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THE PARTRIDGE FAMILY #4 THE GHOST OF GRAVEYARD HILL

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SPECTRE IN THE DESERT.

The bus was still. Out in the desert, several hundred miles from nowhere, the Partridge family lay deep in exhausted sleep.

Shirley Partridge was the first to awaken. As her eyes opened, she stifled the scream that rose in her throat.

A ghastly disembodied face was at the window—a terrible bearded visage set in an ominous scowl . . .

THE
PARTRIDGE
FAMILY
NO. 4

THE
GHOST
OF
GRAVEYARD
HILL

BY PAUL W. FAIRMAN



CURTIS
BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1

Jupiter Pluvius—Bad Guy

□ None of it would have happened if the Partridge family hadn't been quite so faithful to their fans. Disappointing an audience was high crime in their book. This, coupled with a run of misfortune that would have made Job look like heaven's favored child, brought it all about.

First, there was the gamble on distance—almost three hundred miles of central Nevada desert between Red Rock, where they were due, and Jones Grove, where they had performed their musical magic in a huge sheep pen lovingly made over for the occasion by culture-starved townspeople.

Mother Shirley was of course apprehensive. "Can we possibly make it overnight and be ready to put on a show?"

Danny, the Partridge with the "business" head, had a terse comment.

"Reuben spaced us too wide. We should make him buy us a jet out of his commissions."

Laurie, the most beautiful member of the family, except for Shirley, took her brother seriously.

"That's silly. You know the bus is our trademark."

And indeed it was. A made-over school bus, the vehicle had been termed a gaudy monstrosity by some. But it was watched for eagerly by rock fans all over the country who waited for the Partridge family to wing in and do their thing.

Keith, seventeen, man of the family and guitarist-composer *extraordinaire*, sided with Danny.

"You notice Reuben didn't come along on this trip."

That brought eight-year-old Christopher into the discussion. "I think the trip's hexed anyhow. The first one where Simone isn't around to get walked on."

Simone was the canine member of the entourage. She'd become "droopy" in the Partridge vernacular and had been left with a vet for observation.

"Her id needs a new valve job," was the way Danny had diagnosed her case. He now added, "Maybe Simon and Garfunkel will bring us the luck we need."

"Idiot," Laurie snapped, "they're turtles, not lucky charms."

"Like a rabbit's foot," Chris piped. "If it's so lucky, how come the rabbit lost it?"

"Problems, we've got," Danny said. "Comedians, we don't need."

Shirley waved an impatient hand. "Stop sniping, all of you. It doesn't get us where we're supposed to go."

"Okay," Keith said, "let's take a vote."

"I'm not sure about that. Perhaps this should be a command decision—"

"Ha!" Danny hooted. "When the going gets tough, we turn into a dictatorship. So much for democracy."

"Oh, all right. Let's see what the consensus is. Do we try to make—where was it again?"

"Red Rock, Mom."

"Oh, yes. Do we try to make Red Rock in one jump

and turn up worn out and bedraggled for tomorrow night's performance, or do we—?"

"Mother!" Laurie objected. "That's not fair. You're trying to influence our impressionable young minds with subtle propaganda."

Shirley sighed. "Then let's hear it from the constituents."

She was promptly snowed under:

"I say go."

"A romp."

"Are we on crutches or something?"

Down to Tracy's plaintive vote: "Let's get out of here. Sheep smell funny."

So that was how it went. And with the Partridges a democratic family, Mother Shirley acting as Supreme Court only when she felt it necessary—which was more often than the kids liked to admit—they got into their noble old bus and took to the dubious night roads.

Shirley drove while Keith slept. Then Keith drove while everybody slept. The bus ate up mile after dark mile, with the chauffeurs crawling out once in a while to turn a close flashlight on a weather-worn sign and compare it with the gas station map that made all roads look like happy-motoring turnpikes.

There were stars but no moon and as the night wore on, the bus had to peer harder and harder at the dusty throughfare in order to stay in the ruts.

Shirley awoke at four o'clock to take over. Keith objected, but she made a Supreme Court decision on the matter and took the wheel.

Keith grumbled—something about the unfairness of Women's Lib—and went to sleep.

Half an hour later, a rumble awakened little Tracy, who crept forward to huddle by Mom.

"What was that?"

"Thunder, I think, dear."

"Is it going to rain?"

"I'm sure not. This is a desert. It seldom rains on deserts."

In general, that was true. Hardly anything, much less rain, ever disturbed a quiet night in the Nevada desert. But now, the Partridges began waking up, one at a time, for no apparent reason; none but a vague, intangible change in the atmosphere. Poor, inexperienced lambs that they were, they didn't realize that this change would have sent western natives kiting for shelter.

"I wonder if I missed a turn somewhere?" Shirley mused.

This, because the road had worsened. The dust was thicker; the chuck holes deeper. Then the headlights picked out a sign ahead: *Detour*.

There was also an arrow pointing casually to the left, so Shirley sighed and detoured.

This took the bus into an even narrower road, one where an on-coming car would have been a major problem. This road had walls, bus-top high, on either side.

"A canyon," Christopher marveled.

"Hardly," Laurie said. "Canyons have high rock walls, a mile high."

"Well, I didn't say it was the *Grand Canyon*. I just said—"

"I think they call these gulleys *arroyos*," Keith cut in. "Want me to drive, Mom?"

"I'll make it," Shirley replied as another clap of thunder on ahead sounded much closer.

"How far have we gone?" Laurie asked.

"About halfway, maybe," Danny said. "Did anybody check the mileage before we started?"

Nobody had, but it wasn't really important now, because halfway or not, disaster was almost upon them. It came minutes later in the form of a wall of water thunder-

ing down the *arroyo* from the higher ground, a deadly battering ram to overcome and destroy them.

What had happened was simple enough, a phenomenon of the desert. The storm had broken earlier, up in the mountains beyond—a cloudburst that filled every available gorge with mad water on its way to the lowlands. These torrents could travel faster than the clouds that spawned them. Thus, dumbfounded persons could, and had, been drowned by sudden floods coming figuratively out of nowhere.

As the roaring death hove into range of the bus's headlights, Laurie screamed. Tracy wrapped herself around Keith's leg like plaster and buried her face in his thigh. Laurie gasped, "Heaven preserve us!" And Christopher's nails dug into Keith's arm.

Then—who could say—perhaps it was Laurie's prayer to a compassionate Heaven, but at least they were given a chance as they came abreast of a break in the *arroyo* wall.

As the torrent howled its delight at finding victims, Shirley's mind—with her family's lives at stake—raced like a comptometer, gauging the odds in seconds. If she stayed where she was, the bus might conceivably weather the coming onslaught, resist the pressure if it were inundated. On the other hand, if she tried to escape and failed, the bus would be hit broadside and might turn over.

Her decision to try for higher ground was made. Aware of it instantly and not questioning it, Keith threw his weight into the breach, helping to pull the wheel around as Shirley rammed down on the gas.

The motor roared, as though to ask, "What's going on here?" Then the bus responded valiantly, flinging itself around like a wild horse at the touch of a lasso. The rear wheels bit into solid earth; then they were churning mud as the vanguard of the waters snarled through.

The bus nosed up the sharp incline, to be hit seconds

later by the real business—a solid wall of water that rose to window level.

Shirley prayed to her mechanical monster.

“Oh, honey! Go! Go! *Please* go!”

“Lift it! Lift it!” Keith gritted as he fought the wheel with all his strength. “Get that motor—*higher!*”

As though personally aware of the peril and a responsibility to its occupants, the brave bus responded with every nut and bolt under its gaudy paint job. It climbed inch by inch as the water ravened at its sides, seeking to pull it back into the maelstrom.

“Ouch!” Keith said absently as Tracy’s sharp little nails dug into his skin.

Christopher, saucer-eyed, gripped his guitar like a dear friend and cried, “She’s moving! She’s making it!”

And indeed she was. The rear wheels churned as the front ones dug into the bank and helped as best they could. There was a teetering moment as all the perilous factors came together.

Then the bus lunged upward with a roaring snort of contempt for the killer-flood pulling at its back rubber.

“We made it!” Danny shrieked.

“That we did!” Keith muttered grimly.

But it was no time for handshakes all around. A battle had been won while the war was still in progress. Peril was now imminent from above because the bursting clouds had caught up with the floods cascading into the lowlands.

“We’re sinking!” Laurie wailed.

“Not sinking, but—”

“—if the ground is soft enough, we could cave back into the draw,” Keith said, finishing his mother’s thought. “Keep going.”

The ominous settling of the bus into deepening mud was as frightening as what had gone before. It took little imagination for Shirley to visualize the whole Partridge establishment going down, down, down into a mass grave.

"Pull, darling," she prayed. "Keep pulling. Get us out of this."

The world around them was a solid sea. To all intents and purposes, the loyal old bus was now a submarine.

"Stop!" Laurie howled. "We'll go over a cliff!"

"No," Keith replied in a command voice. "Keep going. We can see a few feet ahead and this is still low ground. If we pull up, we may never get started again."

Shirley did not know which command to obey, which made the most sense. It seemed a tossup. So she kept going in fanciful tribute to the bus. It had worked so hard, struggled so nobly, that stopping seemed a kind of defeat.

"Maybe we'll come to—someplace," Chris said.

"We certainly will," Keith agreed. "But where?"

The ground leveled way now, and while the cloudburst continued, the footing seemed somewhat more firm.

"It looks clear ahead," Laurie reported. Her panic had subsided, and she was peering out with her nose against the streaming windshield.

"Give me the wheel, Mom," Keith ordered. "You've about had it."

Shirley did not object. Her muscles had turned to jelly, and she did not want to collapse in front of her brood.

"Don't stop. I'll just slide in."

The transfer was made and the bus plowed on . . .

With even the stars blocked out now, the darkness was total, the headlights making only small tunnels in its ebon wall.

Laurie laughed suddenly. "We're mad! Plain mad! A crazy family driving across an unknown desert in pitch blackness because we haven't got sense enough to stop."

"Where's your pride?" Keith said. "Me, I refuse to let a little rain put me down."

Danny grabbed a guitar and began strumming, "Rain-drops falling on my bus—"

"Cut that out!" Keith snapped. "It's no use tempting fate even if we have got the situation completely under control."

That brought a gargle of giggles from Laurie. "Complete control! Oh, my aching vocal cords!"

Keith, hardly the iron man he was acting out, found laughter himself.

"Look, Mom! No hands!"

Shirley yiped in protest. "Keith! Stop clowning!"

Then she saw his knuckles still white on the wheel and managed a small chuckle herself at being taken in so easily.

There were a few more giggles and then silence fell inside the bus as everyone listened in awe to the thunderous racket outside. This lasted until Tracy found her voice.

"Mom, how can water make so much noise?"

No one answered. There was no time. Laurie managed a single howl of warning.

"Look out!"

Shirley, acting instinctively, seized Tracy and enfolded her. Keith almost rammed his foot through the floorboards as he jammed down on the brakes.

The rear wheels locked instantly, and the bus now turned from a submarine into a sled. It skidded forward with the rear end swinging around as though to find out what was going on.

The impact that followed was sharp and rending. Timbers snapped, cracking out over the roar of the cloudburst. The tinkle of breaking glass came faintly. Then there was comparative silence as the motor coughed and died.

This was broken by sudden wild laughter from Laurie. Hysteria? It chilled Shirley.

"Laurie! Stop it! Please—!"

"But Mom. It's too funny. Can't you see what's happened?"

"I see—"

"It's just too priceless. *Your* son was driving across a desert with no one around for miles, with nothing but mud and rain to worry about."

"So—?" Danny asked.

"And he smashed into a storefront!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, *yes!* That's what he hit. There's glass all around us."

Tracy made snuggle-up sounds and burrowed deeper into Shirley's arms. Chris giggled. Danny gave forth with a gusty guffaw.

And in no time the whole Partridge family had exploded into merriment.

Weary to the bone, Shirley still felt a surge of pride.

My family. My wonderful children. Nothing in the whole world can daunt them.

A car crash draws people; smash up a vehicle and on-lookers rally around. That was what the Partridges expected.

So when none came, they thought it most peculiar; an odd fact they had to live with, however, trapped as they were there in the bus under the still-spouting heavens.

Or rather, they had to sleep with it because exhaustion began setting in. They sacked out in consecutive order, starting at the bottom. Tracy was dead to the world in two minutes. Christopher fought oblivion valiantly before he surrendered. Danny used a guitar for a pillow while Laurie murmured, "We threw a crash party and nobody came." Then her eyelids dropped like curtains on a final encore.

That left Shirley and Keith to wonder as a team.

"We didn't hit too hard," Keith said. "The motor should still be okay."

"I hope our insurance will cover the damage."

"Why not? That's what we buy it for."

"Where do you suppose we are?"

A prodigious yawn. "Someplace where folks have got too much sense to risk drowning to see a little old crack-up."

"How true," Shirley murmured.

Then they, too, plunged into dreamland . . .

CHAPTER 2

Ghost Music

□ Shirley was the first to awaken. As her eyes opened and focused, she stifled the scream that arose in her throat.

It was the face at the window peering in at her that did it. A terrible bearded visage set in a quizzical scowl.

Shirley blinked and it was gone.

Groggy from her rude awakening, Shirley forced her cramped muscles into action, moving forward. Fortunately, the crash had not jammed the door. It opened easily. She stepped out and froze in her tracks, gaping at the unreal world around her. Nothing made sense any more.

The bluest of skies was smiling down at her, azure from horizon to horizon. No clouds, not even a single white, fluffy one, were in sight. A serene, yellow sun stood high above rugged mountains to the east.

Shirley ordered her mind to function. Things were all wrong. Either this was a dream and the terrible storm of the previous night was reality, or vice versa. The two put together were incompatible.

“Where did all the water go?” she asked herself.

"The desert drank it up, I guess."

"Yipe!"

Shirley reacted like a bee-stung pup. She turned to look and saw Keith grinning at her.

"Are you going to climb that pole?" he asked innocently.

"You—you *brat!* Don't you ever do that again. Scaring your poor old mother to death!"

"Sorry, Mom."

Shirley let go of the teetering porch support she'd seized. She petulantly brushed cobwebs off her sleeve.

"About the rain," Keith said. "It happens this way sometimes in a desert. The land is parched—so dry it drinks up the rain as fast as it comes down—or all of it that doesn't run off. If it kept on through the day, you'd start seeing puddles. As things are—"

"Well, thank you, Mr. Answer Man. I have one more question—where are we?"

Keith's shrug symbolized a consciously engendered cool. "In a ghost town. Where else?"

"But how did we get here?"

"Can't tell you. No way to back-track. The rain washed out our tire marks." He waved an arm. "All I can say for sure is that we came from thataway."

Shirley looked in the backward direction and saw nothing but lumpy Nevada desert; lava rock and gray sagebrush clear to a far-off mountain rim.

In the opposite direction—in all directions for that matter—it was the same except more so: desert even rougher and more depressing, mountains farther away in purple haze.

The word for it all was *desolation*.

Keith insisted on remaining cheerful. "Anyhow," he said, "we aren't likely to be sued by the owner of this store."

Shirley studied the still-faintly-lettered sign that was now angled across the roof of the bus.

"*M. Peggot. General Merchandise—Flour and Staples.* I wonder who he was and where he went?"

"He took off with the rest of them when the mines wore out."

"What mines?"

"I don't know. Silver, copper, maybe gold. But there had to be mines out in those hills somewhere. What other reason could there be for building a town here in the desert and then abandoning it?"

"They were good people, too," Shirley said, her mood softening.

"Why do you say that, Mom?"

"The church down there at the end of the street. The steeple tilts a little, but it's still there."

"Uh-huh. And four saloons I can see from here. It looks as though they prayed between drinks."

"Don't be so cynical. Maybe it was the other way around."

"Either way, they're gone these many years."

"I'm really more interested in where *we're* going."

"Why, back to civilization. We've got a date in Red Rock, remember? I'll run a quick check and then back us out into the road."

While she waited, Shirley surrendered to the atmosphere of this strange, eerie place. Even under the bright sun there was a macabre fabric in the silence, the gray teetering buildings that flanked the main street. The emptiness.

No, Shirley decided. Not macabre; sad, rather. They'd built this little town and it had served them and loved them and now it was all alone, patiently waiting for them to come back.

Sad . . .

Keith returned to shake out her mood with two terse words:

"No good."

"What do you mean?"

"I was wrong last night. The gas line is ripped out and the motor's as tilty as that church steeple."

"Good heavens! That means—"

"—we'll have to wait 'til somebody comes and finds us. We're all alone here. Miles from—"

"Keith!" Shirley seized her son's arm, bringing his gaze around sharply. "Oh, Keith! I must be slipping. I forgot. We aren't alone."

"No? Well, let's have it. The lyrics. Never mind the melody."

"When I woke up, there was a face at the window—a terrible bearded face. Two eyes staring at me. A man. He frightened me to death."

"All right. Where did he go?"

"I don't know. When I came out, there was no one in sight."

Keith eyed his mother with some speculation. "Hmmm. You were so scared that you forgot about him as soon as you came outside."

"I was half-asleep, Keith!"

"Sure, Mom. I'll bet he was as scared as you were. Probably thought we were all dead."

"But why did he run away?"

"A hermit, maybe. Some cat hiding from life out here where the buffalo roam."

