

Horse and Horse

BY CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE

HANK WHEELOCK'S first conclusion was that he had come upon a vagrant snow patch. But the idea had barely emerged before he realized its absurdity. Could it be that the scorching humor of the desert had at last seared him to a point of daftness? . . . He moved slowly toward the outer rim of whiteness, as if fearful lest the vision might dissolve, but the mirage did not recede; it became if anything more tangible, more crystalline, more emphatic. Surely this pool of frozen purity had not been there last week.

He bent over, tracing figures in the glistening surface with his gun: if he were mad his new estate had been accomplished with completeness! He next trusted his fingers to a confirmation of the fact before him. He had almost expected a cool reaction, but the scorch of accumulated sunshine bit ruthlessly into his flesh. Immediately every spark of animation was extinguished within him: the suggestion flashing through his mind was too tremendous, too fantastic to be met save in complete immobility. For a full minute he lay upon his belly, there in the yellow sand, like a huge gray lizard fascinated by the prospect of an iridescent meal. When he moved again, it was to scoop up a handful of burning whiteness. Even now he did not altogether credit his senses. He moistened a forefinger, carrying its powdered surface back to his tongue. He knew the look of it, the taste of it, and yet he was not to be trapped unduly. He whipped out his pocket magnifier. His conclusions were reluctant, constrained by the incautions of a lifetime. Borax? . . . Could it be possible—here by the roadway's rim, within a day's

journey of the railroad? . . . He felt himself grow suddenly weak and he had the wit to realize that the sun was in no humor to brook defiance. He moved slowly into the truce of a rocky ledge, sprawling full length in its shadow. Overhead, three buzzards formed a sinister merry-go-round against the turquoise sky. Their foul expectations made Hank Wheelock chuckle. In spite of his sixty years he was a long way from cashing in. Them fool buzzards! Didn't they know a tough old coyote when they saw one? Besides, he wasn't quite ready to provide grub for such an ornery lot of feathered bandits—not yet. He'd have another look at that outcropping of borax first. *Borax!* . . . He closed his eyes. Just wait until he told Jim Bledsoe about it! Foolish, futile Jim Bledsoe. Perhaps he wouldn't tell him! Perhaps he wouldn't tell nobody. It would depend.

He opened his eyes again. The buzzards had drooped a shade lower. A hot breeze began to catch up little whirls of sand and the loose pungent odors of the sagebrush. An intolerable longing for some far-off and dusky coolness oppressed Hank Wheelock. He thought of hedgerows and columbine and hollyhocks and the faint tinkle of silver fountains. After all, he *was* tired and old and ready to quit! And the buzzards overhead knew it. . . . But they didn't know that his luck had turned, that he had fortune by the throat. They didn't know that his was the surrender that always came within sight of the goal. . . . If they had they wouldn't have wasted time circling about him in such a calm, anticipatory frenzy.

He pulled himself to his feet, dragging back to that pool of whiteness which

even now held such an element of unreality. Yes, it was still there—bared unaccountably for his achievement: A glimpse, a mere indication of what must lie buried for miles in every direction under the deceitful gray of the desert. And, in a sudden spasm of joy, he felt himself tossing his hat into the air and heard the exultant cry issuing from his throat, swallowed up flatly by the unhemmed spaces.

Overhead, the buzzards had ceased their circling. For a brief instant they held themselves motionless, then swept eastward with calm deliberation.

In the cool of evening, Hank Wheelock went through the primitive gesture of marking the confines of his prospect with bits of shale chipped from the ledge that had sheltered him from the sun. The definite rules for staking a claim he was unprepared to meet and yet some atavistic urge, harking back to the days when men made covenants with the gods, gave him a foolish pleasure in setting up symbols of his revelation. What he would have liked to do was to have swept back the sand over his treasure with a miraculous rake. There would be people passing and re-passing, Indians for the most part, intent on the piñon harvest, perhaps gathering mesquite beans, or working toward the streams with their fish-snares. These scarcely mattered, but others would pass, too,—white men, with little sharp beady eyes, seeking furtively to wrest secrets from the sun-bitten land. But the desert was capricious; it rewarded whom it would. Take his own case for instance: How many times had he scoured the blunt, squeezed hills to no purpose, coveting their treasures? . . . And this same spot, with its ledge of rock that marked a waterhole of almost miraculous sweetness, how many times had he loitered in its gaunt shade, innocent of its hoard? . . . Last week, when he had tramped eastward to another futile tryst with fortune, his path had been without revelation. The

country had lain somnolent under a blazing sun, taciturn and baffling, as always. But overnight a miracle had happened: a wanton wind had danced with gathering violence across the starlit mesa, furrowing the gleaming sand with its twinkling feet, tearing open quiescent wounds in its frenzy, revealing close-locked secrets. . . . To-night it was conceivable that another wind might rise, blotting out all trace of the one that had gone before, piling the restless sand discreetly back again. Hank Wheelock hoped that this might be so; such a prospect made him feel safer. He wanted to hoard his good fortune for a season, to guard it jealously. Would it be necessary to tell Jim Bledsoe? Not right off, anyhow. . . . He'd bide his time. . . . He might even persuade himself beyond that. . . . He'd do what was right, but he wasn't going to be no fool philanthropist. If they had come upon this secret together, that would have been one thing. . . . But they hadn't. . . . Yet Jim Bledsoe was still his partner.

