





Rider in the Sun

Smith, Edmund Ware

Rider in the Sun

By

Edmund Ware, pseud.



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To
Katharine Ware Smith

Rider in the Sun

Chapter One

1

THE boy was afraid. The deed he planned outgrew his strength. The darkness whispered no encouragement.

To-morrow he would run away from home. To-morrow when the stars came, all familiar things would be behind him: father, mother, the bed he lay upon, the roof which sheltered him and smelled so wonderfully of cedar.

He felt small in his bed. He heard the twitter of a drowsing bird, the moisture falling intermittently from trees, remote tendrils of music from young frogs in the swamp land. The mouths which shaped the meanings of the night breathed endlessly the litany of spring.

The boy felt that the world was gigantic. Its dimensions terrified him. It did not once pause in its seven-leagued stride to acknowledge him. Onward it whirled, forever restless in space, forever brooding in the shackles of its orbit. His

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plan to run away seemed pitiful to him now. He was about to embark for the wild places of the earth and the earth did not care.

Aspects of home which he had long taken for granted isolated themselves in his mind and took sharp meaning: the fireplace before which he had listened to his father's stories and his mother's careful reading; the rugs familiar to his feet; the scenes from windows where each year he watched the seasons ebb and flow; the clean scrubbed wood of the kitchen table; the shape and motion of his mother's hands; her work basket, Gorgon-headed with washed stockings.

Across the hall, his father and mother were sleeping. The most unchanging influence in his life was his mother. She was steadfast, like the mountains. She loved him quietly. She guided him along a course almost as if her arms were stretched parallel and he, between them, marching on.

She taught him courageously, undespairingly. She tolerated no shirking, no swerving from the text, no dreaming over the task in hand. Frequently she helped him with his school work. She knew the instant that his glance strayed from the page. "Dan, dear. You're not *thinking*."

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You're not *listening*. You're wool-gathering. This comes first."

It was different when he studied with his father. In recent years they had read books together and in their conversations championed the heroes. Sometimes they would discard the heroes of the books and devise their own fearless men, sending them forth into dangers. Always these men knew what to do in emergencies and they did it. They trod bloody decks in the name of right or they rode black horses. Sometimes a hero entered battle in burnished armor. Sometimes, naked to the waist, he used a cutlass. Of late, there was one who lay on the brink of a cañon wall with a rifle beside him.

Deepest, most carefully concealed, most invulnerable in the boy's imagination was the character of whom his father once told great tales at bed time. This had been long ago. His father had invented the rider on the tall horse. The rider's deeds, his indomitability, his spirit, filled the child's mind. He had no name except "The Rider in the Sun," and to him nothing was impossible. He could not be dismayed. He was as valorous as a myth, as powerful as an oak, as good as Galahad.

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Each tale Dan's father told involved a quest. Perhaps the Rider searched for a god, a gold mine or for dragons. Sometimes he rode in shadow, sometimes in sun, sometimes in deep woods where no fences ran. The Rider symbolized achievement. He became a misty ideal, and all destiny concerned him.

His father, on those nights long gone, would come on tiptoe into the room to say good night.

"Tell about him, father."

Always in the same way, his father would begin: "He rode a black horse. The horse could run faster than any other horse, because his muscles were long and sinewy; and the sunlight gleamed on his dark silky coat. The rider stopped his horse on a high place, and he looked across to another high place which was miles and miles beyond, so that the mountains looked blue. For a long time the Rider looked at these mountains thinking they might be the homes of rainbows, and then he said to the black horse: 'Come on. We'll go,' and he tightened his reins, and he drew a deep breath, and he put his feet far into the stirrups and started ——"

At some point along the way of the Rider's limitless journey, the boy's mother would come

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into the room and say: "It's time to go to sleep."

Dan would start up, imploring: "Not yet! Just a little while more. An awful little while."

"No more."

The boy would sigh in the way that people sigh when a curtain falls upon a stage and they see the reality that fences them.

Dan's father and mother would kiss him good night and close the door, leaving him to imagine the outcome of the story. He would drift toward sleep while the sound of hoof beats dimmed in his ears, and horse tracks vanished in a distance grown hazy and improbable. But the form of the Rider remained invincible, like designs of trees against the sky.

2

The boy's destination, in running away from home, was as vague and compelling as the point where sea and sky converge. He wanted to do the deeds he most admired. He wanted to inspect his courage. He wanted strength in his

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long thin arms. He wanted to prove himself capable of deeds among men, and he wanted to ride a tall horse in a wild country.

He looked upon all horses as opportunity. He had ridden an assorted lot of them — plodders, plebians, pensioners of the breed. He loved them in a secret and religious way. While he rode, he would sometimes question the horse and invent the perfect answer, so that he felt in some measure the poise of a good king, and the sensations of two lives.

He saw himself, stern and solemn, riding in a smoky land of cactus and sagebrush; great wastes of yellow country; far-flung trails where all men rode, where they rode with their heads thrust forward in defiance of whatever storms might be.

School held no such pictures. Fashioned to the ends of the earthly, school was a level, daylight business. In school you started and stopped at the commands of bells which sounded arrogantly in corridors, and you listened to the droning of gray bespectacled people.

But that land out there! That shining point in distance which beckoned with happenings! It seemed a valid clear-cut need. Like all things

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worth while, it contained a struggle, a conquest and a rest.

The boy had picked a spot on a map where towns were few. He had drawn his savings from the bank. He had made stern preparations. He had taken a last long ride on a borrowed horse, and his blood had pounded until he laughed, and he thought he feared nothing.

But now it was night, and the nearness of departure frightened him. The world seemed formidable and implacable, for he would soon be alone with his own footprints. Searching for a spark which might rekindle his bravery, he remembered that yesterday in church the minister had said: "Be not afraid! Be not afraid!" He repeated these safe words frowningly. "Be not afraid!" He did not then know that such counsel is most glibly given by one leaning securely upon God's shoulder. He went confidently to sleep.

3

At breakfast, a spasm of excitement stirred his heart. Across the table from him sat his

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father. His mother stood by the stove. Soon he would be saying good-bye, and they would not know the depth and sadness of his farewell.

His father got up and stood back of his chair while he folded his napkin. He looked at his watch, drank a glass of water and went out into the front hall where he got his coat and hat. Then he came back into the kitchen to say good-bye. He was very cheerful. He bent and kissed the top of Dan's head.

Dan's hair, bleached by sun and wind, cast a faint yellow glow like a lamp in the daytime. He looked up at his father, his blue eyes dark and still: "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Dan."

The boy wondered if he would forget how his father looked. He tried to bring all his devotion and gratitude to bear intensely upon his farewell, hoping that his father in some unworded way would understand: "Good-bye."

His father looked again at his watch and turned to the stove. Dan's mother was spooning hot water over an egg poaching in a pan.

"Good-bye, dear," he said.

She kissed him. "Don't forget the newspapers, will you?"

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"I always bring them, don't I?"

"No, dear. You just bring them sometimes."

They were smiling at each other. Dan felt them draw apart from him. They were not thinking of him at all, but he was thinking of them so intensely that he feared they might feel his thoughts and come rushing to him. He was afraid to look at them.

His father glanced at the alarm clock on the shelf above the stove. "Is that right?"

"Yes, I set it with the seven o'clock whistle."

"I'll be late."

"I called you in plenty of time."

He kissed her again and went marching out, closing the front door vigorously. He always started off to catch his train this way, somehow with the impressiveness of a launched ship or a soldier off to war.

Dan listened to his father's footsteps on the gravel walk. Soon the footsteps of other hurrying people obscured them, but the sound of his father's steps remained, a cherished echo.

The boy's head bent forward, his glances roving swiftly among accustomed objects. It frightened him to think that he might miss them. He knew that in the lands ahead they would all be un-

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reachable, unknowable, like clouds, or the texture of leaves.

His mother slid the poached egg on to a piece of buttered toast. She poured herself a cup of coffee, brought it to the table, and sat down opposite him. She put a spoonful of sugar into the coffee and stirred it idly. She looked up at Dan and found him staring at her. She stopped stirring. "What is the hypotenuse?" she asked.

He gazed as if he had not heard.

"What is the hypotenuse of a triangle?"

"I don't know. I don't even care."

"Tell me, Dan. You've forgotten."

His lips were unsteady. "It's the long side of the triangle."

"And the square of the hypotenuse equals — ?"

"What difference does it make now?"

"Tell me."

"The sum of the squares of the other two sides."

"That's right." She noticed that he was not eating. "Isn't your egg all right?"

"Yes," he said. "It's all right." He began to eat it. Its goldness seemed to have been created especially for him through some miracle wrought by his mother's hands. It was the same

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with his toast and his cereal. They, the warm kitchen, the cupboard, his mother's face — everything he saw took on a quiet nobility, shaming his horde of reasons for running away. He finished his breakfast and stood up, dropping his crumpled napkin beside his plate.

"You've forgotten to fold your napkin."

He started, folded it clumsily. His mother seemed to see completely through him into his heart yet her look was precisely the look she had given him every day when he was about to leave for school. It was a slow, straight look, a look of inspection and estimate.

"You'd better run along," she said.

He took a step toward her. She could not know what she was saying to him. She touched her lips with her napkin and looked up at him. He saw every wrinkle in her face unforgettably. He bent over and kissed her. "Good-bye, mother." Her hand rested on his shoulder, and, as he straightened, clung a moment and slid down over his arm. "Good-bye."

He took his books and walked into the front hall. He opened the door, stepped onto the veranda and looked out at the morning. Across the street he saw a friend starting off to school.

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The friend waved a greeting, and shouted:
“Coming?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ll wait.”

“You better go ahead. I’ll be late.”

The friend went on with hurrying steps. For an instant Dan wanted to be his friend, to think his friend’s thoughts, to feel as he felt — gay, confident, and bound for school. The sound of whistling floated back.

Dan opened the front door and stepped into the hall. He stood there a moment, breathing uncertainly. Then he walked into the kitchen and stood beside his mother.

“What’s the trouble?”

“Nothing. Forgot my books.”

“You had them when you went out.”

“I must of left them in the front hall.”

“Silly,” she said. “Run along. Good-bye.”

He moved a little closer to her. “Good-bye, mother.”

He made no move to go. Her eyes lifted to his in a clean, brisk interrogation: “Do you *want* to be late to school?”

His whole face lighted with gladness. “I *knew* you were going to say that!”

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4

He was walking in the street away from home, and he noticed that part of the sky had darkened with a rain cloud. Thinly aware of the cloud, he turned off on a dirt road which ran through woods, across a bridge and in a roundabout way to the railroad station.

At the bridge he stopped to look up and down the road. No one was in sight. With a jerk of his arm he flung his books over the bridge into the black river.

A fine warm rain swept his face. He grinned, taunting in his mind all things relative to books, triangles and unusable languages. His face widened in a smile. At the touch of the rain, and of the earth under his feet, a small ecstasy awoke in him. He strode toward the railroad station. From a little distance he saw the brilliant row of war posters paneling its walls. The posters showed men against odds and unafraid; men doing deeds; men who were perfect in their proportions and divine in the certainty that they were right.

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He turned from them into the station, and at a ticket window bought the passage to his own more intimate war. Already he could hear deep drumbeats in his heart and victory was in his mind.

It was raining hard, and the smoke of engines hung low along the tracks. He got aboard the west-bound train. He heard the conductor shout: "Bo-o-o-o-o-rd!"

From the car window he looked down upon the platform and saw an old lady hunched under her umbrella. She walked slowly and carefully, her eyes intent upon some alarming puddles. He did not know her name but he had seen her so constantly about town that she seemed a distinct part of his life. "I won't see the old lady any more."

He felt the train jerk. The platform appeared to move so that the old lady walked in a futile way as upon a treadmill. She kept losing ground and finally was too far behind for him to see.

Through the upper reaches of town the train gathered headway. He noticed factories with tall familiar stacks, a pond gray and brooding under the low damp sky. He saw wet streets where he had tramped with friends. . . .

Chapter Two

1

NOBODY knew the boy, nobody at all. He sat on a hitch rail in front of a store in a shadeless western town. Dust and sand swirled about him in the wind. He knew now that the wind did not fall from gust to friendly breeze the way it did around home. Here the wind blew gustily forever. It howled an oath of loneliness and made all thoughts of God seem tired and untenable.

There had been long nights and days on assorted trains. He had seen a thousand towns, a million people who did not speak. His ears were thick with the sound of the trains and the silence of the people.

On the outer edges of his vision he caught a startling motion and glanced up to see a man riding along the street. The man was amazingly supple, splendidly proportioned. The sounds of his horse's hoofs were secret in the sand.

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The boy strained forward. This was what he had come so far to see. He would ride a horse as wonderful as that! He had dreamed of sitting recklessly astride a silver-mounted saddle, of appearing to others as the riding man appeared to him.

The rider held the bridle reins loosely in his left hand. The horse was a tall blue roan whose hoofs touched the ground with mirage-like lightness. The rider's black hat slanted over his eyes, and the jingle of his rein-chains was bright. In a moment he was close, so close that Dan saw every detail of his riding gear. In the next moment he was gone, and the wind returned laden with the faint creaking of his saddle and the odor of leather and mystery.

Dan frowned at the dust which came in thick puffs, making him squint his eyes. A bay team approached, drawing a long box wagon. A man sat swaying in the driver's seat. He was an unimportant man compared to the rider. The long heels of his boots were hooked over the dash rail, and his elbows rested on his knees. He handled the team with unconscious skill, and above the rattling of the wheels and the rumble of the wagon, Dan could hear him humming a

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frayed tune. As he passed, he looked down and winked. Dan stared. The wagon rocked on down the street. The brown dust frolicked along.

Across the street a door banged. A woman with big hands came from the post office. In one hand she held a letter. She tore an end from the envelope and it sailed jerkily in the wind. Unfolding the letter, she walked slowly away, reading as she walked. Once she stopped. Her lips moved as if at some appalling news in the letter.

"Maybe I ought to write," he thought. Days had gone, and his father and mother did not know where he was. They might think he had been killed. He looked at the post office door. He dropped from the hitch rail to the ground. Stretching his arms and legs, and brushing at his wrinkled clothes, he walked across the street.

Dear Mother and Father:

I could not stand school any more. Of course you will think I am crazy and ungrateful to you, but I am not. I do not know when I will be home but probably in a few years. Please do not worry about me, and please do

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not chase me or try to make me come home. I could not have passed geometry. So that was another reason. So I went away. I am all right here. I like the names of the towns here. I went through a town named Broken Hand. Do not worry about me. I am going to be riding horses.

I will be in this town quite a while.

Dan

He dropped the letter through a slit, and went down the wooden steps into the street. On the other side he saw the bay team standing at the hitch rail in front of the store.

He went over to them. He spoke to them, and their ears leaned toward him. He was rubbing their noses when the driver backed out of the store, his arms piled high with bundles. The driver shouted some banter to the storekeeper, turned around and dumped the armful of packages under the wagon seat. Placing his foot on the hub of the near wheel, he reached across and gathered up the lines. He was about to climb up when he noticed Dan looking at him.

"Hullo, kid."

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"Hullo;" said Dan. It was the first personal word he had spoken in days and the sound of his own voice startled him with its familiarity.

"What's your name?" asked the man. He was a tall man, a man of gaunt, thin angles.

Dan told him and prepared to give further information, when abruptly, the bay team's ears went forward. Their heads swung. One of them neighed piercingly. The riding man was bearing down upon them at a dead run, and the brim of his black hat swept back above his forehead. He leaned easily in the saddle as he went by, waving his arm.

Dan turned to the man beside him. "He didn't even have hold of the reins!"

"He don't need to — on *that* horse."

"Do you know him?"

"Sure, Laramie Jim."

"Laramie Jim. Oh, Laramie Jim."

The man climbed to the wagon seat. Dan took a step toward him, peered up into the sharp brown triangle of the man's face.

"Where are you going now?"

"Home."

"Have you got a ranch around here?"

"Sure."

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"Do you need any one to work for you? I want to work. I haven't got any money left. I can ride."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen — almost."

"Where do you live?"

The boy moved his arm in a casual gesture. He thought that Laramie Jim might move his arm in the same manner. "Oh, around. I'm sort of a — sort of a — See?"

"Sure. Climb up."

Dan climbed up and sat close to the man. He could see the wrinkles in the man's face, the sweat marks on his shirt. "What's your name?"

"Hatt," said the man. "Bill Hatt."

"Oh. Well — what's your brand?"

"Lazy H — horses left hip. Cattle left ribs."

"That means the H is lying down on its side."

"Yuh."

Dan nodded. "I know about those things."

Bill Hatt shook out the lines. The team pressed forward, and the wagon swung away from the hitch rail. Dan looked into the distance where a yellow butte gleamed.

"Are we going there?"

"Farther than that."

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Beyond the fringe of town they came upon mud, and the brown backs of the horses stretched and writhed.

“The mud’s pretty sticky, isn’t it?”

“We call it gumbo.”

The smell of used harness and damp wind grew strong in the boy’s nose. He sat stiff and straight. All his longings were on the brink of fulfillment.

2

Night came stealthily, like cold air crawling in a tunnel. The darkness made the wagon’s rumbling seem closer. They passed between two sandstone rimrocks near a stream, and the stream spoke among stones in a small careless way. In the darkness, with no sounds except from the stream and the wagon, Dan grew tense with a recollection of the man who rode with his reins hanging on the saddlehorn. Admiration swamped his heart. With rein-chains jingling and a blue roan under him, he felt that the con-

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quest of new worlds would be a simple thing. "Pretty soon they'll be calling me 'oldtimer!'"

Bill Hatt whistled once and the wagon stopped. They were in a wide valley where the stream ran slowly and held reflections from stars. Everything was quiet except the wind which blew immeasurably. It was a hard arrogant wind without airiness or banter.

Dan peered all about him in the gloom. When he looked at the stars he was nobody. He was two eyes wondering, but nothing more. Did other people lose themselves this way? His father and his mother? Probably they did. Probably they were looking at the same stars.

"Let's unhook." Bill had climbed down from the wagon. A clank and rattle came from his fumbling at the doubletrees.

"Oh, sure." Dan crawled down over the wheel, finding the ground with his toes. He tried to see what Bill was doing, and to do the same on his side of the team.

When the horses were unhitched, Bill opened a gate and the horses trotted through. Dan listened to their trotting. When it ceased, he heard them splashing in the creek, heard them suck at the water.

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"Come along with me," said Bill.

Dan followed toward a low black lump against the sky. The lump became a cabin built of logs. As they came around a corner of the building, a light shone out at them.

Bill opened the bunkhouse door, and the boy turned for one last gulp of the night. He saw a ragged line where the rimrock reached along the sky. He saw the pale proud stars, untroubled by the wind, or dreams or anything that he could guess. He smelled the black air, and heard in the distance the sound of a coyote which he had not heard before.

Bill motioned to him and he stepped inside the bunkhouse, leaving behind the night and its sensation. In the lighted room he saw three men, and one was very old, with eyes so tired they must have looked upon a million tattered scenes.

Bill moved his hand toward the old man. "That's Soupbone Dodge. And over there in the bunk is Tommy Peters. And that's Pat Rotay — him working on the bridle."