Before Shirley could answer, the town, it seemed, gave a hair-raising reply of its own, hair-raising even in the bright light of morning.

A long, agonized wail; ghostly, yet with material substance, living emotion behind the tones of pain and despair.

Again, Shirley seized Keith. This time she held on. He wasn't much comfort, however, and if she'd been in a bantering mood, she could have said, "Ha! What happened to all that cool you were throwing around?"

It was gone without a trace. Keith gulped and said, "That wasn't anything human, Mom!"

In the midst of her own fright, Shirley felt a small twinge of happiness at the realization that she was still needed, at least in emergencies, by her eldest.

"It came from down the street," she said, "toward the church."

"What did it sound like to you? Somebody in pain?"

It came again, riding a freshened desert breeze, a sound filled with loneliness and despair—expressing emptiness more eloquently than it could have ever been put into words.

A great wonder now glowed in Keith's eyes. "Mom! If I could capture that sound—that heart-tearing heaviness. Do you realize—?"

A thought had flashed through Shirley's mind: "It's the town—the town itself, sobbing out lonely grief."

She squeezed Keith warmly. Her wonderful son. Always the artist. A frightened child one moment, creative the next.

"I'm sure you'll manage it. Now let's stop falling off the deep end and see what's going on around here."

"Sure, Mom. Let's make contact."

Keith cupped his hands into a megaphone and took a deep breath.

"Hallooo! Hallooo! Where are you? Come out! Come out wherever you are!"

The invitation brought results but from the wrong direction. Three Partridges emerged from the bus. Danny led the way, rubbing his eyes in sleepiness and wonder. Laurie followed, arranging her hair with one hand while hauling

Tracy along with the other. Chris, slightly less ambitious, peered grumpily out a window.

Questions tumbled from Laurie. "What's all the yelling about? Where are we? What's going on? What is this place?"

"Hollywood and Vine, toots?" Keith said. "What did you expect? Larkland?"

"Don't be cute. I'm in no mood. Who were you yelling at?"

"The Bearded Stranger. A friend of Mom's."

"It was someone I saw, dear, or thought I did," Shirley said.

Laurie's eyes widened as the truth of her surroundings dawned.

"A ghost town!"

"And I know exactly what you're wondering," Keith grinned.

"You do?"

"Uh-huh. Where you can buy nylons."

"I said I was in no mood!"

Little Tracy, accepting the situation with far more aplomb than her elders, ground a fist into one eye and said, "Mom, I'm hungry. When's breakfast?"

"Right away, dear," Shirley replied, and moved toward the truck. She went briskly but her expression was thoughtful:

I'm sure I saw that face at the window. I could swear it. I don't think Keith believed me, though—even after those unearthly sounds. And maybe he was right. Maybe I created that face out of a bad dream . . .

The owner of the face Shirley created out of a bad dream had gotten away from there fast. The instant he saw Shirley's eyes open, he raced up the street and into a passageway between two buildings. Keeping the town be-

tween himself and the bus, he kited off through the rocks and sage toward a wilder, rougher section a mile or so away. This was higher ground, an area of jagged lava and thorny desert bush and treacherous gullies.

He was an incongruous person with the face of a gorilla and the body of a coal heaver, but with the hands of an artist, hands that didn't seem to fit. They were delicately constructed, with long, slim fingers that would have seemed at home on piano keys or holding a paint brush.

Aside from that, Johnny Harp had little to recommend him. Literally a child in his late twenties, he was victimized and used by others, opportunists he strove to please the way a faithful dog tries to please its owner.

This was the reason for his present haste. He was carrying the news. Once beyond sight of the town, he vanished into a maze, threading a bewildering labyrinth to halt in front of an overhung cave mouth.

"Put the fire out! Put the fire out!" he gasped with the last of his breath.

The two men who awaited him gaped at each other in wonder. They were in sharp contrast. Nick Tate was in his mid-twenties, slim, and hairy as a spaniel. Sam Barton on the other hand was bald, somewhere in his fifties, and highly experienced in venal ways and methods.

As Sam kicked out the fire over which coffee had been brewing, Nick Tate asked, "All right, what's the bind, Johnny?"

"People in town," Johnny replied, happy with the importance of the word he was bringing.

The older man froze with one foot still in the air.

"What was that?"

He had a deep, resonant voice, suggesting that sometime in his long, varied career, he might have been in the theater.

"People in town. A circus."

Nick Tate had reacted only with amusement. He now threw up his hands. "Oh, boy! The other day it was a basketball team. Now it's a circus."

Sam Barton scowled. "What do you mean, a basketball team?"

"He claimed he saw an eight-foot man, didn't he?"

"I fail to—"

"So what would an eight-foot man be except the center on a basketball team?"

"In addition to not appreciating your humor, Nick, I don't like your attitude. Johnny is slightly retarded, true, but—"

"*Slightly* retarded. Man, he's short two-thirds of his marbles."

"I was going to say that he is still the most valuable member of our trio, and he deserves a little more respect than you give him."

Barton turned to Johnny. His patronizing attitude made him guilty of the same basic inconsideration of which he accused Nick. But at least he was gentle and without contempt.

"Tell me, Johnny, what did you see? What's this about a circus?"

"Not a whole circus. One wagon. All painted up. It smashed into the front of the store. Some people in it. A woman and a lot of kids."

"You're out of your skull," Nick said. "What would a circus be doing around here?"

Johnny, more childlike than ever in his eagerness to convince, said, "On the level, Nick. A circus wagon. It's there."

Nick frowned, still not wanting to believe. "It's a weird thing for him to dream up, Sam. What do you think?"

"I can't say. But it's certainly easier to prove or discount than the eight-foot man."

"But how could a circus wagon get way out here?"

"Perhaps it strayed away from some traveling outfit during the storm. That is, if it really exists. I'll admit the chances are slim, but—"

As his voice trailed away, Nick waited, then said, "Something else is bothering you."

"I suppose so—aspects of the whole situation."

"What does that mean?"

"Just this. We had some difficulty in finding Devil's Flat, you'll recall."

"Not after that old prospector told me about it."

"It still took almost a month of hunting."

"But it was worth it."

"Of course it was. Shelter for our equipment. A good water supply. A place forgotten by the world, where obviously no one has set foot for years."

"What are you driving at?"

"The strange period of activity our arrival seemed to have generated. A week after we got set up here, Johnny claims to have glimpsed that fantastic character."

"Don't tell me you *believed* him?"

"Let's say I'm still maintaining an open mind. But you yourself saw those two jokers with the camera."

"A couple of lost tourists. They took a few pictures and tailed out as fast as they came."

"I can buy that for want of a better explanation, but now we have another intruder—according to Johnny—and we'll probably be able to verify it. That makes three of them in two months in a place that was deserted by even the jack rabbits for decades. Doesn't that strike you as a little strange?"

"I will admit you were smart in getting us out, moving our living quarters into this cave. You should have moved the equipment, too."

"I told you that was impossible. The basement we're

using is ideal. Dry, with an even temperature. Close to a pure water supply. We couldn't begin to function properly in an open cave."

"Do you think they'll find it?"

"I don't believe they will. It's well camouflaged. Let's hope they don't at least. For their sakes." A deadly look in the old man's eyes gave eloquent finish to his statement.

Nick came angrily to his feet. "Johnny's out of his mind! It just can't be. No outfit would travel in that storm. And if it did, they wouldn't come in this direction. There aren't any roads."

"For safety's sake, let's assume otherwise."

"So we go see?"

"Hardly. Not until dark. We must stay out of sight at all costs."

"For how long?"

"Until they leave."

"And if they plan to spend the summer?"

"That would hardly be likely."

"Wait a minute. Johnny, you said something about the wagon smashing the storefront."

Johnny, happy to be included in the conversation, nodded vigorously.

"Sure did. Brought the whole porch down on it. It's a mess."

"Well," Barton said, "there is nothing we can do until nightfall."

With that, he sat down against the wal of the cave and went to sleep . . .

CHAPTER 3

The Man Who Liked Thoreau

□ In the beginning, there was a reluctance among the Partridges to face their situation. They even passed off lightly the sad truth that the bus would not again move without expert clinical help.

Laurie said, "I'm sure they'll bring a handsome young mechanic when they come for us."

Danny was apprehensive, but not concerning their plight. It was his investments that bugged him.

"I can maybe get prices on the radio. Maybe I won't, though. What could I do if I didn't like them?"

"Sit here and go broke?" Keith suggested.

"Or maybe the other way," Chris said. "Leave your stocks alone and they might make a fortune for you."

Keith chuckled. "I'll bet Reuben is having a trauma. He'll get the national guard out at the very least . . ."

They had a wonderful time exploring their new surroundings. It was Danny who ascertained the size of the town. Exactly forty-eight buildings.

"Ten mercantile and service establishments supporting thirty-eight residential structures," he announced.

"And what conclusions do you draw from that, mastermind?"

"It's too many for too few. It means the town serviced a suburban population. That supports the mining theory. A lot of people lived outside and came to town for services."

"I'll put that in my diary," Laurie said. "So good of you to tell me."

Laurie found the name of the town in the lobby of its single hotel. She came triumphantly back from a sightseeing trip with a small bell she'd found on the desk.

"See, Mom? It's stamped right there. You can still read it: *Devil's Flat Hotel*. It's a genuine antique!"

Danny examined it critically. "You could be right. The thing might bring a fairish amount of money."

"Money! Always money. Aren't you interested in the esoteric value of things?"

"Sure," Danny replied blandly, "like the esoteric value of a genuine Rembrandt. Much more spiritually satisfying than say an authentic Mickey Mouse wrist watch."

"Mother! Why don't you do something about your son? He has the sensibilities of a loan shark."

"I noticed another thing," Keith said. "The town didn't lose its population overnight. It was a slow process."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's empty. Practically nothing here but the bare bones of the buildings. When people go overnight, they leave things. So it must have emptied out gradually—as the mines failed."

"I'd like to see those mines," Danny said. "With modern methods—"

"No," Shirley said firmly. "And that's an order. We'll have no one wandering off and getting lost. Once out in those badlands and there's no telling what would happen."

This was the first general hint that there could be any danger at all in this new environment. Shirley's face at the

bus window had been generally discounted, and only Shirley and Keith had heard the weird music.

"Well, there's at least one place we can go safely," Laurie said.

"Where, dear?"

Laurie pointed. "Up there." She indicated a slight rise, the profile of which left little doubt as to its purpose. "The graveyard."

"Boot hill," Keith said.

"What's that?" Chris asked.

"The cemetery," Danny cut in. "Don't you read your westerns? Every western town had a graveyard full of men gunned down by other men quicker on the draw. They were all called boot hill."

"Why?" Tracy piped up.

"Because all the earlier westerners wanted to be buried with their boots on."

"Why?"

"Why? Well, because—"

"Maybe they all had holes in their socks," Laurie said.

The laughter was light and gay, marking their holiday mood; all except Shirley, who was too preoccupied to laugh. She was studying their surroundings, frowning pensively the while.

"I want to explore some more," Laurie said, "Anybody want to come?"

"I'd like to look around a little more myself," Keith said.

"Okay, let's check that hotel. I didn't go upstairs."

"I want a Coke, first."

Keith headed for the bus, Laurie calling, "Bring me a Pepsi."

For some reason, no one noticing, this deepened Shirley's frown and added to the faint worry lines around her eyes.

"I'm going to rap with the drums for a while," Danny said.

Then Keith returned. He glanced at his mother. "Anything wrong, Mom?"

"Oh, no. I was just thinking. Reuben is our big hope."

"He'll be along with parachutes and helicopters."

Shirley herded her youngest close. "You stay with me, Tracy. And Chris—don't you go out of sight of the bus . . ."

"You say you didn't go upstairs?" Keith asked. "Why not?"

Laurie followed her brother into the silent, brooding lobby of the Devil's Flat Hotel.

"Do you think I was afraid or something?"

Keith didn't answer. He stared at the time-ruin around him and whistled softly. "Golly! Their maid must have been the first one to leave."

This, because of nature's bold intrusion. Desert dust, a foot thick in some places, had traced patterns over everything. It had tended to gather itself around objects already in place. Thus, the three chairs left behind had been figuratively buried alive, only the tops of the backs still visible. A thick layer of desert soil banked upward toward the desk, making the approach an ascent rather than the mere crossing of a room.

Keith stopped and pointed dramatically. "Look! Footprints! We are not alone!"

Laurie, her nerves tighter than she cared to admit, grabbed Keith's arm. Then she slapped his shoulder petulantly.

"You fool! Those are my tracks."

"Oh, yes. When you lifted their bell. That's a misdemeanor, you know. Stealing hotel property."

Again, Laurie grabbed Keith, clinging tightly this time.

After teetering perilously and regaining his balance, he said, "What's wrong? Don't just squeal. Use words."

Laurie pointed, her eyes like saucers, and Keith saw the creature watching them from the surface of the desk.

He freed himself. "For lord's sake! Don't throw a fit. It's only a little lizard."

"But the way he's looking at us. Up on his legs that way. His neck stretched out. He—he *hates* us, Keith."

"All right, hate him back if it'll do you any good." He flapped a hand. "Go 'way, lizard."

The lizard, evidently possessed of a mind of its own, refused, still eyeing them beadily.

"You're right," Keith said. "Two and a half inches of lethal fury. Maybe the owner left him to watch things and he's just being faithful."

Laurie had backed away. "I don't know whether I want to go upstairs or not. Maybe he's got friends up there."

"Oh, you're just afraid we'll find a couple of dead bodies or some little thing like that."

Moving back down the hill from the desk, Keith went to one of the chairs and began pulling it out of its cone of soil. He finally got it clear.

"I was wondering why they left these three pieces. Now I know. They weren't worth hauling away. See? That leg is—"

He lapsed into silence. Laurie waited a few moments, then said, "What's the matter? You don't seem to be with it."

"The badlands. The sadlands. The place where God sits down to think."

"The place where God—what?"

"Sits down to think, stupid. It's a good line—maybe. With a little work—"

Laurie laughed. "He feels a song coming on," she lilted, paraphrasing an old number.

"The Ballad of the Badlands. Maybe I could write it."

"That's hardly rock. What are you going to do—go country-western?"

"What's wrong with that? 'Home on the Range' did all right."

Keith frowned and turned away quickly. "Come on. We said we were going upstairs, so let's not cop-out . . ."

There were no stairs; or rather, they had been long obliterated, buried to the top in a smooth slope of wind-blown soil.

"Hang onto the railing," Keith said, "but be careful. It may give. I'll go first."

Laurie's mood had turned light again. Or perhaps she was forcing the lightness to cover her tension. As she followed Keith, she hummed, "I'll climb every mountain—"

They reached the top with much dirt in their shoes and found a narrow, low-ceilinged corridor with five doors giving off on either side.

Laurie surveyed the scene with open distaste. "I think the western movies stretch things a little. Beside this, what they show as an early western hotel is positively palatial."

"They don't want to disappoint the public."

Keith turned a knob and leaned against a panel. It squeaked but did not give, a foot of dirt holding it firm.

"You'd need a shovel," Laurie said. "How did this place get so *dirty*?"

"Figure it out. The mining was done here before the turn of the century. That makes this building almost a hundred years old. You can get a lot of dirt in your ears in that length of time."

"Keith!"

There was more than urgency in Laurie's voice. There was near panic. It brought him quickly down the corridor to where she'd wandered and was now staring at one of the doors.

Keith saw that this one was not blocked by drift. It stood open some few inches.

They both stared at it in silence, then turned their eyes upon each other. Their mutual question was wordless, but understood:

I dare you to go in.

Angered at the realization that he'd shown fright, Keith pushed the door open. He entered the room warily after waiting a few beats for a response.

Laurie came close behind him, her breath on his neck.

"Somebody lives here," she whispered.

That seemed likely. There was a chair with only a film of dust on it, a bed with no dust at all; rather, a sheet and a blanket and a pillow.

The floor was comparatively clean, and Keith tiptoed across it to pick up a dog-eared book that lay on a dresser against the far wall.

Laurie, not quite that brave, waited by the bed.

"What's the book?"

"Walden. By Thoreau."

"Well, that's a blessing at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I expected it to be *A Ghost's Guide to Haunting*. Or, *How to Kill a Lot of People Without Half Trying*."

"Look, let's have less clowning and more sense."

"I'm not clowning, not really. I'm—I'm scared to death."

"Well, there's no need to go panicky, either."

"I'm with you," Laurie said fervently. "I go where you go."

"This proves Mom's story at least."

"You mean her bearded friend?"

"Who else? But why is he so gun shy? Why doesn't he show himself?"

"I don't know. Why doesn't he? We wouldn't hurt him. We're nice people."

"We know that but maybe he doesn't."

Keith had returned to where Laurie waited. He gave his attention to the bed, peering at it closely.

"He's only a part-time guest. Either that or he's checked out."

"How can you tell?"

"The dust. This bed hasn't been slept in for a while. I don't know exactly how fast dust accumulates but I'd say he hasn't been here for a week."

"I wonder why he didn't take his book with him?"

"Maybe he got tired of Thoreau and switched over to Freud."

"Now who's clowning?"

Laurie moved toward the door. Keith rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he followed.

"We've got to be careful about this."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't want to start scaring the kids, so don't run up the street yelling, extra!"

"Now wait a minute! You yell just as loud as I do, brother dear."