Well, there was time enough to settle that. He wouldn't reach camp until the next morning. Twelve hours of solitude in which to wrestle with the problem. That was enough for any man. . . . He decided to wait until nightfall before pushing on. When the moon rose he'd start. He flung himself back into the shelter of the rocky ledge. He wondered whether the buzzards would come winging back again. . . . But they didn't, and he fell asleep, chuckling.

He rose with a windless moon, heading south by west, munching thin strips of jerked venison as he walked. He was a spare eater on the trail and he drank from his canteen scantily, barely moistening his lips. The land lay in a cool truce of incredible silver, invoking dreams and fancies and extravagances. He felt a mysterious affinity with hidden forces; like some primitive hero who had been singled out for favor by the gods. His discovery of the afternoon linked

him with the elements, made him touch hands with illimitable time and space. He thought vaguely of the extraordinary patience of nature, and its still more extraordinary whimsies. Imagine piling up a glistening treasure for millions of years, then hiding it slyly, in the end to yield the secret to a chance passer-by. He had seen uncovered borax marshes in his day, stretching mile upon mile under a blazing sun, but never before had there come to his knowledge one discreetly buried, like a dead city of the ancients. He tried to imagine it laying stark and white, as it must one day have done, picturing the first thin line of whirling sand that had drifted upon its pallid face. A few grains of sand . . . mere specks of golden grayness. Grains piling up to a handful. An island in the center of a crystalline sea . . . the sea itself completely hidden! Then shrubs and reptiles and birds in their season. The primitive deceit accomplished. He ended by being staggered at so much elemental perseverance. It was like sprawling at full length with one's eyes upturned to the stars; it crushed you, somehow, until in very self-defense you turned away.

He saved his egotism by veering to problems within grasp. There was the matter of claim-staking, of launching a promotion scheme, of transportation. Twenty years before, his imagination would have evoked endless mule teams chiming through the blistering heat to a railroad siding; now he supposed motor trucks would accomplish the task swiftly and adequately. *Hank Wheelock, the new Borax King!* He ruffled with childish pride at the mere thought. . . . But at that he might sell out at once and let somebody else bask in the warmth of the title. This last speculation brought him sharply against the question of Jim Bledsoe again: Would he be justified in dissolving his partnership at this point? Not that he grudged Jim Bledsoe a share in his good fortune—oh, no, it wasn't that! But a man with a big project ought to have a clear field to develop it, without let or hin-

drance. Of course he supposed Jim Bledsoe would give him a free rein, but then a man could never tell!

It wasn't as if the idea had never before occurred: for upward of forty years he had made periodic gestures toward cutting loose from Jim Bledsoe, to find him always in the end taking the path of least resistance. After all, it wasn't easy to ditch a partner who had the genial vice of optimism, who could rise from the most crushing defeat upon the wings of an irrational hope, whose rainbow fell always just a day's journey beyond. But looking back, Hank Wheelock had to admit that this had been Jim's sole contribution to their common cause: the claims they had staked, the boom towns they had entered, the mining stocks they had purchased on the strength of Jim Bledsoe's enthusiasms! And all to no purpose. . . . It was easy to trace the history of every move they had made toward opulence. The end was always the same; they had picked their penniless way back to the hills to pan dribbles of gold from reluctant stream-sides, or follow a promising ledge to its shallow source, or meet a quick turn in fortune on the spin of a faro wheel. But even then it had been Wheelock's luck that stood by. When had Bledsoe ever washed so much as a solitary nugget from a creek bed, or fallen upon a single gilded outcropping in the blunt, scarred hills, or played a winning number to retrieve their wasted substance? Never once in all them forty years, Wheelock told himself with a note of emphatic satisfaction.

Of course, no matter what his decision he'd never let old Bledsoe want: he'd be generous. And with keen delight he pictured himself in the role of patron, distributing largess. . . . Giving anybody a direct share—well, that was different. People never thanked you for what you conceded were their rights, and the term "partnership" would smother any impulse toward gratitude in Jim Bledsoe. To his dying day Jim would argue:

"Well, who knows—if Hank hadn't struck it rich mebbe I would have!"

And the worst of it all was that old Jim Bledsoe would believe it. Forty luckless years hadn't taught him anything. Wasn't he at this very moment out on another of his foolish quests? How foolish, Hank Wheelock could only speculate, since Jim had enveloped his movements in childish mystery. He'd said casually one night over their beans and coffee:

"I had a notion I'd run up toward Heron Falls for a spell. . . . You ain't got any use for that pack animal, have yer? Leastways, not before next week?"

Hank Wheelock had tried to veil his scorn under a show of indifference. "Pack animal? . . . I should say not! . . . I ain't figuring on taking more'n a ton of ore outar that pocket back of Antelope."

His sarcasm had winged past Jim. "Well," Bledsoe had replied, "yer never can tell. . . . I allus figured there might be a likely lead in there. . . . Still, I kinder lean to a country that ain't so all-fired ornery. Prospects, I say, is a good deal like women folks: it may be a mite harder to find 'em both rich and pretty, but it can be done!"

Wheelock had met this statement with the silent contempt it deserved: Neither Bledsoe's prospects nor his women had ever qualified in either particular.

