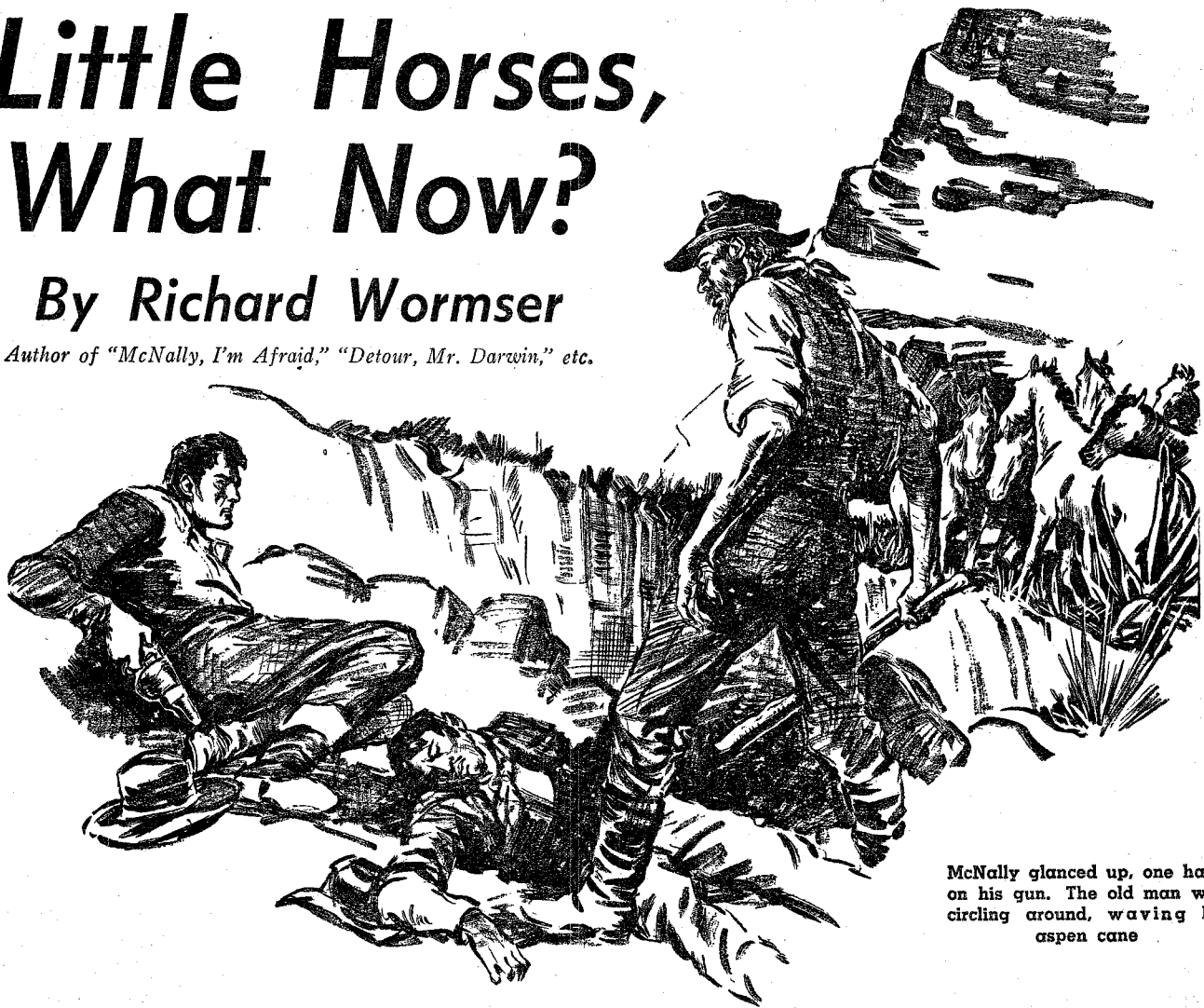


Little Horses, What Now?

By Richard Wormser

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McNally glanced up, one hand on his gun. The old man was circling around, waving his aspen cane

This is a story about how McNally (remember?) herded a merry-go-round on the hoof, and how the merry-go-round broke down. However—it's also about two bottles of Bourbon, an extinct Indian, a crackpot ventriloquist, and an uncuddly woman who didn't think the white man was noble. Take your choice of any or all items

I

WHEN McNally pulled into the gas station, the attendant promptly perched a portable air conditioner into the open window of the coupe. Ice cold air flowed out of the white box and over McNally's dripping face and neck. The lean man let it flow, though that much cold on top of that much perspiration would probably give him pneumonia, rheumatism and green-apple colic.

The gas pumper went back into his steel office and brought out a glass of water and a capsule. He broke the capsule into the glass, and handed it to the customer. McNally drank, turning the empty capsule wrapping over in his fingers.

Saloro, he read. *A saline capsule designed to prevent cramps in steel workers, and others employed near furnaces.*

McNally stared out into the desert night. Somewhere behind the filling station a one-lung gas motor chugged, whipping up current for the bright lights of the station; bats and huge moths fluttered under the lights. "Always this hot here?"

The attendant had on a leather-peaked service cap; up till now it had shaded his face, but now he looked up,

McNally saw he was an Indian. "Not so bad in January," the Indian said. "Sometimes gets seventy, eighty at night in January. Nice."

"What do you do in the daytime now, in June?" McNally asked.

"Sweat. You want five gallons gas?"

McNally said: "Fill 'er up."

"Five gallons to the customer. Truck ain't due for two weeks, gotta save gas."

McNally nodded. "Oke."

He leaned back, enjoying the air machine, while the Indian turned the pump on. His brown fingers turned the map over. He was forty miles into the Snake Indian Reserve in southern Arizona. The name of this station was Black Tourmaline. It was only fifteen miles further to Vandie Ricker's trading post, according to the map, but the map itself left a margin for error by putting in a dotted line, and a note: *Make Local Inquiry.*

McNally made local inquiry. "How far to Ricker's?"

The Shoshone said: "Fifteen, twenty miles. You make it in an hour easy. Two bucks."

"Two bucks?"

"Forty cents the gallon. Includes state, federal taxes."

McNally shrugged, and peeled off two one-dollar bills

from a roll that was soggy with the sweat that had come through his trousers and the leather of the wallet. "Oke. Say, buck. Do you know anything about the ponies that are supposed to run in a canyon just past Ricker's?"

The red man said: "Shu. Not ponies. Li'l hosses. Pretty damn fast, but got weak backs. You from the Smithsonian?"

McNally laughed. "You Southwesterners think every scientist is from the Smithsonian; but I'm not even a scientist. I collect wild animals. I make 'em tame. I show 'em in side shows, fairs, vaudeville stages. Get it?"

"Wild animal, huh?"

"Call it a sucker, if you want to save time." McNally was in no hurry to drive on. It was midnight now, and he'd been on the road from Los Angeles since morning. Only an hour more; and maybe there was no cold-air machine at Ricker's.

"SURE. I used to work abroad. Africa a lot, sometimes South America, sometimes Asia. Used to go to Europe and pick up finished acts for circuses, shows, Billy Rose. No more. Not till the war's over. So I'm two-bittin' down here for a herd of wild ponies."

"No damn good," the Indian said. "I'm frank wit' you. Weak backs."

"Well, I got a weak mind." McNally shook his head. "There's a little girl in Hollywood—you know, where they make the talking pictures? She's nine years old, and she makes five grand a week. You know, five thousand big round ones, like you Indians say."

"Sure. Five grand. Mister, I'm eddicated. I went to Reservation School, up in the Western Navvy country."

"You're not a Navajo?"

"Nope. Aztec."

"You're kidding?"

The Indian reached out and unhooked the air-conditioner. He put it on the ground. He picked up a tire iron. "Oke. Two bucks, all paid up. G'bye."