Dan gazed at them. He gazed behind them, and the room's intolerant strangeness rose to astonish him. There were two bunks on each side of the room, built one above the other against

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the log walls. Everywhere were gear and apparel: an old saddle; two black rifles in a corner; a cartridge belt hanging from a peg in a bunk post; a pair of beautifully made riding boots. The boots had round tops, and bright stitching ran over them. An old rope hung from a peg in the wall under some weathered buffalo horns. And Pat Rotay sat working on a bridle — as though it were a natural thing to do!

“Howdy,” said the old man.

“Make yourse’f homelike,” said Tommy Peters.

Pat Rotay laid his bridle aside. “Hullo.”

They stared at him as if nothing ever surprised them. He thought they wanted him to say something. “Well, hello.”

Bill Hatt grinned. “You better get to sleep. Morning comes early here.”

“I’m not tired. I never seem to get tired.”

As Bill went out, the wind groped through the door and made the lamp flare up.

“You can have the top bunk any time you want to turn in,” said the old man called Soupbone.

Dan looked up at the bunk. The assurance of the men sowed in him the seeds of doubt. He wanted to absorb their drawl and calm. But he

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could not help speaking louder than necessary.

"The gumbo was pretty bad."

Old Soupbone blinked at him. A look of understanding came and went quickly in his sunken eyes. "Ain't you got no soogan?"

"Soogan?"

"Blankets."

"No."

"Well, you take a couple of mine."

"Won't you be cold?"

The old man shook his head and passed Dan the blankets.

The men kicked off their boots and climbed out of their pants. Each crawled into his bunk, and Pat Rotay gave Dan a boost into the one above his own. Soupbone had blown out the lamp, and the room was dark. The men breathed audibly. The log walls creaked.

Dan lay upon his back, his arms stretched tight along his sides. "It was pretty good of Bill to give me a job riding with this outfit."

Tommy grunted from the top bunk opposite. A job riding with this outfit, thought the boy.

"Say, do you know a man named Laramie Jim?"

Old Soupbone stirred uneasily. No one spoke.

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3

Waking, he rested his head on his hand, and peered over the edge of his bunk. Below was the confusion of men dressing: Soupbone, putting on his spurs, was bent almost double, and the veins stood out in his forehead. His lips pulled far to one side to keep the cigarette smoke away from his eyes. Pat stood curling his bare toes from the floor. He was sticking matches into his hatband. Tommy Peters was buckling on a cartridge belt.

Dan sat up shivering. Into him poured the realization that he had a job on a cattle ranch. The future brimmed with riding. Home was just a speck. It did not matter. He dangled his legs over the edge of the bunk, and rubbed his hands in his eyes.

"Get a wiggle on," said Soupbone, "if you're hungry."

He jumped down, dressed quickly, and followed the men out of the bunkhouse into the early daylight. He looked about him at the low log

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buildings, the wind-ripped smoke streaming from the stovepipe of the cook shack, the sheds and corrals, the colors of land and sky.

Breakfast was fried potatoes and salt pork and coffee. When the men finished they piled their dishes in neat stacks and walked out toward the pole corrals. Soupbone wiped and wiped at his white mustache. Bill Hatt stopped beside Dan.

“Sleep good?”

Pat Rotay was climbing the corral fence with a rope in his right hand. In the corral the half dozen horses began to circle as if they thought they could laugh at Pat Rotay. Transferring the coils of the rope to his left hand, Pat shook out a loop with his right. The horses whitened their eyes. Pat's wrist turned over unexpectedly and the loop shot out and settled over a buckskin's neck. At the rope's touch the horse stopped running and came in. In a twinkling, Pat bridled and saddled the horse and led it through the corral gate. Soupbone and Tommy each caught and saddled a horse, and Bill put the corral bars back in place.

The riders mounted with curious elasticity. Horse, man and stirrup-leather appeared to

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stretch with the forward lunge. Tommy Peters rode easily for five long leaps, lying along his horse's neck with only one foot in the stirrup. Soupbone's horse reared and plunged and the old man's face did not twitch or change. They got away and strung out across the valley in the direction of the creek, racing for a little distance. Water flew up as they forded. It was silver in the sun.

Dan turned to Bill: "I better catch a horse and get going!"

"There's a stretch of fence to build."

"Fence?"

"Yuh."

"Oh."

Bill stalked away toward a tool shed behind the corral.

Dan ran after him. "Listen, Bill, I don't know about fences."

Bill was rattling iron tools in the shed: a crowbar, a shovel, a sack of staples, some wire-stretchers. He stood up and seeing Dan in the doorway of the shed, handed him a crowbar and a shovel. "Come on."

Dan followed up the yellow height beyond the bunkhouse.

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“Listen, Bill.”

He tried to keep up with the man striding silently ahead of him. Now and then Bill turned to ask a question, leaning to catch the answer above the wind. “Did you ever dig post holes in sandrock?”

“No, I never dug much anywhere, but I’ve ridden quite a lot of horses.”

Bill’s body lurched in the effort of steep climbing. Dan dropped behind, seeing nothing but Bill’s lean straight back. It was covered with a faded cotton shirt which showed dark where suspenders had shaded it from the sun. It looked hard and real, like a rock upon which one rests a hand.

“Can you milk cows?”

“I milked one, one time.”

He could look nowhere except at Bill’s back, which bent against the hill’s steepness.

“When am I going to ride?”

“Three riders is all I need.”

They came to the top of the divide. The boy paused beside the hard brown man. He turned and looked back. He saw immense miles. He saw in the valley a twisting stream; he saw a yellow rimrock far away, a sky without a cloud, a

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bunch of cattle with their noses to the grass in one direction.

“Bill, *look!*”

“Take your shovel and your bar, and every ten paces dig a hole in line with them other holes.”

Dan picked up his shovel and began. He struck sandrock, and reached for the heavy bar. Thump . . . Thump . . . Thump . . . Earth and sky and awe departed from his mind, leaving only the voiceless ache of exertion.

At noon they drank from a bottle of water and ate thick bread. Dan studied Bill's face. It was strong. Sharp hard bones were near the surface, and over them the skin stretched taut. The eyes were gray and shadowed under straight black brows. A lump of bread swelled the man's cheek. He chewed slowly, looking into the distance.

“What do you think about when you're digging?” the boy asked.

Bill stopped chewing. “I don't think about nothing. I see the fence — the finished fence.”

“Oh. Well — I think about horses.”

Bill folded the paper bag which had contained the bread. He placed it carefully in his hip pocket. “Let's get to work.”

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Shadows reached half across the valley. The boy's feet felt heavy and clumsy. He wanted to stumble against something. It would be a fine reason for falling in the grass and resting.

"Let's call it a day."

"All right — if you say so." Dan's face and mouth were slack from fatigue. His feet, carrying him down hill, hurt with exhaustion. His mouth trembled and he hoped for darkness.

Far below, the three riders moved in across the valley. Smoke swept in a gray writhing river from the cook shack chimney.

4

Around him in the other bunks slept Soupbone and Pat and Tommy Peters. A shaft of pale light came through the window. He knew the light came from stars that would not let the night be dark. It touched the rifles in the corner, the inlay in a bridle, and Soupbone's scrawny hand which was outflung.

The nearness of the men and their accoutre-

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ments moved his imagination. He figured formidably in the pictures, but in the midst of deeds he saw Bill Hatt's untirable back, the dusty knuckles of Bill's hands.

He lay back, resting his cheek against the blankets which smelled faintly of the old man.

He turned his face downward.

Chapter Three

I

HE looked jubilantly at the long line of fence posts, for he had planted them himself with Bill; and the posts were many, straight and uniform, like efficient crosses on a battlefield.

Bill Hatt laid down his tools. "We're most done." He was very near to seeing the finished fence. Then he would feel a brief pin-prick of achievement — and his mind would call something new into line for creation: a ford across Lame Horse creek, cleared land in the bottoms for alfalfa, new buildings.

They started down the hill. Bill hummed as he strode, for he looked beyond the ranch that was and dwelt upon a ranch to be: great corrals, ten thousand head, a bunkhouse with thirty riders. Bill thought of these good things and his eyes reflected the patience and the permanence of undiscouraged men.

Behind him trudged Dan. The weeks of work

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had accustomed his stringy muscles to the weight of shovel and crowbar. The wind tangled his yellow hair. He thought of his father walking up the avenue toward home; his mother singing in the kitchen; himself near her, telling her some accurate things in regard to triangles.

“Hungry?”

“No.”

“You done a day’s work. You’d ought to be hungry.”

“When does mail come?”

“It don’t. Some one brings it. Any one brings it when they go to town.”

In the cook shack the riding men glanced up, and Soupbone waved his fork. “Apricots. Stewed.”

“The gov’ment’s buying up a bunch of horses,” said Tommy.

“I hear they’re getting good prices,” said Pat Rotay.

Soupbone leaned back in his chair: “Shattuck was telling me he’s missing some horses. Some one else knows about them prices, I expect. A man makes good profit selling other folk’s horses.” The old man turned toward Bill. “Shattuck was by to-day.”

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Bill nodded and sat down with Dan.

The cook's face shone in the lamplight. He looked owlshly at the boy, then rolled his eyes toward a cigar box on a shelf where mail and old papers lay cluttered. The cook wore a grain-sack apron, and the cord tying it cut a groove in his stomach. He usually went barefooted, sometimes pinching his toes between the warped floor boards. He served the food in a challenging way, and afterwards hovered over the pots on the stove like a fat sullen bird.

He now inspected a kettle, and, as if reassured that all was well and that it would be safe for his attention to shift for a moment, reached into the cigar box and drew out a letter. Holding it close to the lamp, he read the address and squinted at Dan. "It's for you. Shattuck brought it."

"Me?"

The cook came across the room, stopping once to hiss when a splinter stuck into his foot. In one hand he held a ladle, in the other hand the letter. He passed the letter to Dan and went back to the stove where he began to speak dolefully into steam rising from a kettle: "We're low on coffee, Bill. You'd ought to get twenty pound at a lick."

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Bill, who was eating apricots, stopped the spoon on its way to his mouth. "Spoils if it ain't used quick. The good goes out of it."

Dan longed to slink away into a room with one small light. The writing on the envelope seemed to speak, like a voice of unforgettable loveliness. The writing was his father's. His father was left-handed, and they had joked about his writing, because it slanted the wrong way.

The riding men pushed back their plates and filed out of the shack toward the bunkhouse. He was glad when they had gone. His lips curled in a trumped-up sneer. "I wonder who could be writing to me."

"Maybe it's your folks."

Dan shook his head: "Oh, no. Not them."

Outside, the wind continued its siege, rattling the tin wash basin on its nail.

Dear Son:

Of course we won't chase you. We want you to try and find whatever you are hunting. Mother and I understand what it is that made you run away. There have been times when we felt that way, too. You are hunting the

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answer to everything, and the question is never quite clear in the asker's mind, nor the answer ever complete.

Mother and I were worried, because we had not heard from you. We didn't know where you were. You must never, never again keep us uncertain about you. We would willingly make any sacrifice if it means your life will be finer. But we must know where you are and what you are doing.

We want you to come back, but more than anything we want you to find what you're after. Tell us about your adventures. Tell us about the men you have met and the horses you are riding.

If there is anything you need, write or telegraph. Mother asks about clothes. Have you enough warm ones?

Have you made your plans for coming home?

Your father

On a stool near the lamp the cook sat exploring a catalogue and whispering his discoveries aloud: "Blue denim over hauls. Order number

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D-six-two-nine-four. Two dollars and eighteen cents." He turned a page with a vicious snap of his thumb. "Hell, everything is going up but wages."

Dan's sharp elbows bore against the table, his chin cupped in his hands. The sound of Bill's humming kept tearing his thoughts away from home and he wanted to hide, and think and think about home, to think so intensely that he would hear his father's voice and see his mother's face close by.

He saw each detail of his bedroom. He heard soft rain on the attic roof. He saw his mother's face, remembered it in all detail. He smelled the earth of his own yard, where probably his father and mother would be raking dead leaves away from the shrubs. He saw his father walking up the street popping a newspaper against his leg.

It was as if he were actually there. In his mind he laughed and joked with friends. They listened motionless to his tales. He would raise his hands and say to the listeners: "These hands have dug a thousand post holes ——"

Bill Hatt was humming, and the wind tormented the shack. The boy's fingers dug against

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his cheeks. He was not home! He was two thousand miles away in a country without elm trees. There were no birches, no brooks with dark moss on their beds! He drew a breath, and the muscles of his throat were tight.

"Better go and turn in," said Bill.

He looked at Bill steadily. What did Bill know of his thoughts? What did Bill know about anything?

He stood up and went to the stove. Lifting a lid he dropped the letter into the coals, turned and went out.

Power and incentive had been washed from him. On the hard path between the cook shack and the bunkhouse he stood whimpering. The ridge and gable of the bunkhouse rose against the sky. The moon hung cold and oblivious. He had come here to ride a swift-running horse, to sing to the rhythm of furious hoofs, to listen to songs at night by a fire. Instead his hands had grown hard with clutching a crowbar and his shoulders drooped with its brutish weight.

He groped for reasons to justify returning home. He had done wrong to his father and his mother. He could amend the wrong only by returning. No other way could he show them his

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love, or define his hate for Bill Hatt who hummed and thought of fences.

The wind bore false witness to the beat of hope. The wind was unfair. In dreams it was soundless. Here, it was like a dead regiment hollering in a cave.

Toil, toil, toil. Bent back, hard hands and soil. He would go back! Until then he would sleep with his face toward the east, and he would reach and reach toward home.

A far-away sound made him start. Hoof beats, caught in the wind, blew down upon him. He moved his head suddenly and expectantly, like a man hearing a step in an empty house. *Tunka-tunk. Tunka-tunk. Tunka-tunk.* A sound impossible to hear without a quickening heart. Its echoes challenged and defeated sorrow.

Closer and closer came the sound, like the rising pulse of drums. He could see the rider legendary in the moonlight. His head was tilted and, as he thundered by, Dan saw the shape of his face. He was singing to the beat of the hoofs, his easy swaying in the saddle, and his gestures and his motions in some strange way akin to the ring in his voice — daring, laughing, grand. For an instant the song was clear, the figure gigantic

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in its nearness, the hoofs a joyful cannonade. Then he was gone.

The boy's hands twitched in amazement, his face pale in the glowing night. All things he had wished for lived fleetingly within him.

He ran to the bunkhouse and opened the door. Pat and Tommy and old Soupbone were inspecting items of riding gear. He saw them only as an audience for his unburdening. "Soupbone! Laramie Jim went by!"

Soupbone stuck his thumb through the ear loop in a bridle he was soaping, and glanced warningly at his two friends. He pushed his mustache away from his lips. "Quite a sight, ain't it?"

"Where was he going?"

Pat Rotay laughed. "I figure he was *comin'* from some place."

"Laramie, he most gen'ly rides that way," said Soupbone. "Likely he's goin' to string along with the roundup. It's working down the valley."

Tommy and Pat nodded at their knees.

"The roundup? Does it come through here?"

"It'll work right down the valley. We'll string along, when it gets in our territory."

"I'll string along, too!"

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Soupbone pressed the lid onto the box of harness soap. "You better mention it to Bill."

Dan climbed to his bunk. After a time the others turned in and Soupbone blew out the lamp. Moonlight streamed through the window. The night was still, hovering.

"Soupbone, has Laramie ever shot a man?"

Chapter Four

1

THE wind carried the sound of calves bawling, and the smell of burning hair. The riding men that morning talked nervously. They talked of saddles and bed rolls; or riders they had known. They talked about "old days."

Dan thought that if he did not go with them on roundup he would never have any old days to talk about. He sensed dimly that old days were as wonderful as days to come.

After breakfast Soupbone said: "They've reached Lame Horse flat, Bill. I expect we better be movin' along."

"Sure."

Soupbone nodded and went out.

Dan stopped eating and went to stand in the cook shack door. He heard Soupbone call to Tommy and Pat. They went into the bunkhouse together and after a moment came out, each with a bed roll tied in a slicker.

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They saddled, tying their rolls behind the cantle with thongs. They laughed among themselves as they rode up the valley, and Soupbone turned and looked back.

Dan stared after them. Roundup for the riding men! Roping, riding, cutting out, slipping down into draws in search of Lazy H cows with their unbranded calves.

While *he*, treated as if he were a baby, called "kid" or "son" or "young feller," stayed to dig post holes, to milk frowzy cows that switched their tails in his face, to grub sagebrush on the bottom land beside Bill Hatt. He had shown Bill that he could work as hard as a man. Bill ought to give him a man's job.

He went into the cook shack, stopping beside Bill.

"Hey, listen, Bill."

Bill pushed back his plate and picked up his coffee cup in both hands. He rested his elbows on the table, and holding the cup close to his lips blew gently. "Listen to what?"

"Why don't you give me a man's job? I'm big enough. I can ride."

"What's the matter? Ain't you satisfied?"

Dan's cheeks flushed. "Yes, only I thought

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what with my being big enough and strong enough you'd let me go on roundup with the bunch."

Bill looked out over the bottom land beyond the cook shack window. He and Dan had begun to clear the sagebrush, and their two adzes leaned side by side against a cottonwood stump. "Go 'way, kid. Go 'way away. You got a fever."

"Won't you let me go, Bill?"

"Nope. Need you 'round here. Some one's got to do chores."

Dan licked his lips. "Do I have to do them all my life?"

"For now, anyways."

His shoulders moved forward. He tipped his head slightly back. "Well, Bill — I reckon I'll take my time." Laramie would have said it like that.

Bill stopped sipping his coffee. "All right, I'll bring your money over to the bunkhouse d'rectly."

In the bunkhouse he began to gather his things. After a while Bill came in and sat quietly on Soup-bone's bunk.

"Here's your time. Forty-three dollars, I make it."

Dan took the money quickly and put it in his pocket. Paid in full. Henceforth his job, his

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food and shelter were unknowns. He was too young not to laugh at burned bridges, but a slow doubt troubled him.

"I *want* to go on roundup, Bill. There's horses, and — everything."

"Sure, I know all about it. You go to Al Christie. He's boss. You tell Al I sent you. Maybe he'll give you a job helping the wrangler, if it's horses you want. There's an old saddle in the shed. You can take it."

"Take a saddle? Me?"

"Go ahead an' take it."

"Bill — after I'm gone you'll be grubbing sagebrush all alone."

"Sure."

"Don't you ever get tired?"

"Sometimes I do — but I think of how it'll look with alfalfa growing."

"And then what?"

"I think of new buildings. More land. More cattle. There's always something. It makes work easy if you look ahead and see it done."

"I look ahead, too. I see the roundup, and Laramie and horses."

"Well — you'll like the roundup."

Dan said good-bye, and trudged off up the val-

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ley. The heavy saddle rested on his shoulder, and as he looked ahead he thought of Bill standing in the doorway — motionless, steadfast, leathery.

2

Laramie had no home. He didn't need one or think of one or ask for one.

Dan was in the thick of it now. Swift milling horses lived in his days and haunted his dreams. He loved them hungrily, the molten fluid shape of them, the feel and smell of them, the clamor of their hoofs, their wind-tossed manes. He was one of the bunch, the greatest bunch that ever lived: Soupbone Dodge, Al Christie, and Laramie Jim who had shot a man!

With part of his forty-three dollars he had bought some straight-shanked spurs from Pat Rotay, and from Tommy an old pair of riding boots with two-colored stitching and round tops. The heels were made as boot heels should be made, for Jem Roney said so and Jem Roney was a deputy sheriff.