Well, there hadn't been a likely lead back of Antelope . . . there hadn't been a dribble of ore large enough to so much as fill the obsolete watch pocket in Hank Wheelock's sun-bleached coat. The country had been like Jim Bledsoe's women, at once destitute and forbidding. On the surface, of course. It hadn't opened its hand to a man poking about for trifles. . . . Hank Wheelock might have known that, he might have guessed that its frugality had an element of concealment in it, like some crusty old philanthropist making gestures toward poverty to test the object of its favor. . . . He speculated with a derisive

grunt what sort of geological philandering Jim Bledsoe was up to around Heron Falls. A soft country, truly—buried in a carpet of pine needles; full of the muffled whirr of quail covies; spilling water in lacy cascades down its greenly wreathed sides. A place for loafing, a spot to rob you of everything but content, a sure despoiler of ambition. . . . Jim had gone there fishing, that was it. And one day he'd blow back into camp with a mess of trout and an air of carrying the plunder of an empire in his straw-packed fishing basket . . . Hank Wheelock knew! . . . A mess of fish—nothing more nor less.

He, Hank Wheelock, would be bringing back a fortune and his partner, Jim Bledsoe, would throw down a dozen trout as his contribution to the jackpot. . . . Not this time! It didn't take Hank Wheelock one-half of his allotted twelve hours to settle that question. The moon had scarcely risen to its full height when he had come to a final and irrevocable decision.

For the rest of the journey he was content with a thousand opulent anticipations, not the least of which was the ever-recurring picture of himself in the role of patron to old Jim Bledsoe. This speculation had a pungent sting to it, like a dash of spice in a draught of mulled wine. He didn't think of it as insolence because, one thing, he didn't know that insolence was at the back of every condescension, but chiefly because his sense of introspection had been seasoned beneath the sky blue of heaven. He saw only the large masses on a canvas in which generosity loomed big. He ignored its shadow. Suddenly he had made the first step toward despotism—he was willing to grant a million privileges but not a single right. And in his new-found arrogance he felt that if he but reached upward he could have touched the stars!

Toward daybreak he saw afar the curling gray of a camp fire, and he knew that Jim Bledsoe was already back. This fact disturbed him: he hadn't reckoned

on facing so swiftly the issue uppermost in his mind. But his first irritation was succeeded by a sense of poignant anticipation. It would be good to have the coffeepot already steaming over the brush fire and smell the bacon drippings in the frying pan. It would be pleasant too, to stretch out in the gray-green coolness of the willow trees and ruminate over a pipe with the genial putterings of old Jim Bledsoe within sight and earshot. Some folks would have scorned the meager delights of this particular camp site, but Hank Wheelock always had argued that it served admirably. Where else for upward of a hundred miles could one have found a railroad water-tank dripping moisture and within striking distance of wooded mountain or sunburnt mesa, depending on one's direction and inclination? There was greenery enough and outlook enough and solitude enough; and, plus all that, an extraordinary sense of contact with life in just the fact of that ribbon of steel rails bearing thirsty engines to their slaking. A drowsy place to be precise, as a camp site should be. . . . But it wouldn't stay drowsy forever, not with Hank Wheelock's borax marshes twelve hours distant by foot trail. *Hank Wheelock's* borax marshes, mark you—not the borax marshes of *Bledsoe* and *Wheelock*! . . . The railroad siding would have a name, too—*Wheelock's Junction*. How did that sound? And, in a faint mirage, instead of a captured watercourse coaxing willows to moist pasturage, he saw rise before him a dust-stung town at once clamorous and unlovely. Thus, midway between chuckling satisfaction and a vague regret, he bore down upon Jim Bledsoe fanning a reluctant fire in the early morning light.

They greeted each other with clipped masculine monosyllables and lapsed speedily into the grateful silence of long association. As Wheelock had guessed, fish *had* been flashing in the sunlight of Heron Creek, for above the inevitable pungence of coffee and warming bacon-

grease there rose the sweetish odor of trout browning to a turn. . . . The meal ended, two pipes sent out the villainous perfumes of male contentment, and Jim Bledsoe, turning his faded blue eyes upon his partner, said:

"How'd things turn out back of Antelope?"

Hank Wheelock pulled up to the bitter task before him.

"They didn't. . . . I got to thinking things over on the way back: Jim Bledsoe, we ain't gettin' nowhere."

The blue eyes continued to stare at Hank Wheelock with bland tolerance. "Wal, if yer mean we can't just see the end of the trail, I'll allow that. . . . It's the bends in the roads yer can't look past that makes our game interesting. Leastways, that's my notion."

Hank Wheelock stirred the ashes in his pipe with a burnt match. "You always was a dreamer, Jim Bledsoe," he said with a faint note of scorn. "Mebbe I was one, too, way back. . . . But I've passed too many of them bends yer talk so much about. That's all they are—bends. One's just like another—more t'other side—that's all. And it gits narrower and narrower all the time, harder to do in double harness. . . . I come to the conclusion last night that after awhile it's safer to make the grade single file."

