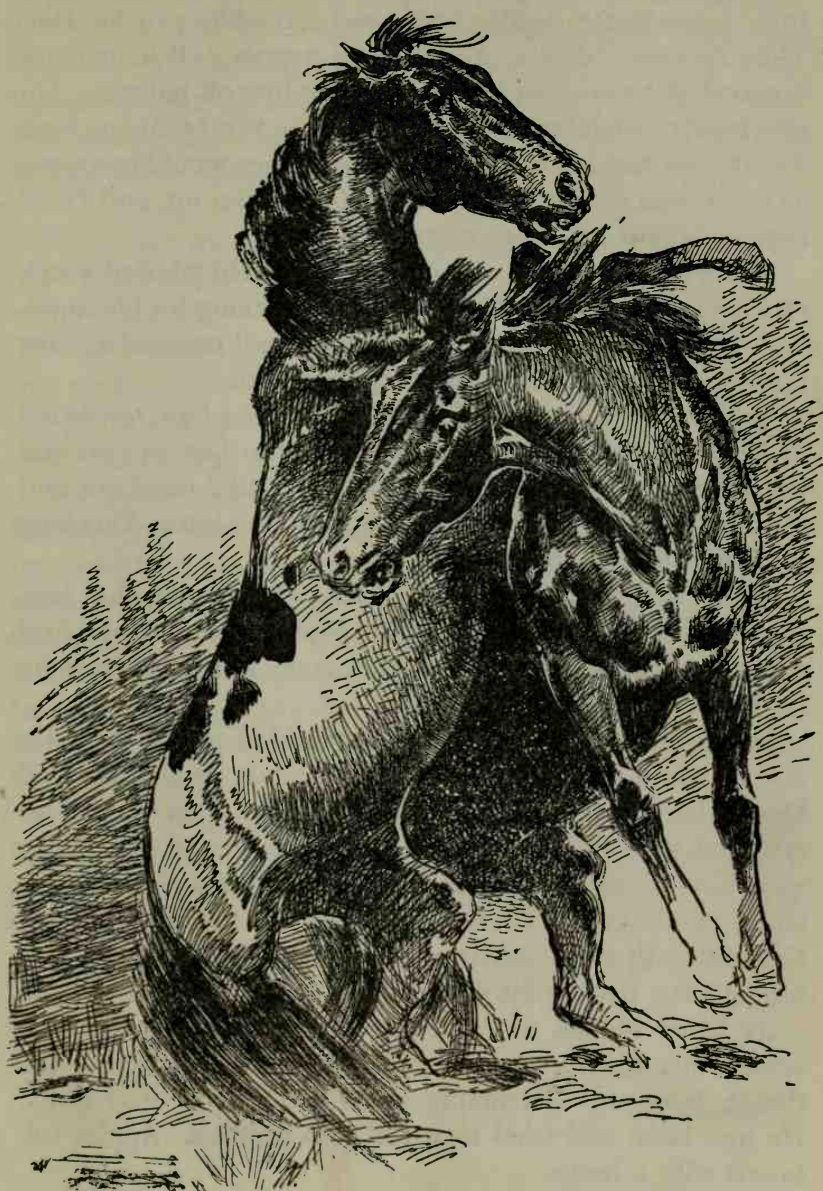
Ignoring him, the two horses rose up on their hind legs and went at each other with bloodcurdling bugles. They met in mid-air, hoofs flailing, teeth popping. One of Devil's sharp hoofs struck Apples' head, almost knocking him off his hind feet. Dazed, Apples felt Devil's teeth sink deep into his shoulder. The pain ran like fire through him and he twisted away in a frantic effort to escape.

He flailed wildly at Devil's head. He felt one of his hoofs strike the Appaloosa's brow, saw Devil reel back under the blow. He came down on all fours and charged into the unbalanced horse, knocking him off his feet. Devil rolled away beneath him, but Apples lunged after him, rearing up above his twisting body.

"You've got him!" Eddie yelled. "Finish it now, Apples, finish it—"

But something held Apples back. He knew he was in a position for the kill. But he could not bring himself to trample the horse beneath him. It was those vague memories again—memories of the two of them in this canyon, frolicking together through the green meadows, rolling together in the cool waters, sleeping together at the feet of the same mother and father.





Devil took advantage of that momentary hesitance, rolling from beneath the deadly hoofs and scrambling to his feet. Then he came back at Apples with a rush. All his weight rammed into the other horse, knocking him off balance. Apples tried to wheel away, but his long run was telling on him. Exhaustion seemed to hobble his feet. They would not move as quickly as they should. They tripped him up, and Devil lunged against him once more.

Those teeth gnashed at Apple's throat. He whirled away, trying to avoid them. Devil reared up, striking for his shoulders, his head. A blow dazed Apples. Devil rammed against him once more, knocking him to the ground.

Apples looked up at the killer reared above him, too dazed to move. He saw the crazy, savage look in Devil's eyes and knew he was through. In that instant, Eddie cried out and ran for Devil. He threw himself against the horse, knocking him off balance.

Devil staggered backward, then whirled on the boy. Again those hoofs flailed. Again Eddie went down. And again Devil reared above him, that crazy killer look making his eyes cold and vicious.