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The rattle of dumb hoofs marching; swish of a short loop, thump of a body falling; smoke of fires, and the sound of young calves bawling. By day a far-flung horizon with sharp white peaks against the blue. By night the purple dark laden with the scent of dry grass and of horses near. There were lonely voices in the night which the presence of the bunch seemed to make more understandable — a coyote yapping on a high divide, a dove mourning in a cottonwood, and the solemn wind like some great person breathing. You couldn't tell but what it might be God, for once in a while He seemed necessary and nearby.

3

Laramie Jim rode into the bed ground on a jaded horse. He came straight toward Dan who stood outside the rope corral watching the animals inside. Dan felt shaky, because he saw that Laramie was going to speak to him and he had not spoken before.

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"How's my roan?" Laramie put his hand on the rope fence beside the boy's.

"He's the best horse in the bunch. I like him, because —" He stopped in the middle of his sentence. Daylight seemed to make no change in Laramie Jim. His black hat was spotless. He walked as if his feet did not quite touch the ground. He walked the way the blue roan ran. He grinned at Dan, showing the white edges of his teeth. "Want to ride him once?"

"Your horse?"

"Sure."

"Well — I wouldn't mind."

Laramie whistled, and the roan's ears jerked. "You take my hull off this plug, and I'll saddle a *real* horse for you to ride."

In a moment the roan was ready. He kept picking up his hoofs and dropping them nervously. Laramie laughed. He drew the reins together above the horse's neck. "Here you go."

The stirrups were inches too long, but Dan didn't mind. The horse lunged forward under him. He rode with his knees, and he watched the wind-torn mane. The horse seemed scarcely to move under him, so smooth was the gait. Objects of landscape slid along, blurred.

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He rode a mile into the sunset, and on the return he overtook Soupbone and Al Christie, who were moving toward the chuck wagon near the bed ground. He raced by close to them, twisting around in the saddle. He felt scornful of them on their chunky graceless mounts. He waved both hands to show that the horse ran free. They watched him go.

4

That night Dan lay in the darkness just beyond the firelight. There he could watch Laramie, and hear his low drawling legends of men who had died in feuds and had not cared. The bronze light flickered on listening faces. The canvas of the chuck wagon flapped in the wind like an uncertain phantom. Laramie began to sing, and the sound of his voice filled the boy with high defiance of wind, of darkness and of home.

Laramie was midway of the song when deputy Jem Roney and three others came searching for a man named Long Bob. They rode straight into

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the firelight, and no one spoke. No one moved, but carelessness and comfort vanished from each man's mood. Dan recognized Jem Roney by his white hair, but the twinkle had gone from his eyes.

The light of the flames danced on bit and buckle. The horses stood silently, except for the creak of leather when they breathed.

Jem Roney reined his horse around so that without turning his head he could look at Laramie Jim. "We're lookin' for Long Bob."

"Well, Jem, he ain't here."

"No, I can see he ain't. I was wondering if you could tell me anything about him."

"Why, no, I reckon I couldn't Jem — anything at all."

"Well, all right, Laramie. It's too bad."

"Yeh, it's a damn shame." Laramie stood up slowly. His legs were braced wide apart, his thumbs hooked in his belt. He tipped his head back a little so that he seemed to be looking down at every one. Dan lay quiet, holding his breath. His lips parted as he marvelled at each detail of Laramie's bearing. He wondered if he might some day bring himself to look at men the way Laramie looked — hard, and high and straight.

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Jem Roney and his men rode away. At the night fire no one talked, or looked at Laramie Jim. The men lay or squatted on their heels and listened to the sound of hoof beats dying out in the dark. The bunch sang no more that night, but watched the embers for a time and one by one went to their blankets.

5

In the morning Laramie was gone.

Dan looked everywhere for him. He looked again and again at the horses in the rope corral. The big blue roan was not there.

He went to Soupbone who was saddling a homely cutting horse. "Soupbone, who's Long Bob?"

"Why, I expect he's the one been taking Shattuck's horses."

"Oh." Dan frowned. "Just a horse thief. Where do you think Laramie Jim has gone?"

Soupbone's eyes looked tired. He smoothed his saddle blanket over and over again. "You

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go over to my warbag and get my other spur straps, will you?"

"Where has he gone?"

Soupbone reached under for the front cinch. "Where? Oh, just moved on, I expect. Feller like him changes his range every now an' then. Kind of itchy restless feet."

"He's a wonderful rider."

"Laramie? Sure, he can ride."

"Will he come back?"

"You can't never tell."

6

Big blue days rolled by as the roundup moved down the valley. Circle riders combed draw and coulee and sparse forest of lodgepole pine. But Laramie did not return, and the bunch said nothing definite about him. They spoke vaguely, as if he were an old memory.

Finally, without warning, the roundup reached the end of its territory. The ranges in its wake were combed clean. The roundup was done.

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The riders disbanded, and each man rode his way with a "so-long" and a wave to his friends.

Soupbone stood over his warbag which was nearly packed and ready for the return journey. He looked down strangely at the boy, and guessed the magnificence of his dreams. "What you troubling about?"

"I was wondering where Laramie had gone."

"There's no telling, kid. But I got a notion he rode south. Why?"

"Nothing. Only — I won't go back and work for Bill."

"Why not?"

"He only thinks about fences and grubbing sagebrush."

"Them things are important."

"My feet feel itchy."

"I expect," the old man said. He stooped, his hands fumbling in the depths of his pack. He brought out an old hat and a split-ear bridle with rosettes on the cheek-pieces. "Here."

Dan took them and inspected them over and again. He turned gratefully. "Thanks. Pretty good leather in that old bridle."

"Yuh."

"Well — I guess I'll be going now."

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Soupbone's eyes were like an ancient hound's.

"So-long kid."

"So-long."

7

On a nine-dollar horse Dan rode along the valley of a slow river. If the distances he rode were small in miles, they were monstrous in his mind. He was on a quest. He felt important in his own right, for about him were no aged men to outdo him or remind him of the fewness of his years. He rode singing in grave imitation of the man he thought he might find. The ways of the land and of horses were friendly and familiar, and he felt unlike a boy.

He owned his own outfit. He had tied a can of tomatoes behind his cantle, after the manner of range riders. His horse took on magnificence in his eyes. He loved the shape and arch of its neck, and the drowsiness of its stare. "My horse! My saddle! My own damn spurs!"

Whenever he met a stranger he would draw rein and push the old hat far back on his head

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and ask: "Have you seen my friend Laramie Jim riding along this way?"

No one had seen Laramie; but once in a town he asked his question of a man standing near the blacksmith's shop. The man laughed and Dan felt young and trifling because of a note in the man's laughter. "What the hell you want with a horse thief?"

"My Laramie Jim's a rider. He rides a big blue roan. There must be two of them, mister."

"Must *be*." The man walked away, his shoulders shaking.

Late one evening Dan rode into a tiny town. Its scattered loading pens by the railroad tracks and its few insecure buildings appeared to sleep. To the right and left of him on the wide street were lighted windows. On the left was a restaurant. On the right was a saloon. From both, pale streams of light ran downward, spreading on the street.

Tied to the hitchrack outside the saloon were several horses. Sometimes they moved a little and looked like living shadows.

As he rode close, one of the horses stepped into a puddle of light. Dan stopped, crying out joyously in his surprise. Then he saw that the dim

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light had tricked him. The horse was a giant roan almost like Laramie's, but it was a mare and the brand was different.

It would have been wonderful to find Laramie, to walk up to him and say, as if he didn't much care: "Why, hullo there, Laramie. How's tricks?" Then they might sit down together on some wooden steps somewhere and talk about the bunch — Soupbone, Tommy and the rest. They might make plans together. "Laramie," he would say, "shall we string along together? You and I? We could get a job riding for some big southern outfit, the two of us." And Laramie would say, "Why, sure," and then probably he would sing, or maybe fumble with the blue roan's bridle reins.

Dan tied his horse close to the mare at the hitchrack and, brushing the dust from his overalls, walked stiff-legged across the street to the restaurant.

He had reached the middle of the street when a sound made him turn. He saw a man coming from the door of the saloon. As the door opened a fat plume of light thrust itself into the street. He caught a glimpse of the saloon's interior. Its noises suddenly increased in volume. He heard

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laughter and the scrape of boots. Three or four indistinct faces turned curiously toward the departing man. The door swung to.

The man walked unsteadily to the hitchrack and untied the roan mare by jerking the bridle reins. Dan watched, worshipping the horse, admiring the man because he possessed such a horse.

Neglecting to tighten the cinches, the man mounted. The saddle slipped and the mare reared straight up on her hind legs. Dan saw her in partial silhouette against the lighted windows. She was so beautiful that he grew tense with love for her. She came down hard on her front feet and kicked her heels high. The man slid off over her head and sat in the street. Still holding the bridle reins, he jerked himself to his feet and reached for the loaded quirt which was looped over his saddle horn.

He led the mare into the light from the windows. Holding her head down by twisting the cheek piece of the bridle, he struck and struck with the butt of the quirt until the white blaze on her muzzle turned dark. Then, tightening the cinches, he mounted and rode away.

Dan swayed forward, shaking with horror. His throat felt twisted and dry and his ears

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rang. All things he had thought beautiful glared in ugliness. He felt sick. All the rightness had gone from life. He did not know what to do.

Scarcely aware of what was in his mind, he untied his horse and followed. His mind and senses hammered him. A man had half killed a horse. He would follow that man and that horse.

8

It seemed only a short time later that he found the roan mare, riderless. She grazed by a creek which looked dark and somber because of the white mist gathering on its surface. Probably, he thought, the man had fallen off the horse because he was so drunk. The man no longer counted.

He dismounted and unsaddled the roan mare. He flung saddle, bridle and blanket into a clump of brush. He rubbed the silken back from withers to rump, went to the creek, moistened his handkerchief and sponged the sore muzzle.

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He was in the midst of a deed decided by himself, taking part in deadly matters. He kept speaking to the roan mare, sometimes mumbling, sometimes whispering, sometimes beseeching, never realizing what he said. "I'm a horse thief now. I don't care. The wetness must feel nice on your nose. I'm a horse thief. That's quite a thing and they'll come after me and get me."

He glared into the darkness, growled at whatever phantoms might be drifting there to hurt her. Tenderly he slipped the bit into her sore mouth. Carefully he smoothed the blanket before he cinched on his saddle. With a slap on the rump, he turned his own horse free, mounted the roan and rode away.

9

Gray arms rose out of the east, and the breath of morning blew from the hills. The sun sent out tall red vanguards which stalked among the cottonwood leaves, the gray sagebrush, the wet stones in the creek, everything. In the boy's

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heart the strength wavered and receded with the rising of the sun.

He began to look back. He had stolen only one horse, yet, merely because of that, they would be coming to get him. Unsmiling men would ride upon him from all directions.

He decided to leave the wagon track and venture across open country into places which would engulf his memory and his deed. Turning to the left he rode up a long narrow valley. On one side was a divide with a scarred patch here and there where the pines could find no mooring for their roots. On the other side, the left, a long sandstone rimrock ran for a mile. Above the rimrock rose the brown hills, billowing back and beyond.

Dan's shoulders sagged. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the saddle's swell. The sun warmed his back. He felt its penetrating drowsiness. It seemed nearly a year since he had rested. The muscles in his face gave up, and exhaustion roamed in the shadows back of his eyes.

Wouldn't it be safe to rest just a little? The roan mare was nearly done. She had had a hard time too.

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He thought then of the can of tomatoes tied in his slicker behind the cantle.

He rode to the bank of the creek which wound through the valley. "There," he said to her. "Ten swallows, ole girl, that's all for now." He drew tight on the reins and she threw her head up and snorted. "All right, eat some blue joint if you want to."

He let her munch for a while before turning into a thick clump of pines part way up the right side of the divide. Above him in the branches the wind sang like remote violins. Across the valley through an opening he could see the hills rising beyond the rimrock — a long brown line against the sky. The land was peaceful and warm. It was contented, as if no humans had marched across it.

He unsaddled the mare and let her out on his picket rope to graze. He opened the tomatoes with a knife and ate them savagely. Everything was all right now. He was an outlaw, safe in retreat. He lay on his back with old Soupbone's hat covering his eyes. The sun sank deep into his muscles. He took a long breath and in a moment was asleep.

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10

Through the air and from the ground, pounding into his ears came the sound he loved and dreaded. *Tunka-tunk! Tunka-tunk! Tunka-tunk!* He swept the hat from his eyes and sprang to his feet. Hoof beats! Why had he rested here? They were coming to get him!

He looked back. A horseman bending low in the saddle rode furiously up the valley. Less than half a mile away, he rode straight toward the boy, swung abruptly into the pines on the hillside and vanished.

Dan ran to the picket rope, caught his foot on a protruding pine root, stumbled, fell. He fell with his wrist doubled under him and he lay for a moment staring curiously down at it. It did not hurt. It felt numb and dead, refusing his commands in a puzzling way. He scrambled to his feet. With his left hand he coiled his rope and strapped it to his saddle. No longer could he hear the wild rattling of the hoof beats. Stillness frightened him even more than sound.

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Maybe the rider was sneaking toward him, hidden among the pines. Maybe he had a rifle. He wished his wrist would do something besides flop when he tried to move it. It was beginning to swell and the pain ran up his arm.

He glanced through a rift in the pines toward the rimrock across the valley. Once the rimrock had been placid and unpeopled. But now five horsemen moved against the sky, like shadows on a wall. He tried frantically to bridle the mare with one hand. But he could not keep his eyes from the men on the rimrock. They were searching the valley up and down. He saw one of them point and he thought the black arm reached covetously in his direction.

He beseeched the roan mare. "Put your head down. Put your head down. I can't reach. I can't ——" She held high. Her ears leaned forward and her head swung toward the thickest of the trees behind him. Dan dropped the bridle and stared, eyes wide open and appalled. Just a few feet away from him, a low branch moved and a man stepped into view.

"Aw — say! Laramie Jim!"

Laramie stood smiling just a little, exactly as he had stood the last time Dan had seen him, legs

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braced wide apart, hat slanting, thumbs hooked in his belt and a grinning coolness in his bearing. Dan straightened and flung out his arms. "Laramie!"

"Hullo, cowboy." Laramie looked at the roan mare and gave a queer ironic shrug of his shoulders. "Where'd you get *her*?"

"Why — I stole her."

Laramie glanced at the riders who were threading their way single file along the rimrock.

"But I'm not a horse thief, Laramie. Honest I'm not. I mean, not a regular horse thief." He went close to Laramie, looking up at him intently. He told Laramie what he had done. He spoke eagerly with small intense gestures. And when he had finished, he paused and said, "And now they're coming to get me."

"Well," said Laramie. "They won't."

"Why?" His hands shook. "Laramie, were you with them? Were you coming after me?"

Laramie searched the hillside with sharp scrutiny. The riders were zigzagging swiftly down toward the flat. "Well — yes. But I got out ahead. My horse has got speed."

In two long strides Laramie reached the mare. He slipped on the bridle and saddled her with

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quick unwasteful dexterity. Dan watched each detail of the work. He was so confident and nerveless! He jerked the latigo down through the cinch ring and dropped the stirrup into place. "There you are," he said. "Now lemme see that wrist."

The boy held out his arm. "You think I'm a horse thief?"

"I expect the law says you are. Got a handkerchief?"

He took Dan's handkerchief and bound the sprained wrist.

"What will they do?"

"Why nothing, nothing at all. Put your thumb on that knot. They're getting down the rimrock."

"Why won't they?"

Laramie's mouth wrinkled curiously. "Because the roan mare belonged to Long Bob and they caught him afoot this morning, so Bob won't need her no more now."

"They got Long Bob! Then why don't I just let them catch me? Then I could tell them about it, Laramie."

Laramie hesitated, eyes turning toward the rimrock. Two of the riders had reached the

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valley. "They might not look at it that way. You see when — when we got Bob afoot back there, why, he told how you had took his horse and they're coming to find out."

"How did he know I took his horse?"

Laramie's hands twitched. The two foremost riders were in plain sight. "Don't say any more now! Get a wiggle on as fast an' far away from here as you can. Quick!"

Dan grasped the bridle reins and thrust his left foot into the stirrup. The color had faded out of Laramie's face.

"Laramie — what's the matter?"

"Get away — quick!"

"I'm not scared, not with you. I'm not afraid of anything any more." Dan looked at him hungrily. The nearness of Laramie, the pain in his wrist, the thumping of his heart stirred him so that his words knew no restraint. He swung his right leg over the cantle. "I'll see you again, won't I? I hate to go away like this. Why, Laramie, you're the *Rider!*"

The last man had made his way down the rim-rock and was coming at a run. Dan settled himself in the saddle and leaned forward, searching Laramie's eyes. "I asked a man in a town if he'd

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seen you. And he said, 'What do you want with that horse thief?' And I said, 'There must be two Laramie Jims, mister.' Wasn't he a fool?"

Laramie looked away at the riders. He laughed, and his voice was like dry sand sliding off a shovel. "He was a fool. They're fording the creek now."

"So-long, Laramie."

Laramie reached up and grasped Dan's injured hand. The pain made the boy's face old and sick, and sweat popped out on his forehead. But it didn't matter. Laramie was helping him make a getaway. Laramie was grinning up at him, saying: "So-long, old-timer!"

Dan touched the roan mare with his spurs and she wheeled up the hillside, taking the ground in live, hungry leaps. He felt the wind tearing at him. He felt the strength of a fine horse under him. Again and again he heard Laramie Jim's last words: "So-long, old-timer!"

Chapter Five

1

HUNGER and sinking sun and faith in humans prompted Dan to open a barbed wire gate and enter the land of a homesteader before twilight.

The homesteader's name was Snell, and his thoughts were of wheat. Snell stood in the doorway of his sod-roofed shack. He was lanky, and his clothes hung in loose folds about him. He watched the boy's horse trot toward him. As Dan approached, a spray of grasshoppers leaped before him nearly to the height of the mare's shoulders. The grasshoppers mainly interested Snell. He looked at them hopelessly, for he knew they had come to despoil his wheat for the third lean year.

Snell's wife and two children came to the door and grouped themselves about the spindling bulwark of Snell.

"Howdy," said Snell.

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"Hullo." Dan looked scornfully upon them. He was an example of a successful and dramatic escape. He knew things they could not even suspect. His face had a smug expression, like a gossip, ostentatious with secrets.

They stared at him. The stare was not of suspicion, but of hunger for news, a new voice, a new encouragement.

Dan had so long been alone with his feeling of being a fugitive that he began now to talk and laugh in a turbulent unbalanced manner. "I used to live in the east, a long time ago. But I live out here now. I'm really a westerner. I just came off the big roundup a few days ago. I was with Soupbone Dodge and Al Christie and Laramie Jim. I know Jem Roney. He's a deputy sheriff. He's my friend. I worked over a month for Bill Hatt and three weeks for Al Christie." The words gushed incoherently.

"Light down and rest you."

"You'll take supper with us," said the woman. Her hands fumbled. Her dress hung like a disheartened thing, and her bare feet pressed flatly against the dirt floor of the shack.

"I'm hungry," said Dan.

"We ain't got much, but you're welcome,"

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said the woman. Unconsciously, almost as if by magnetism, her hand reached out and touched the head of one of her children, a child of two. The hand rested there until the child reached up and drew it down.

Dan put the roan mare in Snell's corral and returned to the shack. He sat down and ate with them at the board table. Potatoes and beef.