"Whoa, whoa. If you want to be an Aztec, it's all right with me. You're not kidding."

"Oke."

"Only this is the Shoshone country and— All right. All right. What's your name?" McNally fished cigarettes out of the glove compartment—he had ruined one pack carrying it in his pocket—and dealt the butts.

"I don't know whether I can tell you," the Aztec said. "Navajos don't tell their names. Shoshones tell everything. On accounta I'm the only Aztec left, I don't know what we do." He picked up the cold-air pumper, and put it back to work.

"I see." McNally sighed. "You got a Social Security card?"

The Aztec beamed broadly, smoke flowing out of his flat nose. He produced a wallet, and showed the card through the cellophane window. "Reilly Aztec, D.V.M."

McNally shoved his Stetson back on his head. "D.V.M.? Distinguished—"

"Doctor Veterinary Medicine," the Aztec said.

"T'hell!" McNally looked around the little filling station, blankly. Then he looked at the flat Indian face.

"Think I'm kiddin'?"

"No, no. But how come—"

"I work a time in a vet hospital in L.A. Work some in Phoenix. I don't like Pekingeses."

McNally roared with laughter. He shoved his hand

out over the top of the white air-conditioner. "Reilly, you're all right. Mine's Dave McNally."

"I heard of you."

McNally said, "If you weren't an Indian, I'd buy a drink."

"My mama was an Irish lady." Reilly Aztec never smiled. "Anyway, Aztecs don't count. They aren't American Indians."

McNally opened the glove compartment. "It's just wasting it, when you're sweating this hard, but here goes." He passed over the leather-bound flask, and they each took a swallow. McNally said: "I can drop the pidgin talk then. And you can drop the blanket buck act, city boy. Why, then, you've heard of Little Sally Dewey, the golden-haired darling of a nation?"

"Sure," Reilly Aztec said. "The kid actress."

"So. Little Sally's sore. She spits at her producer and bites her director. Only last week she threw an apple core at Darryl Zanuck. You know why?"

"Bellyache?"

"Naw. One of the other Hollywood babies—Withers, Temple, I dunno—has a real live merry-go-round in the backyard. Shetland ponies."

"Yeah," Reilly Aztec said. "When I work in L.A., we send one of those kid actors a monthly bill of two hundred bucks just for defleaing dogs. They love animals, these kids. Especially if there's a photographer around."

"ANYWAY," Dave McNally said, "Little Sally's in the middle of a picture. They are shooting all the scenes in which she's—mischievous—and now they are starting on all the scenes in which her dolly's busted or her aunt's dead or something, and she's crying."

"This is Tuesday. See? But next Monday I've got to be back with six or eight Shoshone Canyon dwarf horses, ready to work out in a merry-go-round in *her* back yard. More expensive, rarer, faster than Shetlands."

Reilly Aztec said: "Well, shut my pretty little rosebud of a mouth. Monday, huh?"

"Yeah. Because by Monday they either have to start shooting scenes in which li'l Sally laughs, or else. So here I go."

Reilly Aztec said: "Got any more Bourbon?"

McNally handed over the flask. Reilly took a swallow, handed back the bottle, and went around to the gas pump. He turned the electric pump on, and put the hose in the tank. He pumped the tank full. Then he filled two five-gallon tanks, and stowed them in the trailer, along with McNally's equipment. He loaded a five-gallon tin of oil, and then went around back. The one-lunger stopped, and the lights went out; the air-conditioner warmed up.

Reilly Aztec came back, took the air conditioner down and put it in the office. He locked the office door, and took a carpenter's pencil out of his pocket, scrawled on white paint: *Back soon, maybe-so*. He climbed in next to McNally. "Let's go," he said.

McNally started the car.

"Pass the Bourbon," Reilly Aztec said. "And keep her slow. The road's rough, and climbs fast . . . I only bought this station because I didn't like white people, only now I know I don't like Indians, either. Maybe I'll like little hosses."

"Where you from?"

"Manhattan," Reilly said, swallowing. "And I don't mean Kansas. My old man was a herb doctor there."

AS REILLY AZTEC said, the road climbed fast. The station at Black Tourmaline had been sea-level or lower; but as they bounced along the rutty trail that passed for a road, the giant saguaro and the barrel cactus and the long, wand-like ocotillo of the desert became rarer and rarer, and they began to go through sage brush and greasewood and cascara land. Then, gradually, scrub oak and post oak and manzanita began to give warning that they were getting into timber country.

The car struggled, and McNally dropped to second gear and then to low gear, and they kept on going. Huge buttes rose out of the land around them, some of them capped with white limestone that gave the appearance, in the moonlight, of snow. Reilly Aztec rolled up his window; McNally reached behind him for a coat, and draped it over his shoulders.

White-faced cattle slept in humps beside the road; once they had to stop while a cow got up from her slumbers and rambled off. At intervals of a mile they would rattle over pipes set in the road; cattle guards to separate herds.

Now the road leveled out, and went along a table land. The chaparral brush was gone, and its place of rest of aspens, their trunks straight as ramrods, their leaves turning silver and dark alternately as the breeze of the car's passing hit them.

An hour passed. The car had made a little over ten miles.

"Gets better from here," Reilly Aztec said. "We're pretty near it. Twenty minutes."

McNally nodded. His hands on the steering wheel were icy cold, congealed. And then, without warning from his brain, his foot was pressing the brake down to the floor; the road ahead was not.

"Whata we do now?"

Reilly Aztec said: "Just drive on. It'll be okay."

McNally edged up to where the world ended; he stopped the car, and got out. The headlights sent twin beams out into eternity, to meet, focusing on nothing. McNally knelt and struck a match.

The road was still there. It just went downhill so abruptly that the lamps couldn't find it. McNally took a deep breath, climbing back into the car, and they rounded on the long hill in low, using both the motor and the brakes to hold the car back, the trailer hitch banging into McNally from behind and making it hard to steer.

The hill was so steep, the change so abrupt, that his hands were still stiff with cold when the sweat broke out on his face; and his stomach still had that tight, digestion-frozen ache when he started breathing with his mouth open because the heat had clamped down on his nose. "Gawsh, what a country."

Reilly Aztec said: "Yeah, an' double. You know something? We're about ten miles south of the last U. S. Customs office, and twenty, thirty miles north of the first Mexican one. That's what the good neighbors think of this bit of acreage."

"If it's this hot at Vandie Ricker's, we catch no dwarf horses. You can't herd horses at night. And you couldn't hunt in the daytime."

"We go up again to get into Ricker's, and it's all right there; about twenty-five hundred, and comfortable. I don't know about the canyon. I hear it's deep."

"There'll be water at the bottom, or the horses couldn't live there."

"Right." Reilly Aztec sighed. "Here we go up again."

THEY climbed, the moonlight bright and dimming their headlights, but neither man was watching the scenery now. Eventually they bumped their way over one final, car-shaking ridge, and slid down to a stop in front of a little cluster of buildings.

"Ricker's," Reilly said.

McNally nodded. He had felt tired back at Aztec's filling station, but he was exhausted now. He sat behind the wheel, studying the bleached board shacks.

A store, with Vandie Ricker's name on it and his license number as an Indian trader. Two gas pumps, with their prices on them—gas had gone up to fifty cents a gallon here. An ice house. A little mule shed and a corral in which two skinny horses and a fat burro blew dust. A flagpole, on which Ricker had left the tattered American flag up all night, in disregard of the law.

"I've seen worse," McNally said. "But still, I've got to keep remembering how much little Sally's employers offered me for the horses . . . C'mon, Reilly. Let's try and find Ricker."

He got out of the car and ambled over to the rickety porch. He pounded on the door. There was no answer. He pounded again.

Far in the back of the store someone lit a kerosene lamp; its feeble glow showed a dozen pigeon-holes for a post office, and shelf on shelf of canned goods and dry goods. A batch of saddles sat on horses. "Hey, Ricker," McNally yelled. "Let us in."