"We say nothing 'til we can get Mom alone. Then we'll tell her."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to hear about it," Laurie said in a dismal little voice.

Against Sam Barton's better judgment, Nick Tate went in daylight to have a look.

Returning now with his report, he said, "Okay, score one for the kid. There is a circus wagon nosed into the store. At least it looks like one."

"Any conclusions?" Sam asked.

"What's to conclude? It's there. I saw a woman and some kids. And someone was pounding a drum in the bus. It looks like a school bus made over by a crazy painter with a color complex."

"Why do you suppose they're here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Do you think there's any connection between them and the two jokers with the camera?"

"I doubt it. I'm inclined to go along with the most logical assumption—they got lost in the storm. They certainly didn't crash into the store on purpose."

"That leaves the question we started with—what do we do?"

Sam Barton touched his bald head in a gingerly fashion. The sun had turned it red and made it sore.

"One thought presents itself," he said in his beautifully articulated, resonant voice. "They may be staying here because they can't leave. The crash probably crippled their vehicle."

"Uh-huh. Probably did. So?"

"If we could figure out a way to fix it for them—"

"That's stupid! How can we do that without letting them see us, finding out we're here?"

"We might attempt a masquerade. Do you know anything about motors?"

"Sure. I worked in a garage. You know that."

"True. I'd forgotten."

"What's your idea?"

"You've got your motorcycle. Doesn't that suggest anything?"

"You mean, ride in—?"

"Why not? You look the part of a Hell's Angel or whatever those motorcycle people call themselves. Now suppose you trundle your vehicle around and on the far side of the town. Then you ride in, a pilgrim searching for new vistas. You are friendly. You are affable. You are cooperative. You help them repair their bus and see them on their way."

"We can give it a try." Nick paused to peer into the cave. "Where's Johnny?"

"Out there in the rocks somewhere—sketching probably."

"He's weird. I still can't get used to him."

"A pathetic case, in a way."

"How can he be such a dummy and—well, a genius at the same time?"

"It's most exceptional, I grant. But he's living proof of something few would believe. The boy cannot learn. His mind remains in the lower juvenile level. So all his talent—and it appears to be limitless—is inherent. I know of only one other case like his. A youth who was actually a moron. Yet, he could duplicate perfectly any piece he heard on the piano. He could listen to a Paderewski with that pitiful blank look on his face and then sit down and raise your goose pimples by exact duplication—not only the notes, but the mood and spirit the master put into his work."

Nick stirred uneasily. "That's all over my head. Makes me nervous just to listen. I'm glad you found him, though. He means money in the bank to us."

"I don't look upon Johnny as impersonally as you do."

"You're willing to use what he's got, though."

Sam Barton sighed wearily. "Right. I acknowledge my own weakness. I am getting on in years. I want money to comfort my twilight days."

"Well, let's stay on our toes, old man, or you'll spend those twilight days in jail . . ."

CHAPTER 4

Shirley's Secret Admirer

□ The night passed, as all nights will, and the awakening of the Partridges was somewhat spectacular.

It was brought about by cries of "Help! Help!"

Shirley's eyes snapped open. She waited, doubting the evidence of her ears.

"Help! Help!"

Keith awoke now, reacting more sharply than his mother. Before the second *Help* was out, Keith was plunging toward the bus door and into the street.

There, he was forced to hesitate, until the third plea for assistance rang out.

"The jail," he muttered, and dashed in that direction.

The jail was at the near end of the main street. It was a squat, brick building—the only nonwooden structure in the town—with small barred windows and a front door sagging on one hinge.

Keith rushed inside.

The other Partridges followed in due course. They were slowed down from falling over each other and trying to

crowd out through the door, so they trailed after Keith in straggling fashion.

When they entered the jail, they beheld a curious sight. Keith was sprawled on the floor with his back against the wall. He was holding his sides as he roared with laughter.

They quickly saw the reason. Christopher was scowling out from between the bars of the jail's single cell. It was an old jail, and its outer door may have fallen victim of the decades, but its inner structure was sound—the sturdy cell keeping the faith against wrongdoers through empty generations.

"It's beautiful," Keith was gasping. "Just beautiful! Eight years old and already in jail! Mom, you've raised a criminal! You'd better check the silverware as soon as we get back home."

"It stuck. This crazy door. It won't open," Chris announced sullenly.

"But what were you doing in there in the first place?" Shirley asked.

"I wanted to find out how a criminal felt—I mean one locked up, away from the world."

The Partridges—all except Shirley—had raised a chorus of laughter. Perhaps it struck them as funny as it had Keith, or perhaps his laughter was contagious. Even Shirley, vastly relieved, was forced to smile.

"Will you idiots stop cackling and get me out of here?" Chris demanded.

"No can do!" Danny grinned. "You'll have to wait 'til we can arrange bail. And if the charge is murder, you're in for good."

"You all think you're so smart! This could happen to anybody!"

"It certainly could, dear," Shirley agreed. "Now you boys stop your laughing and help your brother."

Keith climbed to his feet and crossed over to the cell.

He and Danny inspected the door. They gripped the bars and pulled in unison.

The door held rigidly.

They tried again. The same result.

Keith peered at the lock. "You sure must have slammed this thing."

"I had to. I wanted the authentic feel of imprisonment."

"Well, you've got it. And maybe for longer than you want. If that lock fell in someday, we could be in trouble."

"I think it's the rust," Danny said. "The two flat, rusty surfaces were jammed together."

"If we could get the bus started, we could pull the door off maybe, but—"

"I can't wait that long," Chris wailed. "I want out."

"The shortest sentence on record," Laurie grinned, still not believing it was serious.

"Who asked for your two cents?" Chris fumed. "Think of something, you guys."

Danny stepped back and pulled at his chin. "Well, the circuit judge gets into these parts in a couple of weeks, if his stage ain't held up—"

"Cut it out! Do something!"

"Easy," Keith said. "Let's try prying it."

Keith crossed the street and brought back a section of two-by-four broken off from the porch of the store.

"Now if this isn't too rotten—"

Using a section of an old tabletop for proper leverage, Keith gave the signal and the two boys tugged. The two-by-four groaned from age but it held, and the rust on the door creaked stubbornly as it gave.

"That—does—it," Danny grunted as the last half-inch of surface resisted and then surrendered.

"The prisoner has been sprung," Laurie announced. "Now, let's either have breakfast or get out of here before the posse comes."

"Huh! Wise guys," Chris glowered. "Wait 'til I get you in a spot sometime."

"The prisoner's gratitude is noted and duly recorded," Keith said. "I vote for breakfast and let the posse do its worst."

Thus began the Partridges' second day in Devil's Flat . . .

After a breakfast of what would have been classed as snack food under other conditions, Shirley left the two youngest Partridges with Danny in the bus and motioned Keith and Laurie out of earshot.

"What is it, Mom?" Laurie asked. "You look worried."

"Frankly, I *am* beginning to worry. There are some things I've noticed."

"Such as—?"

"The sky for one."

"Are you expecting another storm?"

"Hardly, but there hasn't been a single plane anywhere."

"But this is only the second day we've been out of circulation. They would hardly have started hunting for us yet."

"I'm sure that's true—"

"What did you mean about no planes, Mom?" Laurie asked.

"Wherever we are, it's nowhere near a commercial air lane. No private planes, either. That means we're really isolated."

"But they will find us."

"I'm sure they will. The question is—what do we do in the meantime?"

"You mean we'll starve?"

"No. What we have in the bus is hardly a balanced diet, but we'll make out. Just see to it you take your vitamins."

"Then—"

"It's water I'm worried about. Do you realize this town hasn't a drop?"

"That didn't dawn on me. All I've been drinking is—"

"Colas and soft drinks. I know. And our supply is running out. We've got to start rationing."

"We've got to start monitoring the radio, too," Keith said.

"What for?" Laurie asked.

"For word of our disappearance, lamebrain—and what's being done about it."

"Ha! You certainly think we're famous, don't you?"

"We are, but it wouldn't matter. Reuben will have word on every station in the country. He knows how to do those things."

"I'm sure he does," Shirley said. "In the meantime, we make out as best we can. With our water substitute rationed, we do less running around in the heat of the day. And we can cut down on our food intake—for a while at least."

"Mom," Laurie said, "you don't seem much worried about the bedroom we found in the hotel—whoever has been using it."

"I'm certainly not happy about it."

"Maybe the man will help us. It must have been the one you saw yesterday morning."

"Perhaps."

"Why is he afraid to contact us?"

"I don't know. At least, though, he hasn't harmed us, and that *is* helping us in a way."

"We'll make out, Mom," Keith assured her. "Don't worry."

"Of course we will. I think it's important that we keep this talk to ourselves."

"Sure, we don't want the kids to get up-tight."

"I'll handle the rationing as diplomatically as possible. Are you sure you can't fix the bus?"

"I'll try. But that part of my education was neglected. I'm no great shakes as a mechanic."

"Do what you can. And another thing—I think we should have some rehearsals. We could use them and it would help pass the time, too."

The Partridges were quickly assembled for a rehearsal, but without Keith, who went off on an exploring expedition through the town.

He found a monotonous sameness everywhere. Empty houses, some almost totally reclaimed by nature; tilting structures in positions of seeming torture from warped walls and supports.

If anyone ever commercialized the place, he thought, they'd have to spend a lot of money putting it into the romantic shape people expect of a ninety-year-old ghost town.

He visited the church at the far end of the street and realized those who had lived in Devil's Flat—at least many of them—had been God-fearing people. The building had also been victimized by time, but the quality of its construction put it a few decades ahead of the other buildings. The tilt of the steeple had been caused by rotting timbers on one side, and the stairway up to a dim choir loft had fallen. However, most of the beams and supports were stubbornly erect.

He scooped the gathering of dirt from the pulpit and stood where the vanished messenger of God had exhorted his flock to better ways. How many, Keith wondered musingly, had listened?

A sensitive, imaginative youth, he could almost see the rows of upturned faces before him.

"Dearly beloved—" he murmured.

Then his mind wandered in another direction, and being perhaps somewhat of a ham at heart, he began putting his thoughts into words.

"There have been a few changes since you left, friends. Like radio. You just switch on a little box and music comes to you right through the air. And if that doesn't send you, there's television. A box with a screen on it where you can see the musicians while they're playing, or watch a movie John Wayne made when he was a juvenile.

"Prices are a little higher now. No more nickel beer. You have to hand out a sizeable chunk of your money for income tax, too, and we've had wars that would break your heart.

"Oh, yes, we sent a couple of boys to the moon. Uh-huh. The moon—just to look around and tell us what's up there."

"What *is* up there?"

Keith gulped and reddened.

"You've got a nerve! Sneaking in on a guy!"

"I didn't sneak," Laurie replied. "I just walked in to hear the sermon. You do believe in religious freedom, don't you?"

"You could have made a noise."

"You were making it all. Are you going to take up a collection?"

"Don't be funny. Why aren't you rehearsing?"

"Mom's giving Chris and Tracy some vocal exercises. Danny's trying to get stock quotes on the radio. Golly, it's hot."

"It'll get hotter. Remember what Mom said about taking it easy."

"I think I'll go back. Finish your sermon and I'll save half an Orange Zip for you."

His good nature returning, Keith left the pulpit and they walked out together.

"Keith, do you think Mom's really scared?"

"Well, I don't really know. She's funny."

"What do you mean?"

"The things that get her. With the Beard skulking around, I'd think she'd be sitting up with a tire iron. But it's other things."

"Like she said—the man hasn't harmed us. And the things that worry her are the ones that affect us. Food, water."

"That's true. We've got to watch her, you know."

"Why?"

"Unless I miss my guess, she'll be nibbling and sipping like a bird from now on. We've got to make her eat and drink her share."

"Uh-huh. By the way, I'm not as thirsty as I thought I was. I don't think I want an Orange Zip for a while."

Keith grinned and tousled his sister's hair. "I don't either. See you back at the bus . . ."

It didn't work out quite like that. Laurie returned, and Keith began exploring the other side of the street.

Half an hour later, they heard him calling and saw him standing in the street motioning.

"Come on up here! Everybody. I found something!"

He waited until they'd all come running; until Danny said, "All right. Don't just stand there making a production out of it. What did you find?"

"In here."

Keith led them into one of the saloons where Devil's Flat citizens had quenched their thirsts so long ago. One corner of the building had fallen away to give an excellent view of the bus.

Beside the break was a relatively clean expanse of wall. Keith pointed at it.

"Look!"

There was a long moment of silence, then a concerted gasp went up from the Partridges.

"It's Mom!"

Shirley, as flabbergasted as the rest, could only stare in wonder.

"It's not. It *can't* be!"

"But it is, Mom," Laurie insisted. "A charcoal or pencil sketch."

Tracy capped it off, ending all debate as to authenticity by asking, "Who drew Mommy on the wall?"

"That's the question," Shirley said, "do we have a secret artist in our family?"

"Not me," Keith said.

"Not me."

"Not I," Laurie declared, at the same time correcting everyone's grammar.

Danny was studying the sketch closely. He rubbed a finger over a line.

"It's fresh—no doubt about that. Somebody stood here and watched Mom and did a picture of her on this wall."

"A secret admirer," Laurie said.

"Your bearded friend, Mom! He's more than a friend! He's a phantom Romeo."

It was the first time in her memory that Shirley ever suffered stage fright in front of her family. She hid it as best she could.

"Let's not have any nonsense. This is serious. Who did the sketch? Why is he hiding from us?"

"We don't know, Mom, but I've got a hunch he'll come out in the open. You'll see him at the window again some morning and—"

Shirley cut in on Danny's excited outburst. "You're reaching. We don't even know it's the same person."

"You mean there could be two of them?"

"I don't know what I mean. But I do know this—we'll go on as we are, rationing our food and drink. Being careful in all things. Remember, we have no doctor out here if anyone gets sick. We have to handle emergencies ourselves."

Laurie said, "You're right, Mom, but I hope—"

"That's fine, dear. You keep right on hoping. And in the meantime, we'll conduct ourselves as though we were the last six people on earth."

"In a way," Keith mused, "I guess we are."

"And you, young man. I haven't seen you around the bus very much. Have you even looked at that motor?"

Keith's reaction was peculiar. Scowling sullenly, he muttered, "Don't bug me. I'll get to it."

With that he made an ungracious exit, and a few moments later they saw him striding toward the bus. Not to go to work on the motor, however. Instead, he emerged from the bus with his guitar and crossed the street to move off into the desert.

"Golly," Laurie said, "what happened to him?"

Shirley was wondering herself. Sullenness had never been a part of Keith's make-up. But then, the family had never before been stranded under these circumstances. A morale problem while isolated in a ghost town was not beyond comprehension.

"Just let him alone a while, children. He'll be all right. Now let's get back to the bus and find ourselves something to do . . ."

CHAPTER 5

Then Came Johnson

□ "Hi."

"Hi."

They looked at each other and liked what they saw—both of them.

Laurie was at the church end of the street that morning. Keith was off in the desert with his guitar. Mom and the kids were busying themselves having a house cleaning in the bus.

So Laurie had been all alone when she saw the plume of dust out in the rocks and sagebrush. This turned into a moving pinpoint, then into a man on a motorcycle who grew larger and larger until he skidded to a halt in front of her and she saw a young man who'd just finished making like a Hell's Angel.

But he wasn't one of those, not by any means. Slim, mustached, lithely muscled, he confirmed the identification that had entered Laurie's mind as he materialized: *Here comes Bronson.*

It had dawned on her also, while waiting, that the Partridge family's troubles were over. Help had arrived.

There had been the urge to run and give the family the good word.

That could wait, however. It was only fitting that she stay to welcome the young man.

Nick Tate, in turn, saw a pretty little chick who looked a lot different close up than through the heat's haze from behind a rock at a distance.

"Nice place you've got here," he grinned.

"I'm Laurie Partridge. I'm glad you like it."

"Johnson's my name. Ben Johnson."

That would do, Laurie thought. *Here comes Johnson* wasn't too far off.

"What are you people doing out here in the desert?"

"Frankly, we got lost. Then we broke down. We're in a mess. You're a life saver."

"That your runabout up there with its nose in the building?"

"Uh-huh. The rest of my family is having a house cleaning or they'd have heard you coming and been here."

"No harm done," he said, smiling pleasantly. "Maybe I can help."

Was there any doubt of it? His handsome presence alone, Laurie's fluttering heart told her, was a tremendous help.

They moved up the street slowly, Nick Tate—Ben Johnson trundling his cycle and Laurie walking beside him.

She knew immediately who he was—a Hollywood actor on leave or on vacation or something; probably on a pilgrimage, like Bronson trying to find out who he was.

"How many of you are there, Laurie?"

Her thrill deepened. He had such a beautiful smile, such . . . such a *regal*, commanding presence that one didn't mind playing the innocent country girl to his prince-of-the-manor approach. Then he stopped suddenly before she could answer him and snapped his fingers.

"Partridge—Partridge. Sure! But it can't be! The famous rock family out here in the middle of nowhere!"

"I'm afraid it is."

That lovely smile again. "You folks do things big; even when you get lost, you do it big. Any idea where you are?"

"The town is called Devil's Flat. That's all we know."

"You're smack in the middle of the land God forgot, that's where."

"We don't even know how we got here."

"I'd say it's impossible in a bus—except that you did it."

"How did *you* get here?"

His smile turned a trifle shamefaced. "To tell the truth, I'm lost myself."