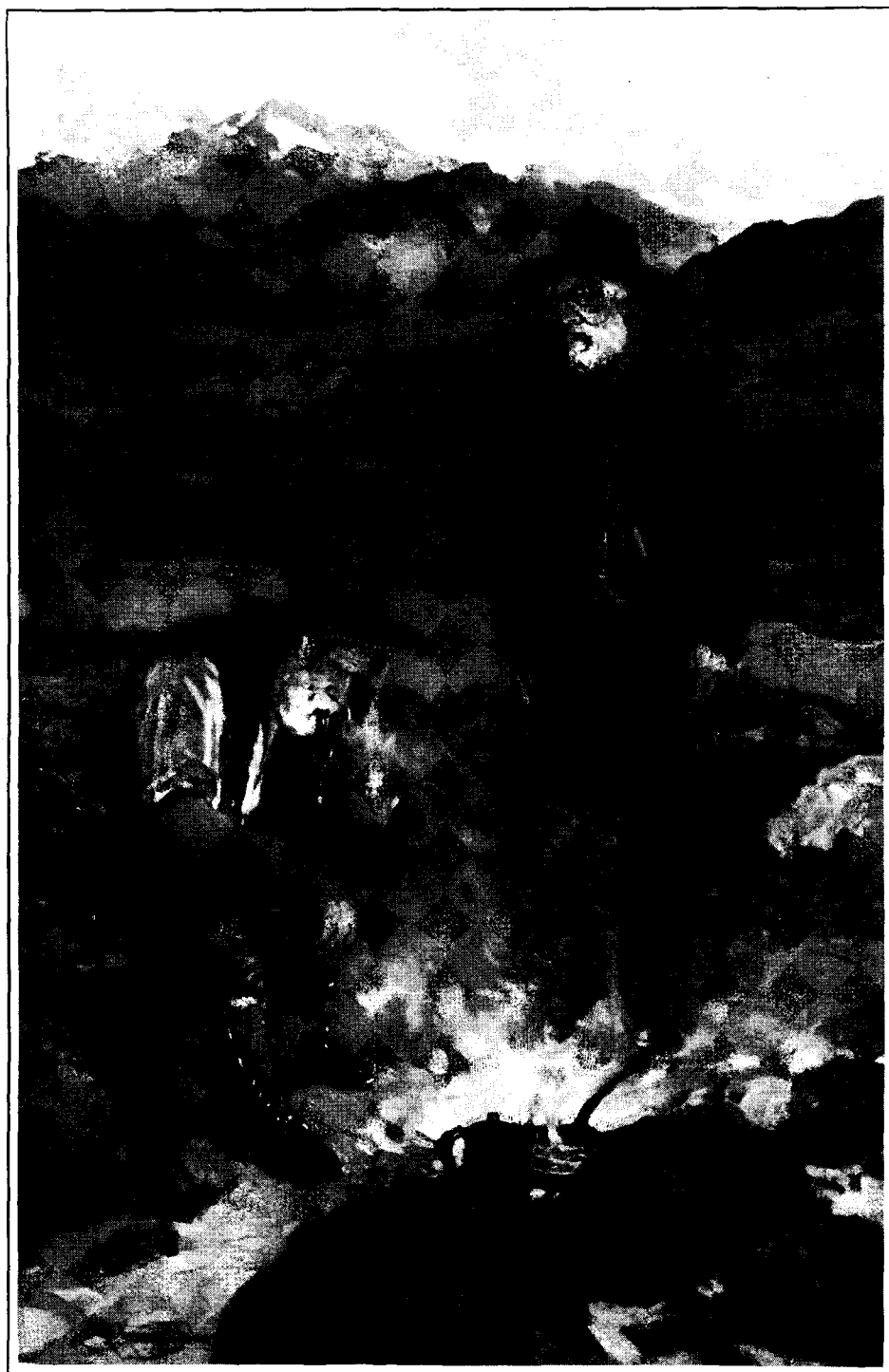
He didn't look at Jim Bledsoe when he said this; he didn't have to—the long silence that followed told him that his shaft had struck home.

"Yer mean yer want to break the partnership?"

"I was thinking of it."

"Pshaw . . . not now, Hank—not after nigh onto forty years."

"That's just it—forty years! . . . Forty years turning them bends in the road yer talk so much about." Hank Wheelock's voice rose with a sort of desperate vehemence. "We've just been dead weight to each other, somehow. . . . You'll say, 'Wait for the next turn!' I know what's beyond *that*—the poorhouse!"



Drawn by F. Tenney Johnson

"YER MEAN YER WANT TO BREAK THE PARTNERSHIP?"

A look of bewilderment crept into Jim Bledsoe's glance. "You're wrong there, Hank. I ain't said nothin', I was just waitin' to surprise yer, but up Heron Falls way there's a prospect that—"

A low guttural laugh, two-edged with contempt, sent Jim Bledsoe's revelation scattering.

"Prospects—up by Heron Falls! . . . I guess a mess of fish now and then's about all yer'll ever take out of *that* country! . . . I heerd tell of your prospects before!"

Jim Bledsoe fumbled for his tobacco pouch, and his hand shook. "Yer right, Hank Wheelock," he said, in a voice that was much too high and clear and confident. "It's *time* you and me was quittin'."

Jim Bledsoe spoke to him once more—after the evening meal. He came and stood close to where Hank lay sprawled before the camp fire. He was ready for the trail—blanket roll, canteen, and canvas bag snug with essentials.

"I'm going over to Heron Falls," he said without rancor, "and after that I'll drop down into Potterville. . . . Ain't nuthin' I can do for yer down that way, is there?"

Hank Wheelock stirred himself to a sitting posture. "How soon yer coming back?"