There was no answer. But the kerosene lamp moved a little, to show a shotgun being held just outside the door to the back room.

McNally yelled: "This is no time for horseplay and foolishness. Let us in!" He rattled the door down. "If you want to play hermit, save it for the weekend. Let us in or I'll take the store apart."

This got an answer, but not the answer McNally expected. A woman's voice said: "Go away this very instant, or I shall blast you with this rifle."

McNally peered through the glass again. The hand that held the gun could be a woman's; but the gun itself could not be a rifle. It was a shotgun.

He bawled: "I'm looking for Vandie Ricker. I sent him a wire I'd be here. My name's McNally."

The woman said: "Just a minute."

SHE was silhouetted for a moment in the door to the back room before she picked up her lantern and brought it with her. A long, bony silhouette in some sort of pajamas. Then she came to the front of the store, carrying the lantern in front of her; a sucker's trick if there was any shooting to be done.

The woman held the lantern to the dirty glass of the shop door and peered out. "Mr. McNally? Yes, yes. Let me see you aren't armed. Mr. Ricker was expecting you."

McNally held up his hands, grinning. The door opened to the creaking of rusty bolts and hinges and locks.

The woman set the lamp down on the ledge of the post office window. "How d'ye do," she said. She had the pseudo-British accent of the over-educated. "I'm Doctor Lawford. Mr. Ricker, I'm sorry to say, came down to the hospital in Ajo yesterday. Appendicitis. He was worried about his store, and I offered to come up and watch it for him."

McNally looked at her again. She was not as old as he

had thought at first; not more than thirty, maybe younger. And she might not be bad looking if she had not had her nose pinched up superciliously, her lips compressed suspiciously.

"Ricker get my telegram?"

"It was in Ajo waiting for him. He never saw it; I left it with the floor nurse."

"Fair enough," McNally said. "I've got a man with me; we can do the work ourselves. You a doctor down at the hospital?"

The woman said: "No, I am connected with the Aboriginal Foundation. I have a grant of money to study the Indians."

There was a noise behind McNally and he turned. Reilly Aztec's face had that flat, blanket Indian look back on it that he had had when he had first met McNally.

"Ugh!" Reilly Aztec said.

Dr. Lawford's eye lit up. "Oh. What an interesting warrior! What's his name, McNally?"

"Me Winged Eagle," Reilly Aztec said. He slowly raised his right hand, placed it on the scholarly brow of Dr. Lawford. The brown hand passed down, stroking her cheek. It chucked her under the chin, then passed up the other cheek to the forehead again. There was no expression on Reilly Aztec's face. "You good squaw," he said. "Me tell easy by feel."

McNally groaned, and hurried out to the car to get himself a drink where the doctor couldn't see him. "I don't live right," McNally muttered to himself. "Admitting I don't live right at all, must I be punished this bad?"

III

MCNALLY awoke at dawn. He moved his right leg out, stretching it carefully forward, then up. He moved his left leg in the same routine. He raised his arms over his head, caught hold of the edge of the counter on which he had slept, and pulled himself backwards, letting his legs drag. The cracking noises in his chest as his ribs stretched back into position were a pleasant assurance that he would feel better when he moved around a little.

He had slept on the counter. Dr. Lawford had the bedroom, and Reilly Aztec had slept out on the ground. "House for Injun like trap for coyote. Me sleep under Mother Moon an' li'l baby stars."

Everything Reilly had said the night before had been to the accompaniment of the soft whisper of a pencil in a notebook. Dr. Lawford was fascinated.

Reilly's motives were a mystery to McNally. Maybe the boy's queer sense of humor was urging him on to this Noble Redskin routine. And maybe he was on the make for Dr. Lawford. Reilly Aztec had not seen a white woman for some time, and the reservation squaws would not be appetizing dates for a New Yorker. Or—and most likely—Reilly had his eye on that Aboriginal Fund.

McNally, lying on the hard counter, didn't know, nor care. He had been born in a circus dressing tent and brought up in carnies and circuses. And he followed the outdoor showman's creed: Don't queer the other guy's pitch.

He moaned a little, and swung his legs to the floor. Stretching, he broke a can of coffee out of Ricker's stock, and went out in the rising sun.

It was chilly, with the tiniest, lightest mist in the world rising off the upland ground. McNally got his coffee pot

and canned heat out of the car, found water dripping from a pipe over the horse trough, put coffee on to brew. A hen cackled in the little shed, and he wandered in there, found a couple dozen eggs hidden here and there in the sorted alfalfa. He collected them in his hat, and put them on the counter just inside the store; two of them he added to the water boiling for coffee.

He unlashed the cover of his trailer, and got out his fine linen and horsehair ropes. He tied one end of each rope to the corral rail, and stretched ropes tight to the bumper of the car. Then he broke open his eggs into a tin cup, poured himself some coffee, and ate breakfast, his cowboy Stetson tilted to the back of his head.

Afterward he pulled the ropes tight, went over them inch by inch. One linen rope had four, five chafed places in it. He crouched on his heels, staring at the heat waves rising off the bottom land.

He'd had that rope a long time. It had caught, on an underhand throw from a running board, one of the very last true, or mountain zebras ever to be collected. That was in the Cape of Good Hope country. It had hogtied a spotted hyena in the panther country for such time as it took McNally's Musselman boys to build a stout crate. It had been the snare in which the dingo had hung himself, the dingo that had killed three of McNally's duck-billed platypi in Australia.

Yeah, it had been a good rope. Slowly, McNally pulled out his knife and cut the rope into halter-lead lengths. He unraveled the parts that were gone, and used the strands to whip the ends of his halter leads. Then he sharpened the knife, drank another cup of coffee, and put two more eggs on to boil.

HE WALKED around the car to where Reilly Aztec was sleeping, wrapped in one of McNally's Hudson's Bay blankets. He stirred the boy with his toe. "Lo!" McNally said.

Reilly Aztec grunted. McNally stirred him more vigorously. "Lo!" he said again.

Reilly turned over on his back and opened his eyes cautiously. "Huh?"

"Lo, the poor Indian," McNally said. "He's gotta get up and go to work."

Reilly rubbed his face. "Nuts. What time is it?"

"About five-thirty. I want to get an early start; it may be too hot to work down in that canyon after nine, ten o'clock. Get going, boy."

Reilly Aztec got to his feet, grunting. "Hangover," he said. "That was the first whiskey I've seen in months. Say, how much you payin' me?"

"Ten a day," Dave McNally said. "Clear to L.A. That'll be sixty bucks."

"It's bus fare back to New York and a stake when I get there," Reilly said.

McNally said: "There's eggs boiling by the fire, there's coffee. There's a box of crackers. Get something into you, and let's get out of here."

"Check," Reilly said.

McNally went back to coiling his ropes. He found a pack saddle in the shed, but it was not in very good shape; he was busy thereafter in taking the latigos and cinch straps off it and replacing them with good leather he had brought along. Then he gave the burro a rubdown with an old piece of burlap, and blanketed and saddled him.

Reilly joined him, and they lashed a sack of rolled oats.

brought by McNally, a sack of alfalfa taken from the shed, the ropes and a pile of gunny sacks onto the burro. They added a pair of pinch bars, two rifles, two big canteens. McNally got a little saddle leather kit out of the car, and put it on top. It contained an awl and waxed thread and leather for repairing boots; a first aid kit; antivenin for snakebite.

"All right, boy," McNally went to the car, and strapped on a .45 revolver and cartridge belt. He handed the burro lead to Reilly, and looked around.

A figure hitched across the dusty windows of the store. McNally strode up the porch to say goodbye to Dr. Lawford.

As he opened the door, the thin woman dropped the receiver back on the hook of an old-fashioned wall phone.