"Do you mean you're as bad off as we are?"

"Well, no. Not quite. My bike's still working and I know my general direction, so I can get out again. I lost my bearings late last night when I took what I thought was a shortcut. Went over a bluff and knocked myself out."

Laurie was immediately solicitous. "Good heavens! Are you hurt?"

"No. I had a fool's luck. Not even a scratch. But then I played the idiot and got back on when I came to and really got lost."

"You *can* get out, though?"

"Oh, sure."

The conversation was interrupted by a whoop from Danny, who'd glanced out the window.

"Hey! Mom! We've got company!"

The Partridges piled out of the bus in breathless disorder, and Laurie did the honors, enchanted by her new heartthrob's easy, poised manner. Mom couldn't help but approve of this one.

And Shirley's manner did show that she was at least favorably impressed.

"You're the answer to our prayers, Mr. Johnson."

"Oh, now, not *Mister Johnson*, Ben, please."

He immediately turned his attention to the bus. "Laurie said you cracked up. She certainly told the truth. These old buildings are cardboard, though. Maybe things aren't so bad."

"I'm afraid they are," Shirley said. "That store was a little tougher than cardboard. Keith, my elder son, said it can't be fixed with what we have here."

"I'm a car buff of sorts," Nick said. "I'll have a look."

The younger Partridges had surrounded Nick's cycle and were scanning it briskly. Danny, after acknowledging the introduction, stood by silently while Nick burrowed into the innards of the bus and Laurie relayed the story of his coming to Devil's Flat and all its tribulations.

After listening thoughtfully, Danny joined Chris and Tracy at the bike. He examined it carefully.

Then he straightened and called to Shirley, "Mom, I'll go get Keith."

"Do you know where he is, dear?"

"Out beyond boot hill. He's got a rock he sits on out there."

Without waiting for permission, Danny trotted on his way. Once around the building across the street, he speeded up, racing along so that he arrived at Keith's desert sanctuary quite out of breath.

Keith seemed hardly to notice this. He scowled at his brother and said, "Can't a man have a little privacy? Does he always have to be bugged?"

It had been that way with Keith since the morning flare-up when he'd strode off with his guitar. But Danny wasn't impressed. He knew the symptoms even if no one else seemed to.

Keith was struggling with a song and it wasn't coming.

"Listen to this," Keith said before Danny could answer.

He strummed a few bars and sang a chorus that began with: "Little town in the badlands—Little town in the sad-

lands—” And ended with: “A lonesome village crying, ‘Love me, please.’ ”

“Lousy, absolutely lousy,” Danny said with sincere honesty. “But there may be something in the idea—with a lot of work.”

Keith tossed his guitar away and kicked at a piece of unoffending sagebrush.

“I can’t get it! I just can’t get it. It’s here, all around me, and I can’t put it into a lyric and melody.”

“The melody’s easier than the lyric and the theme, I suppose.”

“You *suppose*—”

“It would be for me if I had the talent. All you have to do is listen to the wind. It wrote the melody you’re after. You can hear it all around you.”

Keith turned his eyes heavenward in mock despair. “A poet, a philosopher, and a speculator all in one—we Partridges sure turn them out.”

“An investor, not a speculator,” Danny corrected while not denying the other labels.

“You positively send me—you really do.”

“Tense down and listen. I’m not here for kicks. I’m here to tell you somebody came to dinner.”

“Who?”

“A phony on a motorcycle.”

“When?”

“Half an hour ago.”

“Amazing. A cat shows up on a bike and you spot him for a phony in a matter of minutes. I suppose everybody else did, too.”

“Uh-uh. They think he’s great. Laurie’s being her usual smitten self. Mom is so relieved to see another living soul that she’d welcome Attila the Hun. And the kids—well, they love everybody.”

“But you know he’s a phony. How come?”

“He got lost last night after he tried a short-cut and

went over a bluff and knocked himself out. He kept on riding and got lost and lost if you'll pardon the good English. Then he showed up here."

"Well, it could happen."

"Sure, but he came in smiling like one of the Happiness Boys and didn't even ask for a drink of water."

"So he's got a canteen."

"Not hardly. I looked over his bike. No snack box. No canteen. A road runner with none of the equipment."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Then what's the point?"

"Put it in *your* computer. Mine's too dry to work."

"You're writing suspense fiction. The point is, he came in here so he can show us the way out. Phony or not, if he's got a bike and gas to roll it, I'm with him."

Danny sighed. "Okay. But remember—I warned you. He's a phony . . ."

When they got back to the bus, Nick and Laurie were not in sight.

"What gives?" Keith asked.

"I suppose Danny told you, dear. Our troubles are over. A savior arrived on a motorcycle."

One thing gratified Keith immensely—Shirley's smile was no longer tense. The worry lines around her eyes had vanished.

"I see the motorcycle," Keith said, "but where's the savior?"

"A nice boy named Ben Johnson."

"Fine, but where is he?"

"Laurie's showing him around our town. And by the way, he checked the bus and says it's hopeless trying to repair it with the tools we have."

"I told you that a couple of days ago."

"I know you did, dear, but Ben is a mechanic. That makes it—well, official, don't you think?"

"I guess so. There's the king of the desert right there, though. The cat's bike. Like you said, our troubles are over."

If Shirley had been paying close attention, she might have detected the doubt, the lack of enthusiasm in Keith's words. She might have noticed the quizzical look that passed between her two sons after Keith inspected the motorcycle and verified the no-food bit, the lack of a canteen.

Out of earshot, Keith said, "I don't know. It's really negative evidence."

"What do you mean?" Danny asked.

"It *proves* nothing. This cat may be the type who would handle himself this way."

"What about not asking for a drink if he's been without water as long as he says?"

"That," Keith murmured, "confuses me."

An exultant cry emanated from the bus. It was Chris. "Hey! Come listen! Everybody! We're on radio."

They rushed into the bus and caught the static-charged newscast in mid-sentence:

"—left Jones Grove in their bus bound for Red Rock. Somewhere between the two towns, they disappeared. One of the foremost instrumental and singing groups in the nation, the Partridges specialize in their own variety of rock. Their manager, Reuben Kinkaid, did not accompany them on the trip. Busy with their affairs in the east, Mr. Kinkaid became uneasy when he did not receive a prearranged phone call from Shirley Partridge, the mother of the five youngsters who make up the remarkable group—"

"Get that," Chris grinned. "We're remarkable."

"Shut up."

Rising static drowned out the next sentence or so, after which the newscaster said:

"Sheriff Lee Harney, alerted to the situation by the worried Kinkaid took immediate steps. But the difficulties of locating the Partridges, if they are indeed lost, are clearly apparent to a native Nevadan. The country between the two towns in question is rough, dangerous, almost totally unpopulated. Sheriff Harney was openly surprised that Mr. Kinkaid would have allowed the inexperienced family to start for Red Rock in the dead of night and into the teeth of the worst rain storm this section of Nevada has seen in years . . ."

Danny cut in, happily venomous. "I guess the fuzz gave Reuben the works for not taking care of us."

"Quiet," Shirley said. "You know it wasn't Reuben's fault."

"—genuinely concerned at this stage, Mr. Kinkaid has given orders that no expense be spared in the search for the Partridges—"

Danny yelled. "Turn that guy loose with the checkbook and we'll come out of this paupers!"

"—the Partridge bus is famous for its psychedelic paint job. Therefore, it would seem simple to locate it on a gray-brown desert, at least from the air.

"This is not necessarily true, however, as Sheriff Harney pointed out. There is no way of knowing which direction the Partridges took, what with the violence of the storm. Also, the bus could be hidden in one of the dangerous crevasses or small canyons that thread the desert in all directions aroune Red Rock . . ."

Static rattled in at a great rate now, blocking out the newscast. Danny fiddled with the receiver, but when it got straightened away again, music burst forth.

"Well, we got most of it," Danny said.

"We know they're looking for us," Chris said.

"Sure."

Chris asked, "Mom, does it mean I can have an extra root beer?"

Shirley turned her eyes on her eldest son. Keith had listened to the newscast in silence, without reaction one way or another.

"What do you think, Keith?"

There was a long pause, after which Keith uttered a terse, "No. We aren't out of here yet. Leave things as they are . . ."

"Hi."

Keith straightened from peering at the underside of the big motorcycle.

"Hi. Nice bike you've got here."

"Nice town you've got. Laurie's been showing me around."

Laurie looked the way she always did when she was being feminine, and Keith had to admit that he couldn't blame her. Ben Johnson had it. No doubt about that. The looks, the manner, the charisma. Supremely self-confident, yet glossed over with a faint shyness that said, *I'm looking for the same things you are, so let's be friends.*

"You're Keith, of course. I'm Ben Johnson."

"Glad to know you. Understand you're lost, too."

"More or less."

"You checked the bus?"

"Yeah. Fuel line's ripped out."

"Then it hasn't changed since I looked," Keith said with a sidelong glance at Shirley, who was just emerging from the bus. "How about a Coke?"

"No, thanks," Nick said.

That drew a second sidelong glance from Keith—in Danny's direction this time—as Nick added, "Maybe we'll have to pour a can in the bike, though, if the gas is gone. I'd better check."

As he went about it, Laurie began prattling. "I showed Ben the lovely picture of mother somebody drew—our mystery man. And the occupied room in the hotel."

Ben scratched his tousled locks in a gesture of perplexity.

"That room. Weird. Looks like you've got a ghost living in your town."

"Except a ghost doesn't put a dent in a pillow," Danny said.

"Not hardly. Whoever used the room was around lately."

"It looks to me as though he checked out when we checked in."

"I wonder who the cat is?"

"Hard to say."

"We caught a newscast a few minutes ago," Danny said. "We were on the air. Reuben's got the national guard out looking for us."

Laurie clapped her hands. "I knew we could depend on Reuben!"

"But can we depend on the national guard?"

"Silly! There'll be helicopters all over the sky in no time."

"At a hundred bucks a copter, I'll bet," Danny said gloomily. "Now that we don't need him, Reuben goes into action."

Shirley's voice interrupted the conversation. "Rehearsal time. We mustn't forget who we are and what we do."

"I think I'll split," Nick said.

Laurie's face fell. "Oh, no! Not in this heat. Why don't you wait—"

He laughed. "I'll take the heat and daylight to comfort and pitch black."

"You'll pass the word?" Keith asked.

"Oh, sure. As soon as I find my way out. I'll play back-stop in case your man Reuben fails."

He mounted the cycle, kicked the starter, and the motor roared . . .

As the vehicle's dust plumed out in the direction from

which Nick had arrived, Keith and Danny went into private conference.

"See anything odd?" Danny asked.

"He was in a hurry to get away."

"Anything else?"

"He still wasn't thirsty."

"Anything else?"

"Was there something?"

Danny eyed his brother critically. "You've got a nice garden variety voice and you fuss with a guitar real good. But you'd make a lousy detective."

"All right, Sherlock. Brief me."

"Okay, you're supposed to be a showman. What's more dramatic—a bed that's been slept in by some passing stranger, or an exact likeness of your mother sketched on the wall of a ghost town building by a mysterious artist?"

"Mom's picture, why?"

"Because Ben Johnson didn't twitch an eyebrow over the picture, but he was no end of interested in who slept in that bed."

"You may be right—"

"If you'll backtrack over the dialogue, you'll see I'm exactly right."

"What do you make of it?"

"That he knows who sketched the picture but doesn't know who slept in the bed."

"I think you're reaching. You just disliked the cat."

"Uh-uh. I'm suspicious of him, so I don't like him or dislike him. When you feel that way about someone, you've got to be careful not to get prejudiced by likes or dislikes."

Keith laughed. "You're too much, Danny. But all this stuff you've come up with about Ben Johnson, where does it lead? What does it prove?"

"So far it's led nowhere and proves nothing. It goes into the same computer with Mom's sketch, the slept-in bed,

the face at the window, and the weird music you and she heard."

"We'll probably never get the answers. Ben's gone and there'll be somebody here after us anytime now."

"That's another thing."

"What's another thing?"

"The way Ben split. Didn't you notice? He was having a good time roaming around with Laurie—not in any rush at all. But when he heard about the newscast, he was all in a sweat to take off."

"Coincidence?"

Keith was putting the suspicion down. Yet, the word still came out as a question.

Later, assessing his role as unbeliever, Keith was fair enough to admit it was based somewhat upon resentment, even jealousy. Danny was remarkably perceptive for his age. This tended to make Keith feel guilty. As the man of the family, it was his place to see the suspicious things. The kid was just too smart for his pants.

"Well," Keith observed, "like I said, we'll probably never know. Our desert adventure is about over."

He couldn't have been more wrong . . .

CHAPTER 6

The Genius of Johnny Harp

□ “Got any water? I’m dry as a rock.”

“Sure. Johnny went down before dawn and filled the canteens.”

Nick seized one, drank his fill, and poured the rest of the water over his head. The sun was low in the west, and Sam Barton tried to control his impatience until Nick got ready to talk.

“That isn’t all the kid’s been doing,” Nick said. “He sneaked down into the town and drew a picture of Shirley Partridge on a wall.”

“Who’s Shirley Partridge?”

“She’s the mother. The Partridges are a famous musical family.”

“They’re the ones in the town?”

“Right. Five kids. They were heading for an engagement. A place called Red Rock—from Jones Grove—”

“Red Rock! You’re kidding. How could they get clear over here if they were going from Jones Grove to Red Rock? This is in the opposite direction.”

"There was the cloudburst, remember? You were worried about it flooding our equipment—"

"So you fixed their bus."

"Not a chance. The gas line's wrecked."

Sam Barton swore softly. "Of all the rotten luck—"

"Another thing—maybe Johnny was right about some cat prowling around. The girl took me to the hotel down there and showed me a room somebody cleaned up and was living in. It sure wasn't us."

"Well then, who is he? What does he want?"

Nick Tate grinned. "Maybe he wants to know what we want. He was probably here first."

Nick enjoyed baiting Sam. He knew Sam regretted taking him into the caper and that he had far less to lose if it went bad. He would simply get on his motorcycle and take off. He would feel a little down about the whole thing because he wasn't averse to making himself some loot. But he didn't have the compulsive greed for money that motivated Sam.

"Whoever he is—do you suppose he knows about the equipment down there?"

"I've got a hunch about that."

"Then spill it."

"He may or may not but if he does, I don't think he gives a damn. If he does know and was interested, we'd have tangled with him long before this. We've been here two months, remember?"

Sam scowled. "All the work, toting that press in. Trouble with the ink. We should have been out of here a month ago. As it is—"

"As it is, we're in big trouble, my friend. The Partridges have a manager. He's been blowing his cool. It's all over the radio. They may go in the wrong direction for a while, but pretty soon they'll be looking down our throats from helicopters."

Sam Barton rubbed his sore, peeling head. He sighed

deeply and had thoughts about fate sending a special imp to make his existence intolerable.

"Take a walk," he said. "I've got to think."

"Be my guest," Nick replied, and strolled off whistling softly between his teeth . . .

Sam Barton didn't want to think, not really. He wanted to forget the whole blasted mess and go back to the penny ante grifts and con games that had fed and clothed him before he'd suddenly seen the dark years of age galloping down on him and had begun to worry about providing for them.

But thinking seemed a necessary chore at this point, so he compromised by going back—way back to when he first conceived his grand plan.

It began when he first set eyes on Johnny Harp on a carnny lot in an Iowa country town. Sam was peddling a stock of gaudy necklaces at the time, beautiful pieces of inspired art work that would not raise blisters on the throat for several days, thus giving him time to get out of town.

It was there that he was struck by the excellence of a sketch a young man was making of a pretty Iowa farm girl. The young man was Johnny Harp, and he was in the clutches of a callous opportunist named Digger who pocketed all the earnings, giving Johnny small change when he begged for it.

Sam was amazed at the waste of talent, but he was positively stunned when he learned of the true situation: a pathetically retarded mentality and positive genius functioning in the same body.

He could have done nothing about it except marvel at the phenomenon if fate hadn't given him the first of its seeming windfalls by arranging for Digger to drop dead of a heart attack. This left Johnny alone and confused, and as no one seemed to want him, Sam took him under his

wing, substituted kindness for Digger's harsh formula, and was again amazed at the result.

Johnny's talents thrived under sympathetic attention as a flower would thrive from rich soil. They went on with the carny bit, doing very well, and Sam bettered things for Johnny by seeing to it that he always had as much as two or three dollars at a time for his very own. This generosity brought a doglike love and loyalty.

A few weeks later, Sam got his big idea. One segment of his checkered past had been involved with printing and engraving. Watching Johnny's work one day, Sam wondered if by miraculous chance, the kid might be good enough to—well, Sam hardly dared form the idea at first because it was the most perilous urge he'd ever experienced. Then, too, Johnny probably wouldn't measure up.

But Johnny did.

In a remarkably short time for such a fantastic project—some six months—Johnny Harp's genius created a pair of plates that would have been the envy of every counterfeiter in the world; things of such exquisite perfection that only an expert, after deep study, could have segregated them from the ones the United States Government use to produce ten dollar bills.

Even as he exulted, Sam realized he'd taken only the first step. Also, that he was probably the world's most inexperienced would-be counterfeiter.

This daunted him somewhat. Should he sell the plates and take a short end? No. Should he ask around and find professionals in the game and benefit from their experience?

No again. Anyhow, the best ones were probably in jail.