On a bench in a corner of the cabin sat a very old woman with thin gray hair and spectacles. She peered at Dan with eyes so aged they showed no changes, lights, or interests.

"That's my mother," said Snell.

The old lady swept some sewing from her lap, stood up by slow degrees and walked crookedly to the stove where she moved a black iron kettle over the fire. "You'll want tea," she said without looking at them. "You'll want tea." She repeated it raspingly to assure herself that she had said it.

"Bill Hatt sent us this beef," said Snell.

"Bill Hatt? Did you say Bill Hatt?"

Snell nodded. "His place ain't far."

Recently he had thought of Bill Hatt as being tremendously remote.

After the meal Snell stood in the door of his

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cabin. Sometimes a hovering bird dipped down and a small cloud of grasshoppers arose, scattered and receded. The wheat was doomed.

Dan stayed near Snell's wife, following her about in the shack from table to stove, stove to table. She was silent, working like one who has stopped thinking about monotony and struck a steady stride maintainable till death. She was the first woman Dan had laid eyes on in two months. This was the first family of father, mother, children and grandmother he had seen. He was moved to confide in them, to tell them deeply buried things. He heard himself talking to Snell's wife of his mother and father. She was serenely interested, asking questions in a voice which had no inflection:

"Do you miss your mother?"

"Miss her? No."

"Doesn't she know where you are?"

"She *did* know."

"Do you think about her?"

"Sometimes, when I —"

"I reckon you miss her." The woman's face was expressionless. It was like her voice and her work and her life, as if it too had found a painless and enduring mold. She stared with

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pallid curiosity at Dan's bound wrist. "Hurt your hand a little?"

He moved his wrist nervously. He regarded it as a memorial to things unreal. "It's nothing," he said, "Nothing at all."

Details of home marched through his mind. He wanted Mrs. Snell to know of them. "We've got a fireplace with tiles around it. Blue tiles. There's a couch in front of it. My mother sews there at night."

"What does your father do?"

"He reads."

The woman nodded.

"Once a week we have beans cooked in a stone pot," said Dan.

"With molasses?"

"My father and I take walks on Sundays in the woods. Back of our house there's a path running into the woods."

"Do you have brown bread with the beans?"

"Yes, raisins in it. They sink to the bottom. You only get them in one end. I used to get that end. We burn leaves on the lawn in spring and fall. Every one does on our street."

The woman worked with her dishes. "You better stay with us to-night."

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The family retired a short time after night-fall. The grandmother slept in one bunk with the two children. They tussled and pushed at her with their hands, but she did not move or respond to their play. She was limp, like an old sack worried by puppies.

Before getting into the bed with her husband, Snell's wife came quietly to Dan. She was carrying a greasy lamp. She had come from looking at her two children lying with their grandmother. She had touched their blankets as if to assure herself that all was well with them. With the same uncalculated gesture she smoothed Dan's blankets and looked in at him. There was a hollow gasping breath as she blew out the lamp, then immense stillness and the stench of coal oil.

It was almost like being at home in his own bed. He felt the same security and peace until bits of earth began to drop from between the rafter poles. They fell to the floor with a sound like raindrops in a forest.

The smell of burning pitch awoke him. The grandmother stood by the stove, rattling a black skillet. Snell's wife came to him and touched his shoulder gently. "My, but you slep' sound."

"You sure did," said Snell. He sat hunched

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on a bench like an outlandishly patient crane.

Dan pulled on his boots and washed in a basin. They sat down to breakfast. He helped the children to fried salt pork, dipping their bread in grease for them, laughing aloud when they spoke of it as gravy. He wanted to stay a long time to play with the children and to talk with Snell's wife.

"You never heard a sound all night, did you?" she said to him.

"I guess there weren't many sounds to hear. I would of waked up — just like a wolf."

"Jem Roney and some men stopped by about twelve o'clock."

"They had Laramie Jim," said Snell.

The food in Dan's mouth turned dry. He could not swallow. He looked at Snell's wife. He looked at Snell. They did not seem to be accusing him. His eyes were puzzled and beseeching. "Why did they come?"

Snell's wife ate for a moment, then said: "They had Laramie Jim and Long Bob."

"Laramie Jim?"

"Yes," said Snell. "Him an' Long Bob been stealing Shattuck's horses a long time."

"What do you mean?" Dan started up from

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the bench. "He never stole any one's horses."

Snell's wife reached out both arms and gathered plates, sliding the knives and forks from them and piling them in a greasy tower. "Roney took that big mare along with him. They found your horse. They left him for you. He's out there in the corral."

Dan's mouth sagged. He started jerkily toward the cabin door.

"Ain't you goin' to finish your food?" the grandmother screeched after him. The old woman's fingers sneaked out and, seizing his plate, dragged it to her. She began to eat like an animal, her eyes half glazed with famine.

Dan went to the door and looked out. His nine-dollar horse stood in the corral drowsing on three legs, lower lip rising and falling. His fingers picked at the front of his shirt. "Laramie Jim didn't steal Shattuck's horses."

Snell's wife came to the doorway.

Snell said: "Everyone knows he's a horse thief." He spoke in a detached way. He was staring through a window across his wheat fields where the grasshoppers fed relentlessly. "It's a dry year." He seemed to forget everything: poverty, frustration, the squalor around him, the

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heat, the barrenness of his life, even his own presence amid elements which had defeated him. He smiled, and his sunken eyes, looking inward, beheld a vision of grain bending in a wind which promised rain. His vision gave tenacity to life, gave happiness, gave a pulse to the passage of time. It was deathless in him.

Dan crossed the threshold of the cabin.

“Where you going?”

He ran toward the corral. They watched him saddle and ride away. Snell's wife raised a red hand in a listless wave. Her face was blank. She glided back into the cabin and Snell took her place in the doorway where the rays of a white sun slanted. He looked out like a lord over his wheat, dreaming, while his wife began to work. The grandmother, having finished her feast, retired to a dark corner, and sat. In her lap her hands flopped over and back.

2

Dan rode swiftly, seeking in the clatter of his horse's hoofs to escape the wreck of certainties

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which had been fond. But there was no escaping the inrush of reality that threatened to engulf him.

The mystery surrounding Laramie was not magnificent, but mocking. The men had been reticent because they did not want him to know what they knew. Most poignant, most bewildering, was the realization of what Laramie had tried to do. And when this accumulation reached him in its fullness, all cords which held him came apart. His spurs, his boots, his belt and bridle sickened him. Accoutrements of dreams! Fake medals on the breast of a ghost!

Dismounting on a hill, he lay face downward, clutching the grass with his fingers. His heart grew round and furious with hurting. All might have been a dream except for the pain in his injured wrist, and the handkerchief binding it, and the knot that Laramie had tied.

His shoulders rocked, and the words rushing between his immature lips were incoherent and believed.

"I love my father and my mother, and I hate everything and every one here. God, I guess I am not big any more."

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3

From the top of the hill he looked into a valley. Beyond, the sun touched mountain ranges with a beauty too full to recur, drawing all hardness from the fringes of the world. He felt solemn and selfless, as if he were alone in a church.

Only a good world could contain such views. Only a good world could harbor such beings as his father and mother, Mrs. Snell, Bill Hatt and Soupbone. He thought devoutly of their goodness, and pondered the meanings of their lives. His father's and his mother's hopes were centered upon making him more complete than they themselves had been. Dim or blazing, this hope was constantly alive in them giving them motive and purpose. The homesteader's thoughts were of wheat in wondrous fertility. As long as he could see that picture, poverty was justified, hunger quenchable, toil purposeful, life good.

The color drifted to the rim of the sky, and distant objects grew vague. He came to a fence, below which spread the purple valley. He gave

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an astonished outcry as he recognized the valley and the fence. It was a stout substantial fence with four taut strands of wire; a remarkable and righteous fence; a familiar and lovable fence.

Below was the bunkhouse, the cook shack with the pale smoke straightening from its chimney. He felt the swelling elation of one who has gained the first plateau in an ascent. Safety! Known things! Harborage! He opened the barbed wire gate, and on his nine-dollar horse rode down the hillside.

The sage rattled against his stirrups as he crossed the flat. From the dusk a tall man emerged, his shoulders slightly stooped, a remembered solidness in his outline.

“Bill! Bill! Hey, *Bill!*”

Bill Hatt leaned his adz against a sage bush. “Hullo, kid.”

Dan glanced at the cleared area closing around him in the dark. “You’ve done an awful lot, haven’t you?”

“Just begun.”

“Can I help you some more? I’ll work hard, harder than before.”

“Sure.” Bill patted the horse’s neck. “You ride a nice horse there.”

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“One I picked up for nine dollars.”

“Nine dollars? Let’s go eat.”

He twitched the reins and the horse stepped ahead. Bill strode alongside, his hand in the horse’s mane.

“Look, Bill, we’ll get this whole flat cleared, just the two of us working together.”

Beside the horse Bill’s brown boots shuffled with a patient sound. “There’s a letter waiting for you.”

4

My own dear son:

I am writing this letter without knowing whether it will reach you. It has been so long since your one first note, and I am anxious to know everything about you. Please write to me, son.

Father’s understanding of your motive in running away is very fine, and you would love him more than ever if you could hear him speak of his faith in you. We have talked again and

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again about it; but I cannot lose the hurt of your going.

I am dreadfully anxious to see you, and to hear about your adventures, and I am lonely for you, dear.

Mother

P.S. I am sending you a bundle of clothes.

After a few days, when his wrist had healed, Dan wrote in answer to his mother's letter:

Dear Mother:

It seems as if I had been gone from home a year. Your letter made it seem like more than a year.

I went on roundup with a man named Laramie Jim. He was a wonderful man and the finest rider I ever saw. But he was a horse thief. So I came back to Bill Hatt's ranch and I'm working beginning to-morrow, grubbing sagebrush with an adz. Have you ever seen an adz? Bill Hatt's ranch is where I first got a job digging post holes. I am going to work until I have enough money to come home. The

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cattle shipments start in fall and I will come as far as the stockyards on a cattle train and on the fastest train from there.

There is an old man in the bunkhouse named Soupbone Dodge. He doesn't say very much, but I think he likes me. He gives me things.

I don't ride very much. I have got some riding boots and spurs and Soupbone gave me a hat and bridle. He seems to think a lot of me. I had one ride on Laramie Jim's horse which was the finest horse I ever saw.

I will be very strong from working when I get home.

*Love,
Dan*

Chapter Six

1

SOMETIMES, in the midst of toil, he lost his hold on the picture of home, fastening with provident greed upon the job at hand. In the confines of exertion, life grew very narrow, its horizons sometimes as close as the separate blows of his adz. His world became so contracted that it was like looking across the top of an accordion, each peak of each fold being a goal. Each blow with his adz brought gratification in the anticipated completion of the next, and he lived in the contemplation of these compressed triumphs. It made small difference toward what he saw ahead — sunset, supper, the passing of a cloud. As long as the point deserved a hope, no moment of the present was unendurable. Sometimes he swung the adz until in his weariness and hunger, food and shelter and rest became his dearest dreams. He worked close to the earth, where these three are inveterate essentials, where

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dreams of bread and beef and bed are as gratifying as the concept of heroism, or gold.

Bill Hatt worked near by, the dried sweat seaming his face and chalking the creases of his clothes with salt.

Frequently Dan longed to write home for money, to leave this work forever behind him. But sterner longings intervened. He divined that a finished job was a kind of nourishment without which no human could subsist.

His feet stumbled to the cook shack door, to the bunkhouse, to the flat. The things he missed were play and laughter. Days so much alike that to remember one was to remember all, except for one outstanding sound — the note of a single cricket lamenting Fall's approach.

2

One morning Soupbone tarried at breakfast, clearing his throat for the passage of important words.

"I was talking to Al Christie on the Lame Horse yesterday. He said he got word that

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threes and fours was bringing around fourteen."

Bill shoved back his plate: "We can make up a trainload between us. You go up an' look over that bunch to the west. They ought to be in good shape."

"They're all right. I can tell you now they're all right."

Dan's mouth hung slightly open, as if to assist the inward rushing of joy. Was it possible that from this moment he could count the days? He could not believe it. His tight pattern of existence would not loosen without leaving wounds. Yet the end was near! It was actually so, because Soupbone and Bill hinted honestly at it.

"You said I could go on the cattle train, Bill!"

"I'll send you an' Soupbone."

"When?"

"Maybe a week."

His voice rose in a giddy laugh. "A week!"

3

All that day alone on the flat he worked like Hercules, revelling in the stretch of muscles as he heaved his adz at the sage. Clump after clump

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fell before him. He removed his shirt so that he might feel the wind cooling his arms and give them all possible freedom. He worked in a fiery exultation, a kind of clarion happiness.

No more could he see fault in Bill Hatt. He even loved Bill, seeing despite his reticence and his humming an eminently solid man. It was so good to be alive and in a world filled with good, quiet men.

Early in the afternoon Bill rode toward him from the shack. It was the first time he had seen Bill ride. He was astonished that he rode so well.

“Bill, see how much I’ve done!”

“Quite a jag,” said Bill.

“Tell me about the cattle.”

“We’ll ship.” Bill hesitated a moment. “I got a little extra job for you: Can you find your way over to Snell’s?”

“Easy!”

“There’s a meal bag of fresh beef in the shed. You take it over your saddle and leave it to Snell’s for them to eat. An’ on the way back go into the north pasture an’ bring down them eight horses for the boys to ride gathering stock. Can you do it?”

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Dan flung the adz far away from him. "Didn't I help the wrangler on roundup?"

"Here — take my Steve horse. You got four hours till dark."

Bill dismounted, and Dan caught up the bridle reins. Steve shied away from him, eyes white.

"Easy. He ain't been rode all summer."

"I can ride him."

4

He sallied forth through the big gate. He sat straight in the saddle and his head was high. The springs that leaped in Steve's body were under the power of his bridle hand. Soupbone's decrepit hat slanted over his eyes and the bit chains jingled in private merriment.

This was a real job. Bill Hatt had given him sole trust of a bag of beef and eight horses. And in a week the wheels of a cattle train would be rolling him homeward. He could count the days to his mother's voice, to his father's detailed questionings: "Just what did Laramie say?"

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“Just how did you feel when you first saw him?”
“How long did you work each day?” “Exactly what did Bill Hatt look like?” “How long was the fence?”

He searched for landmarks, one hand holding the reins, the other steadying the beef which rested across the swell fork and held him nicely in the saddle. He smiled loftily, as he spotted a yellow hill sprinkled with a few dark pines. Beyond the hill was Snell's homestead. Bill thought he couldn't find it! He puffed at Bill for his lack of comprehension.

A few minutes later he arrived at the parched homestead. Poor old Snell. It was his own fault. Any one should know this was a cattle country and not a wheat country. Snell was a fool.

Everywhere around the cabin and the dooryard waved untidy grasses. Steve's hoofs clip-clopped commandingly, but no children came to the door to stare.

A feeling of uncertainty traveled coldly within him. Everything slid from his mind except the view of the cabin. The wind played boisterously with the door. The dirt of the dooryard was flat and without footprints, the corral bars down,

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the horses gone. A plow with rusty share and gray weather-cracked handles leaned against a shed wall. The dwarfed wheat rustled, "lean, rent and beggared in the strumpet wind."

"Hello there, Mr. Snell!"

Dan pondered the sound of his own voice for a moment, and called loudly and disparagingly. "Hey, Snell! Where are you?" There was no answer. He was puzzled, thinly frightened.

"Snell!"

Steve shook himself, ruffling him from head to heel and setting up a rattle of gear. He began to prance at this delay and shouting for no sane reason. He arched his neck and turned squarely around. Dan's eyes swelled wide, and his face dropped open in horror. A wooden cross leaned at the head of a long grave where coyotes had dug.

The horizontal bar of the cross had been fastened with a nail, and single-minded animals rubbing against it had swung it downward at one end so that it looked foolish and contained no aftermath of meaning. A name was scrawled on the cross arm. Dan dared not go close enough to read it. It was better not to know, even though he wondered whether the ground covered Snell, or Snell's wife, or the old, old lady.

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A squawk from the swaying door made him blanch. Snell and his family had gone, leaving souvenirs of death. Why had he not heard of this before? It was a brutal country where neighbors died without your knowing; where you came abruptly upon the grave of a friend. He straightened in his saddle, determined that this happening would not affect him. In a week he was going home on a cattle train and nothing could diminish that.

5

At dusk he opened the barbed-wire gate into the north pasture. A few high clouds gathered, moving regally across the night. One or two arctic stars blinked down at him. A tune sprang to his lips, a tune of frail defiance. Bill had said eight horses in the north pasture. He could not conquer a doubt about the horses really being there. Why, why did Bill call it a pasture? Eight square miles of guttered hills.

Steve began to shy and dance and snuffle. Once,

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when he wheeled and started for home, Dan nearly lost the beef which had grown companionable against his middle. Where were those horses, anyway? Why couldn't Soupbone and Pat and Tommy ride their regular horses? This was a fool's mission, hunting for horses which no one really ought to have.

He yanked the bridle with both hands. Steve reared and then quieted. Perhaps if he listened he might hear the horses, but he heard nothing except the wind's rumor of old ice and solitude.

He saw now that home was a long way from him. He saw a thousand dangers, a thousand accidents gleaming along the miles. He was no match for them. He thought of the grave in Snell's dooryard and he knew that one quick happening could tumble him wantonly into hell.

Steve broke into a run, and at the bottom of a declivity swerved sharply. The beef careened off into space, frightening the horse when it thumped upon the grass. He lost his right stirrup, and felt deserted and insecure, bobbing up and down like a fat woman. Steve ran wild.

He fought the reins, angered at himself, bitter toward the horse which defied him. Bill and Soupbone would sneer at him for this, calling him

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coward. They would wink at each other and congratulate him with sniffs.

His head howled with speed, and tears streaked backward on his cheeks. Soupbone's old hat was snatched from his head, and the chin cord tugged at his throat. His left leg brushed against something, and he covered his eyes in desperation. Then Steve's hoofs rang on hard-packed ground, and at the sound Dan knew that he had come back through the gate and that Steve was racing for home.

He had failed. He had not found the horses. He was not a good rider. He was a stupid stockman, and worthless in a multitude of ways. His finish on a great ranch was inglorious. It would prick him forever with hints of cowardice.

A stubborn flood of resistance rose in him. His lips drew tight across his teeth. He gripped with his knees, dragging on the reins with all his strength. Steve fought him briefly, and came to a plunging stop. "There!" The wind gathered up the word and shot it away. "*There!*" he shrieked.

Back he turned, handling Steve with the firmness of a victor. He had ridden but a few minutes, when he discerned some blots moving

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and stopping in the darkness. Horses! He could hear their snorting breaths, their amiable nickering. While he had been searching, they must have strayed out through the gate. They must be bound toward the corrals, decoyed by dreams of grain.

He circled stealthily behind them, his eyes enlarged as he counted: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight! All safe in a bunch. He was now a fine horseman! He was a lone wrangler on a great range. The night grew docile and easy to deride. He rode behind the horses, slouching carelessly in the saddle. He sang, holding his young voice low in his throat, after the manner of men who sang at night to cattle in the old days.

He brought his small herd safely to the home corral and turned them in along with Steve. He remained for a moment outside the corral, taunting his captives through the bars.

He was disappointed that the cook shack was dark and still. He marched toward the bunkhouse, dragging his heels so that his spurs clinked. No one had cared enough to wait up for him. To them his valor was nothing.