"Calling the hospital?" McNally asked.

Her white hand was pressed against her mouth, back to her lips. Why, she's afraid of me, McNally thought.

Then he remembered the gun on his belt. He laughed. "Scared of this, doc? I just put it on for snakes or gila monsters. Came to say goodbye. Reilly and I are going down the canyon now."

Her voice was shaking with the inexplicable terror. "Reilly?"

McNally remembered. "Winged Eagle."

"I think it's horrible," the woman said, her voice still shaking. "Horrible to victimize the Indians, to give them ridiculous names, to—"

"Yeah?" McNally grinned at her. "Reilly doesn't mind, lady. Ask him."

"He's got ten times the nobility of a white man. I think Indians are wonderful."

"Sure," McNally said. "Well, so long, lady. Be seeing you by noon, I hope. Or, if it's feasible and necessary, we'll camp down there tonight, be back tomorrow."

He went out, and joined Reilly, who was hazing the burro toward a trail. They walked uphill, slowly, toward the canyon wall.

Reilly Aztec said: "Old man Ricker dropped a pipe line down to the canyon floor one time. His windmill's hooked to it. I figure we can follow the pipe down."

"Oke," McNally said, lighting his pipe.

They walked along amicably, and they were nearly to the wall when McNally remembered the woman. He did not know whom she had phoned, or why; and he did not know what she was afraid of. And he had left his car there.

IV

BELOW them was the canyon. It was no Grand Canyon; you could fill your pipe, throw the empty tobacco tin down, and the noise of its landing would be back before you had the pipe lit. But neither was it one of the dinky little cracks in the hills that they call canyons around Los Angeles.

Below their feet the wall fell, at first glance, sheer away. At the top, the early morning sun painted the west wall, under them, a deep gold; the top of the east wall was gray, with yellow sandstone streaks. Then, down a third of the way, both walls were a deep, mysterious purple; and at the very bottom, green bloomed from the white stream rushing through the arroyo.

McNally said: "You can see a path down a little ways. Then—"

"We try it," Reilly Aztec said. "Ten bucks a day."

"Oke." They hazed the burro down. The path crossed and re-crossed Randie Ricker's waterpipe, and it was steep, but not too bad. It was chilly, and they moved along briskly.

Reilly led the burro, McNally drove him with a piece of brush. They rambled on down and now they were no longer level with the golden wall opposite; they were in the deep purple. It was warming up, but not unpleasantly so.

Once there was a little leak in the water pipe, with a patch of green weeds springing up around it. McNally stopped and plugged the leak with manila shredded off a pack-saddle rope. "Do old Ricker a favor."

"Yeah," Reilly said. "Say, Mac—"

It was the first time Aztec had called McNally by any name at all. "Yeah?"

"You think that dame's got much money from that foundation? That's the big museum up on Fifth Avenue in New York, you know."

McNally said he didn't think so. "Probably a thousand or so to finance her for a year. That's the way those things usually work. I did them a paper on Australian bushmen once, and they gave me thirty bucks. Of course, I hadn't applied for a grant."

"Me," Reilly said, "I'd like to go out on a lecture tour for 'em. Stay at some Injun lover's house, drink expensive wines, eat good food. That's for me."

"No expensive wines," McNally said. "People like that would know it's a Federal law not to give liquor to the Indians."

"That's right," Reilly said. He swung his machete, and cut away an ocotillo that had sprung up in a patch of sand where the wall made a little shelf. "Yeah. I'd have to be a Mex Injun, and they wouldn't care for that so much. All them Communist painters 'at come up from Mexico are Indians, and the act's been played out. I thought of being one of the kind that plays a tune on a little war-drum, and does a dance with a tommyhawk around the stage, then gives 'em a line about followin' the path of beauty."

"No liquor in it," McNally said. "And not much money. You'd have to be a noble redskin who called money by some quaint name—white man's buttons or something—and rose above it. No. You wouldn't like it any better than de-fleaing Pekes."

REILLY AZTEC turned suddenly and grabbed at McNally's gun. The showman was fast with his hands; but he had been, at the moment, hanging onto a hunk of root with one hand and waving the goad with the other. Reilly got his gun.

"This is it," McNally said. He swung his feet ready to kick out.

But Reilly Aztec had turned his back. The gun roared.

The Indian turned back. "Snake," he said. "Even so, McNally, I think I'll keep on kidding that dame. It's something to do in the evenin's. If we're gonna be up at that dump till Monday, I'll go nuts without somethin' to do."

McNally reholstered the revolver, and gulped a little. "We'll have to pull out by Saturday noon, probably. I figure on phoning for a horse truck Friday."

But his mind was jumpy, his hands a little unsteady. It was the first time he'd ever been out on a two-man trip

where the other man was faster than he was. He didn't like it. Reilly Aztec was a simple, unassuming, embezzling son of nature; but he liked liquor, and he liked a joke. And it was not at all a good thing that he could out-manipulate McNally with his hands.

They kept on down. At nine o'clock they were distinctly hot; but also they were nearly at the bottom. When their feet or the burro's little hooves were not disturbing the peace, they could hear the water in the stream.

The trail got less and less steep, and then they were on the floor itself. McNally wiped sweat off his brow, and looked around.

It was not bad. Not bad at all. The floor of the canyon was not as badly littered with boulders as he had expected; the air was not too hot. McNally's watch said nine-thirty; if it was this cool at that late hour, they could get through the noon time by taking a siesta in the shade.

"We'll tie the burro," McNally said. "And work upstream looking for pony sign."

Reilly said: "You go. I'll wait for you here."

"Come on."

"No spikka Ingliss."

McNally stared at his helper for a minute. Then he shrugged, and started up the canyon floor.

Grass grew between boulders; tall, succulent weeds sprouted from the gravel in the stream bed. A horse could not have stayed alive down there, a steer would have gaunted, but a pony or a burro would have made out all right.

There could be ponies here.

There had been once; McNally had seen one that had been brought out from here. But animals have a trick of disappearing; they follow an underground river, or they get an epidemic germ, or they just melt into thin air.

He wandered upstream, threading a way through the boulders. It was easy going for a man with stout boots; and it was good horse trapping country, too. The round boulders, many of them ten and twelve feet in diameter, made natural corrals; McNally saw many a place where ten minutes' work with ropes and rocks would make a box into which the ponies could be driven.

And as for closing the entrance—a horse never looks up. They would go right by a man perched on top of the boulder. When they were in, all he would have to do was drop down and guard the entrance.

Oh, easy. If the little horses were there.

McNally opened his shirt against the increasing heat. Once he stopped and took a dip, with all his clothes on, in a backwater of the canyon stream; afterward he had fifteen minutes of chill from evaporation.

When that wore off, he looked around for another pool; the stream itself ran too fast to be trusted. Here the canyon floor was divided down the middle by a bulwark of rocks and half-rotted tree trunks; he climbed over, and saw, on the other side, a backwater edged by tall green reeds.

Where there are reeds, there must be still water. He slid down the bulwark, and saw a fine pool; maybe three feet deep, ten feet long. In the shadow of a rock, he slid out of his clothes, and into the water, floated on his back.

Ten thousand dollars to get these horses, and a lead-pipe setup like this. Easy trapping, a trail that didn't have to be worked over to get the ponies up, and a climate that was not bad at all. Boy, oh, boy! He stood up,

scrubbed his body with sand, and plunged forward on his face, kicking with his heels.

His outstretched hands hit a rock, and he opened his eyes. And there, directly under his eyes, was a hoof-mark on the bottom of the pool—a tiny hoof-mark under the water.

McNALLY stood up, water dripping off him, and studied. A little horse had come here to drink. He waded out, and inspected the reeds. Some of them had been carelessly cropped off, as if an animal who was not hungry had taken a bite after drinking.