He would devise and execute an operation so off-trail that the Federal fuzz, even if totally knowledgeable concerning counterfeiters, would find themselves baffled. Sam would confuse them by staying far from the customary haunts of professional counterfeiters.

The latter were inclined to do their work in innocent looking apartments in nice, middle-class neighborhoods. But they'd done it so often that no apartment in a nice middle-class neighborhood was anything but sinister to the T-Men.

Or on a farm where the fine old church-going owner was above suspicion. No chance. Federal agents had grown to suspect such people even when they weren't looking for evil doers.

So—?

A place so far from civilization that a federal agent's expense account wouldn't even get him there without a special appropriation from Congress.

A western ghost town.

Sam considered this thunderbolt of creative thinking to be on par with the genius Johnny Harp had displayed in making the whole idea possible.

The search began, and annexing Nick Tate to the operation was an indirect result. It was through Nick that Devil's Flat, a dream town for Sam's purpose, was found. A third member was needed, and Nick qualified from the standpoint of being a nonprofessional with ethics as elastic as grandfather's suspenders.

From there out, it was a breeze, though a tedious and complicated one. Sam's past experience guided him in the selection and purchase of the equipment, piece by piece in many different locations.

And now, here they were . . .

Sam got up from where he'd squatted to do his thinking and found that it had refreshed him and given him renewed confidence. A deal so providentially sent his way and so meticulously carried out couldn't fail. Fate was merely teasing him with small obstacles. The equipment was well concealed. The Partridges hadn't found it and they wouldn't.

So why worry about anyone else—the people who

would come to rescue the crazy family? They'd want to get out of Devil's Flat as soon as possible.

As to Johnny's eight-foot man, he had been seen by no one else, and the used bedroom in the hotel notwithstanding, he'd make himself no problem even if he did exist.

Sam patted his sunburned head and smiled. Everything would be all right. Everyone would leave in due course. Production would commence in earnest. Then it was only a problem of selling the queer to the highest bidders until a fortune in good U.S. money had been made . . .

The plan was foolproof . . .

"Laurie, where is Tracy?"

Laurie looked up from the copy of *Rolling Stones* she was reading and replied, "I don't know, Mom. She and Chris were playing with Simon and Garfunkel a few minutes ago, giving them drops of soda pop."

"I told you to watch them."

"I did. I told Chris to watch Tracy."

"That's not the same thing. It was your responsibility."

A crisis was averted by a thin shriek of joy. Shirley whirled around. So far as she was concerned, it was only a shriek, it's motivation still to be proved.

She saw Tracy far down the street—too far—jumping up and down and waving something in the air.

"Mommy! Everybody! Come look! I'm rich!"

Shirley waited while two short legs propelled her youngest busward.

"Young lady, I told you to stay within my sight at all times. I swear, you'll be the death of me."

"But I'm rich. Look what I found!"

Chris, properly curious, said, "Well, if you want us to see it, quit holding it behind your back."

"Guess!"

"A picture of Garfunkel wearing overshoes."

"No, silly. This!"

Shirley gaped along with the others.

"Good heavens! A brand-new ten-dollar bill!"

CHAPTER 7

Of Little Girls and Butterflies

□ It is said, and with scientific proof, that all things live. And it follows, according to the mystics, that all living things communicate. Rocks, they tell us, speak in their own language to other rocks; earth communicates with earth, trees with trees, and if we do not hear their various languages, if we pooh-pooh the whole idea, it is to our shame, not theirs.

The most cynical will admit that species of dynamic life communicate with each other and in many cases word gets across from one species to another.

Which brings us to a truth overlooked by many:
Butterflies talk to little girls.

Proof of this is easily come by. Ask any little girl.
Ask Tracy Partridge.

Tracy was sitting in the shade of a building opposite the bus, minding her mother by staying in sight, when this butterfly came along. It fluttered about in aimless butterfly fashion and finally came to rest on the protruding splinter of a broken board.

Tracy looked at it and said, "You're dusty."

"That's because of the ecological conditions in this part of the country," the butterfly explained. "Very little moisture. Dust everywhere."

"You aren't very pretty, either," Tracy observed with the honesty and frankness of early childhood.

"Sorry."

"Where I come from we have big, beautiful butterflies. They're all colors of the rainbow."

"You don't have to rub it in."

"I didn't mean to be nasty. And you *are* pretty in a way. Pale yellow is nice."

"Thank you." The butterfly took off, spiraled engagingly and came down again. "Would you like to go and play?"

"I can't. Mom told me to stay within sight of the van."

"That's too bad. I know a place where there's a lovely flower."

"Is it far?"

"Not very far. We could go there and you could be back before your mother knew you'd gone."

"*How* far?"

"Just over there beyond those rocks."

The butterfly went up into the air and flew in a circle. The circle got wider and wider as Tracy watched. Each time the butterfly acted as though it would not come back again. But each time it did.

"Fraidy cat!" it said at the apogee of one of its orbits.

"I am not!"

The next time around, Tracy asked, "Is it a *very* lovely flower?"

"The loveliest. Come on, I'll show you."

The butterfly took off, threatening never to return, and Tracy found that she could go to the back edge of the building in the same direction and still be in sight of the bus.

"Is it *real* close?"

"Of course. Would I lie to you?"

"All right."

Which goes to prove that you should never trust a butterfly any more than you would trust a grasshopper. Neither of them have sense enough to look ahead to the coming winter.

The distance proved to be much farther away than very close. Not only that but the butterfly, with its interesting aviation—loops and whorls, dives and straight-up ascents—made Tracy forget about the distance until the town was hidden by rocks and hummocks.

There was a flower, though, so the butterfly hadn't told a complete fib. A beautiful blossom that entranced Tracy.

There was such contrast to it. First, there was this cactus, a squat, cluster of flat, pear-shaped leaves with long spikes all over them. Not only that but at the base of the long spikes were clusters of tiny tweezer-type stickers that could get into your fingers and hurt like fury.

Then, growing out of the end of one of the ugly leaves was a lovely bloom so fragile it seemed as though even a slight breeze would blow it away. It's beauty made Tracy gasp—many shades of red, from deep to delicate pink, were blended in a pattern beyond the capabilities of all but Nature herself.

"It's a member of the *Cactaceae* family," the butterfly said. "You should see the big ones."

"It is lovely," Tracy said, clapping her hands.

"Well, good-bye," the fickle butterfly said. "I must be going. I'll be seeing you if I happen to come in this direction again."

As the butterfly spiraled up into the air, Tracy cried, "Wait! You've got to show me how to get back to the bus."

"Sorry. This whole incident is beginning to bore me. I never stay in one place very long."

"But how do I get back?"

"It's very simple. Just point your nose in the right direction and follow it."

The last words came faintly and the butterfly was gone. Tracy got up from where she was kneeling beside the cactus flower and looked about in panic. Then her panic subsided. It was really very simple. She'd come from that direction, from over by the big rocks.

She knelt to look at the flower again, circled it to see it from all sides.

She debated picking it to take back to show the others, but she decided not to. She knew she'd been bad and there was no use bringing back a thing that would prove it even if that thing was a beautiful flower . . .

"Where's Tracy, dear?" Shirley asked.

"Danny took her with him down to the church," Chris said.

"But I told—"

"You said it was all right. Danny asked, remember?"

"Oh, so I did. But they must come back now. It's almost sundown."

"I'll yell."

"No. My ears are worn out from you children yelling to hear the echoes. Go down and get them."

Chris trotted off. He fully intended to run the errand. But then he came abreast of the place where Tracy had found the ten-dollar bill and he was tempted.

He yielded to the temptation only a little bit by telling himself he'd just give a quick look. Maybe there was some more money lying around.

The building had once been a bank, which made Tracy's windfall seem all the more logical. Only the fact that the ten-dollar bill had been brand-new made it so strange.

Outside, the building looked as ramshackle as the rest of the town, but inside more care had been taken with the

construction. The floor was still even. It did not belly and warp grotesquely as did those of the other buildings. The grill that had separated the customers from the teller was still intact, an iron fretwork that probably gave a certain class to the establishment in bygone decades.

When the management left, they'd swept the floor and taken the moveable furniture with them. Some debris had been left in one corner, swept there and not removed, giving, oddly enough, a sense of abandonment that would have been missing in a completely cleaned-out room.

Chris looked about quickly. It did not take long because nothing was hidden. He found no money, which was somewhat of a disappointment, but that in turn was diminished by a feeling that something was wrong here.

It annoyed him, not being able to figure out what that something was. Chris had been in banks, modern ones, and he tried to make the association in his mind. This didn't work. It was impossible to compare this forlorn little orphan, abandoned ages before Chris had been born, with the shining urban establishments of modern times.

There was another irksome impression in Chris' mind. He had a hunch Danny would have spotted the mistake in this picture instantly. And if Danny could, so could he!

But he couldn't. He tried and tried. Then a surge of guilt wiped out everything else in his mind. He'd been sent to find Tracy and it was getting later and later.

He began shouting at the top of his lungs. He went back into the street and found that Mom had put the other Partridges to work also. Keith emerged from a building across the street and matched Chris' shouts with his own.

On down the street, closer to the van, Chris saw Danny in conference with Mom. Mom was doing most of the talking while Danny hung his head, shrugged, and revealed in eloquent pantomime that Tracy was no longer with him. Then, excused by his mother, he rushed off to join the search.

Chris checked the building next to the bank and then came out to see Laurie appear—ghostlike now in the gathering gloom—from between two buildings across the street.

The otherwise quiet town had come to life with the shouts of the Partridges. This was made even more eerie when, far off across the desert, a lonesome wolf joined in the chorus.

The long, dismal “*Wooooooooo—woooo-woo-wooooooooo*” laced the fast-chilling night air with macabre portent.

But that was only the build-up, not the climax, because hard on the heels of the wolf solo, a closer and more eerie sound stopped the Partridges in their tracks.

Chris and Keith had come together and they froze in unison.

“That’s it!” Keith cried.

“Tha—that’s what?” Chris quavered.

“The music Mom and I heard the first morning we were here!”

“It’s—*music*?” Chris said as the deep, mournful wail colored the night around them, charged it with an indescribable, skin-tightening melancholy.

“Sure it’s music—what else?”

“You tell me!”

“It’s coming from over there.”

“From the church, I think.”

“The guy who was sleeping there? He’s come back?”

“Maybe. But no human being could wail like that. Even the wolves are scared. They’ve shut up.”

The unearthly wail quavered away into silence as the night breeze that had sprung up died also, leaving the near-dark to hang like a baleful threat over Devil’s Flat.

“We’ve got to keep hunting,” Keith said. A few minutes later, Shirley called to her brood from the bus. They returned there from a complete and fruitless search, guided now by the beam of the flashlight Shirley used as a signal.

They came together in silence.

Finally, Keith said, "She isn't here, Mom. She isn't in this town anywhere . . ."

The impact of the tragedy was physical as well as emotional, but the Partridges faced up to it. Laurie's fingers dug deep into Keith's arm. Chris moved closer to Danny, touching him with his shoulder, while Danny, in turn, pressed against Shirley.

These were the only outward reactions, each of them grimly controlling their emotions, Laurie biting her lip to keep the panic down.

As usual, Shirley took charge as she always did in emergencies such as this when democracy went by the boards and the children looked eagerly for guidance.

"She's gone off into the desert," Shirley said. "And we've got to face it—we're in deep trouble."

"It gets cold out there at night. Cold enough to maybe freeze a little girl to death?" Keith asked.

"I don't know," Shirley said, "but that's only one of the dangers."

"The wolves we heard," Laurie whispered as though fearful of the very words.

"Canyons, rocks, snakes—" Danny muttered.

"Oh, don't!"

"Stop it, all of you," Shirley said.

"We've got to hunt," Keith cut in. "I mean, I do. I'll take a light and—"

"Three of us will hunt," Shirley said. "You, Laurie—and you, Chris, stay here."

"No, Mom!" Laurie cried. "I'd die just waiting around. I'll hunt. Danny and Chris—"

"Hold it," Danny snapped. "I'm a boy. You're a girl."

"I can hunt as well as you can," Laurie said.

"Be quiet," Shirley ordered. "It *will* be Laurie. She's older. Now we'll go in three directions. And I don't have

to tell you to be careful. Keith, you cross the street and search on the north side of the town. You seem to know that area beyond the cemetery fairly well. Laurie and I will veer out on this side, and we mustn't get out of sight of each other's flashlights, Laurie. Do you understand that? Keep calling out, too. And whoever finds Tracy—wave your light in a circle."

Shirley voiced conviction with that last—*whoever finds Tracy*—not allowing the least shred of doubt that she would be found.

"Yes, Mom."

Danny no doubt felt that he'd been treated badly but he voiced no complaint. The decision had been made. He asserted his place in the pecking order by sternly warning Chris:

"You stay with me. Don't make me have to start looking for you."

With Tracy not there to take orders from him, Chris remained silent.

Three flashlights were provided, and the three oldest Partridges faded into the gloom, while far off in the night a wolf or a coyote howled its restlessness . . .

Keith moved sure-footedly off into the desert, picking out a narrow, lighted world on ahead, a sleeve of reality in an otherwise black unreality of total night. He'd heard that the stars were huge and low in the summer skies over the west. This was not true in the desert around Devil's Flat. They were distant and cold and alien, hoarding their illumination like misers in the sky.

Long shadows formed and moved in the flashlight's beam, fading to make way for other shadows even more sinister.

"Tracy—baby—where are you? It's Keith, honey—I'm here—where are you?"

His plea for a response was like a litany to the gods of

night, one he repeated over and over, while his mind dwelt on many things.

Mainly, he castigated himself for his neglect of the family. He'd gone off alone to try to write a silly song when he should have been in the town by his mother's side, bearing his share of the responsibility.

He lashed himself with this whip of guilt, perhaps not realizing that it was not a punishment so much as a defense. It kept his mind from forming any image of the possible end of this terrible night, a negative result.

By staving that off, he could hold himself together and go on searching. Even so, his mind kept skirting the dark core of disaster, striving to peer into its depths.

An odd thought resulted. He suddenly knew, most intimately, why doctors never operate on their own; why they absent themselves while a colleague, free of emotional attachment, takes over, and he would have given anything for professional help.

"Tracy—Tracy. It's Keith! Where are you, honey . . . ?"

The night wore on . . .

Laurie, bravely facing the fearsome night-desert, followed the path of her flashlight. She found also that she could recite the litany of search while leaving her mind to form images of its own.

These took the form of self-recriminations so bitter, so poignant, that they seemed to spring from a depth of her mentality she'd been totally unaware of

Regret. A quality of regret so sharp that it blocked out all personal fear of the dangers around her; the peril of stepping on a poisonous rattler or falling into a crippling ravine were of no consequence in the face of what threatened—the Partridges no longer whole, the family no longer complete.

Why, she demanded, had she never appreciated what

they were to each other? It seemed incredible now that she could have taken all those blessings so casually. How could she have been so insensitive? Only a very callous person could have refrained from thanking God every minute of the day for such a showering of His grace.

Perilously, like a person standing in a fragile bridge over a chasm, she tried to visualize a future without little Tracy. It was impossible. A future that bleak simply did not exist.

But the reality was like a slow, sickening electric shock. Never before had Laurie experienced sickening fear. Now, she had, and no matter what the future held, she would never again be the same person.

"Tracy—darling—oh, baby—where are you? Where are you? Answer me."

From across the blackness of the desert night, Laurie saw the beam of her mother's flashlight cutting a faint, forward path. It brought little comfort . . .

Shirley Partridge was perhaps better prepared to face the crisis than her children. But to offset that was the fact that the missing child was her own; she'd borne Tracy, which perhaps did not make a closer relationship but certainly a different one.

In a sense, when a mother loses a child she has borne, even long after that birth, she loses something of herself, something of her own body. Thus, she can be said to be diminished to a greater extent than can a brother or a sister.

These thoughts went through Shirley's mind, though in vaguer forms—reflected mainly in emotional pain and haunting despair.

There had been crises with the children before, but never one as terrifying as this; one that caused Shirley to berate herself for having been a "pushy mother." A defense—that she had not been that at all—was of little

comfort. Through her acceptance if nothing more, the Partridges were a band of gypsies, roaming the nation—perilously it had now been proved—seeking the applause and adulation of those who appreciated their talents.

Shirley had gained pleasure from this state of affairs, pleasure that now reflected back as shallow vanity. Again, defense was futile in face of the fact that if the family had been at home where all families belonged, living normal lives, Tracy would be safe in her own backyard.

Shirley searched and called, called and searched. A coyote's howl mocked her efforts, made cruel fun of her terror.

Between calling out, she prayed in whispers:

"Dear God! She's only a little girl. Only a baby. Please be merciful . . ."

The night passed. Dawn brightened the east. The Partridges straggled back to the town, each clinging desperately to a last forlorn hope—that somehow, through some miracle, Tracy had returned.

Laurie came first, her cold flashlight hanging from a listless hand. She found Danny and Chris huddled in the open door of the bus.

"It's morning," Chris said. That was all. Laurie dropped to the ground beside them.

Shirley arrived, steeled for the worst, finding it, and holding herself together. Feeling like a helpless child herself, she dropped her weary body to where she could touch her children and draw comfort of a sort. They remained silent . . .

Keith appeared a short time later. His bearing was truly that of the man of the family, its main strength. He walked with firmness, no weariness showing.