His pace slackened as he drew near the bunk-

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house door. A shadow moved against the wall, and a voice said: "I was fixing to come after you."

"Hi, Soupbone! I found 'em all right."

He went quickly to Soupbone and stood near him out of the wind. The old man felt warm. He smelled of dead cigarettes, and horse.

"I brought 'em back. Bill thought I couldn't."

Soupbone pushed himself away from the wall. "Find Snell's place all right?"

"Oh — yes. I was going to tell about that. He's gone. There wasn't any one around. But there was a grave. It must be Snell or some one of his family."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

Soupbone was quiet a long moment. Finally he said: "He had a hard time."

"I guess he had an awful hard time."

"Did you put the beef back in the shed? It ought to be hung up."

He had forgotten the beef. "It fell off up in the pasture. I couldn't help it. Steve got to pitching and it fell off."

"Where did it fall?"

"Where?" Dan tried to tell him, and after he had described impossible landmarks, Soupbone

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said: "You go in an' go to sleep. I'll find the beef."

"How can you find it in the dark."

"I'll find it."

He felt an immense disturbing gratitude toward Soupbone. He was puzzled and reverent. He went silently into the bunkhouse, undressed and got into his bunk. In a moment he heard the hoof beats of Soupbone's horse. He thought it improbable and outrageous that an old man could ride out at night into a ghostly land and search optimistically for a bag of beef.

Chapter Seven

1

BEFORE daylight Soupbone tugged at his shoulder. Dan sprang up, shouting in his eagerness. They ate a hurried breakfast, saddled and rode slowly to the herd which had been gathering for days on the flat. Approaching its fringes they whistled and called exaggerated calls. They drew the ends of their ropes and thwacked them against their chaps. The cattle were goaded into motion. Dust and the smell of steers hung in the air behind them, tumbling when the wind advanced. The sun rose, and Dan looked joyfully in its direction. This was all gallant and exciting, all charged with the shuffle of hoofs.

It was the longest day he had ever spent at work. The riding men prodded horses, cattle and themselves over the last few miles to town; and when finally the herd stood bunched and moaning at the gate of the loading pens beside

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the railroad, the dust cloud above it glowed gold in the light of afternoon.

The beeves crowded through the gate into the pens, urged by yells, by swift plunging spurts of mounted and relentless men. Soupbone and Bill closed the gate on the last tired critter. They sat their wet horses, watching the stock cars crawl along the siding and stop at the mouths of the loading chutes.

Dan was riding his own horse. He looked on absorbed while the cars were shunted into position. Each car was to be part of the train that would carry him a great leg of the distance home. He beamed upon them, appraising their heavy wheels, their red sides, the white lettering upon them. He found them good.

Dismounting, he tied his horse and went across the tracks into the railroad station. He had thought of writing a letter to his mother. He would send it ahead on a fast train. She and his father would know in advance of his coming. They would prepare for him, and he would have the joy of knowing that they expected him.

Behind a grating in the station a sour-looking man stared from under a green visor. Dan asked for paper and pencil and an envelope. The man

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gave them wordlessly. He was interested solely in the brass telegraph key beside him. When he turned his head away from it, he appeared to lurch an ear in its direction.

Dear Mother and Father:

The cattle train is getting ready to leave. All I can hear is the bawling and bawling of cattle. It will take eight days to the stock-yards and then a day more home. We drove the herd eighteen miles to-day. But I am not tired. I do not seem to get tired any more, because I think of coming home. Bill Hatt and Soupbone say that I have done good work, and I know I am as hard as nails. Wait till you see the muscles in my arms and you will think so too. I will tell you everything when I get home. I cannot wait to see you and tell you. It seems as if I had been waiting forever.

*Love,
Dan*

P.S. I think I could do good work at school now.

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"Can I mail this letter here?"

The station master, whose cheek was fat with tobacco juice, said "Sure," carefully.

"I'm going with Bill Hatt's cattle, Soupbone and me. Will the letter get there first?"

The man spat aimlessly. "Christ, yes."

"Are you sure it's all right to mail the letter here?"

The station master scowled at the address. The telegraph instrument at his elbow began to click. He read its message as if it had been spoken directly by a voice. "Number Four is in the block. You come out on the platform and watch her pick up your letter on the fly. You'll *think* it'll get there all right."

A small distance to the right across the tracks Bill and Soupbone talked together, their horses' heads close and confiding. They were waiting for a car to come into position at the loading chute. Tommy Peters and Pat Rotay had dismounted. They lay on the grass, smoking.

A faint sound came from the rails at Dan's feet. The rails began to hum portents, and to click impatiently, but he could see no train.

The station master came out carrying the mail sack. He hung it on an iron arm extending from

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a post close beside the tracks. Then he went into the station and pulled a black lever. Dan heard a harsh sound and glanced around to see an order-board moving. Then, far off to the west, he saw the train.

The station master, too, was looking at the train, proudly regarding its approach, as if thinking: "That's mine. I work for *That!*" Twice a day, each day of his life, the station master saw the spectacle of the eastbound and the westbound: Number Four and Number Six. They held him to his job. Thoughts of their journeyings and approach bridged boredom, made time race. He lived for them, because of them. They were the milestones of his life.

The engine loomed black and intolerably near, and for the first time Dan saw that a racing locomotive joggled and swayed on the rails, and that the rails cringed beneath its weight. He caught an instantaneous flash of the fireman's face, as the engine towered above him. From the corner of his eyes he saw the mail sack swinging from its hook. He heard nothing above the thunder of the train, but he was aware that the station master had cried: "Watch!" An iron arm reaching from the baggage car door plucked

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the mail sack from its hook and snatched it inside the car.

Then a lesser motion brought his glance to the side of the baggage car. This motion which attracted him was foreign to any motions he had thought of in connection with trains. A man swung in mid air from the hand rail at the head end of the baggage car. He was preparing to jump from the train, and Dan saw that he would be killed instantly and cried out to him not to jump — all in the merest trifle of time. The station master stood in a scared posture, his jaws tight shut.

The rear cars of the train pounded beside them, but Dan did not heed them. The man jumped. His hat leaped from his head and disappeared. The man sailed for many moments, and finally struck the ground, curled into a round ball. A spot of dust flew up. Some leaves popped out of a clump of brush. The man rolled and rolled, and at last was still.

Dan and the station master had forgotten the train. Far away the afternoon light gleamed on the brass railing of the last car.

The station master ran toward the fallen man, Dan following. The man was nearly two hun-

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dred yards from them, and before they reached him he rose nonchalantly to his feet and began to brush dust and smudges from his clothes. Hearing their boots crunching the cinders, the man looked up into their faces as if to congratulate them in their running. They stopped near him, dumb with surprise.

“Seen anything of a hat?” the man said. Casually he spied about him, until his eyes focused on a point near Dan. “There it is. You stepped right on it.”

Dan started as if something had squirmed under his feet. He saw the hat and stooped to pick it up. It had no band, and there were torn places in the crown. He walked to the man and presented him with the hat.

“Thanks.” The man’s smile sparkled like sun on moving water.

The station master simmered. He spoke indignantly to the man. “*Fool!* You ought to be pulled in for a trick like that.” In his anger, he started toward the man but when he got properly close he stopped in his tracks and a woeful expression came into his eyes. “Hell. It’s you, Laska! I ought to know it. What’s the idea, jumping? Ain’t you goin’ through?”

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Laska laughed. "They'd have nailed me at the next tank. I was on the blind." He cracked his hat against his thigh and watched the dust explode from it. "I thought for a second you wasn't going to remember me, Pete," he said to the station master.

Traces of anger remained like fumes in Pete. He was offended that this man should regard his beloved Number Four so airily. "You'll get killed some day, Laska. Serve you right. By Jesus, it would."

"Killed? Me?" Laska made a deprecating grimace. "That jump was a cinch. You'd ought to seen me going west for the harvest. I jumped in a wheat field and I thought to God I'd never stop rolling. I threshed about an acre of wheat and tore out a mile of barbed wire before I come to a stop."

"I'd ought to have you pulled, dam' if I hadn't. You're a menace. That's what you are. A menace. I'll lose my job account of you some day."

Laska put on his hat. He tugged at the brim, so that it slanted over his forehead and partially hid the lights in his black restless eyes. He looked along the tracks to the loading pens. "Stock train pulling out to-night?"

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"You keep off it, see?"

Laska regarded him derisively.

"Think I'd ride a rattler like that?" he said, and walked toward the pens.

Dan followed Pete back toward the station. Pete kept frowning and grumbling in Laska's direction. Between imprecations he discharged scraps of Laska's history which Dan devoured with growing wonder.

"Every year he rides through to the harvests. Then he rides back east an' works in tunnels underground. When col' weather comes, he goes south. He can board a train going forty an' never stretch a gut. Some time he'll miss. You'll see. Sometimes he'll — hell! He never paid a short-bit for railroad fare in his life. They call him Alamo Laska."

Some distance ahead of them Laska quickened his stride. He walked with spring and confidence, looking all around with laughing eyes. Pausing beside Bill Hatt, he patted Bill's horse, and began to talk and gesture as if he had known Bill many years. Bill himself began unexpectedly to smile and he had never seen Laska, nor Laska him.

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2

It was strange to hear Bill laugh. Generally he merely smiled. Even Soupbone who stood near grinned at something they had said. Laska climbed to the top of the loading pen fence and sat down, hooking his heels in a space between two boards. Bill turned across the tracks and into the station.

A stock car rolled into place at the loading chute. Dan mounted his horse, and he and Soupbone rode into the loading pen among the cattle. "Hi-yah! Hi-yah!" they cried, dashing against their flanks. Dumbly and doubtfully the cattle filed up the chute and through the door of the car. Pat Rotay stood by the chute, shouting tally from time to time. A long chain of loaded cars rumbled along the siding.

Frequently Dan turned in his saddle to look at Laska. It was growing dark and Laska had become a tall shape on the fence. Twice Dan saw him light a cigarette, and the match glowed bronze in his face.

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Bill's form showed in the lighted doorway of the station. Shortly he appeared moving toward them along the tracks. Soupbone and Dan closed the gate of the loading pen, and waited. A turbulent excitement flowed in the boy's veins.

"Tie your horse to the corral," said Bill.

He dismounted and did as directed, and Bill handed him a paper. "Here's your pass. Don't lose it."

Dan took the pass and tried to discern its color. He put it carefully in his pocket and sometimes reached for it, gloating in its touch and meaning.

Resting against the fence below Laska, Bill spoke in a low chuckling voice. "Here you are, Laska. Made out in the name of Henry East. All according to Hoyle."

Laska took his faked pass. "Thanks. Pete would give birth to a butte if he knew."

"He sure would."

Laska climbed down from the fence. "I better board her up the line a ways."

Dan walked over and stood beside Laska. "Coming with us?"

"Sure."

Bill and Soupbone had begun business. "Same

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commission company as last fall," said Bill. "Watch the feed and water — you know what to do."

"Sure," said the old man. "They'll get there in good shape."

"Hold the weight on 'em all you can."

"They won't suffer none."

"Keep your eye on the kid, too, will you?"

"I won't let no harm come to him."

Dan felt qualms of resentment against Bill and Soupbone. They persisted in the belief that he needed protecting, whereas he knew, and suddenly he wanted Laska to know, that he needed no tutoring except from his own experience. But Laska, having vanished far up the right of way, could not have heard.

In augmenting thunder the clash of couplings ran the length of the train. Soupbone and Bill ran toward Dan. "She's starting!"

"So-long, kid," said Bill. "Watch Soupbone. He'll show you what to do. Just keep the cattle on their feet."

"I know what to do." Dan grasped Bill's hand. It was the first time he had ever touched Bill's hand, but he had seen it so many times that the look of it was graven upon his mind. The

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hand was hard, strong, rough as splintered wood.

“Good-bye, Bill.” A wave of gratitude welled in him. He wanted Bill to know how he admired him and was indebted to him. He wanted to tell Bill many things, but there was no time. “Take care of my horse, Bill. Sometimes give him a graining.”

“I’ll look after him.”

Dan and Soupbone climbed to the roof of a car, and felt its motion through their feet and in the coolness of their faces. Laska had not yet got aboard, but the train was moving. A deliberate brakeman walked below them, his lantern throwing a mobile circle on the cinders.

The boy’s breath came fast. In the gloom he saw Bill mount and start away from the tracks, leading two horses. He marvelled at the dark shape of him moving calmly into the chasm of night. Eighteen miles alone with two led-horses.

The wheels rumbled in imperceptible crescendo. A steer bawled singly in the night, its note tragic with ignorance.

They started back over the roof-walk toward the caboose. “You want to be careful jumping between the cars,” said Soupbone. “Stick near me.”

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In response the boy jumped recklessly, walking faster, so that the old man labored after him thinking hard of his responsibility for the train-load of cattle and for Dan.

The shouting of the engine died slowly as the rumble of the wheels gathered volume. Dan smelled coal smoke. Once, looking around he saw uproarious color rising from the open fire-box door. "You suppose Laska'll make it all right?"

"Sure."

They reached the caboose and climbed over the eaves to the rear platform. Standing between the two red lanterns, they listened to the clucking of the wheels. Inside the caboose the voices of the other cattlemen were subdued. Vaguely they sensed that a poker game had begun. They watched the short span of rails flowing from beneath the caboose platform, vanishing into the gulf behind.

Dan was washed in hard-earned weariness, but he knew he could not give up to drowsiness and contentment until Laska was aboard. He scarcely heard Soupbone's voice: "When I was a kid I wanted to travel, too. Always wanted to see the ocean. I remember once, when —"

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"We must be going thirty-five miles an hour now."

"He'll make it all right," said Soupbone. "I was goin' to say how I used to read books about ships and sea-faring men."

Startlingly, silently, as if wafted upward from the cinders came Laska. They had seen his hand clutch the iron rail, and his arm and his whole body stretch with unbelievable grace and elasticity. No sign of strain or effort changed his face. He merely floated up to the platform and was aboard.

"Say!"

Laska's face beamed: "It's a great night, ain't it?"

"A mite chilly," said Soupbone, looking over his shoulder toward the door. "I expect I'll go set in the game." He went slowly, hitching at his belt.

After a time of silence the boy said to Laska: "They say you worked all over, everywhere, underground in tunnels, too."

"Ever work in the ground?"

"Not yet. I been working for Bill Hatt — with cattle."

"Soupbone was telling me."

Dan wondered if the old man had casually

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betrayed him as to the manner of work he had done. Mostly his work had been with barbed wire, fence posts, and an adz. "Soupbone is old," he said. "Must be sixty."

Laska grinned. "I could show you some things."

"Soupbone wants me to stick around with him."

He looked at Laska. Unaware, Laska stared out at the steel ribbons running into the dark behind the train. He seemed entranced with thoughts. They reflected in his eyes, which flashed like enemies of tranquillity. He began to hum. He had been humming for many moments before the boy's ears caught the sound above the greater noises of the train. Laska was unaware that any one listened; and, as his humming grew louder, he seemed to gather a need to translate the humming into words, into the chant of homeless men. "The miles will make my footsteps slow before I see a perfect face, or put my feet upon a place from which I will not want to go."

Chapter Eight

1

ALAMO LASKA loved laughter, legend, and the company of men. He was the opposite of repose, for in his mind some precious destination loomed inveterately. He told astounding and veracious tales. He told of mines, of tunnels, of steel-birds clinging to the skeletons of buildings. The hearts of his listeners beat faster with a renewed sensing of possibility. "Live on! Live on! 'There is no end, no limit, measure, bound!'"

He was on the way now to a great construction job, the building of a tunnel sewer on the outskirts of a city. He told of Crip, the night watchman who at twenty-four had been blasted for life by an explosion. He told of Tommy Engine, who, with his one eye, saw all the mysteries of the titan steam machines he operated. And he told of Big Stender, the foreman, who was always the first man down when the earth

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caved in upon his men. Stender was a saver of lives, a blasphemer against death, and a mocker of danger.

Soupbone did not respond to Laska's stories. Soupbone was a cattleman, in charge of a train-load of beef, and of a boy. He thought of nothing else. He welcomed each brief stop of the train, for then he could walk stiff-legged, like an old crane, peering into the cars. When a steer was down he would get into the car among the crowded beasts, reckless of being gored or trampled. And he would not come out until he had goaded the critter safely to its feet.

2

"I was always interested in traveling, same as you." They sat together in the sunshine on the roof of a car. The old man looked furtively at the boy. Near by, other men lay about on the roof but, in the sound of the train, conversation did not carry to them.

"I was just like you, kid." He hoped a sim-

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ilarity to his own youth might bring the boy closer to him. "I was telling you how I wanted to see the ocean. Always interested in boats and the ocean."

"The ocean's nothing . . . just a lot of waves coming in."

"I expect that's about all it is . . . well, six days more to the yards. You stick near me."

At the other end of the car Laska sprang upright. "We're on a siding!"

They felt the shock of brakes, and the train slowed and stopped. A brakeman hurried along the roof-walk. "What's up?"

"Silk Special," shouted the brakeman.

"A Silk Special's going through," called Laska. "The fastest freight afloat. Right of way over anything."

"Why?" said Dan.

Laska looked far to westward, but the train was not in sight. "They're loaded with silk. Lot of money tied up. She'll come like a bat out of hell."

Soupbone called to them. "Let's take a look at them cattle!"

"They're all right. Why do you keep worrying?"

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"They're Bill's cattle." Soupbone climbed down the iron ladder to the roadbed. Laska and Dan followed reluctantly.

They ran along the train, glancing into the stock cars, finishing their inspection hurriedly. Climbing again to the roof of a car Dan and Laska watched for the Special. They forgot the cattle. They forgot Soupbone who was still below prowling painstakingly from car to car.

A metallic whisper awoke in the rails of the main line beside which their train rested on the siding.

"Hear it?" Laska grinned, his eyes aglow. "Look! Look at it come! They don't stop for nothing." Speed and motion seemed to set him blazing.

Watching Laska, the boy felt a mustering of wild sensations in his heart. He wanted to yell, to wave his arms, and dance.

The smoke of the Special's engine lay flat along the top of the train. Two flags, ripped with speed, flew at the boiler head. They saw a looming and waning flash of the engineer's face, a blue elbow braced on the sill of the cab window.

The force of the wind as the Special shot by

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slapped at Dan's clothes. The heat of the engine hit a surprising blow. A belligerent racket overflowed his ears like the break of an iron wave along an iron shore.

There were seven cars, all in perfect condition. On the rear platform of the caboose stood a trainman. For an instant he was a swollen blueish figure. An instant later he was a speck decaying in distance. Weeds and bits of paper danced belatedly in the wake of the train. A column of harsh dust arose, hurried, fell hopelessly behind.

"Pull a man clean apart to board one of them fast ones on the fly!"

"Did you ever try?"

Laska smiled, as if happily challenged by the thought. He waved at the train which, on a distant curve, looked like a ruddy prehistoric worm. He gazed as though at a respected enemy. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he walked close to the edge of the car and glanced downward to the roadbed.

Laska had taken off his hat. He stood crumpling it in his hands, his black curly hair tumbling and flattening in the wind. He smiled at the twanging memory of the train, and as Dan

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watched, his glance went straight down to the cinders beside the car.

The boy could not see what Laska saw, for he was behind and to one side of him, and the roof of the car interfered. But he saw the enchantment wither and drift from Laska's face like sun from a prairie when a cloud goes by.