"I ain't coming back—leastways not the way I'm figgerin' now. . . . I'll stick to the timber fur awhile. . . . I've had enough of this here alkali country."

Hank came to his feet. "How about dividing things up?"

Jim Bledsoe swept the issue aside with a gesture of indifference. "Ain't much to divvy, is there? A few camp contraptions and a pack animal. I figgered you'd need 'em more than me. I won't be runnin' wild much longer."

His voice was untinged with patronage, yet his words brought the blood to Hank Wheelock's forehead. "I'd rather we cleaned up right!" he threw back savagely.

Jim Bledsoe shrugged. "I've got all the best of it *now*!" he answered.

Hank Wheelock twisted his lips into a smile. "Well, if you're satisfied . . ." he said.

Their hands came together instinctively.

"Good luck!"

"Good luck!"

The sound of old Jim Bledsoe shuffling into the darkness . . . wind drawing up the mesa . . . the piercing wail of a coyote. . . . *After forty years!* . . .

He lay all night beside the camp fire, gazing up at the stars. An extraordinary sense of freedom possessed him. He had no one to answer to now, except God, and His outline had grown too vague to throw any shadow. Curious how irksome a human relationship could become! Not that old Jim Bledsoe ever meddled, but he was always there, an unescapable fact to be reckoned with. After all, what had happened was inevitable. The surprising thing was that it had been delayed so long. Jim Bledsoe would be happier—he'd be free to loaf in the timber now, undisturbed by the clatter of achievement. Bledsoe was never a man to face facts anyway. He was always veiling his passion for the soft seductions of the stream and forest in a pretense of prospecting. He'd have no place in wresting a fortune from the desert. *Tired of the alkali country*—that's the way he put it. Well, let him dream awhile longer over his trout stream! Hank Wheelock would show him; Hank Wheelock would give him a taste of real generosity! There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for his old partner, short of letting him have a hand in his enterprise. A lovable old wastrel, this Jim Bledsoe, Hank Wheelock conceded. Take such an issue as dividing up, for instance. It was characteristic this yielding everything, even the pack animal. If it hadn't been that he could repay this gesture tenfold, Hank Wheelock would have stuck to his first protest. Perhaps he should

have, anyway. What if Jim Bledsoe were one day to say:

"Hank Wheelock ain't done nuthin' more'n he should. Didn't I turn over the whole shebang to him—pack mule and all, just before he struck it rich?"

Oh, well, if it gave Jim Bledsoe any satisfaction! . . . He'd likely find some excuse to horn in on the deal. Folks were like that—unwilling to concede unalloyed liberality.

After all, the camp equipment and the pack animal did mean something at this stage. He'd have a bit of traveling about to do. To begin with, he'd have to go into Potterville to attend to a thousand legal details, after he had staked his claim properly. He'd have to look people up, talk to them, get their interest. Yesterday, under the spell of his outstanding discovery, he had thought in terms of quickly matured plans; he saw now that weeks, months must elapse before they would swing forward. And he'd need a handful of money for the preliminaries too. If the country back of Antelope had only yielded a decent pocket of ore! Perhaps if he pushed on a little further. He knew a huddle of hills just beyond Mesquite Ridge that he had always thought of as promising.

He decided to start at daybreak. A fever of anxiety suddenly swept him. With the postponement of his triumph came a sickening fear that he had overestimated the whole circumstance. What if the outcropping he had come upon were just that and nothing more? If veins of gold could swell deceitfully on the surface and peter out, why couldn't borax do the same? It wasn't likely, leastways he'd never heard of it, but it might! One always thought of borax marshes as the dried beds of inland seas, but he supposed they could be as easily the wash of prehistoric puddles. But it wasn't likely, he repeated again and again.

But even as he reassured himself a more fantastic idea consumed him. Could it be possible that the whole thing

was a mental fabrication? Was the first suspicion which had swept him as he bent over that patch of unexpected whiteness the right one? He had fancied then that the heat had touched him. Suddenly the canvas of his memory became crowded with brief hallucinations that had been the portion of desert rovers. The visions they had testified to!—incredible, alluring, ridiculous visions! He remembered them all, every one, with diabolical clearness.

His first plan had been to achieve Mesquite Ridge by a direct route that would have struck a little north of his discovery of yesterday, missing it by a half day's journey. There hadn't seemed any necessity for going out of his way merely to view a spot that he had quitted not twenty-four hours since. It would still be there, no matter what happened, and time was precious. But now, shaken by cold gusts of incredulity, he decided to take the longer route. He wanted to rest a moment in the shelter of that little mound of rock, and test once again with his fingers the reality of that sun-bleached pool that had so captured his fancy.

He broke camp without waiting for the sun to rise. Everything he possessed was loaded upon the protesting burro. His return was problematical. If he found that he *had* been snared by a vision, why—

But he refused to consider seriously such a contingency. Yet as he swung his footsteps eastward he had a sense of sickening dread that he could not define.

Toward evening the jutting ledge of rock which marked Hank Wheelock's spot of promise swam in the haze of a slanting sun. For a moment he leaned upon his rifle, motionless. The pack animal halted too, making an inanimate outline against the sky. A thin curl of smoke drew upward in a straight line and mysteriously lost itself. . . . His first thought marked it as the camp fire of Indians. He felt annoyed. He had counted on solitude, and a brood of

Indians was not to his liking. The alternative was even more distasteful: a white man would insist on chattering. . . . *A white man!* Had somebody already jumped his claim?