But he, too, found nothing to say when he arrived. Only two terse words:

"No good."

Their silence was agreement.

"I'll go back again," Keith said, "as soon as I have an orange. I'm a little dry."

"You've got to get some rest, dear."

"Mommy—I'm hungry."

Their reactions were ridiculous in that they did nothing. They sat there with Keith towering over them, their expressions not changing.

"Mommy—"

Now they galvanized into action as one. Shirley led the way into the bus. She was the first to reach Tracy, scooping the child up into her arms in a surge of strength that would have been impossible moments before.

"Oh, darling—you're safe—you're safe!"

"I followed the butterfly . . ."

"What do you mean you followed the butterfly, darling?"

It was several minutes later. The Partridges had gone through a period of thanksgiving that would probably never again be duplicated in their family history.

Shirley had checked her sleepy daughter carefully and found no marks of injury except a slightly scratched knee.

"It knew where there was a flower—"

"Ask her how she got home," Laurie whispered.

Shirley shushed her older daughter with a movement of her head.

"A flower, precious?"

"Uh-huh. On a prickly old cactus."

"So you followed the butterfly?"

"Uh-huh. Then it went away and left me and it got dark. I'm hungry, Mommy."

"In a minute, dear. Now tell Mother how you got home."

"The giant brought me."

"The giant? I don't understand."

"I was crying and he came."

"Where did he come from?"

"I don't know. He was just there. I was afraid of him, too. But I didn't have to be. He was a gentle giant. He picked me up and brought me here and I went to sleep."

"When?"

"I don't know. A long time ago. It was still dark."

Shirley frowned, turning her attention to Danny and Chris.

"But how did he come and go with Chris and Danny—?"

"All right," Danny said quietly. "You don't have to put us on the stand. We weren't here all the time."

"But I told you to stay by the bus!"

"I know. We . . . we just disobeyed."

"We didn't disobey very much, though," Chris said. "We wanted to help and the street was out there and—well, we thought maybe Tracy was in one of the houses and had been overlooked." Chris turned to his older brother for help.

"I guess that was about it," Danny said, resignedly.

"We took the other flashlight and went to look. We kept coming back, though. We came back three times."

"I guess it must have happened the last time we went," Danny said. "We were clear up at the church. I got to thinking about that weird moan we heard and thought maybe somebody was holding Tracy prisoner there."

The defense rested, looking expectantly at the judge, aware of the gravity of their offense, but hoping the sentence would not be too severe.

Smoothing Tracy's soft hair, Shirley said, "There will be no punishment. Perhaps there should be but I just can't. We've got too much to be thankful for this night."

"Amen to that," Keith said fervently. "Amen to that . . ."

CHAPTER 8

The Gentle Giant

□ "What do you think?" Keith asked.

Tracy had been fed and returned to Morpheus. Both Danny and Chris had quickly surrendered to sleep also. Laurie held out longer, considering herself one of the adults of the family rather than a child, but her eyelids drooped soon, and Keith and Shirley were now outside on the steps of the dilapidated storefront.

"What do I think? I guess I *do* think, but I'm really not sure of even that. I'm just so thankful, so grateful. All I want to do is go up to that old church and kneel down in the dust and pray my heart out."

"Let's walk up there, then," Keith said.

They moved slowly up the deserted street, Shirley's pretty face radiant with a calm that hid her weariness, Keith's features drawn up in thought.

"It would seem that at least one of the crazy things we've had happen would be answered, just one little mystery solved."

"Mystery?" Shirley said vaguely.

"First, there was that weird singing. We've heard it

twice. No—first there was that face you saw at the window. Then there was that ten-dollar bill Tracy found.”

“That *was* strange,” Shirley agreed.

“Now there’s this gentle giant she claims brought her home.”

“Claims? But it has to be true. She couldn’t possibly have come home by herself.”

“I’m not doubting her story. I’m just trying to explain it. Did the man you saw look like a giant—was he big?”

“No—no, I don’t think so. Of course, I didn’t see much of him. In fact, I couldn’t swear now that I even saw him at all.”

“I think you did. That used room in the hotel certainly proves something.”

“Tracy could be wrong about the giant part. She was probably lying down when he found her. He would loom over her. Anybody standing there in the night could look like a giant to a frightened child.”

“But why did he sneak her home and then vanish? What kind of business was that?”

“I can’t say. I have no idea. I’m just so thankful she’s safe, I’d like to spend the rest of my life thanking the man—whatever he is.”

They had arrived at the church and automatically fell silent. It was no more than an old building, abandoned along with the rest of Devil’s Flat; yet it had a dignity that demanded respect, its own brand of silence standing it apart from the rest of the town.

“I heard something once that I want to check up on when we get home—get the book and read it for myself.”

“What’s that, dear?”

“Well, at school, we had an egghead—”

“An egghead?”

“A cat that was so off-beat you could hardly reach him. We were rapping once and I don’t know how it came up, but he said buildings were different.”

"I don't see anything so off-beat about that. Of course they are."

"No, that wasn't it. He said the wood was different. It was the theory of some philosopher—like you take a church and a jail. They could be built from the same tree if you could find one big enough, but as soon as they were put to their different uses, the wood itself would no longer be the same."

"That's pretty deep philosophy. How did it go over with the kids?"

"As I remember, we all went down to the chocolate shop for sodas. I forgot about it myself until now, but—"

"But what, Keith?"

"I kind of halfway get what he was driving at, not that I believe it of course—"

"Why not?"

"Why not, what?"

"If you understand it and want to believe, why don't you? Because it's too off-beat?"

"Well—"

"Would you be ashamed to? Afraid that if you voiced it to your friends, they'd think you were an egghead?"

"Oh, Mom. You—"

"I'm sorry, dear. It was just a notion that struck me. You were saying—?"

"I don't fully understand it. It's just that—well, if I heard the cat talking again, I might listen more."

"I see. The theory seems to be that the *use* a thing is put to changes its whole context. It could hardly be taken literally."

"No, but this whole building does seem different from the others. I feel it even if I can't say exactly—"

"Search for truth anywhere you can, dear, as long as you test it as being truth. I guess I'm of a more simple nature. I see a church as a place where I meet God and He

can come to me on my simple terms. Out of all His complexities, he achieves the miracle of appearing for me in a simple form I can grasp."

Keith laughed softly. "You're quite a philosopher yourself, Mom."

Then his thoughts veered to the immediate. Light of the morning sun drenched the town, now, and he regarded his surroundings critically.

"There's a choir loft up there. See where the stairs fell down?"

"I wonder how old this town really is?"

"Older than all of us put together, I'll bet." Keith was peering up into the shadows. "Look—the way the stairs broke away. It's kind of a ladder. I think I can get up there."

"No, Keith! You'll get hurt. The whole loft might come down."

"No, Mom. You can see the foundation beams. It's as strong as the building itself."

Shirley heard sounds of Keith scrambling and when she reached the spot where he'd taken off, he was already in the loft.

"Now how on earth are you going to get down?"

He didn't answer. Peering upward, trying to see through solid wood, Shirley called, "Keith. Are you all right?"

"Mom! There's an organ up here. They had them even in those days."

"Of course they did. They had them long before that."

"It's not very big, but it's got the pipes and everything."

"Well, you complained because we weren't solving any of our mysteries. Now we've solved one."

"That's what you think."

"What do you mean?"

"This organ hasn't been played in years. At least not by anyone human. It's thick with dust. There isn't a footprint

or a fingerprint anywhere. Only lizard trails running over the keys."

Shirley laughed nervously. "Then perhaps we've got some talented lizards in town. You'd better come down from there."

"Okay," Keith said reluctantly.

"And be very careful."

As he came warily down, Keith said, "Nobody human could play that organ even if he tried. The bellows for the air fell apart like paper."

"Well," Shirley said, forcing a cheerfulness, "at least we haven't lost ground. We're just back with the same old mystery."

"Would you like to see the bed in the hotel that was slept in?"

"Definitely not. Once you've seen one slept-in bed, you've seen them all. I want to get back to the van and get some sleep myself. You, too. We've earned it."

"I'm not the least bit tired," Keith said with a prodigious yawn . . .

Laurie awoke ahead of the others and was surprised at how rested and refreshed she felt. She left the bus quietly, so as not to disturb the sleepers, and walked out toward the westering sun.

This was along the path she'd followed the previous night during the desperate search, the contrast now giving her a feeling of almost exultation. How dark and foreboding it had been! How calmly beautiful it now was!

Laurie found her mood to be a rare one indeed. It's as though, she told herself, I'd been a child all my life and now I've grown up overnight. Well, kind of at least. They say tragedy and suffering gives one new depths. Maybe that's true also when one suffers a terrible fright. I know that I'll never take blessings for granted again. Nor will I

have any more childish, immature crushes on every good-looking boy who comes along. That Ben Johnson, for instance. He *was* a nice boy, and I respect him for going off and trying to find out who he is and all that. But I can see now that he's *such* a child . . .

This turned Laurie's mind toward her really important attachment—to Lonny Wells, the singing star of "Meet Me in the Islands" and "Warm Pacific Sands."

The time she'd met him, at the Westfall Festival where he'd come to publicize the new picture they were shaping for him, she'd almost passed out from the thrill. She'd never before met anyone as groovy as the golden-haired boy with the Adonis smile.

She remembered the get-together, when he'd favored a whole group of adoring fans with his electric presence—how, while telling them about his new picture, he kept his warm blue eyes on her most of the time.

Looking back, she tried to recall the rapture of those moments and how *something* told her this was *real*, this was truly serious; how sure she'd been that he'd sensed it, too, and the casual way he'd said good-bye when other commitments forced him to split, was merely a cover-up for his true feelings.

She remembered her sure sense of destiny—fate would draw them together again.

How childish! How utterly juvenile!

Laurie sighed contentedly. How wonderful to be finally grown up! To see things the way Mom saw them. Even the way Reuben saw them.

How—

Laurie had seated herself on a rocky spur where she could watch the desert change and suddenly, it was as though a shadow had passed over her mind, warning her that she was not alone.

The feeling was so clear and positive as not to be doubted. Someone was close by. Laurie's surge of fear was

quick. It brought goose pimples and a catching of her breath.

Did she dare look around?

She waited, frozen, trying to muster the courage . . .

"Was the little one all right?"

The voice was soft, yet it reflected a deep vitality. It was friendly, yet paradoxically impersonal.

Struggling to answer and failing, Laurie turned to look.

Her first impression was that she saw a god. This impression came right along with the absolute conviction as to who the man was.

Tracy's gentle giant!

He was tall, very tall, but hardly the towering figure Tracy's imagination had conjured up. Not anywhere near the ten feet she measured with a stick against the side of the store.

He was broad and superbly muscled, reminding Laurie of Johnny Weismuller in the old Tarzan pictures she'd seen. Stripped to the waist, he presented a picture of such gold-bronze magnificence that Laurie could scarcely catch her breath.

"You—you were the one who brought Tracy home," she blurted, totally unable to match his calm tones.

"A small child—yes. I didn't know her name."

"But then you left!"

"There were my meditations to be attended to. And the child was perfectly all right. Just terribly tired."

"You could have come back and let us thank you."

"There are no thanks necessary."

"There certainly are!"

"Tell me, why are you staying in Devil's Flat?"

"Because we can't get out. You saw our bus—"

"Yes, I assumed there had been some sort of an accident. I hope no one was hurt."

"No. And we'll be leaving soon. Our manager is looking for us."

"Your manager?"

"Yes. We're the Partridge Family."

Laurie waited for the flash of recognition that was sure to come, except that it didn't come. The bronzed god looked as blank as one of his handsome visage could possibly look.

"You've—you've heard of us, haven't you?"

"No, I'm afraid not. But that means nothing. I've been pretty busy."

"You mentioned meditation." Laurie's eyes widened. "You're a yogi!"

The answering smile was faint. "Hardly that."

"A holy man."

"Definitely not."

"The Beatles had their own holy man from India."

As she spoke, it all flashed through Laurie's entranced mind. The Beatles weren't so much. Their swami was entire worthy, but he was—well, nowhere near as photogenic as this desert god, and not nearly as young. This one could hardly have been past his late twenties.

The Partridge family with a yogi of their own! Could anything be more wonderful?

Supercharged with the inspiration of the moment, Laurie's mind soared on. She could see the headline now:

Laurie Partridge, of the Famous Partridge Family, Weds Indian Mystic.

And perhaps:

The happy couple plan to spend their honeymoon in the Himalayas, where they will seek cosmic consciousness together.

Exalted beyond words, Laurie fell back on poise and dignity as a defense.

Rising, she extended what she hoped was a cool hand, spoke in what she desperately tried to make a poised, yet warm voice:

"I can't tell you how grateful we are. You *must* come to Devil's Flat and let us thank you properly. My mother will be hurt if you don't."

"Perhaps—later—if you insist."

"About meditating. I was wondering . . ."

"I find it clears my mind. The quiet night hours are best."

"I'm simply mad about India!"

This appeared to surprise him. "You are?"

"The land of mysticism. The home of the White Brotherhood."

"The White Brotherhood?"

"Yes. I read about them in a groovy—I mean a fabulous paperback on the mysterious Orient. They are a very exclusive group of esoteric masters who do fabulous things. They can walk on water, cure all diseases, even travel through space instantly. You aren't by chance one of them, are you?"

"Hardly."

"They become very old, hundreds of years, but they have such a grasp on the basic laws of life that they remain forever young. Someday I'm going to India."

"When you do," he replied, "be sure and get all your inoculations. Much of India is very unsanitary."

Laurie yearned to invite him back to the bus that very moment, insist that he come. But she stifled the urge. She would have died, having him see the family all tousled and grumpy and half asleep.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"William Rivers."

That would be his American name of course. They always had two—those who did not care to exploit themselves. His was probably something very romantic, like Sri Aurobindo, or Krishna—Krishna what? Laurie couldn't quite remember the rest of it. But none of that mattered.

She told herself this as her heart sang within her. They had found each other and there would be time—plenty of time to learn each other's secrets.

She was not even disturbed when he excused himself and took his leave. He would be back. Deserts, mountains, or rivers could not keep them apart now.

How fortunate, she thought, that I suffered and grew up the night before I met him. When I was a child, I thought as a child—

That last, she knew was from the Bible, but she couldn't remember the rest of it. William would of course not hold it against her that she was a Christian. All the practitioners of eastern religions were very broadminded in that respect.

At least, Laurie hoped they were.

She hurried back to the bus, fairly bursting with news. But as she approached the outskirts, something happened. A change came about; a natural change, she thought, as a result of her new adult status. Mature people did not go around wearing their hearts on their sleeves. It had been all right in other days to have crushes on this one and that one and make the crushes public. This was different. When the real thing came along, you nurtured it in your *secret* heart—not the one you showed the world.

When she got back, Shirley was washing Tracy with soap and a towel from a pan on the bus's fender. The other Partridges were out of sight.

Laurie was so preoccupied with her new adulthood that she did not notice, for a few moments, what was going on. Then it dawned.

"Mother! What are you doing? Washing Tracy with lemon soda?"

"Water, dear. Nice fresh water."

"But where—?"

"Right here by the bus. Two big pails of fresh water.

They were here when we got up this morning. I put them inside to keep them cool."

Laurie was as much amazed by her mother's attitude as by the miraculous windfall.

"You don't seem very excited."

"Don't I?" Shirley replied cheerfully as she smiled at her eldest daughter. "Well, perhaps I'm not. I was delighted to see the water. I even wondered where it came from. But my first thought was how badly we all need baths. Perhaps I'm still in shock from last night."

"Oh, Mom! You're just something else!"

Before Laurie could expand on the idea, Keith and Danny appeared down the street. They were obviously taking the arrival of the water far differently.

Danny reached into the van and got a glassful and poured it on his head. His attitude, as was Keith's, reflected pure frustration.

"There isn't a wet spot in this town," he muttered. "It's the darnedest thing—"

"Danny," Shirley said, "I'm surprised at the way you're using that water. Two buckets won't last forever. If you must use it that way, get a bar of soap and do it right."

Keith exploded. "Who brought it? The Gentle Giant? The bearded Peeping Tom? Did the phony bike character sneak back to do us a good turn?"

"And how come," Danny added gloomily, "we're always sacked out when the good Samaritans slip in?"

"Speaking of good Samaritans—what about Ben Johnson?" Keith said. "I don't see any stampede of rescuers rushing in to rescue us."

"I told you he was a phony," Danny said.

"All right. But even a phony makes some sense. He didn't make any. There was no logical way he could have appeared as he did and then split."

"Except if he was spying on us."

"Why would he want to do that?" Shirley asked as she gave unwelcome attention to Tracy's ears.

"I don't know," Danny replied, "unless he didn't come from the outside at all."

"That's crazy," Keith said.

"Maybe. But I know something's going on in this town."

"Then why don't we know about it?" Laurie asked.

"Because we sleep so much. Every time something important happens, the Partridges are sacked out. Lots could go on around here. Industry could thrive. There could be births, deaths, marriages. How would we know?"

"Danny, calm yourself," Shirley cautioned. She knew that their dilemma was wearing on the nerves of her high-strung brood. The signs were beginning to show.

"Yeah," Keith said, "getting up tight isn't going to help. Let's keep on hunting for that water supply."

"No use. It doesn't even have to be in town. It can be out in the desert somewhere. And if you'll recall, we couldn't even find our own sister."