The boy was drawn by a morbid magnetism. He felt strength and confidence ebbing from him. He crawled on his hands and knees to the eaves of the car, face slack with curiosity. He looked down, strangely aware of one of Laska's shoes protruding upon the margin of his vision.

Feet hidden underneath the car, a man lay face down on the cinders. His hat rested not far from his head. The man moved as if, sighing in his sleep, he were settling into a more restful position.

A kind of fear that he had never known before rose in the boy and spread through him. The man moved again, so slowly that it could not have been by his own will but by the will of gravity alone. In the process the man's head twisted upward revealing the side of his face.

"Soupbone!"

The old man's eyes were open and sightless.

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It seemed a horrible and perverted restraint that kept the old man from answering, from closing his staring eyes.

“Soupbone!”

Dan clenched his fists and shook them up and down to the terror in his mind.

“He’s dead! Soupbone’s dead!”

Laska jumped off the eaves to the cinders. He knelt, peering intently into Soupbone’s face. Trainmen ran toward them. Cattlemen converged from two directions, their faces vastly different in shape, strangely alike in expression.

The boy stared down at the group which encircled the old man. He saw the backs of huddled heads, the tops of hats. He heard Laska talking: “He was working with the cattle. He must of been just nicked in the head. He must of been climbing the ladder when it went by, an’ he lost his balance, an’ it nicked him.”

The conductor of the freight took a pencil from beneath his cap and wrote in a wrinkled book. When he had finished, he and every one stood around the old man. Some went close and peered at him. Others looked at him quickly and cautiously. Others looked in the direction the Special had gone.

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Finally the conductor and Laska picked up Soupbone and carried him back along the right of way to the caboose.

After a long time the train started. The mark in the cinders where Soupbone had fallen slid away to westward. Near the spot, they had left the old man's hat and Dan cried out when he saw it blow away in the wind. It blew behind a hill. He thought of its lying there, and of animals sniffing at it.

3

He lay quaking on the roof. When he opened his eyes he could see Soupbone. He could see him when his eyes were closed. He could see nothing else. He was frightened because of the belittling thoughts he had had regarding the old man. There was nothing wrong with him, he now told himself. He would guarantee to fight any one who said anything against Soupbone. He would defend his memory. Soupbone was a wonderful and perfect man. He was kind and gentle and quiet, and he had worked his whole

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life through. How could death happen to such a veteran and steadfast spirit?

He thought with terrible intensity of Soupbone. If Soupbone could die like that, he, too, could die — suddenly, at any moment, maybe the very next. Soupbone was good and did not deserve to die. *He* did not deserve to die.

It was the first time he had seen death. Its unexpectedness, its brutal unknowable machinery revolted and bewildered him.

The car swayed and rocked under him. He dared not move. The sun sank, and the wind chilled him. Stars appeared tentatively, then brazenly. He tried to pray, to spill out the misery that was in him. "God, make it all right for Soupbone. He was good." Beyond that he became confused and inarticulate. If God was worth anything why had He permitted Soupbone to be killed?

The car joggled unheedingly beneath him. The earth rolled on about its business. Nothing paused. Nothing paid homage to the snuffed life. The boy hammered his fists against the boards of the roof, hoping that the brief pains in his knuckles would unsnarl the knot in his throat.

Soupbone! What was it like to die? If I

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died, what would it be like? He knew only that wind blew, and the old man couldn't feel it. The cattle moaned. He couldn't hear. He couldn't taste or smell the autumn air. He couldn't help himself, or hope, or remember. That was being dead. A thousand times blind. A thousand times deaf and dumb. It was unapproachable. It mocked united imaginations. It made the future seem tortuous, carnal and unrhyming. Effort was a puff of cloud, planning pretentious, prayer nothing but voiced hope.

Hard heels on the roof boards sounded in his ears. Laska stood over him, then kneeled beside him. "You'll freeze up here."

Laska's low encouraging voice loosed something in the boy. He shuddered and began to sob, his tears cold in the wind against his cheeks. "Laska, cinders were on his face."

"I brushed 'em off. Now forget it, see? It never hurt him for a second. He never knew what hit him. When a guy's dead he's all right."

"He — he gave me this hat."

"It never hurt him at all. Just *click*, and his clock stopped."

"How do you know?"

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4

The caboose smelled of coal oil and the smoke of pipes and cigarettes. A man sleeping in the cupola was sprawled in an unenviable position. The others spoke pot-valiantly and drank from bottles. It was warm and there was light. In the early morning they left Soupbone in a town.

Chapter Nine

1

BUTTES receded, badlands dwindled, prairies reached as though trying for infinity. Then the towns grew larger and more frequent. The men on the cattle train stopped waving to people because there were so many that they tired of lifting their arms. Dan's pass had been punched with a countless array of shapes: hearts, arrows, spearheads, circles, squares, ovals and triangles. His clothes had become a loose obnoxious skin, and he disliked the smell of himself.

Far-wandering Laska laid the ghosts of miles with stories. He knew a hundred lingos. He spoke of mines, of mariners, marauders, muckers, gambling men. He told of cities, seas and sinners, narrating most fondly of the deep-trench men, the diggers in clay he was destined to join.

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2

In the outskirts of the city they weighed the cars, and moved on into the stockyards. With a sad lack of banners and cheering, the trip was done, ceasing abruptly as if the train had been stopped by an inadvertent gate. But the rumbling of wheels endured in Dan's ears. He wondered how long the sound would persist before, unhindered, he could hear other sounds.

It struck him as absurd that the cattle he had driven through yellow dust among hills should now be ogling a city. In a pleasant melancholy way he felt sorry for them.

Unheeding brakemen walked contentedly, dinner pails in their hands. One, as he walked, gnawed a fat pickle.

"Come on!" Laska hopped from the steps of the caboose.

They went in search of the commission company to which Bill's cattle were consigned. Dan exulted at the completion of the long leg of the journey home.

The commission company occupied a barnlike

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office. On its walls were lithographs of empty-headed steers with blue ribbons painted on them. A set of polished horns entitled "From Texas" spanned the top of the doorway.

Laska saw a man behind a wicket at the back of the office.

"Twelve cars of threes and fours," Laska told him jauntily. "Lazy H."

"Lazy H." The man's face was red.

"For Bill Hatt," said Laska.

"Yeh, I know," said the red-faced man.

Dan felt that they were now living in the moment for which Soupbone had died. He wondered if Soupbone were watching critically, or if such watching were a myth handed down through generations of Sunday school teachers.

Outside the wind blew in boorish gusts through the aisles of holding pens. The moaning of beasts preyed upon his ears. The whole of life stank of flesh. Behind them some exhausted cattle staggered down an aisle, flanks painted green with their own manure.

From behind the wicket the red-faced man came like an inquiring ferret. He carried documents in his hands. The man had no chin and his hands were stubby and dirty. He licked his

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thumb and began to shuffle the documents. "What shape are they in?"

"Good," said Laska. "How's prices?"

"Never can tell. Think they'll be good, an' down they go." The man wore a crownless straw hat. He did not appear observant of the season's changes. The songs of birds or the odors of spring would perhaps have been nauseous to him. His perfume was the smell of old meat, his music the bawling of the doomed.

He grunted and scuttled out of the door. They followed him into the cobbled alley. The man whistled. A dusky horse trotted to him, and he got groaning into the saddle. "Let's take a look at 'em."

3

Dan bent over a scarred desk in the commission office writing a note to Bill Hatt. "Dear Bill: I think everything is all right," he had written. But Laska, looking over his shoulder, had taken the pen from his fingers and crossed out "I think."

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Over and over in his mind Dan checked the details of instruction Bill Hatt had given Soupbone in regard to the cattle. It seemed to him that he must have left out something of grave importance, yet he could not think what it was. The cattle were in safe hands waiting for a bidder. Soupbone would nod approvingly from heaven and ride away forever. Dan's throat ached from dust and melancholy. He must not forget anything that Soupbone would have done in connection with the cattle. He must not let his excitement at the prospect of home interfere with these inherited duties.

"Is there anything we'd ought to do more than we've done?"

"We're through."

They walked to the railroad terminal. Inside thousands of men and women strolled, sauntered, lounged, hurried, looked about them.

A lighted sign said: Long Distance Tickets.

Dan read intemperately. In a moment he would speak to the adroit man behind the grating. He stepped hesitantly in his direction, a slim smile on his lips. "Well, Laska — guess I'll buy my ticket." In a little while he would be gone. Everything would be at his back, pushing.

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Nothing but home ahead, no intermediate diluting thoughts.

"I'll be drifting, too," said Laska. "I'll grab a flyer in the yards. A man's a fool to pay for riding."

Dan laughed, "Well . . . well, so-long."

They shook hands. Dan stared, embarrassed. Finally Laska pulled his hat forward over his eyes in a strikingly familiar gesture. It meant a period to an episode in his life, and the simultaneous birth of new adventure. He waved his hand and laughed so that his black forelock shook below his hat brim. "Here goes! So-long!" He weaved away with a great lift in his stride, and, vanishing in the crowd, he left a most magnificent imaginary wake wherein machinery rumbled, miles unfolded, and the din of industry echoed.

Dan turned toward the ticket window. He thought that the man behind the grating would be impressed by the remoteness of his destination. He spoke the name of his home town with a proud shiver. "One way."

The man was very casual. To him far places in any direction were names on strips of paper at certain prices. "Plunk!" went the rubber

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stamp under his emphatic fist. "Plunk! Plunk!" He folded the ticket and whipped it into an envelope. "Thirty-five, eighty-five."

4

People settled and sighed in green seats, some trying pontifically to read, some looking from windows, some waving at friends whom Dan could not see. Their lips moved hastily with messages of instruction, admonition, farewell. The train moved in a luxury of silence in comparison to the cattle train. Dan's ears, having acquired unbreakable habits during the past eight days, distinctly heard the bawl of a steer.

He knew that somewhere in the yawning yards Alamo Laska would soon be boarding a train. He knew that Laska would ride alone in the dark and cold; and if he got caught or missed his footing he would go gaily to jail or to his doom. He was as irrepressible, as dominating, as confident as tide.

The boy stared at the stream of rails beneath

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the window. Smooth enough to be water!
Straight as a line! Built by men who maybe
saw the finished fence.

He had dreamed for months of this moment.
He had sampled and sapped its sensations. He
had dreamed of the feeling on the back of his
head of this upholstery. He had invoked the
senses of this very second, thinking of it then as
the most beautiful probability in all future.

But he sat now tense and wide awake, com-
paring his own small traveling to Laska's. He
was aware of being the only one on the whole
train who knew of Laska, of Laska's adventur-
ing. Occasionally in the peace of this setting
he almost doubted there was such a person as
Laska. It was easy to doubt, for everything
about him was improbable and untouchable. He
was mystery, rumor, tension, vibration, singing,
laughter, legend, daring, not mere flesh and bone.
He never suffered. He acknowledged no pain,
no unpleasantness, no defeat. He was so accus-
tomed to hunger that it was no enemy. He met
men and knew them instantly as friends. He
departed from them as lightly as though they
were felons. Laska never appeared asleep, never
resting, never motionless except against some

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startling background. He would be rocking on his feet, laughing, singing in a shack in the rain — dizzy, dissipated, drunk with journeys.

Dan could not remain in his seat. His dreamed-of lassitude did not exist. Twice he walked the length of the train. Where are you, Laska? Where are you going? Who is going with you? Why are you going?

5

The train crawled with caution into an ornate station. Supporting the roof of the station were steel pillars. A few people scurried in and out among the pillars. It was early in the morning, many hours before light.

Dan's glance kept even with a man who walked toward a pillar. Leaning against the pillar was a second man who looked in idle irony at the train. Dan started up, white with amazement. The man was Alamo Laska.

Dan knew he was looking at a ghost. He cowered on the seat, cringed from the window

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and crept down the narrow corridor into the vestibule between the cars where he stood spying fearfully out into the station.

Laska was still there, the trainmen eyeing him sourly. His gaze, wanly innocent, roved in patient inspection of the station ceiling. Dan let out a laughing half-sane whoop and sprang down the steps and across the platform. Laska spotted him instantly, and in a mild voice said: "Enjoy the trip? I got in about a month ago."

"You *what?*"

The trainmen growled at Laska with splendid savagery, but swayed toward the train as it began to move.

"Laska," cried Dan, backing uncertainly toward the train. "Say!"

"Take a guess," said Laska. One of the trainmen swore with his lips, and, as the train began to move, Laska laughed aloud into his face.

"Get aboard, Dan. You'll get left!"

Dan gazed stupidly at the train. A porter trotted awkwardly beside it, his face round and perturbed. He waved his rubber-matted step at Dan. Dan, his eyes blank, waved at the porter. Flinging his steps into the vestibule the porter shouted: "Hurry an' get on! Hurry!"

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"Go ahead! I don't care! Go on!" Dan heard himself laughing. Laska, too, was laughing, and they were shaking hands and making a small celebration around the pillar.

"Go on! Get out of here!" yelled Dan to the train. His face ached with laughter and yelling. "Get a-going! Don't stop for me!"

He felt as if a small band of demons danced delightedly inside of him. The rear-end platform of the train grew small, faded and became red lights.

"Laska! Were you on that train?"

"Sure. I caught her blind end in the yards."

6

They were walking in the dark in a lot at the outskirts of the city. At regular intervals they passed ghostly signposts marking the corners of future streets. At length they turned away into a void of darkness. Then far ahead a light flickered, tiny in the abyss of night.

"What's that?"

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“Crip’s night fire, I’ll bet a hat.”

With each step, unfamiliar things took shape in the light from the fire. A man appeared sitting on a box beside it. Directly behind the man a great monster of iron rose to an unknown height, spread to an unknown and dismaying width. Metal gleamed upon the monster. Dan spoke in a whisper: “What’s that?”

“The machine! Wasn’t I telling you?”

Dan stumbled, instinctively recovered himself and went on.

The figure beside the fire came erect. “Who’s there?”

“Hello, Crip!” Laska strode boldly into the firelight. The night watchman squinted at them over the fire. Dan noticed that one side of his face was nothing but scar. A gun rested on the box where he had been sitting.

“Well, I’ll be gah-damned! *Laska!*”

“Sure!”

They shook hands and immediately asked clan-nish questions about their doings, their friends, and other years. Dan thought that Laska had forgotten him, but suddenly he turned around and grabbed him by the arm. “This kid wants to work underground.”

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Crip turned his head, showing his scalded and misshapen face. He thrust out a hand. Dan grasped it, recoiled as if a snake had craned its neck into his face. The fingers of the hand were stiff, curved, cold. They were of steel.

"Sit down," said Crip.

Dan looked from face to face, from shadow to shadow. Always in the background he felt the machine — gloomy, threatening, capable.

"We got a big job here, twenty-nine thousand feet open cut, eighteen inch pipe."

"Open cut?" "Most of it's pretty deep."

"Deep!" "Tommy's got the machine set to around thirty feet."

Laska grinned.

The words held no accurate meanings for Dan, but they sounded immense, like the gossip of emperors.

At daylight, they said good-bye to Crip and went in search of a room in which to live.

"I ought to write a letter."

"A letter?"

"I ought to let my mother and father know."

"God! Twenty-nine thousand, open cut!", Laska said.

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7

Dear Mother:

I thought I was coming home, but I guess I better not for a while. I do not know what made me get off the train. I just looked out and saw Laska and then I got off and stayed off. Laska is a man I met. He has done almost everything. He has been everywhere. Things happen everywhere he goes.

I have been working already for three days, on a big sewer construction job. Laska and I lay pipe in the bottom of the trench behind the digging machine. You ought to see it dig. It is noon hour now and raining and cold. But we never stop for rain, because if we do the mud oozes into the pipe we have laid and then the inspector makes you do it all over again. So in a minute I am going out again. Laska and I and a man named Nick Christopher are the only ones working. This is Sunday, and besides the surface gang goes home when it rains. But we have got to keep the pipe open.

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I do not know why I left the train but I wanted to and I did. Please do not think it was because I did not want to come back to you and father, because I do. Mother, if you knew how I have been thinking of you all this time you would understand. But I wanted to go with Laska.

*Love,
Dan*

Chapter Ten

1

A CITY was spreading outward, like spilled water spreading on a floor. Here the city was little more than a blueprint and a scar on the prairie. When the unknown planner set to work, doubtless his dream was beautiful. Doubtless he reached into the future, and, though he touched nothing, a glow was in his mind. He saw the fine aspect. He heard no sounds of harshness in his streets. He skipped their building, and looked upon them built. He viewed them in sunshine. He saw no poverty, no hunger. He felt no fear, no pain. The men and women walking in his streets and living in his houses bore no burden of reality. Where went his vision, there went the planner lightly and without footprints, scorning the dull delinquency of truth.

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2

Three figures leaned against the slanting rain — Alamo Laska, Nick Christopher, and the boy who had run away from home. They rested on their long-handled shovels and as they gazed into the crater which by their brawn they had hollowed in the earth, the blue clay oozed back again, slowly devouring the fruits of their toil.

Laska, the nomad, thought of the wild geese winging southward to warm bayous. Nick's heart, under the bone and muscle of his great chest, swelled with sweet thoughts of his wife and child who lived in a foreign city across an ocean. The boy felt the sting of rain against his cheeks and dreamed of his mother who seemed lovely and far away.

It was Sunday. The regular deep-trench gang lounged in their warm boarding house and drank dago red, while out on the job the three men toiled alone. They breathed heavily, and the gray steam crawled upon their backs, for it was cold.

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“Look at ’er filling in,” growled Laska, “faster than a man could dig.”

“Mud’s get inna pipe,” said Nick. “The Inspector make us tear him out if she fill any more.”

Backed close to the edge of the crater stood the trench-digging machine. A broken piston had crippled its engines and they were swathed in tarpaulin.

A long gray mound stretched away from the crater opposite the machine. Buried thirty feet below the mound was the new-laid sewer pipe. From the bottom of the pit at the machine, the pipe ran a hundred yards horizontally under the surface, opening in a manhole. This hundred yards of new-laid pipe was the reason for the three men digging in the rain. They had dug eleven hours trying to uncover the open end of the pipe in order to seal it against the mud. But rain and ooze and storm had bested them. The bank had caved, and the mud had crawled into the mouth of the pipe, partly obstructing it.

“It’s getting dark fast,” said Laska, “an’ we’re licked.”

“We can’t do any more,” said Dan.

Scraping the mud from his shovel, Nick looked up into the whirlpools of the sky. “In a year I

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go old country. I see my wife. I see my kid."

"Nick," said Laska, "go over to the shanty and get a couple of lanterns and telephone Stender. Tell him if he don't want the Inspector on our tail to get out here quick with a gang, Sunday or no Sunday."

Nick stuck his shovel in the mud and moved away across the plain toward the shanty.

The cold crept into the boy. It frightened him, and in the darkness his eyes sought Laska's face. "How could we clean out the pipe, even when the gang got down to it?"

"Maybe we could flush her out with a fire hose," said Laska.

"There's no water plug within a mile."

Laska said nothing.

Picking up his damp shirt, Dan pulled it on over his head. He did not tuck in the tails, and they flapped in the wind, slapping against him. He looked like a gaunt, serious bird, striving to leave the ground. He was bare-headed, his yellow hair matted and stringy with dampness. His face was thin, a little sunken, and fine drops of moisture clung to the fuzz on his cheeks. His lips were blue with cold.