He felt wrath pounding at his temples, and, suddenly, instinctively, he began to run forward, his gun glistening with flashing menace. A figure scrambled from the sands to meet him.

"Wal, stranger, what's the hurry? . . . Don't yer calculate to stop at no flag stations?"

Hank Wheelock fell back. "I was all-fired thirsty!" he lied, conscious of two eyes riveted upon a thin trickle of moisture issuing from his canteen.

"Which way yer headed for?"

"Over by Mesquite Ridge."

"Prospectin'?"

"Yep."

Hank Wheelock shuffled to the water hole and bent over. "Which way *you* goin'?" he shot out, putting his lips to the moisture in his cupped palm.

The stranger stirred his miniature camp fire.

"I ain't made up my mind," he announced with a cryptic chuckle.

Hank eyed his man grimly, but he had wit enough to lapse almost at once into a show of indifference. He straightened up slowly, casting his glance in the direction of the thing that he had traveled all day in the blistering heat to confirm. If he were mad before, his mind was still touched—the outcropping of borax glistened even in the twilight with emphatic whiteness. The stranger was bending over the fire. A primitive gust swept Hank Wheelock: he grasped his gun securely, but the next instant relaxed his grip, shaken further by the realization that he could turn yellow even for so brief a moment. The man had risen.

"Wal," he drawled, "I expect it's about time to chew!"

Hank wiped the sweat from his eyes, accepting the stranger's implied invitation with equal indirection, as he said:

"I guess I'd better unpack that fool

burro if we calc'late to eat without jackass music."

The stranger's name was Starbuck—a garrulous, cynical soldier of fortune with the gossip of boom-town and mining camp and trail bubbling up unceasingly. He had inside stories of clean-ups and collapses, and racy anecdotes of prominent citizens grown suddenly respectable overnight by the magic of money, or old age, or pure expediency. Listening to the suave ripple of incidents flowing from his lips, Hank Wheelock grew profoundly irritated. Here was a man that one felt knew too much, whose grasp of the inconsequential seemed vaguely significant, with a chuckling humor capable of diabolical disillusionments. . . . For Hank Wheelock was still a childlike soul in spite of his wordly contacts—a man with enough buoyancy of spirit to be forced upward instead of swamped by the ugly currents of life.

This man Starbuck was sly, too; one got that in his half-closed glance, and there was something in the curve of his lip which seemed pregnant with ridicule. Hank Wheelock was burning to know whether thirst was the only thing that had lured him to this water hole, and having slaked it, what held him there. Surely he had experience enough to know borax when he saw it. Yet on this significant point he was strangely silent. . . . No, not strangely, when Hank came to think of it. Being no doubt possessed of the secret, Starbuck was as intent on guarding it as Hank himself.

Hank ate sparingly of Starbuck's bacon and beans, keeping his gun within easy reach. The impulse toward cold-blooded murder which had seized him earlier had vanished utterly, but he was ready this time for a fair fight, if he felt himself forced to it. He had rights which he was prepared to defend, and the thought thrilled him.

He tried discreetly once or twice to force Starbuck's vaporings into significant channels when suddenly, without

warning, Starbuck himself rippled toward the desired explanation of his presence. They had finished their meal and their first pipes when Starbuck began to pack his mess kit with slow deliberation.

"Might as well be ready to move when I take the notion," he said.

Wheelock's heel dug into the sand. "What's your hurry?"

"Hurry? . . . No, I ain't exactly in a hurry. . . . But I jest swung a few miles out o' my course to-day to have a look at this here spot. Things on the desert stay pretty much as they were at the start. It's bin twenty years or more since I come by here."

"And yer mean ter say yer found nuthin' changed—*nuthin'*?"

"Not a damned thing!" He threw a greasewood twig in the direction of one of the piles of rock with which Hank Wheelock fantastically had staked his claim. "Excepting them fool monuments!" He gave a chuckle. "When I seen them I looked around for a skeleton or two. Sez I to myself: 'Bud Starbuck, nobody but a tenderfoot done anything *that* foolish.'"

Hank Wheelock felt his face dyed slowly with a flush midway between anger and confusion. Could it be possible that this man suspected who was responsible for this futile and childish performance? He slapped his thigh ruminatingly, trying to frame a disarming reply.

"No, nuthin' changed in twenty years," he heard Starbuck drone on, "excepting them fool monuments and the sand shifting back and forth. . . . Now in the timber country you'd find trees growed bigger, or split by lightning, or mebbe a creek bed widened. But *here!*" He threw his shoulders upward with a lift of lively disgust.

A strange dryness puckered Hank Wheelock's lips—something like premonition urged him to complete silence as if such a course might check the flow of Starbuck's speech, and yet he found himself saying almost hoarsely:

"How'd yer come to think o' stopping at all? . . . Ain't nuthin' here so all-fired unusual! . . . Leastways nuthin' that would make a man remember that fur back?"

"Wal, mebbe you'd think different if you'd drove a mule team past this water hole twice a week or more for nigh onto a year like I did. . . . Yes, sir, I passed this place more times than I could shake a stick at back in them days when I was hauling borax out o' Paiute Valley."

Hank Wheelock bent forward suddenly. "Borax!" he echoed faintly.