His pulses throbbed. Hard luck and a narrowing market had given him plenty of tough luck lately; maybe this was the beginning of a lucky streak. He climbed into his clothes; and before putting his boots on, soaked the cloth to keep him cool. Then he put on his boots and his gun, and took up the trail, going along bent over, tracking.

There had been five of the little horses. They were not, as Reilly Aztec had said, ponies; their hoofs were not round, but horse shaped; just smaller.

And they had not kept to the main canyon, but had gone up a side cut. A smooth, redstone arroyo. It was funny; because as he went along, first the vegetation and then the water ceased. Not the sort of place you would expect a horse to go. Nothing to eat.

McNally, who had tracked a thousand horses in his day, put his mind in theirs. Why, sure. They had come up here to sleep! There was no place in the main wash smooth enough for a little horse to lie down. And a horse—particularly a wild horse—can sleep standing up for just so long. Three, four days. Then he finds a smooth spot, and lies down on his side and sleeps, sometimes for twenty-four hours.

McNally had found the horses' bedroom.

Now the sandstone floor of the arroyo had gotten so hard and smooth that he could no longer find hoof marks to follow. He straightened up and stopped, gasping.

The geological formation had changed completely. The time had changed, the setting had changed. He was no longer in the Shoshone Canyon of southwestern Arizona in 1941.

He was in the prehistoric ages, in some horrid cairn of Central Asia where dinosaurs and flying monsters laired. He was in a movie producer's idea of Hell. He was—

McNally stood stock still, his hand on his gun, and stared, cowering a little.

THIS arroyo rose sheer to the sky, with the top edges seeming to bow toward each other and hem the world in. The cliffs were of blood-red sandstone, granular and brilliant; no direct sun penetrated this far down, but some reflected from one wall to the other, and made the red stone glow.

Deposits of gypsum and borax broke the walls; sheets and threads and chunks of the soft chemical rock, weathered to incredible shapes and sizes. Directly ahead of him was one piece of selenite, ten feet long, with a sawtooth top and a transparency that allowed him to look right through it, to see the sandstone behind it distorted, wavering, but visible.

The sheet was not more than five inches thick, and yet it stood there. The stone floor in front of it was stained where the chemical had melted away in the infrequent rains of this desert world.

Ahead of McNally the arroyo twisted into almost a right angle. He stood there, a dwarfed figure in a cowboy hat and high boots, hand on his impotent gun, and he was afraid to go ahead. He, Dave McNally, the toughest guy in the expedition and amusement business, found himself shaking.

His eyes smarted, and he told himself that was from the chemicals that dusted off the gypsum and borax and got on his sweating forehead to run into his eyes. Sure.

"Barnum'd go on," he muttered. "Th' Martels'd go on. Frank Buck'd go on. I'm gonna go on."

But he wished Reilly Aztec had come with him. With someone to talk to, this would just be an interesting place to photograph.

He began to whistle at the top of his palate. There was only one tune to whistle. *The Merry-go-Round Broke Down*. Sure. But he was going to fix it up. He was going to go round that bend, and follow those little horses, and—

His heavy boots went clump, clump, keeping time for him as he marched up on that corner in Hell, whistling as loud as he could. *Oh, the merry-go-round broke down, but you don't see me frown—*

He rounded the corner. There was nothing to scare a man in the wispy beard of white chemical that the rocks shed. Nothing at—

Oh, the merry—

He stopped whistling, and whirled on his heel, his gun out, ready. Someone behind him had taken up the tune, one bar behind him. Someone was whistling rounds with him.

Then he laughed, and his hard, brittle laughter came back to him, a dozen times, from behind, from ahead. Sure. If you turn a sharp corner in a steep rock canyon, you walk past an echo. And if there is another sharp corner ahead of you, why, it's an echo, too. Let's go, McNally.

He kept his head up, and he tramped ahead, but he did not whistle now. He was still and the only noise was the tramp, tramp of his boots, and the tramp, tramp, tramp of the ghost army that marched with him, the army of echoes.

Ten grand, and the light in Little Sally's eyes as she sees her merry-go-round. The grand, and the gratitude of a producer who might well shoot an animal picture next week or month or year.

Ten grand, and who's afraid of the big bad echo? Not McNally.

V

MCNALLY rounded three of the awful bends; he rounded four, and then he and his ghost army stopped marching. At his feet was horse sign, still warm. Ponies ahead. He forgot about the ghastly red-and-white rock formations, forgot the echoes, forgot the sweat that hurt his eyes, and went ahead faster. He whistled again, but between his teeth this time, so that it threw no echo.

He found a couple more bends, and the pony sign got thicker, and he was no longer aware of the rocks that threatened him. He knew what was ahead now—ponies. Not dinosaurs, not megasaurs or vampire bats, but good, honest little horses to pull a screen star on her laughing way.

When the voice called him back, he didn't even notice. It cried: "Come back," and it cried it from behind him,

but McNally had been fooled by that echo before, and he was not going to fall for it again. He kept on.

"Come back, before it's too late!"

McNally wiped sweat from his face, and plucked his drenched shirt away from his chest. You can't fool me, little old echo. I'm too—

He stopped dead, and turned in his track. The heat was getting him. Because there couldn't be an echo, not in the deepest, sheerest canyon in the world, unless there was a voice to start the echo. And he hadn't said a word!

He pulled his revolver, and started back. Then he laughed, and again ghosts laughed back at him from all sides.

Reilly Aztec! The kid had known this canyon was here, had known it was where the ponies bedded. He had pretended to sulk, to hang back so he could follow McNally and play this joke on him.

McNally called: "Hey, Reilly!" The canyon answered him: "Ly-Rei, Ly-Rei, Reilly!"

"Come on, Reilly," McNally called. "The ponies are up ahead, and we'll make our roundup and be back to Ricker's tonight."

There was no discernible answer. The echoes took that speech and twisted it up so, threw such fantastic chunks of it around, that it was impossible to tell if new words were being thrown into that mess of sound.

McNally sat down on a hunk of sandstone that was weathered to the shape of a toadstool, and waited.

The echoes died down, and now there was no noise at all. McNally uncoiled the rope he had brought with him, and flicked it out onto the sandstone floor of the arroyo, played with it. He waited for Reilly.

No Reilly appeared. Well, if that phoney Injun wanted to play little jokes, let him. Just so he was back there, that was enough. His presence—the strange presence of a man—in the narrow gut would stop the ponies if they started back. And McNally could dock the Aztec ten bucks for a day's work, on account of insubordination.

Dave McNally stood up, and walked ahead. And when the voice called behind him: "Come back, back before it is too late," he disregarded it.

But it was funny that Reilly's voice came clear and un-repeated, that there was no echo with it . . .

McNally rounded one more bend, and stopped, grinning. Ahead of him was his quarry.

LITTLE horses. Two dozen or more little horses! They ranged from almost black to buckskin, with fine sorrels and bright bays in between. Not a pinto in the lot, and that was fine; a pinto would look like a misshapen Shetland.

McNally stood there, twirling his rope to block the canyon, and tried to sort the horses out in his mind. Let's see. He wanted eight—because the other little merry-go-round had had seven—little horses of the same color. Well matched.

His contract didn't call for it, but he wanted to give extra value. Let's see. Three buckskins. So buckskins were out, though he might take them along to fill up the car. Only two blacks. Sorrels. Now, there were plenty of sorrels, and—

His hat flew off his head. Something . . .

He stepped backward, picked it up, not turning his back on the herd. A stone had dented the crown of the Stetson. McNally ducked behind a rock and waited. Reilly

Aztec—or someone was ahead of him. On the other side of the pony herd.

He studied the horses' bedroom. It was the very end of this twisting arroyo, a sort of box canyon off the main canyon. A little spring bubbled up at the end, at the foot of the sandstone wall, ran a few feet, and disappeared into the ground again. And the space was wide and round, a sort of circle perhaps a hundred feet in diameter, with McNally standing in the only opening.