Laska stared into the pit. It was too dark to

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see bottom, but something in the black hole fascinated him. "If we could get a rope through the pipe we could drag sandbags through into the manhole. That would clean her out in good shape."

"How could we get a rope through?"

"Stender'll know." Laska walked over to the digging machine and leaned against its towering side. The rain had turned to sleet. "It's cold."

Dan went close to Laska for warmth and friendship. "How could we get a rope through?"

Laska's shoulders lifted slowly. "You'll see. You'll see when Stender gets here. Say, it's freezing."

After a long time of waiting, a light flamed into being in the shanty, and they heard the muffled scraping of boots on the board floor. When the shanty door opened, a rectangle of light stood out sharply. Swart figures crossed and re-crossed the lighted area, pouring out into the storm.

"Ho!" called Laska.

"Ho!" came the answer, galloping to them in the wind.

They heard the rasping of caked mud on dungarees, the clank of shovels, the voice of Stender.

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Lanterns swung like yellow pendulums. Long-legged shadows reached and receded.

The diggers gathered about the rim of the pit, staring. Stender's face showed in the lantern light. His lips were wrinkled, as if constantly prepared for blasphemy. He was a tall, cursing conqueror. Orders shot from his throat, and noisily the men descended into the pit and began to dig. They drew huge gasping breaths like beasts mired and struggling.

The boy watched, his eyes bulged in the dark. Hitherto he had thought very briefly of sewers, regarding them as unlovely things. But Laska and Nick and Stender gave them splendor and importance. The deep-trench men were admirable monsters. They knew the clay, the feel and pattern of it, for it had long been heavy in their minds and muscles. They were big in three dimensions and their eyes were black and barbarous. When they ate it was with rough and tumble relish, and as their bellies fattened, they spoke tolerantly of enemies. They played lustily with a view to satiation. They worked stupendously. They were diggers in clay, transformed by lantern light into a race of giants.

Through the rain came Stender, his black

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slicker crackling. "They're down. Angelo just struck the pipe."

Laska grunted.

Stender blew his nose with his fingers, walked away and climbed down into the hole. They lost sight of him as he dropped over the rim. The sound of digging ceased and two or three men on the surface rested on their shovels, the light from below gleaming in their flat faces. Laska and the boy knew that Stender was examining the pipe. They heard him swearing at what he had found.

After a moment he clambered up over the rim and held up a lantern. His cuddy, gripped firmly between his teeth, was upside down to keep out the wet.

"Some one's got to go through the pipe," he said, raising his voice. "There's fifty bucks for the man that'll go through the pipe into the man-hole with a line tied to his foot. Fifty bucks!"

There was a moment of quiet. The men thought of the fifty dollars, and furtively measured themselves against the deed at hand. It seemed to Dan that he was the only one who feared the task. He did not think of the fifty dollars, but only of the fear. Three hundred

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feet through a rat hole eighteen inches in diameter. Three hundred feet of muck, of wet black dark, and no turning back. But, if he did not volunteer, they would know that he was afraid. He stepped from behind Laska and said uncertainly: "I'll go, Stender," and he wished he might snatch back the words for, looking about him, he saw that not a man among those present could have wedged his shoulders into the mouth of an eighteen-inch pipe. Had they known he would be the only volunteer?

Stender came striding over holding the lantern above his head. He peered into the boy's face. "Take off your clothes."

"My clothes?"

"That's what I said."

"You might get a buckle caught in a joint," said Laska. "See?"

He saw only that he had been trapped. At home he could have been openly fearful, for at home everything about him was known. There, quite simply, he could have said: "I won't do it. I'm frightened. I'll be killed." But here the diggers in clay were lancing him with looks. And Laska was holding a ball of line, one end of which would be fastened to his ankle.

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“Just go in a sweater,” said Laska. “A sweater an’ boots over your woolens. We’ll be waiting for you at the manhole.”

He wanted so desperately to dive off into the night that he felt his legs bracing for a spring, a tight feeling in his throat. Then, mechanically, he began to take off his clothes. Nick had gone clumping off to the shanty and shortly he returned with a pair of hip boots. “Here, kid. I get ’em warm for you inna shanty.”

He thrust his feet into the boots, and Laska knelt and tied the heavy line to his ankle. “Too tight?”

“No. It’s all right — I guess.”

“Well — come on.”

They walked past Stender who was pacing up and down among the men. They slid down into the crater, deepened now by the diggers. They stood by the open mouth of the pipe thirty feet below the surface of the ground.

Laska reached down and tugged at the knot he had tied in the line, then he peered into the entrance of the tube. He peered cautiously, as if he thought it might be inhabited by fiends. The boy’s glance wandered up the wet sides of the pit.

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Over the rim a circle of bland yellow faces glared at him. Sleet tinkled against lanterns, spattered down and stung his flesh.

“Go ahead in.”

He blanched.

“Just keep thinking of the manhole, where you’ll come out.”

His throat contracted, seemed to be bursting with pressure from inside. He got down on his belly in the slush-ice and mud. It penetrated slowly to his skin, and spread over him. He put his head inside the mouth of the pipe, drew back in horror. Some gibbering words flew from his lips. His voice sounded preposterously loud. Laska’s was already shopworn with distance. “You can make it! Go ahead.”

He lay on his left side, and, reaching out with his left arm, caught a joint and drew himself in. The mud oozed up around him, finding its way upon him, welling up against the left side of his face. He pressed his right cheek against the ceiling of the pipe to keep the muck from covering his mouth and nose. Laska was gone! Laska was in another world — a sane world of night, of storm and the glow of lanterns.

“Are you all right, kid?”

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Dan cried out, his ears ringing with his cry reëchoing from the sides of the pipe. The sides hemmed him, pinned him, closed him in on every side with their paralyzing circumference.

There is no darkness like the darkness underground that miners know. It borrows something from night, from tombs, from places used by bats. Such fluid black can terrify a flame, and suffocate, and drench a mind with madness. There is a fierce desire to struggle, to beat one's hands against the prison. The boy longed to lift his pitiful human strength against the walls. He longed to claw at his eyes in the mad certainty that more than darkness curtained them.

He had moved but a few feet on his journey when panic swept him. Ahead of him the mud had pushed up a stolid wave. Putting forth his left hand, he felt a scant two inches of air space between the wave's crest and the ceiling of the pipe. There was nothing to do but go back. If he moved ahead it meant death by suffocation. He tried to back away, but caught his toe in a joint of the pipe. He was entombed! In an hour he would be a body. The cold and dampness would kill him before they could dig down to him. Nick and Laska would pull him from

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the muck, and Laska would say: "Click, and his clock stopped. He never felt a thing."

He thrashed with delirious strength against his prison. The skin ripped from the backs of his hands as he flailed the rough walls. And some gods must have snickered, for above the walls of the pipe were thirty feet of unyielding clay, eight thousand miles of earth below. A strength, a weight, a night, each a thousand times his most revolting dream, leaned upon the boy, depressing, crushing, stamping him out. The ground gave no cry of battle. It did no bleeding, suffered no pain, uttered no groans. It flattened him silently. It swallowed him in its foul despotism. It leaned its merciless weight upon his mind. It was so inhuman, so horribly incognizant of the God men swore had made it.

In the midst of his frenzy, when he had beaten his face against the walls until it bled, he heard a voice he knew was real, springing from human sympathy. "Are you all right, kid?"

In that instant he loved Laska as he loved his life. Laska's voice sheered the weight from him, scattered the darkness, brought him new balance and a hope to live.

"Fine!" he answered in a cracking yell. He

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yelled again, loving the sound of his voice, and thinking how foolish yelling was in such a place.

With his left hand he groped ahead and found that the wave of mud had settled, levelled off by its own weight. He drew his body together, pressing it against the pipe. He straightened, moved ahead six inches. His fingers found a loop of oakum dangling from a joint, and he pulled himself on, his left arm forward, his right arm behind over his hip, like a swimmer's.

He had vanquished panic, and he looked ahead to victory. Each joint brought him twenty inches nearer his goal. Each twenty inches was a plateau which enabled him to vision a new plateau — the next joint, a brief deceitful rest upon a march.

He had been more than an hour on the way. He did not know how far he had gone, a third, perhaps even a half of the distance. He forgot the present, forgot fear, wet, cold, blackness; he lost himself in dreaming of the world of men outside. It was as if he were a small superb island in hell.

He did not know how long he had been counting the joints, but he found himself whispering good numbers: "Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three

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——” Each joint, when he thought of it, appeared to take up a vast time of squirming in the muck, and the line dragged heavily behind his foot.

Suddenly, after staring into the darkness until his eyes hurt, he saw a pallid ray. He closed his eyes, opened them and looked again. The ray was real, and he uttered a whimper of relief. He knew that the ray must come from Stender's lantern. He pictured Stender and a group of the diggers huddled in the manhole, waiting for him. The men and the manhole grew magnificent in his mind. He thought of them worshipfully.

“Seventy-six, seventy-seven, seventy-eight ——”

The ray grew slowly. It took an oval shape, and the oval grew fat, like an egg, then round. It was a straight line to the manhole, and the mud had thinned.

Through the pipe and into the boy's ears rumbled a voice like half-hearted thunder. It was Stender's voice: “How you makin' it?”

“Fine!” His cry came pricking back into his ears like a shower of needles.

There followed a long span of numbness. The cold and wet had dulled his senses, so that whenever the rough ceiling of the pipe scraped his face

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he did not feel it; so that struggling in the muck became an almost pleasant and normal thing, since all elements of fear and pain and imagination had been removed. Warmth and dryness became alien to him. He was a creature native to darkness, foreign to light.

The round yellow disk before him gave him his only sense of living. It was a sunlit landfall, luring him on. He would close his eyes and count five joints, then open them quickly, cheering himself at the perceptible stages of progress.

Then, abruptly it seemed, he was close to the manhole. He could hear men moving. He could see the outline of Stender's head as Stender peered into the mouth of the pipe. Men kneeled, pushing each other's heads to one side in order to watch him squirm toward them. They began to talk excitedly. He could hear them breathing, see details — and Stender and Laska reached in. They got their hands on him. They hauled him to them, as if he were something they wanted to inspect scientifically. He felt as if they thought he was a rarity, a thing of great oddness. The light dazzled him. It began to move around and around, and to dissolve into many lights, some of which danced locally on a bottle. He

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heard Stender's voice: "He made it! He made it all right."

"Here, kid," said Laska, holding the bottle to his mouth. "Drink all you can hold."

He could not stand up. He believed calmly that his flesh and bones were constructed of putty. He could hear no vestige of the song of triumph he had dreamed of hearing. He looked stupidly at his hands, which bled painlessly. He could not feel his arms and legs at all. He was a vast sensation of lantern light and the steam of humans breathing in a damp place.

Faces peered at him. The faces were curious, and impressed. He felt a clouded, uncomprehending resentment against them. Stender held him up on one side, Laska on the other. They looked at each other across him. Suddenly Laska stooped and gathered him effortlessly into his arms.

"You'll get covered with mud," mumbled the boy.

"He made it all right," said Stender. "Save us tearing out the pipe."

"Hell with the pipe," said Laska. "Untie the line."

The boy's wet head fell against Laska's chest.

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He felt the rise and fall of Laska's muscles, and knew that Laska was climbing with him up the iron steps inside the manhole. Night wind smote him. He buried his head deeper against Laska. Laska's body became a mountain of warmth. He felt a heavy sighing peace, like a soldier who has been comfortably wounded and knows that war for him is over.

Chapter Eleven

1

FOR many days afterward, thoughts of his experience in the pipe produced a curious conflict in him. His reason promoted a calm comparison between his achievement and the distances to stars. His emotions set up an array of worldly congratulations until he grew portly with pride. In this mood he believed himself superior to such monotonous persons as his mother and father; and he came gradually to regard his own future as a sprightly and galloping journey.

After a time the detail of his night's adventure lost the brutality of outline. His memory grasped only the fact of his triumph, his proved courage, the monosyllabic comments of the men who had seen him through.

Each day he and Laska worked side by side in the cramped quarters at the bottom of the trench. Stender had remarked that they made

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the best team of pipe layers he had ever seen. This seemed an important and noteworthy utterance, and he began to form bloated opinions of himself: there is nothing I cannot do.

He had grown accustomed to working underground, to balancing on the slippery bottom of the trench, to half-light, to the buckets thudding into the clay so close to him. He felt that because these dangers were no longer strange, they were no longer dangerous, and he became reckless.

2

Alamo Laska, leaning against a great steel beam, sang softly. No listener would have stirred, for restlessness was in his voice and in the words that he sang. The words sprang from some hidden background which the boy had not hitherto suspected.

*Doe on the river shore, drinking, drinking,
Lynx in the cedars. Wonder what he's
thinking?*

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*Smoke on an island, twisting, blowing.
Man by a night fire. Wonder where he's
going?*

In the dusk the trench machine loomed shadowy and terrible. The air was heavy with the odor of wet clay. The thump of a steam pump, like a giant metronome, established the rhythm of Laska's half-sung song.

Dan sat beside him, his wiry legs dangling over the edge of a pile of stringers. The lights on the far shore of the river puzzled him pleasantly. He fell to wondering who had turned them on and to light what.

Out in the channel a dark shape moved. He heard the sound of engines churning, and of water sweeping by. Yonder an iron ship glided. On the ship were men. One stood in the darkened pilot house close to the binnacle, watching the needle, guarding the lives of ship and crew and seeing in his mind a safe arrival and a journey's end.

Indistinct, illusory, suggestive, these perceptions crept into the boy, swelling his spirit. But he was not happy. He could not isolate for examination the phantoms of distress which haunted

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him. He need fear no crisis. He had achieved. He was as good as the diggers in clay, as good at their own game. But he was not happy.

"Man by a night fire, wonder where he's going?" Laska sang.

He felt suddenly that Laska's singing was not a product of happiness, but of discontent. His voice held a quality of slumberless woe, like the chanting of convicts.

The wind came surging across the river. Laska had remarked frequently upon the cold, saying it was time to be moving south, saying with redoubtable emphasis that men should come and go as they pleased, that only fools and prisoners remained in one place.

Suddenly Laska's song broke short. His hand shot out toward the boy. His dark head was thrown back. He stood up, seeming to stretch inches above his normal height. Dan knew by the feel of Laska's hand upon his arm, by the way his eyes strained upward that in the realm of nomads something big was transpiring.

"Listen! Listen to *that!*"

Dan stared up into the night. He saw nothing; but a remote rushing sound came down to him. It seemed to have no origin, but to fall

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out of boundless space. He did not know the sound. He could think only of a ship with uncharted waters hissing at its bow; a voice pleading from a derelict. It was the summing chord of all wandering, all migration, all adventure. It had the quality music sometimes has of making its hearers afraid of nothing.

“What is it?”

Laska held up his hand, waiting until the sound died before he answered: “Geese going south.”

Laska chuckled: “*Say!* Do you know where they come from? Hudson’s Bay! The Arctic circle! That’s *traveling!* Jesus! I’m anchored compared to them.”

Laska’s hand closed on Dan’s arm. “What do you say we finish out the week — then head south! What do you say?”

Unaccountably, obtruding upon the lure of Laska’s personality, Dan remembered the calm rain on the roof of his home. He smelled the odor of cedar, saw the smoke rise from dead grass burning on the lawn. He heard the rustle of leaves trickling down through the branches of elms. He choked with the clearness of these imagined things.

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Laska was thumping his shoulders. "Hell with finishing! Let's go to-morrow night!"

"What about Stender?"

"Hell with Stender!"

"Go south? Where, south?"

It mattered little to Laska whether the boy went with him or not, but he began to speak calculatingly of the example set by the geese. He told of river deltas, of a shallow southern ocean, of palms and mangroves, of the mysteries of cypress swamps, bayous. "In three days we can be down where the niggers sing on the levees. You'll hear yarns from Step-alone and Sunny North and others of the bunch. They'll make you hold your breath. That's the way to live! Hell with finishing!"

The boy gazed at the river lights, spellbound in his whelming sense of motion. The world seemed tumbling, moving, vastly traveling. Wings rustled, air swirled, lights danced, pistons churned, the river flowed deathlessly. Where? Where was it all going? Why? It was like the *Rider*, never stopping except to see new distances, new horizons beyond which it would soon be lost.

Laska regarded him trickily. "That was a

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nervy thing you did, crawling through that rat hole."

"It doesn't seem so — now."

"You're getting husky. Arms like iron."

"I been working a long time, Laska. That's why." He gazed straight at Laska, trying to distinguish his features in the darkness. Laska was giddy, topsy-turvy. Hell with finishing! Of a sudden that seemed to be the essence of Laska.

He inquired abruptly of himself about the condition of the world, if it contained only men who said Hell with finishing. Nothing would be achieved. There would be no completion. Buildings would be roofless. Boats would be rudderless. Mountains would be half-climbed. Rivers would not reach the sea. There would be no aspiration, and life would have only a snickering false-fronted majesty.

"I'm going home."

"You'll *never* go home!"

"I'm going."

"Well, go ahead. I'm going down to Patsy's."

"Patsy's?"

"Sure, I haven't been drunk for two months."

Dan was frightened. He had never seen

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Laska in such an abandoned mood. "You *can't* get drunk. You got to work under the machine to-morrow!"

Laska whipped his coat from where it lay upon the steel beam and swung away toward the river.

3

Dan came into an avenue, blinking in the light of an arc lamp. An empty street car joggled by. Late at night cars made a howling noise. All other sounds had quit, leaving a free field.

He crossed a vacant lot back of a packing plant and came to the rooming house. In the room he undressed and snuggled under the blankets with a long rapturous sigh. "I'm going home." You ran from home because everything about it was familiar, and you returned for the same reason.

Somewhere a clock struck. A dark breeze stole through the window and made the curtain wave silently toward him. He shivered a little. The curtain was like a hand saying farewell.

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4

“Up with the larks!” It was Laska’s voice waking him.

“Didn’t you go to bed at all?”

“Waste of time to sleep.”

Dan dressed, and together they went to a near-by restaurant. Laska was in high spirits. He hooked his heels on the rungs of the stool and spanked the counter with his big hands. “Ham and eggs and coffee!” He held up his hands in front of him. They were shaking.

After they had eaten, they walked to the edge of the city. They started across a field, shoes glistening in the damp grass as they approached the machine.

From the shanty came one-eyed Tommy Engine, carrying a satchel of wrenches and a can of oil. He brooded over the machine, walking completely around it. He dragged the tarpaulin from its engines, surveyed its bulk with furtive pride. He picked up a mattock, broke some kindling and lit a fire under the boiler. Then he

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climbed to the iron pilot seat, cushioned it with his greasy coat and sat down, enthroned. He did not glance at Laska or the boy, but sat watching his gauges. He alone understood this iron animal, and his love for it lifted him above the run of men.

The day gang filtered in twos and threes from the shanty, gathering near the machine to bask in its oily warmth. Tommy Engine scorned them. He was a disdainful monarch austere among hand-toiling pygmies.

Stender appeared, his face as long as a horse's, his eyes cold and aloof. Stender alone could speak on even terms with Tommy Engine. "Got steam up?"

Tommy wiped water from the socket where his eye had been and nodded. Stender turned savagely toward the surface men. "Get goin'." They took shovels, grasped bracing planks and screw jacks, went to prearranged stations.

Dan and Laska waited. Their turn would come when the machine had dug space for the laying of the first pipe. They waited nonchalantly and watched. Dan moved a trifle closer to Laska. There was kinship in the aristocracy of subterranean men.