"Yes siree, borax. . . . He picked up another twig and hurled it this time in the midst of the crystalline pool, upon which Hank Wheelock was gazing with tragic uncertainty. "Yer see that? . . . Would yer like to know something about how it come there? Well, listen ter me, stranger, and when I get through if yer don't agree that nuthin' ever changes in this fool country, my name won't be Bud Starbuck!"

Some time in the night with the rising moon, Hank Wheelock heard the clinking of a mess kit swaying rhythmically, and he knew that Starbuck had hit the trail again. He was wide awake, but he did not stir; he did not even call out a farewell: he had had enough of Bud Starbuck. It was not so much that this man had robbed him of an illusion as that he had convicted him of idiocy. Fancy a seasoned prospector letting himself be snared by anything so obviously fictitious as this outcropping of borax! What could he have been thinking of! After all he hadn't made a fool of himself to Jim Bledsoe—his humiliation, bitter as it was, would at least always be self-contained. . . . Unless Bud Starbuck suspected! . . . And there were moments when Hank Wheelock fancied that he did.

He had told his story with suspicious gusto, as if he were inwardly smiling, and at the end his "I'd like ter clap my eyes on the greenhorn that reared up them

there stone monuments" had been significant with contempt. The very memory of it still made Hank Wheelock wince.

It was a well-told tale and the element of extravagance was in it despite its underlying triteness. Bud Starbuck had the gift of vitalizing his narrative, and Hank Wheelock had been captured at once by the picture of the narrator setting out with his mule team on a wind-swept morning twenty years before to haul borax from Paiute Valley to the railroad siding. A fool thing to do in such a sandstorm, according to Starbuck's own statement! But bravado lay back of it, an answer to a carelessly flung challenge, with a wager to add zest to the performance—some fifty dollars for the delivery within a given time of the load at its destination. A hard-fought battle through blinding wind and sand, with a snapped axle almost within sight of victory. Then the load dumped in a little saucer-like depression near the water hole, the maimed wagon trailing to shelter behind staggering mules like some wounded animal dragged unwittingly to slaughter. Next day rehabilitation and the mules trotting back with their rattling "empty" and Bud Starbuck intent on plans for salvaging the abandoned load.

And the finish—to quote Bud Starbuck himself:

"Covered up jest as clean as if some fool grave-digger had been at work. . . . I'd 'lowed that there ledge of rock would shunt off the whirling sand. But no siree, it jest jumped *that*—as pretty. . . . Yes, stranger, the sand's the only thing changes in this dern country, and then it just skips about like grasshoppers. . . . That borax has bin there nigh onto twenty years—jest waiting fer another fool wind to uncover it. . . . And I'm willing to bet if I was to load that up again, it wouldn't be ten pounds lighter—no siree, not ten pounds!"

Could any tale have been more commonplace, more ridiculous, more extravagant, all in one breath? It was so

obvious and simple, once it was told. . . . Why, Hank Wheelock didn't have to so much as look again to realize how shallow and artificial and altogether unconvincing of promise was this little glistening patch of crystal winking its thousand eyes mockingly in the sunlight. . . . What was Jim Bledsoe doing up by Heron Falls?—gentle, kindly, simple Jim Bledsoe. . . . If he might only wake to-morrow to the sizzling of bacon in the pan and the sweetish smell of trout browning to a turn! . . .

He lay all the next day in the imperfect shadow of the ledge of rock watching the buzzards circling overhead. At intervals he ministered to the thirsty needs of his pack animal with patient scooping of moisture from the water hole, but for himself, he was content to drowse in a feverish retrospection. . . . Nightfall . . . another day . . . a procession of sunsets and dawns. . . . He was tired—that was it—all-fired tired! To-morrow he would start in the direction of Mesquite Ridge, but not to-day! . . . Again and again he dulled the faint urge within him with this promise, and as often let it be strangled slowly by inaction. Overhead the buzzards grew into a black and menacing cloud. . . . Well, they screened the sun anyway, he would mutter, closing his eyes. The pack animal brayed pitifully! What did it matter? . . . He would start to-morrow! And thus one day merged into another without circumstance or change or human visitation, until in the faint flush of a wind-blown dawn he saw the figure of old Jim Bledsoe drifting forward in a gilded haze.

VIII

Jim Bledsoe's bacon and coffee had never tasted so good. They were like a miraculous sacrament that could revive the spirit as well as the body. With every gulp of muddy coffee, Hank Wheelock could feel the sense of proportion and reality return. But above the physical content which was stealing over

him there rose a suspicion of Jim Bledsoe's presence, a premonition that this old partner of his had sought him out deliberately for some sly purpose he could not define. It all came out, finally, at the appointed time for men's revelations—over the inevitable and pungent pipes. It was Jim Bledsoe who opened fire.

"I warn't at all sure I'd ketch yer," he broke out suddenly without warning.

"How'd yer know I was here?"

"I met a man working up toward Windgate—Bud Starbuck. He said he'd seen yer. . . . But he 'lowed you'd be headin' for Mesquite by this time. . . . But, I dunno, somethin' seemed to tell me you was right here. . . . O' course, I could have waited at camp, but things looked so sort of cleaned-out there—as if you'd bolted fer a spell. . . . I jest couldn't sit there and wait, so I sez to myself: 'If he ain't at that there water-hole, I'll follow him up.'"