McNally got behind his rock, and called: "It's all right, pal. You can heave rocks at me if you want. I've got a gun, and the gun's got sic—no, five—bullets in it, and you don't get out until I tell you you can."

He smiled to himself. He almost laughed. He had been afraid of ghosts, and then someone had thrown a stone at him. Ghosts don't throw stones. Men throw stones, and men have a great advantage over ghosts: you can shoot men with a .45 revolver.

McNally waited.

Again the voice cried: "Come back, back, back," but McNally didn't turn his head. Sure. A guy could be in front of you and throw his voice at the right rock, and the voice would come out behind you. Nothing to it.

McNally scorned himself for having been afraid before, but that was over. No use crying about it now.

The horse herd moved restlessly, and milled, like range cattle. McNally had never seen horses mill before. All of a sudden a little buckskin stallion whistled, and reared, and then put his small head down between his hooves, bucked once, and charged for the opening.

McNally's rope whistled, and the end of it flicked the little stud in the face. The horse whirled, faster than light, and charged back into the herd, whickering nervously. He buried himself in the middle of the other horses, safe from the strange, invisible sting that had hurt his tender nose.

Oh, they'd be a cinch to break and train. That ten grand—minus expenses—was in the bag.

But first something had to be done about the lug who hid behind the horses, and called things at McNally.

The showman listened to those things for the first time in minutes. "Back, back, come back. The ghost of Red-rock Canyon orders you back, back, back!"

There was a timing, a cadence to the chant that would have terrified a superstitious man. But McNally was not superstitious. He was—

Why, hell, he was a showman, and so was the guy who was doing the hollering. That yelling was timed, spaced, by someone who had once learned to handle an audience.

McNALLY stood up, and ducked the first rock that came over. "Cease firing," he called. "I'm an agent from the big time! I'm out booking acts for a presentation! You wanta bean me before I get you signed up?"

The ghostly, fearful voice chanted: "Four a day or six a day?"

McNally called back: "Six a day with a road show, but they pay traveling expenses," and then amazed at the background, the setting, and the conversation, broke out into helpless, destroying laughter. He rolled behind his rock, on the powdery sandstone floor, and howled, holding his sides.

Tears streamed down his face and washed the punishing borax out of his eyes. His ribs ached, and his stomach nearly collapsed with laughter.

When he finally got control of himself, the ghost voice boomed: "You're not crazy, are you? Vaudeville's dead."

"Maybe I'm crazy, but I'm on the level, boy," McNally said. "It's just—"

"What office are you from?"

This was business, this was serious. McNally named his own agent. "Jake Loeb, New York. I'm Dave McNally."

"I've heard of you," the ghost said. "It's a fine thing when they have to get out an explorer to go book the best ventriloquist on the old Keith time."

"Sure it is," McNally said. "Come on down here and let's talk terms. I can't leave because I have to hold these horses in the cup here."

"That's what I want to talk about," the ghost said, and appeared.

HE WAS a thin guy, about six feet but looking much taller because he was so emaciated. A straggly gray-and-brown beard covered his chin, and dangled to his breast-bone. He was wearing a Chimayo cloth coat that was in pretty good repair—but Chimayo never wears out—and a pair of pants that seemed to be made of two bur-lap sacks.

He came from behind a rock at the spring; and McNally had never known the rock was there, it was so much the same color as the back wall. He carried a huge manzanita-wood slingshot in one hand, and helped himself along with an aspen cane.

Just as he stood, he would have packed them in in a fortune-telling act in the beach towns. "That's what I want to talk about," the ventriloquist said. "The horses. I have grown very attached to them. It will be necessary for me to take them with me on tour."

McNally tried to visualize a vaudevillian who insisted on taking a dozen ponies on the road with him. He couldn't, but then nothing fazed McNally. "Sure," he said. "Sure. Let's herd them up and get going. They're holding up bookings for you."

It was essential that he not ask the man's name. He was supposed to have made this trip, come to this hell-hole to book him. Therefore he must know him. And it was also essential—McNally's brain clicking the facts into line like an adding machine—that the man not know his horses were going to be sold to a little child actress.

"Can you make the ponies follow you?" McNally asked. "Back to my pack outfit? I left my fountain pen there, and we want to get our contract into writing as soon as possible."

"Of course they'll follow me," the ventriloquist said. "Easiest thing in the world. I just throw my voice behind them, to the side of them, any place I want to. I could do it without these echoes: the Great Marino can throw his voice at will. And with the walls—ha!"

"Ha!" McNally said.

"Young man, I have spent five years studying these walls. I know every one of those tricks."

"I was sure that Marino could beat a thing like that in five months," McNally said gravely. "And with five years—ha!"

"Ha," Marino answered. "But please—not Marino. I insist on my full billing. The Great Marino!"

"The Great Marino it is," McNally said. "Come on, Great Marino. Oh, wait. Maybe I better go ahead." He wanted to get to Reilly Aztec, tell the bum to keep his

mouth shut. One word about the merry-go-round, and this old crackpot would be off, and the horses with him.

"No, McNally," Marino said. "You walk with me. I wish to discuss details for the booking. Costume. Billing. Stabling for my friends here. Let us go, McNally. Coil that stupid rope of yours, and watch the Great Marino herd horses."

"Oke, Great Marino," McNally said. He would have to take his chances on Reilly Aztec. The bum had never yet failed to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, but maybe this would be an exception.

Ah, well. Things had been too easy so far. You have to expect a little trouble.

VI

THE Great Marino was right; he could herd those horses like Gary Cooper and Joel McCrea with Gene Autry helping them. All he had to do was throw his voice; the horses shied away from it. And Great Marino knew every knob and bump in the canyon; he could get a single echo, a double echo or a rolling echo at will. The little horses went along in a compact bunch.

"How come you to live down here?" McNally asked.

"Alimony," the ventriloquist said, sepulchraly. "I was playing Tucson when she caught up with me. Vandie Ricker was in the bar when I ducked out to save taking the papers. He told me about this canyon."

"Ricker's in the hospital," McNally said. "Appendicitis."

"A good man," the actor said. "Yes . . . I've done some silver work, mounted some bits of agate I found in the canyon for him; he's kept me in groceries. But the little horses, they have been my friends." His ghostly voice shot ahead of them, to check the herd. "I could not be separated from them."

They were coming downstream faster than McNally had gone up. And it was later in the morning. The heat down here was terrific. McNally would drop out from time to time to duck into pools, without even bothering to take his boots off; the leather was getting a doughy rotted look already.

They drove on. The ventriloquist's voice was all around him, but he didn't heed it; just stumbled along.

It was eleven when they hit the pipe line and Reilly Aztec.

McNally knew it first when Marino shook his arm. "Man ahead," the old actor was mumbling.

"Phoney," McNally said. "Phoney. Mirage. Illusion."

But the hand shook him harder, and harder, and McNally opened his eyes. His hands were swollen and cracked from the heat, his wrists and temples felt as though they would burst from the pressure of expanding pulses. He wondered dimly how long Marino had been shaking him.

"Gotta—" McNally muttered. "Gotta—" He was aware of Marino taking him to the stream, helping him into it. The current tugged at him, the icy water chilled him, and his brain started to work again. He got out of the water, shivering.

"Why, man," the ventriloquist said, "this isn't hot. Wait till July, August."

McNally said: "I can't wait." Then he laughed. "That's my helper ahead. He's all right. My guide. A friend of Ricker's. Hold the horses here, and I'll go talk to him."

"I'll go along," Marino said.

McNally looked at him. "Suspicious, aren't you?"

The ventriloquist smiled. Together, they went up, Marino pushing the horses into a side wash with his voice, permitting McNally to make a rope gate at the entrance to the wash to hold them there.