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Stender put his fingers to his lips and whistled a blast. Tommy Engine moved a casual hand. A lever slipped home. The machine took life, shook clots of clay from the agitated buckets. Gears growled. The boom lowered sedately into the earth.

Stender whistled twice. Tommy Engine pulled another lever, kicked a hidden clutch. The buckets commenced their downward journey. Reaching the trench bottom, each bucket tipped over, drove its teeth into the clay, gouged up a mouthful and, turning, crawled upward on the under side of the boom to the surface. Five minutes passed. In that brief time, the machine dug a trench thirty feet deep, two feet wide, and four feet long. With each turn of its engines, the caterpillars carried it forward. Across the plain it left a scar. Men, grimy with grease and oil, besieged its sides, scampering in a Lilliputian swarm.

Stender waved across the trench at Laska and Dan. He made an irrefutable downward motion with his arm. They leaped to the side of the trench and climbed to the bottom on the cross braces.

A momentous rhythm thundered in the ground,

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becoming an essential in the world of gloom at the slippery trench bottom. Theirs was a vast and pulsing job. The rhythm stirred their blood, like the beating of gourds in a jungle.

Laska's back was toward the boom, his heels inches from the buckets. He never so much as glanced at them, but when he heard the teeth bite he backed toward them a fraction of an inch. Their sound timed his progress. He kept perfect pace, disdainful of the merciless power behind him. He was a machine grafted to a machine. It controlled him. He depended upon its beat: "B-a-a-room! Boom. B-a-a-room! Boom."

Far above in the sunlight the surface men hovered about for signals from the toilers in the hole.

"Down with a crock!"

Two men lowered a length of pipe on a chain. Laska caught it, flung off the chain and wrestled it into place. Dan circled its end with oakum and stood ready to cement the joint.

"Grade-stick!" The inspector dropped the tip of a long slender pole to the flow-line of the pipe. Dan held it in place while on the surface the inspector sighted along his levels.

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“Aw-r-i-i-ight!”

Dan cemented the joint.

Every five minutes they laid a pipe, graded it and cemented the connection. They stripped to the waist, and mist rose around them. Their muscles strained, sweat trickled into their eyes. The pulse of the machine possessed them like a habit. “B-a-aroom! Boom. B-a-aroom! Boom.” Damp clay, cool air in aching lungs, underground gloom, remote voices of men above, tremors in the earth. Men doing things, getting somewhere. Men against the ground! Pipe, oakum, grade-stick, cement. Pipe, oakum, gradestick, cement. A monitory deserving of worship.

Laska heaved at a pipe, his chest alive and slippery with straining. “A lousy fit,” he gasped.

Dan passed him a sharpened spade. Laska tipped the pipe on end out of the way. He grasped the spade, preparing to shave away the clay and bring the pipe to level. Dan saw him lift the implement. He saw his torso stretch and tighten for a blow. Every muscle stood magnified. Then Laska’s foot slid on the slimy bottom of the trench — shot backward under the teeth of a bucket.

Dan leaped upright: “Look out! Look out!”

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He saw the glinting outline of the bucket descending. He jumped forward, grasped Laska's leg and dragged it back. His own feet went out from under him on the slime, and he toppled over Laska's back. Laska's slippery hands fought to tear him away from the teeth. He saw the teeth gleaming at their polished edges. He heard Laska's voice roaring:

"Stop! Stop! Stop the machine!"

From the surface came Stender's whistle. Some one shrieked. He did not know what had happened. He knew only that he lay on his back looking up at the narrow strip of surface light. Faces beaded with sweat stared over him. Hands lifted and tugged. Men breathed huskily around him. Beside him he saw Stender white with exertion. Stender's eyes were desperate glowing coals.

Laska was holding some part of the boy's body from which all feeling had gone. He longed to say something cheerful to Laska, but he could not speak. Eyes, voices, the sounds of breathing faded out. No longer could he see the hands lifting and tugging. He was floating against his will upon a cloud.

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5

It was as if he had been toiling up through a long black distance. There was no sensation save the strain and ache of stumbling alone close to the brink of another world. Laska came miraculously and looked at him from a sky. Dan saw his black hair tussling in the wind. The rushing of wings was in his ears, and Laska turned to search for the geese, lifting his hand for silence.

He opened his eyes. The ceiling and walls were white, and three thin cracks in the plaster formed a triangle above the door. The room smelled clean, like a drug store. A curtain fluttered in the breeze coming through a window. Below the curtain, heat waves shimmered over a radiator.

Laska, gray-faced, stood by the window. It was good to see Laska. It was good to lie in the sputtering peace of steam heat. There were sheets on the bed, clean and cool. Tiny ridges showed where they had been creased and ironed. Dan felt dreamily contented.

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"What time is it?"

Laska stared. "'Bout two o'clock."

"Where is this place?"

"A hospital. You been hurt."

"Hurt? I don't feel hurt."

"That's good. I'm glad."

"What happened?"

"You fell under the buckets."

Half drowsing, Dan examined and approved his sensations of comfort. It was dramatic to get hurt, and come out all right. It was dramatic to see Alamo Laska looking serious. Only big events impressed Laska, like floods, and storms, and wars, and crawling through rat holes, and falling under buckets.

Great peace saturated him. During the time it took a thought to swim the river of his mind, all things he had yearned for were contained within him. He was a justified miser with all the earth's gold in his keeping. Some one, God maybe, had been good to him. His father and mother would listen fascinated to the things this some one had brought to pass in his life. He had sought alliance with a legendary Rider in the Sun, and seemed now to have him by the bridle, to be on the verge of wresting good secrets

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from him. He had journeyed in the company of great men. He had reached some strangely divine destination, and was so transcendently happy that tears flooded his eyes. He said in a thin trembling voice: "I'll have some things to tell them, Laska."

"Yeh."

Dan stared at the three cracks above the door. It was funny they should have formed a triangle. "The square of the hypotenuse equals the sum of the squares of the other two sides." He sighed, testing his body, pressing deep into the bed. He moved his legs, but when he tried to move his arms, a dull terrorizing pain sprang up inside of him. He lurched, eyes bulging as he stared at the bandages on his right side. His face jerked convulsively.

"Laska! My arm! My arm! It's gone!"

Chapter Twelve .

1

LASKA had come to the edge of the bed and looked down at him, and he had calmed himself by Laska's nearness, and by a steady regard to the cracks in the plaster.

"I didn't mean those things."

"It isn't so bad. Look at Crip."

"I've *been* looking at him."

They smiled.

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

"Have you been here — all that time?"

"Sometimes Stender was here."

Evidently he was a personage if Stender had come to watch over him. Stender and Laska, for three whole days!

"You better go out now and get some rest."

"I don't mind sticking around." Laska looked at the window. He went over to it and looked out. "I might go out for a little while."

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"I'm all right. Go ahead."

Laska took his hat from his coat pocket. He shook it into shape, and wheeled away toward the door. His feet shuffled and his eyes roved. "I'll go over to the job an' tell Stender you're all right," he said. "Your money's in the safe down in the office."

"How long will I be here?"

"The croaker said a couple weeks more."

"Oh."

Laska came over to the bed and took Dan's hand. With his other hand he pulled the brim of his hat over his eyes, like a man preparing to run against the wind.

"So-long," said Laska. "I'll be seeing you again." His eyes were those of a man avoiding a beggar in a storm.

"So-long."

2

Stender came in. He was uneasy. He scrutinized his hat which was covered with gray spots

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where blobs of cement had dried and dropped off. In his hand was a bag of grapes which he passed toward Dan. His face twisted in a fine relieving oath. Then he said: "Eat them Christly grapes. How are you?"

Dan took the grapes. "I'm all right, Stender. I'm fine."

"Yeh?" Stender sat down in a religious-looking chair. "Good."

Dan peered at the ceiling until his eyes blurred. "Where's Laska?"

Stender reached out and took one of the grapes. "Over on the job."

"You're fooling me. He's gone south. I know he's gone south."

Stender's face stiffened in ferocious denial, then softened. "You might as well know it."

"I did know it. I could tell by the way he put on his hat."

Stender ate the grape resoundingly. "What the hell do you care?"

"I don't care at all."

Stender's bony hand probed in the bag of grapes. He looked furtively at the boy's bandages which extended only a few inches below the elbow.

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"I'm thinking about home," said Dan.

Stender switched his eyes to the boy's face. He seemed suddenly arrested, halted in all his functions, like a man holding his breath. His hat fell off his knee onto the floor with a soft sound. "Thinking about home, hey?" he said, and began to eat grapes in a furious uncontrolled way. He swallowed some of the skins. Others he put in his vest pocket. Sometimes he reached for his pipe, but when his fingers touched it he would see the hospital room and smell its smells, and he would snatch his hand guiltily away. Finally he got up, pulled down his coat and shook the folds of his pants. "Well, I got to go. What do you s'pose them bastards are doing over on the job while I'm here?"

Dan laughed. "You better shake a leg."

Stender looked down upon the bed from his great height. His glance shifted from Dan's face to the twin hillocks at the base of the bed where his feet lay under the sheet. He grabbed one of the boy's feet and squeezed it.

"Well, see you later," he said. He stalked out through the door, stuck his head back into the room and mumbled something. Then he was gone.

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3

He found that he could close his eyes and see and even feel the suppleness of the riding men. He could almost grasp in his hand the seamy splendor of Laska. He could see Laska balanced on his toes on the eaves of the cattle car, his broad back scorning a ninety-foot drop off a bridge. He could feel the good permanence of Bill Hatt, the loneliness of Soupbone. Frequently he found himself smiling. He was happy without asking why.

No one could wrest the beauty from his mind. No machine could break his dreams, or cripple them. Within his mind lived all good things, all past, all future. The present alone was real, too transient to count. He felt suddenly that as long as he could be inspired by thoughts of where he had been and where he was going, nothing could injure him. This came formlessly upon him as a vast emotion of confidence and adjustment. "I can laugh at anything."

He began to toy with time as he had toyed

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with the joints in the sewer pipe. A nurse brought him newspapers. He read them lying upon his back. He read of war which was hiding all human attributes with smoke. His own countrymen had been fighting for months. He examined catalogues of dead, and devoured news of guns and salients.

Some of the warriors flew in the sky in airplanes, sneering at the earth. The airmen took form in the boy's mind. He loved to think of them. He would allow himself to become inspired with the imagined roaring of motors. He would deliberately place himself in the midst of enemy hawks and dismay them with his maneuvering and marksmanship. Returning from the kingdom of these thoughts, he would ring the bell at his bedside and the nurse would come and sit smiling beside him.

"I suppose you want to know what time it is?"

He would laugh, laying hollow wagers as to the time, and when she would give him a glimpse of her watch, he would say: "Is it *that* late? Say, the time went! How many days till I go home?"

"After you sit up there'll be just a few days more."

Sometimes when she spoke of his getting well

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and going home she would put her hand on his forehead and push the hair away. When she left him he would lie thinking of to-morrows. He would think of the wonderful sensation of sitting in a chair in positions he had been devising.

A day came when he was told a definite time for dismissal, and the nurse said she would buy his railroad ticket for him.

“On the fastest train there is!”

“Yes, the very fastest.”

He looked again at the cracks in the plaster.

“Laska left my money in the office. You take it and get me that ticket.”

She laughed and went out, and he lay thinking of how he had earned the money. He thought of it as very solemn money which should be spent only for things like Bibles and monuments.

Later, when the nurse handed him an envelope he tore it open with his teeth and dwelt greedily upon the long green strip. The nurse stood watching him.

“You better let me send a message to your mother telling her you’re coming.”

“No! No!”

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4

The nurse came with a bundle under her arm. "Here are your clothes. We've had them all cleaned for you."

He reached for them and hugged them under his arm. He wondered how bloody they had been. He opened the bundle. Everything was there. The boots in which he had tramped eternity; Soupbone's old hat which had sheltered him from a hundred suns; the woolens which had clung to his body on a dark crawling journey. Here was his coat, and the nurse was reaching for it.

"I'll cut the sleeve and sew it up for you."

He passed it to her, and picked up his belt. It was a belt of broad dark leather from which Excalibur might appropriately hang. He closed his eyes and stretched. The nurse was clipping off the right sleeve of his coat with a pair of surgical scissors. He heard them cutting, and he grinned at the husky sound that they made.

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5

He had said good-bye to the nurse, and she had kissed him. He had said good-bye to the doctor and walked out of the hospital into a cold wind to discover that children in the streets stare barbarously at one-armed men, while adults stare as barbarously in the other direction.

He had gone out to the sewer job, and Stender and the barrel-chested men had gathered around him. Each one said or looked something which made him glad to be alive. Crip, the night watchman, grinned with sly comprehension and shook him by the left hand.

6

He sat in a comfortable green seat in a train. The wheels spoke securely on the rail joints, saying: "Home, chuck, chuck. Home, chuck,

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chuck." The wheels rolled him smoothly across flat land, over bridges, along the edges of stubbled fields. Towns! Towns by the hundred with people walking about in them, many of them looking up at the train. "Home, chuck, chuck. Home, chuck, chuck."

When night came the train began to puff through dark familiar hills. In the dim light reaching outward from the car windows he could see near by an endless river of rocks and trees, trees that he knew by name and shape. He had sat in the shade of trees just like them. He put his face close to the window and looked up at the blue-white stars. Unless he could stare at the stars, the joy of familiar landscape was too great for him to bear.

A stream of lights flashed by, and the roar of the train made his ears seem spacious. He got a glimpse of the name of the station — a name he knew, a name he had known ever since he was old enough to remember.

The next station was his. "Home, chuck, chuck. Home, chuck, chuck." He felt the impact of brakes, and as the train slowed, a great dignity came upon him. His feet had trudged enough leagues to produce tranquillity. His

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eyes had seen enough sights. He had talked with enough men in enough places, and he could return with the austerity of achievement in his bearing.

There were only a few lights at the upper end of town. Some of the people in his car were asleep, sprawled on the cushions. Others sat like sphinxes, trying to think of nothing. A few reached for bundles or bags on the racks overhead. These stepped into the aisle with their luggage, forming a line which moved out of step toward the forward door of the car. Two or three in the line sat down on the arms of seats, and some sighed with weariness.

He stepped into the aisle close against the man ahead. He hugged the stump of his arm close to his side. His left thumb hooked into his belt and his fingers toyed with the buckle. A smile was on his lips. The things he would tell them! The words he would use! The tone he would use! A low steady drawl like Laramie Jim's. Words like Laska's, with some of Stender's grimness, and the granite calmness of Bill Hatt.

There was a jolt. The train stopped. A trainman hollered something, his voice fashioned

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expressly for sad roarings. The boy stepped down onto the platform, and a thought came into him of the old lady he had seen walking in the rain so long ago. Up the tracks he saw signal lights and switch lights — green, red, yellow. The locomotive blew white into the night.

He crossed the tracks and walked up the avenue past the drug store and the bank. He remembered that his grandfather had put a dollar in the bank for him the day of his birth. And some one had said if a dollar was left in a bank it would double in sixteen years.

The street was deserted, silent save for the muffled rattle of pins in the bowling alley in the yellow brick block.

He walked past the church where the minister had said: "Be not afraid!" Next to the church was the armory, and every window in its stone façade was militant with light.

From across the street he saw illumined war posters on the entrance walls. The posters were red, blue and black. They showed men doing incredible deeds against incredible odds. They advertised the incredible cruelties of the enemy. He went over to look at them. Two uniformed men paced at the entrance to the building. One

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had a rifle over his shoulder. His uniform was new, his eyes proud.

The boy looked hungrily at the signs: "Enlist now." "Serve your Country." For months a myriad mouths had been shouting in homes and in streets and in great cathedrals and small churches: "We shall go forth to war to save the world for democracy. This is the war to end war." God must have grinned at such guileless perjury.

Dan stood reading the signs and glancing now and then into the eyes of the soldiers. He yearned to be one of them, to join clannishly with them and to share in their boasting. He moved slowly toward the one who carried the rifle. He was about to question him about enlisting when he felt a tugging at his coat and looked down into the intense admiring gaze of an urchin. A ragged cap covered part of the urchin's face, and from beneath it burned two dark imploring eyes. The urchin reached up his hand and touched Dan's stump. "Was you in the war?"

Dan's veins went stiff. In the instant it took him to realize that this was a war which would tolerate no one-armed men, he choked back a cry that had sprouted in his throat and grinned

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serenely into the urchin's eyes. This child looked up at him as he himself had looked at Laska, Laramie and the others. He was the urchin's Rider in the Sun! He was the urchin's destination. He was what the urchin yearned to be. He winked at the child and walked swiftly away up the avenue.

He turned into his own street, trying to stifle his excitement. He did not want them to see that he was excited. He was a man, and therefore unshakeable. He had done and seen things worth reliving and retelling. His adventures were worthy of profound retrospect and solemn high recounting.

What would he say first? How would he say it? He spoke a few experimental words aloud in a composite voice. It was a good voice. After all it did not matter much just where he began. They loved him passionately. They would listen passionately to his narrative, and live through all he had lived through.

First he would open the door, happening in upon them in a smoke of unexpectedness, saying in a drawl: "Hullo, everybody." That would surprise them. Then he would sit down. His mother would go quickly and get him something

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to eat. Then, calmly, he would tell them how he had ridden in dust behind a herd of cattle, the end of which was beyond seeing. He would tell of Laramie Jim, of his wild ride on Laramie's horse. He would take the hat from his head, and, holding it toward them, say: "This is the hat Soupbone gave me. Soupbone is dead." He would tell them of Laska's songs, and Laska's personality. He would describe the digging machine, and Tommy Engine. He would tell how he crawled alone in the darkness which is underground and nowhere else. He would tell them of scarred hills. He would tell them of a wind which blew. About a wind —

He stopped, tilted back his head and stared up, up, up through the still bare branches of an elm. He stood listening, feeling the silence under the sky and in the sky and in himself. *There was no wind!*

He started on, panting and eager. Beyond big elms he saw his own house, dark and quiet.

He ran toward it. His body, no longer in perfect balance, lurched clumsily. Closer, closer, closer he came to the house. He bounded up the porch steps. It was very cold, and the steps creaked under his weight. He rattled the door

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knob. The door was locked. The door bell was exactly where he knew it would be, and as he pressed it, the sound of its ring was old in his ears.

He wanted to cry out, but more than that he wanted them to see him standing before them calm and strong and controlled, incapable of the emotion which feasted in him.

Upstairs a light came on, and footsteps sounded faintly. There was an eternity of fumbling at the lock from inside. Then the door opened. It was his mother.

He stood rigidly before her. His lips parted and his eyes stared straight into hers. He tried to say some of the things he wanted to say. They had departed, leaving no hope of capture in their wake. The words had gone, and the wish to say them had gone. His voice was weak and husky, like the stirring of wind in old leaves.

"Mother."

Before him in the faint hall light her face was glowingly alive. Her eyes knew that his had beheld life and death, that his heart knew the misery of disappointment and the high leap of hope.

She moved half a step nearer. Her face

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grew old and white and lovely before him. Her arms went out to him in a profound hungering gesture.

“Mother!” he cried, and rushed to her, pressing himself against her, so that she could not look at him and he could see only darkness. A long choking sob seemed to tear him apart.

“Mother, Mother! Oh, *Mother!*”

She held him quietly in her arms. She was the sea. He was a small white ship at anchor.

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