Hank Wheelock felt the necessity for explanation. "I was aiming to leave to-day. . . . Somethin' I eat must have put me off my feed. I jest felt all-fired ornery. . . . Were yer calculatin' to swing over to Mesquite with me?"

Jim Bledsoe shook his head and a little gurgling note of triumph issued from his throat.

"No, siree, not me. 'T warn't for that reason I trotted after yer. . . . But I was jest like a fool woman—bustin' to tell yer the news. . . ." He cleared his throat. "Hank Wheelock, you and me don't have to go traipsin' around this here alkali no more, tryin' to hog-tie fortune. I struck somethin' up in that Heron Falls country jest like I said I would. . . . Oh, it ain't nuthin' suddin'—I've bin flirting round with it fer nigh onto six months, now. . . . Yes, siree, fishin' ain't the only thing I done up there. . . . I jest laid low and said nuthin', working it all up on the sly. . . . Well, I got a man ready to give me a quarter of a million ter hand over my option. . . . O' course, he'll pull out ten times that. . . . But I figgered you and me couldn't

spend much more'n he offered before we cashed in." He gave a chuckle. "Leastways, not unless we got a couple of gals to give us a hand."

Hank Wheelock drew viciously on his pipe. A quarter of a million! . . . Old Jim Bledsoe! It was incredible! But more incredible still was the simplicity of including a partner who had so unceremoniously cut adrift from him. Hank had no words of gratitude to meet such a situation, so instead he found himself saying with almost a sneer:

"I don't see where *I* come in, *now!*"

"Say, yer don't think fer one moment, Hank Wheelock, I'd hold out on yer jest because yer kicked over the traces once in forty years? I'll allow I was sore—at furst! . . . But pshaw, it ain't as if you and me was strangers. . . . Besides, I know what you'd ha' done if you'd bin in my place!"

A flush spread over Hank Wheelock's face: the sort of flush that used to rise when as a boy his mother had imputed undeserved virtues to him. A sudden and secret shame overwhelmed him, and the bitter truth rose perversely to his lips.

"Oh, yer do, do yer!" he sneered. "Well, let me tell yer one thing, yer wrong! . . . If you'd ditched me, Jim Bledsoe, I'd ha' let yer starve—that's what I'd ha done!"

He stopped, amazed at the lengths to which his self-contempt had swung him. In the stillness that followed he had a sense that he was hanging upon Jim Bledsoe's reply with drowning desperation.

Jim Bledsoe shook his head. "Yer don't have to tell me, Hank Wheelock—I know what I'm talking about!"

For a moment the feeling of relief which swept him was almost painful. It wasn't any use telling Jim Bledsoe the truth. Why bother, then? What folks didn't know wouldn't sicken them. He might just as well share in the prospects. *A quarter of a million!* At last he could take it easy!

But this gust of satisfaction passed swiftly and left him as chilled as when he had stood, with his finger on the trigger of his gun, watching Starbuck bending over the fire. . . . No, it couldn't be done: it wasn't sporting! He'd been a gambler all his life and he'd made mistakes, but he'd never cheated. He couldn't horn in on a game he'd dropped out of; he couldn't keep on playing when he knew that there had been a misdeal. A passed hand was a passed hand. And a dissolved partnership was *dissolved*: there wasn't nothing else to it. Besides, a man had his pride. *He* wasn't no beggar! . . . He wasn't dead yet, neither, and there were just as good claims in the hills as ever were dug.

He scrambled to his feet and he knew that his voice was clear and cold and triumphant as he lied:

"Wal, I've got some news fer you, too. . . . You ain't the only one's bin working on the sly. . . . I got some-thin' pretty nice staked out over in that Mesquite Range. . . . It won't be a quarter of a million, but it will be enough—fer me!"

Jim Bledsoe rose more slowly. "Jest as you say. . . . But I don't feel comfortable, somehow. . . . We was partners, yer know, when I fust came onto that holdin'. I should have told yer right off."

A hot breeze began to catch up little whirls of sand and loose the pungent odors of the sagebrush. An intolerable longing for some far-off and dusky coolness oppressed Hank Wheelock. He thought of hedgerows, and columbine and hollyhocks and the faint tinkle of silver fountains.

"Yes, siree!" he heard Jim Bledsoe repeating in a tone of self-rebuke. "I should have told you right off!"

Hank Wheelock turned his face upward to the lifted circle of buzzards wheeling expectantly in the turquoise expanse. A flicker of indecision sputtered and died. He nodded in the direction of the Mesquite Range and his voice shook with the triumph of a gambler who scorned a secret advantage as he said:

"That's my case, exactly! . . . Yer see—it's jest horse and horse!"

Who Bear God's Gifts

BY VIOLET ALLEYN STOREY

WHO bear God's gifts bear burdens; night and day,
Like caravans that thread the desert sands,
They pass with thoughts and dream-stuff from faint lands,
Splashing monotony's dry, stinging gray.
Against each face the fevered breath of heat;
Within each heart, mock warnings, "But you knew, you knew,
As with all dreamers, so it is with you.
The giftless still can walk a shady street."

Yet who but those who've felt day's sun can taste
Ambrosia of the evening, spiced and cool?
Who but the thirsty find the hidden pool,
Akin to Dian, loved of trees and chaste?
And who, at dawn, but travelers through the night
See distant cities passionate with light?