McNALLY went forward, shook Reilly Aztec's arm. The Indian was asleep under a thorn bush, on his stomach, his head pillowed on his arms. He didn't move. A little distance away, the burro grazed, still loaded. McNally frowned, stood up. He poked Reilly with the tip of a toe. "Wake up, buck. Wake up!"

The Indian groaned, and didn't move. "Sunstroke, or heat exhaustion," McNally muttered. "We've got to get him out of here."

The Marino said: "I never heard of an Indian suffering from the heat."

"He's not an Indian. Just a phoney."

"Oh."

McNally was brisk now, his own heat exhaustion thrust aside. "Help me unpack the burro. We'll strap Reilly on his back, get him up the hill. We'll nose and tail the little horses behind the burro, and we'll all be out in an hour. It's faster going up a trail like that than down. We won't have to worry about the burro falling."

His hands were busy unlashng the pack. "Take this pile of ropes. I'll show you how to tie the little horses. Going up the trail this way will break them at the same time it gets them out; they'll be almost ready to use when we get to the top—"

When no hand closed on the pile of rope he held out, he looked up. Marino was just standing there. "McNally?"

McNally said: "Step on it, man. I'm gonna give Reilly here some medicine to hold him, but he ought to go to a hospital and—"

"McNally, I can't go."

McNally stared.

"Huh?"

"I'm afraid. I've been here so long." The deep booming tones of the actor had cracked. This was just the whining of an old man. "The world. People are different. . ."

McNally was thinking about Reilly Aztec. "All right, old man. Stay down here. I'll come back some time and talk to you about it. But you'll help me hitch up the little horses, won't you?"

"Horses?"

McNally was swabbing Reilly Aztec's arm with iodine. Bent over, he plunged the hypodermic needle into the Indian's arm, giving him medicine to take care of him until he could be gotten to a doctor. Over his shoulder, he said: "The horses, sure the horses. That I came for. It's too dangerous"—he withdrew the empty needle, dropped it back into the medicine chest—"to make another trip down here for them. I want to get them out today. Just tie these ropes to their necks and—"

Something hit him on the back of the neck. Only the fact that he had just moved to shift Reilly kept the staff from cracking his head. He glanced up, reaching for his gun.

The Great Marino had gone wild. "You tricked me. You tried to trick me! It's not me you were after, but my little horses. You wanted to steal my horses and—"

McNally ducked and rose. The old man was circling around, waving his aspen cane.

McNALLY stepped back, one hand on his gun. And then something happened to him that he had heard about, read about, but had never seen happen before. He saw himself, his life. Not the early part, when he'd just been a punk, talking in front of other men's pitches in carnivals, showing off other men's animals in circus acts, even doing a talk-dance act in vaudeville. But the part since he'd grown up, the years of tramping the jungles, the veldts, the bazaars, the mountains for acts.

Animals. Using a gun when he had to use a gun. Driving men on through malaria country and precipice country and overseas, to get his animals back to the United States.

He was not wealthy, but he wasn't in need of coffee money, either.

He said: "T'ell with it. Keep your horses." He heaved Reilly Aztec up on the burro, lashed him tight, threw a water-soaked burlap over him, and picked up a short rope to haze the burro. "So long."

The old man still circled him cautiously as he started for the trail up. "Yeah," McNally said, "I wanted the horses. I was offered a lot of money for eight canyon dwarf horses in Hollywood. They would have been famous, they would have had their pictures in all the papers." He hit the burro with the rope. "Get along, mule."

The trail started up, and they made the first crossing of Vandie Ricker's waterpipe, but the old man still circled cautiously around McNally, fearing a trick. "The horses would have been well cared for. Beautifully cared for. They would have slept in good stalls and gotten good feed, and they would have lived longer than they will here."

The old man had some boom, some oomph back in his voice. "You tricked me, you tried to trick me."

"Sure," McNally said. "Only I'm on the level. I've killed men in my time—because they wanted to kill me, or because they couldn't stand the work they hired on to do, and died of overwork—but I keep my word. I'd've gotten you bookings. I'd've fixed it so you could live with your little horses when you weren't on the road. But I'm being a sap."

The old man's breath was coming hard. "You wanted to steal my horses."

"Ah, shut up," McNally said. "All of a sudden I'm tired of crackpots and screwballs. This phoney Indian here—I could leave him in the shade down there, and take care of you, talk to you. Give me time, and I can talk anybody out of anything. I'm McNally!"

"And it's his own dopey fault. He stole a bottle of whiskey out of my car, was drinking it down there in the sun. I could smell when I bent over him. I ought to leave

him to take his chances. Or sock you, and take the horses I need.

"You're a crackpot, and it seems to me a guy making a legitimate living like me has a right to take a sock at a crackpot. You don't need all those horses, and I just wanted eight sorrels. But so long. I'm a sucker, but this guy might die if I stayed to rope up those ponies or to argue with you, so so long."

He raised the short end of the rope, cracked the burro. "Get up the trail, li'l old mule. And so long, Marino, you screwball."

The burro climbed, and they were out of the sun now, and out of the little patch of dampness in the bottom of the canyon. The old man wailed something threatening and confused, and then dropped back.

The burro's heels rung as he crossed the pipe line again, and he seemed to drag. Reilly Aztec's prone form moved slightly on the donkey's back. McNally let half a cup of water from the big canteen fall on the sacking over Reilly's face, and hit the burro with the rope. "Get along, li'l dogie."

Under him, the dwarf horses and bearded old crackpot were getting dwarfed with distance.

VII

ABOUT the climb up, there wasn't much that stayed in McNally's mind later. Awful, burning, baking heat without sun, heat that came not directly, but reflected off canyon walls and floor, that enveloped him. This was worse than the rays of the Arizona sun, because it penetrated under the shadows of rocks and bushes; there was never any respite from it, any time when it was better or worse.

It was everywhere, and constant.

His boots cracked from it, after the soaking he'd given them in the canyon floor. His head reeled from it; he'd been a sick man before he'd discovered Reilly Aztec passed out.

It occurred to him, clear as if it were written on a rock in letters of fire, that the movie company that employed Little Sally could have sent out a location scout and two horse wranglers and gotten the horses considerably under ten thousand dollars. In October, in November, or any time before May.

He had been offered all that money because the producer had known that it was hell in Shoshone Canyon in June. Had known that McNally would get no help. They had paid him for his knowledge of animals, sure. But knowl-



edge of horses is much more common than knowledge of tigers or coatumundis or whales.

The money had been for the McNally guts, the McNally reputation. That canyon, with its soothing, lulling heat of dawn, its murderous baking of a few hours later had been his match.

"Get along, little mule," McNally said, and threw the first canteen away. He dropped half a teacup of water over Reilly Aztec's face, and one drop spilled on McNally's finger. He licked it off eagerly, anxiously. "Get along, little mule."

And it had licked him. No common decency, but head-madness had made him let those horses go when he'd once had them.

Get along, little mule.

SOME weary time later—it was still well before noon, but McNally couldn't know—the burro brayed and put on speed, and they were over the rim. Then they were walking down to Vandie Ricker's station, McNally and his burro; or the burro was walking—McNally was staggering.

He was aware that there were two or three cars parked around the station, besides his own, but he didn't care. He saw men unstrapping Reilly Aztec, and then he saw only the gloomy dusk inside the store, and staggered for it. The dark shadows slid up along his legs and his body, and then covered his face, and he was cool again. He lay down under the counter.

Maybe it was five minutes, maybe five hours, before he awoke. It was a woman's voice: "I see no reason to keep that poor Indian here until your prisoner is ready to travel. Winged Eagle ought to go to the hospital. At once!"

And a man's voice: "Lady, the Injun's gonna be all right. That bootlegger saved his life, anyway. Giving him the shot and rushing him up here was the thing to do."

The thin voice of the woman was triumphant. "Then you admit he's a bootlegger."