Keith's reply was cut off by Laurie. "I found the Gentle Giant," she said.

Her words were as much of a surprise to her as to the others. She'd resolved to keep her first, really genuine, true love a secret, but the need to communicate had become too great.

Her family stared in silence for a few beats. Then Keith said, "Well—thanks. Nice of you to mention it."

"You two were doing all the talking. If you'd let a person get a word in edgewise."

"You have the floor," Danny assured her. "Speak, dear sister."

"He asked me if Tracy was all right."

Shirley had stopped scrubbing Tracy's neck. "What did he say, Laurie? Who is he? Tell us."

"Just a man," Laurie sighed.

Her tone and manner negated that completely—to a point where Keith, knowing Laurie well, said, “Hmmm. *Just* a man, eh? I’ve got a hunch he isn’t eighty years old with cross-eyes and a wooden leg.”

“A *beautiful* man—right?” Danny asked.

“Dear, why didn’t you bring him here so we could thank him properly?” Shirley said.

“I asked him but he was too busy.”

“Too busy doing what,” Keith demanded.

“Oh, too busy rescuing the children of stupid families stranded in the desert maybe. How do I know? Just . . . just leave me alone!”

With that, Laurie rushed off to be by herself.

The Partridges watched in surprised silence. Danny took a few steps as she fled up the street but Shirley stopped him.

“Let her be. She’s as confused and tired as the rest of us. She’ll tell us in due time.”

Shirley finished with Tracy and put her away for a nap. Chris was plucking away at a guitar. Shirley silenced him by diverting his attention to a book. Then, feeling a need to be alone herself, she walked off toward some rocks several hundred yards away where there would be some shade against the hot sun . . .

CHAPTER 9

The Water Bearer

□ Johnny Harp was entranced.

He'd felt strong guilt at disobeying Sam, but the temptation had been too much. His first glimpse of the Woman there in the town had remained with him to haunt him without mercy. She looked so familiar; a face out of a long-lost dream; a vision buried in the hazy past that came to him now only in misty moments of recall he'd learned to reject as painful.

His mentality, a complex mixture of poverty and riches, produced clear perceptions on the one hand and vague impressions on the other.

The sight of Shirley Partridge had complicated things even further. She was somehow a shining light glowing through the darkness to illuminate a better time and a better place.

Johnny had posted himself at a safe distance from the town to pass many hours in vigil, his reward, a glimpse of Shirley now and then.

He listened to the Partridges at rehearsal and had been drawn by the music and yet repelled by it. Many of the

pieces seemed harsh, grating against his sensibilities. Other, simpler melodies soothed him.

On this day, he'd been watching as usual from a rock pile where he could see the bus. Then, magically, Shirley Partridge began walking in his direction.

At first, he was elated—she was coming closer. Then he was frightened. Sam would be mad. Stay out of sight. That had been the prime order.

Shirley moved closer, and Johnny faded back around the high side of the rock pile. He peered through crevice to see her stop on the other side, in the shade, and perch crosslegged on a boulder.

The fear and elation merged into one indescribable feeling.

He was trapped. A quick thought agonized him: *She'll see how ugly I am . . .*

Shirley was too preoccupied to sense another presence close by. Deep in her own ponderings, she had turned to find a more comfortable position facing the higher side of the pile. Her eyes were unfocused, unseeing.

Then a chill formed of its own volition at the base of her spine and moved upward. It was as though her conscious mind became aware of this and told her senses to check it out. Her eyes focused.

From between two boulders, a face was staring at her. The chill deepened into fear. It was the face at the bus window.

Afterwards, Shirley would be unable to describe her thought pattern at that moment. She did not judge or plan. There was no urge to run screaming for help. So she sat as she was, looking into the ugly little eyes, studying the vaguely misshapen face.

"Hello."

There was no answer.

The dawning came quickly for Shirley, one that would

have evaded a less perceptive person. She was not talking to an adult. The face, the size, the outward image, were deceiving.

This was a child.

Shirley smiled. "Cat got your tongue?"

There was an effort at an answering smile but it failed.

"It must be hot there in the sun. Why don't you come here in the shade?"

The trip around the boulder took a long time. Shirley neither encouraged nor interrupted it. Finally, the child—this was what Shirley had to call him—was sitting warily on the edge of a rock some ten feet away.

"I think I saw you once before. When we first came."

A slight nod.

"You ran away. Why didn't you stay and say hello?"

"I was afraid."

"There was nothing to be afraid of."

"Sam wouldn't like my talking to you."

"Why?"

"He—just wouldn't."

"All right. Then we'll have a secret. We won't tell Sam."

"I listen to you when you sing."

"Do you like to hear us?"

"I guess so."

"You must come down to the bus. If you have a favorite song, we'll sing it for you."

Johnny shook his head. "I can't. Sam wouldn't like it."

"I'm sorry."

"Did you like the water?"

"*You* brought us the water?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where did you get it?"

"From the pump."

"Where is the pump?"

"Sam wouldn't like me to tell you. I'll bring more water, though."

"That's very nice of you."

Johnny was staring into Shirley's face with an intensity that could have been disconcerting if she had allowed it to be. As it was, she found herself intrigued by the quality of the look. The poor lad's ugliness was accentuated by the vacancy of his expression. Now that changed. Intelligence glowed in his eyes, making them no longer small and piggish.

As she watched, Johnny reached into his pocket and brought out a thick artist's pencil. He looked at it, frowned, and exchanged it for a piece of chalk.

Keeping his eyes on Shirley's face, he began to draw on the surface of the rock in front of him. As she stared, fascinated, Johnny's hand moved in firm, bold strokes. He scarcely looked at the sketch he was making, glancing at it fleetingly now and again.

"Smile a little more."

Shirley obeyed, struck by the fact that the command was voiced in different tones; that while this strange person had an artist's tool in his hand, he was someone else—perhaps the person he'd been meant to be.

The sketch, as exact a likeness as any professional could have produced, was finished in scant minutes. Shirley got up and crossed over to have a closer look.

"It's—it's marvelous! You did the sketch on the wall over in Devil's Flat, didn't you?"

"You were sitting in the door of your bus. I just did your head and shoulders. I'd like to do all of you sometime."

"That would be wonderful. I'd frame it and hang it in my library at home."

"You would?"

"I'd consider it a privilege."

"I'd want to make it in color."

"Where did you learn to paint?"

The vacant look was back. The confused mental groping. "I didn't learn. I just draw."

"It's fantastic. You could be a great artist."

"I've got to get back to the cave. Sam will be mad."

"I wish you could come down to the bus with me and meet my family."

Johnny shook his head reluctantly. "No. Sam doesn't want you people to know what we're doing here."

Shirley didn't press. All the questions boiling around in her mind remained unasked.

"I'm sorry, but maybe we can see each other again before long?"

"I'd like that."

He got up, slipped around the rock, and was gone. Shirley stayed where she was, oblivious of the sun's heat now. Most of it was confusion, but one thing stood crystal clear:

The poor boy sees me as a mother.

There was no doubt of this. The look of wordless yearning, the faint flashes of groping hope; a mother far less perceptive than Shirley Partridge would have recognized them instantly for what they were.

Shirley's heart went out to the poor unfortunate even as she wondered and groped in her own mind . . .

If Shirley was more silent, more preoccupied that night, no one noticed. There was a rehearsal but she begged off, giving family duties—darning socks to be specific—higher priority.

The rehearsal was spirited, and so her silence wasn't noticed until she spoke suddenly, during a break.

"Danny, you're the closest. Empty the water in that pail into a pan and then put both pails outside the door."

"Okay, Mom, but—"

"Do as I say."

"All right, but you don't have to snap my head off."

"I'm sorry."

"Something wrong, Mom? I mean something more than usual?" Keith asked.

"No. I'm just a little tired, that's all."

Danny did the chore demanded of him and the rehearsal went on. They became even more preoccupied when they began working on Keith's song, "Ballad of the Badlands."

Finally the rehearsal broke up with lemin soda all around. Danny was just lifting his can when he froze.

"Shhhh."

"What is it?" Laurie asked.

"Somebody outside."

"Somebody with the pails," the sharp-eared Chris said.

Keith started toward the door.

"Sit down," Shirley ordered.

"But—"

"I said, sit down, Keith. Pay no attention—none of you."

They were all held motionless as much by surprise at their mother's sternness as in obedience to the command.

All ears were of course sharpened, and everyone knew exactly what was happening outside. Someone had taken the empty pails while they were rehearsing and was now returning them, filled.

They listened as the footsteps receded, and only the howl of a distant coyote broke the silence outside.

Laurie spoke first. "Mom, I don't want to sound like a rebellious daughter, but we *are* members of the family. I think we're entitled to—well, a briefing?"

Shirley had slipped back into her seat, not realizing that she'd been perched tensely on the edge of it.

"You're quite right. I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so con-

fused myself. I met our benefactor today, out by the rocks."

"The one who brings us water?"

"Yes. He also does marvelous sketches."

"He's the one who drew your picture?" Tracy asked.

"That's right, darling. I saw him in the window that first morning, too."

"Mom's shy admirer," Danny said. "And is he *shy*."

"You don't understand. It's not like that at all."

"Then how is it?"

"He sees me—well, I'm a mother image to him."

"A mother image. You said he was a man, not a kid."

"And this mother bit. You're already spoken for," Keith interjected. "Whoever he is, he's stepping out of his league."

"What's he doing around here?" Chris asked.

"I don't know."

"Then let's get in touch with him and find out."

"I don't know where he's staying."

"What about the water? Where did he get it?"

"I don't know that either."

Danny fell back into a seat in a gesture of total frustration.

"Oh, boy! Our Partridge women. They're certainly something else. Laurie finds the Gentle Giant and doesn't know where he lives. Now, Mom, you meet the Bearded Stranger and forget to ask for his telephone number."

Shirley had been half-ignoring the protests remaining deep in her own thoughts.

"There's so much I don't understand."

"Welcome to the club, Mom," Danny said.

"I mean about that boy."

"Wait a minute. What is he, really?" Laurie asked. "A boy or a man?"

"He's both."

Laurie sat down gently. "I give up."

"He's actually a retarded adult."

"You're kidding. A retarded adult made that sketch of you?"

"He made another one while we were out there on the rock pile. It gave me goose pimples watching him. While he was sketching, he changed. He—oh, I don't know!"

"Why didn't you want us to contact him when he brought the water?"

"There's someone he's afraid of. Someone named Sam."

"But you didn't find out any more than that?"

"I didn't want to press him. I was afraid it would drive him away for good."

Keith had said nothing. He sat back, thoughtfully regarding his mother. He got up suddenly and reached out and took her hand.

"Mom, we aren't critical. We're just interested. If there's something you don't want to tell us—"

"It's not that, dear. It's just that I don't know how to tell you. I mean that something terrible has been done to that boy—is being done. I want to help him but I don't know enough about such things. I can only go by my instincts."

"I can dig that. I'm sure we all can."

Danny was shaking his head in wonder. "It's absolutely cosmic," he marveled. "We come to a place we can't get out of because nobody's around. And all we find is people. Now there's Sam, whoever he is. If this keeps up, we'll be lucky to have standing room."

"Mom," Laurie said, "now that you've found this character, do you suppose you could talk him into getting us something to eat?"

"A great idea," Chris enthused. "When we get out of here, I'll never be able to look a potato chip or a chocolate cookie in the face again."

Danny waved his arms in the air, *a la* Hamlet. "Confusion, confusion, all is confusion. Where do you suppose that cat's getting the water?"

"I'm going to find out," Keith said grimly. "I'm tired of this helpless feeling. First thing in the morning, we'll—"

"Let the others hunt, Keith. I've got a job for you."

Keith blinked in surprise. "Okay, but if it's fixing that motor—"

"No, I want you to help me get up into the church loft."

"What do you want up there?"

"That weird music interests me very much. I'd hate to leave here, forever wondering where it came from and how."

Keith shrugged. "All right. It shouldn't be too hard to rig a ladder."

The way she'd put it—*I'd hate to leave here wondering*—reflected an attitude all the Partridges had consciously nurtured—that they *would* leave in due time, whole and unharmed.

But now Danny insisted upon questioning that, or at least bringing it up for discussion.

"Before you start climbing into lofts," he said, "we ought to do a little rapping about this groovy situation we're in. Like not hearing from Reuben."

"I'm sure he's trying his best, dear."

"That's the point. We know he is. So why hasn't somebody shown up?" When nobody had a ready answer, Danny went on: "My orderly methodical mind tells me it's because this place is more isolated than we've even dreamed of. A real lost spot on the planet."

"I've been thinking about that, Mom," Laurie said. "I'm beginning to not like the vibes a little bit."

"Uh-huh," Danny said. "Like that song Keith's been trying to write. 'Where God sits down to think.' I don't want to be disrespectful, but I'm beginning to think He's the only one."

"With all these shadowy characters around, we're alone?" Chris said. "I can't believe it."

"We must have a little faith," Shirley insisted. "No one has injured us yet. In fact, we've been helped by—"

"Mom," Danny cut in, "you make me think of that old joke."

"What joke?" Tracy piped up.

"The cat who jumped off the top of a twenty-story building. As he passed a window on the tenth floor, somebody heard him say, 'Nothing's happened yet—nothing's happened yet.'"

Shirley laughed while the others looked pained. "Let's break this up before we got morbid. We have water and the sun shines on schedule and it's still God's planet. Let's be thankful."

As she spoke, she drew Tracy close to her. A silent reminder that made Keith turn to Laurie.

"Yeah, how about that giant of yours? How come you couldn't mention the fact to him that we're in a squeeze here?"

"I have my pride! Do you think I could tell him I belong to a family that doesn't know where it's at?"

Keith threw up his hands and groaned. "Come on, Mom. Let's crawl into that loft and hibernate . . ."

CHAPTER 10

The Ghost of Devil's Flat

□ In a city quite some distance from Devil's Flat, in a luxurious suite of offices, a conference was in progress, one that would have a strong bearing on the destiny of the Partridges.

Men of importance had turned sharp eyes on a mass of statistics, a series of expensive blow-ups done in color, upon cost sheets and comparative figures.

The conference was taking place at a long table, with all eyes pointed toward the head of it where a comparatively young man sat pondering all the facts and figures they'd thrown at him.

"A hundred thousand over the old estimated budget," he mused. "Is the realism worth it?"

A dozen heads remained motionless, a dozen brains trying to fathom the young man's idea on the subject before the dozen heads could shake in *yes* or *no* unison.

The young man kept his opinion to himself as he eyed the group. It was a phenomenon of the present-day scene that experts in varied fields such as these could be put in a position of hanging on the words of a youth in his mid-

twenties whose brain housed less than one percent of their combined knowledge, experience, and ability; ironic that the youth's single asset could dominate so many varied skills.

The youth turned his head to single out two men seated together on one side of the table.

"Hot, you said."

They nodded as one. "Like the Seventh Circle, only worse maybe."

"It would be." The youth consulted another of the group: "That would mean big stuff, Clint. Something to cool a good-sized shed for us to live in. How would you move it?"

"Rent a pair of copters would be best. It would work."

"Truck the rest in?"

"Might be better to fly the whole works. I'd need the word before I make that cost comparison."

The youth got up and turned to look out the window—down at the city below. Perhaps he was pausing to enjoy the feeling—that of being the king of that city. At least one of the kings, of that city and many others.

Probably not, however. He sat on too precarious a throne to spend much time enjoying it. The thing was to stay there as long as possible and you could be deposed quickly. Take a short nap and you could find yourself back where you started, looking up the ladder wondering what had happened.

He made his decision after the manner of a computer that had digested all the facts and announced the final correlation:

"Okay. We get off the beach. We go."

A dozen smiles appeared.

A dozen heads nodded in agreement.

The youth stopped this with a word. "Now for the big problem," he said.

Smiles vanished. Eyes questioned. Minds waited.

"A new theme."

Someone said, "Oh, sure," but with doubt and uncertainty.

"What else? 'White Clouds and Blue Water' is out. Do you want a loused-up sound track?"

"But it's your identity."

"Off the beach it'd be for laughs." The youth turned to the aide ever at his elbow. "Arrange for a conference with the talent. Then I'll go have a look."

The conference broke up . . .

Keith wiped the sweat from his face and chest and said, "Okay, Mom, there it is. The world's first organ."

"Hardly that, but it's a little beauty."

"It might be if it was cleaned up a little more. I wonder if that bellows will hold?"

"Danny's black bicycle tape seems to do nicely."

Keith grinned. "Maybe I can't fix motors but I do all right with musical instruments, don't I?"

"It must be your talent, dear." Shirley looked at the little organ and her expression softened. "Can't you just see the fine people who brought it here for their church?"

"Uh-huh. The congregation out of a John Wayne western. I wonder why they didn't take it with them when they left?"

"Perhaps they thought it belonged here."

"More likely they went in dozens of different directions and couldn't figure out who owned it."

"I doubt that."

"Maybe they had a big fight. I hope nobody was killed."

"Keith! Wipe off that stool so I can sit down and try it."

A moment later, Keith said, "Okay, Mom, let's hear it for the coyotes."

Shirley sat down at the organ, Keith pumped his improvised bellows. Shirley ran her fingers over the keys. Discordant noises resulted.

Keith stopped pumping and held his ears. "It must be the pipes," he said. "They're full of dirt."