In that fearful instant, Apples stumbled to his feet. He saw he would have to make his choice now. If he didn't kill Devil, the horse would kill Eddie. Those memories of his colthood with the other Appaloosa were blotted out. They were blotted out by other memories—memories of soft hands and a gentle voice. Of the long nights in the shed back at Calico's, with a black-haired boy sitting up with him, rubbing his leg, patting his neck, pleading with him to get well.

As Devil started to come down, Apples lunged at him again. His teeth caught at the other horse's unprotected throat, hung on. Screaming in pain, Devil twisted away. He tore loose and tried to wheel into position. Apples followed with a lunge.

His bad leg gave way beneath him and he almost fell. He stumbled erect to see Devil coming at him. His eyes were filmed with exhaustion. It was like lifting a great weight to rear up and meet the other horse, but he knew this was his last chance. He had to finish it now, or both he and Eddie would die.

Eddie lay on the ground, too dazed from that second blow of Devil's hoofs to rise. Snow was blowing like a thickening scarf across the dim outlines of the battling horses. The boy could barely see the wolves, hanging back, sitting in a circle on their haunches. They were licking their slavering jowls and waiting for the end of the battle, when they could rush in and pull down the weakened victor.

The battle was carrying the twin Appaloosas farther and farther away from Eddie. During a lull in the howling wind, he could hear the sodden impact of flesh on flesh, bone on bone, could hear the gunshot pop of teeth coming together, the squeals of pain, the screams of rage.

Then he saw one horse go down. The other reared up, brought his forehoofs down heavily on the fallen animal's head. The downed Appaloosa gave a spasmodic lunge, fell back, lying still.

The other horse reeled away and stopped, swaying, almost falling. Eddie forced himself erect, stumbling toward the animal. Desperately he sent his plea through the uproar of the storm.

"Apples?"

Chapter 18

CALICO JIM HAD FIRST HEARD the furious sounds of the battle during a lull in the storm. He had been a half mile down the canyon from the fight, but the insane screams had been carried clearly to him. The little bay mare had snapped her head up, fighting savagely to free herself of the lead rope he had put on her neck.

Calico urged Billygoat ahead, but even the mule could not keep up with the impatient mare. Finally, she was pulling both the mule and the pack horse along in her wake as she floundered through the deep drifts toward the sounds of battle.

Calico thought it was Apples, fighting off the wolves. He already had his gun out, keeping one hand over the muzzle so it wouldn't clog with snow. Before he reached the scene of battle, however, the sounds stopped. There was only the battering of the wind again.

Then, dead ahead, he heard the dismal howl of a wolf. He straightened in the saddle, then booted Billygoat so hard that the mule jumped ahead with a disgusted grunt. They charged through the last of the snow and came upon the scene of battle.

There was one Appaloosa down, and one standing. Beside the horse still on its feet stood Eddie. He had hold of its mane and was looking fearfully at the wolves, now slinking in a circle around him. When he saw Calico, he cried out.

"Pop, it's Apples! Get those wolves out of here. They've been chasing him for two days and they aren't going to get him now. Get them out—"

Calico swung off Billygoat, leaving him ground-hitched. He snapped the lever on his Winchester and took a shot at the nearest wolf. The beast leaped in mid-air, howling in pain. It was only stung, but it ran off with its tail between its legs. Calico fired at the next one, saw him cringe from the bullet whining over his head and turn to dart away. The others faded into the storm. They were man-wise and knew a healthy fear of the barking gun. Seeing that they were driven away, Eddie called to Calico again.

"It's Apples, Pop! He saved my life. He isn't yellow! I told you he wasn't yellow! He didn't want to kill Devil that last time because Devil's his brother. Some folks might say horses aren't that smart, but I know they are. He couldn't kill Devil 'cause Devil was his brother. But when he saw Devil would kill me, he knew he had to kill him. It was the only reason he did it, the only reason he did it, Pop, to save my life—"

There was hysteria in Eddie's voice, and Calico realized it was the babbling of a boy near the point of collapse. "Sure, Jigger, sure," he said quietly. He went close and put an arm around Eddie's shoulders, warming him. "We'll just find a tight spot where we can sit this storm out and then

we'll take Apples back. He'll be all yours again. You came a long way to get him, and he's yours for good now."

Eddie gulped, unable to believe his ears. "But I thought you wanted to make a show horse out of him and sell him."

"That was before I realized how bad you wanted to make him your own. If you'd go through all this for him, how could I take him away from you?"

"You mean we can take him back to town with us and keep him there while I go to school next year?"

"If that's what you want."

"It sure is," Eddie said. He turned to the horse. "How about you, Apples?"

The Appaloosa threw up his head and whinnied. It was feeble but it sounded happy.

"Looks like we got the O.K. from the boss," Calico said. "Everything's all right now."

Eddie leaned over and put both arms around Apples' neck. "It sure is," he said. "Sulphur and molasses, it sure is!"

LES SAVAGE, JR.

was born in Alhambra, California, and grew up wanting to become an artist. He studied art through high school and college, and would have gone into it professionally but for a quirk that sent him into a short story class in his last year at college. He sold his first story before he was finished with school and has been making his living with a typewriter ever since.

He has sold several hundred stories to magazines, such as *Argosy* and *Pic*. In 1947, he published his first novel and since then has done twenty books. Several of them were bought by the movies, including one called **BLACK HORSE CANYON**, starring Joel McCrea.

Les Savage says, "I've always had a keen interest in horses, have done a lot of riding and like to write about them."

At present he lives in Santa Monica, California, with his wife and their young son, nicknamed Butch.