The man said: "Sure. Sure. There was liquor on the Injun's breath even when we got him. That guy must have made a flying trip up the canyon."

"You sound as if you admire him." The woman was Dr. Lawford.

"Lady, don't be so tough. The guy was giving liquor to the Indian for money. He's not a regular bootlegger. That outfit of his in the trailer's worth a couple of thousand, and he only had two bottles of whiskey in the car. Maybe he didn't even know it's against the law to give liquor to Indians."

McNally held his breath. This was it. This was the works. No ponies, a mediocre case of sunstroke, and then a year in a Federal pen for bootlegging on an Indian Reservation. Oh, lucky McNally, oh, fortunate McNally. Buffalo Dave McNally, the King of the Golden West.

The great McNally lay under his counter, and tried to figure an out. Reilly Aztec was not, of course, an Indian in the legal sense of the word. And a swell time McNally would have proving it. The New Yorker had taken advantage of his Indian appearance to get free schooling over in the Western Navajo Reservation; he would be registered there as an Indian, and to deny his aboriginality here would get him in jail over there. And Reilly was no man to go to jail as a favor to McNally or anyone else.

If I could get to the phone and call Jake Loeb in New

York, he'd fly me a lawyer who could talk me out of it. If that dinky one-wire forestry phone has a long-distance hookup which it hasn't.

Well, then, let them take me in, and I'll phone Jake from the U. S. marshal's office. Only—

Only, McNally had been going out on expeditions for a great many years. And he had never yet come back empty-handed. Oh, he hadn't always gotten what he went after; he'd brought back cats when he wanted llamas, and a gorilla when he'd started out for an African village act; but he'd never been whitewashed.

And without the horses, he would be a joke. There wasn't another blinking thing for miles around worth exhibiting.

He hated to have Jake Loeb get the laugh on him. He'd never hear the end of it. McNally getting soft-hearted, and letting ten grand worth of horses loose because he didn't want to conk an old man.

Dr. Lawford had been moving around the back room. Now dishes rattled. "There's your lunch, Marshal. And right after you eat it, I expect you to take Winged Eagle to the hospital. And that man to jail!"

The marshal said: "Lady, lady. After I eat, I take a siesta. And that poor guy doesn't go to jail till after dark. You want him to get sick from the sun?"

"I don't care. There is nothing more despicable than a white man who will sell liquor to the Indians!" The front door slammed.

The marshal muttered: "These Injun lovers the museums send out here!" and then made a good deal of noise chewing up his lunch.

MCNALLY got his legs and arms under him, and started creeping along the back of the counter. He got to the bedroom door and pulled up enough to look around the edge of the counter. The marshal was a stout bald man; he was sitting in front of the post office window in the deepest shade, with his back to McNally.

McNally got a hand up, opened the bedroom door, and slipped through. Then he got to his feet and stood swaying; spots danced before his eyes. Gradually the blood drained from his head; but when he faced the window, the sun outside blinded him. He looked at his watch. Only two; he hadn't slept so long after all.

He slid the sun-warped window open with as little noise as possible, and dropped out.

Now. He could put his feet under him and move them, and walk west, toward the California line and comparative freedom. While the charge against him was Federal, the marshal's whole speech and bearing indicated that he wasn't going to go to a lot of trouble to bring McNally back; he was acting because that Lawford woman would get his job if he didn't.

Yeah, McNally could walk to California. A hundred miles, more or less. With the temperature, in spots, a hundred and twenty, a hundred and fifty. A nice cool cell in Leavenworth had it all over that plan.

And besides, the country was so open they could spot him in an instant from a car. And he didn't dare touch his own car. He—

He crept around the house. There was only one place to go. Back down into the canyon. Hide out with the Great Marino, a pair of fugitives from a couple of petit larceny laws. An Indian bootlegger and an alimony fugitive.

But, by Gargantua, if he ever went down that canyon again, he would talk Marino out of those horses. He would come up and he would have ten thousand dollars' worth of little dwarf horses, and t'ell with Dr. Lawford.

If you want something done, do it yourself. If he'd never taken Reilly Aztec down with him, he never would have had to hurry back, and he could have put on a sales talk. So here he went for the second trip.

A little voice inside McNally's head told him another trip down into that oven today might kill him. But he laughed at the little voice. He was McNally, and if he had been going to die, it would have happened years ago.

He crept around the house. And then he stopped.

DR. LAWFORD was asleep in a hammock slung from one corner of Ricker's store to a tamarack tree. Sound asleep, her skinny hands folded on her skinny bosom. Her skinny legs in her sleazy slacks neatly crossed at the ankles.

Asleep.

A devil, an imp born of the sun, was born in McNally's brain.

Cautiously, quietly, he crept to the marshal's car. There, there it was, on the floor in back; the evidence. The remaining two quarts of bourbon.

McNally uncorked one, and tilted it up, and the thirsty Arizona sand took half the evidence. He uncorked the other, and poured out some whiskey. But not all. No, not all. He saved a nice, jukey pint.

Cautiously, quietly, he crept up on the hammock. And then one hand came down on the woman's mouth, pressed her firmly back into the hammock. The other hand raised the bottle.

The eyes over his hand were wide with fear. McNally laughed, and he hoped there was a good fiendish quality to the laugh. He poured the whiskey slowly, firmly on her head; he drenched her hair with it. He heard his own voice laughing, and then let her go. The bottle was empty, and the case against him was pretty well messed up.

The woman dashed at him furiously. McNally raised his voice, his tough voice that had advertised a dozen sideshows. "Hey, Marshall!" he yelled. "Hey, cop!"

The stout man came charging out of the store, his shirt open, the top button of his trousers loose, ready for his siesta. "Help, help," McNally screamed. "This dame's drunk and attacking me!"

"I am not drunk," Dr. Lawford yelled. "I'm—"

But McNally had the edge on her in volume. "Drunk as a lord," he yelled. "She reeks like a distillery."

The marshal caught Dr. Lawford's elbows from behind. "Phew," he said. "Why, doctor."

The sun beat down on all of them. But it beat down most, it seemed, on the whiskey-drenched hair. You could have smelled it in San Francisco. "I'm not drunk," the doctor said. But she said it feebly.

"Drunk and fighting," McNally said. "They'll like this when they hear about it at your foundation."

The marshal let the woman go. And then, suddenly, tears came into that hard face. "You wouldn't—my career—"

But Buffalo Dave McNally rode again. He said: "No. I'd never queer another guy's pitch. Of course I won't tell your bosses. Forget it. Go sleep it off."

The woman was staring at him strangely. She said: "But—"

"You see," McNally said, "what can happen. Listen. That mug asleep in the ice house isn't an Indian. He maintains he's half Aztec, but he was born in New York. Only you were going to push a complaint against me for giving him liquor, and with your standing, I'd have been in a jam I never would have heard the end of. Still going to sign the complaint?"

She shook her head. "No. I—"

"Forget it," McNally said. "I'm busy. I've got to go back down the canyon again."

Dr. Lawford said: "Why?"

"As soon as it's dark," McNally said, "I can sell that old crackpot down there on bringing his horses up and going to L. A. with me."

"What old—"

McNally said: "I forgot. You don't know about him. An aged ventriloquist who lives down there; and if that isn't one for Ripley, I'll eat the canyon. I just thought of an argument that'll bring him out of there like a bullet out of a gun."

"What's that?" the marshal asked. "Or are we all crazy?"

"I'm not," McNally said. "I'm taking a portable radio down with me. Charlie McCarthy's on tonight, and when that old screwball hears the buildup they give Bergen, he'll be crazy to get to the nearest broadcasting station."

McNally walked to the car, started getting up a new pack for the burro.

"I may not know much," McNally said. "But I know actors."

His head still ached from the sun, but it didn't matter.

He wasn't going home empty-handed, and that was all that mattered.

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