"You're right. They'll have to be cleaned."

"How could I do it without taking the organ apart?"

"You can't, I'm afraid. It would be nice if we had a vacuum cleaner and a live outlet."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Not now. It's too late. Where could the time have gone?"

Shirley got up from the stool and hugged herself. "Chilly, too. It's amazing how the temperature changes when the sun goes down."

Reminded of the change, Keith felt the chill also. He draped the towel he'd used over his mother's shoulders and turned to the makeshift ladder he'd constructed for Shirley.

"I'll go down first, Mom. Then I can catch you if you fall."

"Fall? What do you think I am, an old lady?"

"You'll do 'til one comes along," Keith said cheerfully, and started down.

He got halfway to the lower floor and stopped. He was held motionless by the same phenomenon that held Shirley in rigid pose by the ladder's top.

"That's it," Keith gasped. "It's coming again!"

"Our ghost music!" Shirley whispered.

She stepped slowly back as Keith climbed back up the ladder just as slowly. Then they stood there staring at the organ.

"It's playing by itself," Keith breathed.

"I know. But *what* it's playing! Somehow I don't care how it's doing it—"

They stopped talking to listen, and it was as though the ancient instrument had a mind and a soul of its own, as though it poured that soul out to the listening desert in a threnody of lamentation born out of loneliness.

The music—and it was music—rose and fell, and Keith found himself swaying to its hypnotic beat.

“I can get it!” he whispered fiercely. “I know I can get it!”

“It’s the wind,” Shirley said, now thoroughly bemused. “The hot air is rising through that hole in the roof, and the cooler air rushes in from below and goes through the pipes.”

“I can get it! There’s a melody! It’s got a rhythm, a theme.”

In contrast to Keith’s stir of excitement, Shirley was awed at the phenomenon.

She said, “All art really belongs to nature. We humans clash color and sound, but nature never does. No landscape nature paints ever clashes, even though she uses dozens of shades and colors.”

“The music is here every night and morning when the temperatures change, I’m sure,” Keith said. “It’s only when the wind is very strong that we can hear it out in the street—down by the bus.”

Still in her own soliloquy, Shirley said, “Nature is always true to herself when she’s left alone. She can even correct our mistakes when she’s given a chance.”

“What do you mean, Mom?”

“This organ went to pieces through human failing. But nature took her wind and her sand and wrote a symphony that expresses the mood of this empty land perfectly. Does that tell you anything, dear?”

“Well, I guess.”

“It tells me that if we stop polluting what God has given us, nature will restore it to its original beauty. In the desert, in the cities, on the seas—everywhere.”

The temperature-change wind was dying. The music sighed to a perfect finale. In the silence that followed, Keith forced a laugh.

“Come on, Mom. That was a great sermon but there’s

no one here to listen. Let's get down before it's so dark we'll break our necks."

"I could stay here all night—"

"And freeze to death. Besides, you've got an obligation to your lovely family of which I'm one and I need your help on that melody."

They walked slowly up the dark street toward the bus that now glowed through its windows with the neonlike light from the emergency gas lamp they'd carried for so long and had used for the first time in Devil's Flat.

"It's going to give out pretty soon," Keith said, the spell of the church fading there in the cold night air.

"Yes. Living through dark nights in this town will be hard on Tracy and Chris."

"They'll be a moon by that time, maybe. Or maybe Reuben and his rescue people will start looking in the right direction."

They'd heard nothing of the search from the radio but Reuben could not be faulted for that. Static had blocked reception to a point where they'd gotten nothing at all.

"He'll come through, Mom," Keith said. Then he turned and peered at Shirley's face. "You *are* beginning to worry a little, aren't you?"

"Maybe—just a little," Shirley replied. "But we must be careful. We mustn't let the children know. You see, our food is almost gone . . ."

CHAPTER 11

Solve a Mystery—Find Another

□ "I have found it! I found it!" Chris screamed.

The screams brought every Partridge head to alert in the various places where they were strung out through the town.

Keith and Shirley were in the church. Laurie sat on the battered store porch brooding over her Gentle Giant. Tracy and Danny were working out a rhythm with a tambourine and a guitar.

All in all, it was just another day at Devil's Flat, with the Partridges busy and comparatively happy, when Chris yelled the news and stood jumping up and down in the middle of the street until they were all assembled.

"You found what, dear?" Shirley asked.

"Wait'll you see!"

"Don't be a goon!" Laurie said. "Tell us."

"The water! I found the water!"

"Well, glory be!" Shirley cried. "At last we've solved one of our mysteries."

"That's what you think," Chris retorted. "Come on."

They followed back through an areaway between the two buildings next to the bank. He stopped at the far end and grinned at them.

"All right, what do you see?"

"I see two walls—one on each side," Danny growled. "Come on. Are we playing a guessing game or something?"

Enjoying his moment of dramatic surprise, Chris bent over and removed a lower section of one of the walls. He straightened and pointed.

"There. What do you see?"

They stared as one.

"How did you find it?" Laurie asked, her mind not entirely on the question as she bent for a closer look.

"Just good detective work—what else?"

Which was not quite true. The section had been so carefully and cleverly cut out and fitted back so snugly that it might never have been discovered if Chris hadn't stumbled and fallen against it while kiting through the areaway after a fleeing field mouse. However, he felt justified in giving himself a little credit.

The Partridges were strangely silent as they contemplated Chris' find; all except Tracy, who clapped her hands and cried, "Golly! What a pretty green pump!"

That was the problem. It was too pretty; far too clean and brightly painted to have spent ninety-some years all by itself in a ghost town.

Keith, standing beside his mother, looked at her and asked, "What do you think?"

Pushing a strand of hair up off her worried face, Shirley replied, "I think Chris was right. We perhaps solved one mystery but we've got a bigger one."

Keith's face reflected worry also. But it didn't concern the pump. It concerned his mother. She was the rock, the foundation of the family. It had been her courage and

warm cheerfulness that had buoyed the rest of them. But things were wearing away at her. She could take just so much, what with the responsibility she bore.

"Not necessarily," Keith said. "I mean nothing's turned up here that we didn't know before. We knew there was a source of water somewhere around and that we aren't alone in Devil's Flat—not by any means. So the pump's a brand new one. With other people using the town, why shouldn't it be? And it was natural for them to hide it—just as they've hidden something else around here."

"What?" Chris asked.

"If we knew that—"

"Where?" Danny demanded.

"Oh, come on! If we knew what and where we'd be getting someplace."

"You've got a point," Chris muttered.

He bent over. With two strokes of the pump handle, he brought water gushing out onto the ground.

"Don't waste it, dear," Shirley said.

"Look," Tracy broke in excitedly, "I know what we can do."

"What, darling?"

"Just wait. Just sit here and wait until whoever it is comes here for water and then ask them."

"Ask them what, squirt?" Chris frowned.

"Don't call me squirt!"

"Okay—okay—"

"We might as well all go back to what we were doing, children," Shirley said. She turned in the direction of the church and Keith followed.

Tracy, angered because her suggestion had been taken so lightly, plumped down on the ground and prepared for a vigil.

Chris drew Danny aside when they were back in the street and said, "Something's been bothering me."

"Welcome to the club," Danny muttered. "Me, I feel like the whole financial structure's crashed out there and I'm trapped in here."

"Come on."

Chris led Danny into the bank. Once inside, he said, "What do you think of this place?"

"What's to think? It's where the haves kept their money in the old days and the have-nots came to borrow it."

"It bothers me."

"Because there's nobody here to make a loan?"

"Cut it out. Look around. Quit clowning. Don't you see anything wrong?"

After a quick look at the premises, Danny said, "You're goofing on me."

"I am not!"

"Then you're putting me down."

"Look, I brought you in here because—well, because you've got a sharp head."

Danny's eyes widened. A compliment like that from Chris was rare. It had to be earned. Danny's whole attitude changed. He now wanted to be worthy of his brother's admiration. He looked around again.

"Exactly what's your complaint about this scene?"

"I don't know."

"It was a bank. There's the grill-work. That's where the teller waited on the customers. Is it something about that ten-dollar bill Tracy found?"

"No, not that. I've got a blind spot about this place and it bugs me. Something's wrong."

Danny gave the place the entire benefit of his sharp head. Finally, he gave up.

"I dunno, brother. You must have a sharper skull than I have because I'm not even bugged. It's just an old bank with all the money gone."

"Okay, maybe I'm just too far out on the thing."

"Maybe you're tripping because all the juices are gone. No Coke, no Pepsi, and all we've got to drink is plain water."

"Could be. I think I'll go sit with Tracy and meditate . . ."

Back at their project, Keith and Shirley consulted on how to proceed.

"You realize, Mom, that when I clean the dirt out of those pipes, we've lost it forever. That real heavy sound will be gone."

"That's true, Keith, and we mustn't make any mistakes, because this means so much to you. But the sound itself is a sometime thing. I mean it will change. The dirt in the pipes isn't stable. A really big wind could change it."

"Uh-huh, and it's probably changing all the time anyhow."

"It's really up to you, dear."

"Okay. We go. I'll clear the pipes so you can get your own vibes out of the organ. It won't take too long."

"Can I help?"

"No. Just bring me some water once in a while. This place will be a bake oven before I'm through."

"You're not going to ruin your health, Keith. When it gets too hot, you quit."

"Okay. See you later . . ."

Left to herself, all the children occupied, Shirley decided to take her troubles into the open. Without thinking, she gravitated back to the rock pile where she'd met Johnny Harp.

It was with a vague feeling of guilt that she contemplated Johnny. Her heart went out to the poor unfortunate but she had her own family to think of, a family in a state more desperate than it may have appeared on the surface. So was there room in her overloaded mind for a stranger?

Perhaps she hadn't come to the rock pile with any idea of contacting Johnny. Still, she was not surprised when a shy, "Hello," interrupted her thoughts.

"Hello, Johnny. Thank you for the two pails of water you brought last night."

She was both touched and saddened by Johnny's reaction; a helpless eagerness to please; a need for love and understanding that caused him to redden above his beard and writhe like a friendly puppy.

"You have beautiful hands, Johnny."

Shirley reached out and took one of them into her own. Johnny Harp's smile vanished. He withdrew his hand and withheld it as though it contained something of great value.

"I have to take care of them."

"Of course."

"Sam gets mad about my hands."

"What do you mean?"

"He's always telling me to be careful with them. Before I made the plates, he bought gloves and I had to wear them all the time I wasn't working."

"Working at what?"

"Making—" Johnny stopped, Sam's demands for secrecy stilling his tongue. "Doing the thing Sam wanted."

"Sam must be very fond of you. He knows how valuable your hands are and he doesn't want you to hurt them."

New clouds formed in Johnny's face. "Fond?" He shook his head. "Sam's getting mean. He hit me today."

"Why?"

"Because I brought you the water."

"You told him?"

"He made me. I wouldn't dare come out here but he's asleep. He stayed awake all last night worrying."

"What does he worry about?"

Johnny didn't answer. Shirley could see by the look in his eyes that she was reaching shaky ground. She wanted

more than anything to continue with the direct questions and get to the bottom of this mystery. But her instincts told her no, and with nothing else to go on, she obeyed them.

"Tell me about yourself, Johnny. Where did you come from? Who are your people?"

"My people—?"

"Your mother and father."

This turned out to be difficult business, but Shirley persisted. Two hours' worth of daylight vanished across the hot sky before Johnny's nervousness in regard to Sam put an end to the conversation.

After he left, she pieced together what she'd been able to dredge out of him.

His only clear memory was the Home. He'd gone there after something terrible had happened. He'd been five or six or seven then. He was not sure.

Someone had been killed. Nothing clear evolved from that probing, and Shirley suspected that there had been a father and a mother and a lover. Shirley was forced to rate Johnny's parents as most dubious in a moral sense. Anyhow, someone was killed, the father went to prison and the mother vanished out of Johnny's life.

He stayed in the Home until he went to a place called the Farm, a school of some sort, Shirley judged. It was a place of minimum restraint because Johnny wandered away several times, only to be brought back.

When he came of age, he was either released or he wandered away again, and because of his age was not returned.

Shirley was puzzled by his keeper's lack of interest in his talent. It seemed to her that he should have merited special attention which he did not receive. Perhaps, she thought, the talent had not blossomed during those early years.

It was discovered by a man named Digger, however,

and put to use; a rather unimaginative use, which gave a clue to the caliber of this Digger. Anyhow, he died of a heart attack on a carny lot somewhere, and the mysterious Sam took over.

That had ended the story, at least for the time being.

So Shirley could only ponder the terrible waste here; that or the callous use—whatever it was—that was being made of Johnny's skill.

Shirley had had no particular reason for not telling Johnny that they'd found the pump. Now, she was glad she hadn't. The urge to supply the Partridges with water might bring him back to the van. If it did, Shirley would not let him go as easily as before . . .

Sam Barton had been experiencing a slow falling apart. No single incident had precipitated it; an accumulation, rather, of all the frustrations besetting him had altered his personality.

He was turning vicious.

At first, he'd had faith. Then it had seemed incredible that a caper planned so carefully could go so wrong. The basis of his plan had been isolation. So how could all these people turn up, seemingly on schedule, in a place that had been deserted for so many generations?

This complaint, plus his helplessness to offset the cruel thrusts of destiny, had filled his mind with a bile that began eating at its walls.

The discovery that Johnny had disobeyed orders to a point of carrying water to the Partridges flushed him into a rage.

"You stupid half-wit! How do you expect them to leave if you furnish them with all the comforts of home?"

Johnny cringed on the ground in front of the cave where a backhand blow had put him and whimpered, "She's a nice lady. The kids got thirsty."

"You blinding imbecile!"

"Besides," Johnny said, sniffing through his tears, "they can't go nowhere anyhow. Their bus is broke down."

"I know their bus is broke down! But if they got thirsty enough, they might wander off into the desert and die. That occur to you?"

It had. It was the very reason Johnny had provided the water.

His anger still boiling, Sam turned his attention to Nick Tate, who lounged lazily against a rock observing Sam with a kind of detached curiosity that was even worse than Johnny's stupidity.

"And you! A fortune in your grasp and you sprawl there like an oversized amoeba!"

"What's an amoeba?" Johnny asked.

Sensing ridicule that was not there, Sam kicked out viciously at Johnny.

"All right," Nick said, "that's enough. Leave him alone."

"You're taking over?"

"I'm telling you to quit taking your stupidity out on him."

Sam measured the distance between them, gauged Nick's vulnerable attitude, and computed the odds. He didn't like them. He might get in the first hit but then there would be others.

"What do you mean, my stupidity?"

"This whole crazy idea of yours. It was ridiculous from the start. An amateur like you pulling off a counterfeit caper. It's a lot different than shilling a mark out of two-bits at a carnival."

"I notice you came along."

"Strictly for the laughs." Nick got to his feet, yawning. "And now my jaws are tired from all the buffos and I'm checking out."

"You're what?"

"Splitting."

"You can't do that!"

"No? It's very simple. I walk a couple of miles to where my bike's stashed. I get on and kick the starter. I roll and that's it."

"But why?"

"I got a message from Chicken Little, friend. She says the sky's going to fall on you and I don't want to be around when it happens."

"You're in this as deep as I am."

"You come up with such original stuff," Nick mocked. "I've got to remember that one."

"But it's true."

"I don't think so. All I did was get you a line on this place. Then I stood around waiting for that press to fall on your foot when you hauled it out here." Nick's grin was calculated to anger Sam even further.

Nick shrugged innocently. "I didn't know anything about making phony tens. I thought you wanted to open a gambling joint out here. I was just waiting around to use the swimming pool."

For all his banter and ridicule, Nick was not hiding the serious motivation behind his action. He saw the whole operation falling to pieces, and he didn't plan to be there when they passed out the handcuffs.

So he touched his forelock, swung a playful fist across Johnny's jaw, and went whistling off into the desert to be seen no more in the vicinity of Devil's Flat.

Sam and Johnny stared after him until he disappeared. Then, his voice thick with anger, Sam said, "Get out of my sight. You make me sick."

He slumped down against a rock, and Johnny slipped off into the desert to mourn by himself . . .

The camping light that brightened the Partridges' evenings was giving out. It now cast little more than a eerie

glow. Still, Shirley insisted on taking the optimistic view:

"There's a quarter moon, children. Very soon the night will be as light as the days out here."

Half-humorously, half-seriously, Keith intoned, "How many moons? How many moons have come, gone? Come and gone, here in the badlands, the sadlands—"

"Spare us," Laurie said.

Keith stretched wearily and replied, "Would you stifle the creative urge, sister dear?"

"Under the circumstances—yes," Laurie replied. "I'm going to sleep . . ."

One by one, the Partridges drifted off. Even Keith lost the battle to stay awake by his mother's side.

Shirley, for her part, smiled at them and remained wide awake.

An hour passed, then another. Shirley began nodding, about ready to give it up. Then the soft footsteps sounded. The empty pails were picked up and carried away.

Shirley left the bus and waited in the areaway between the store and the next building. Johnny returned, his footsteps heavier now, burdened by the full pails. He set them down and retraced his path, moving in between two buildings farther down the street.

Shirley followed. With as much caution as was practicable, she strove to keep the retreating footsteps within earshot, praying the while that she would not fall down and break a leg or step into a hole and sprain an ankle.

She succeeded remarkably well for one not versed in night trailing. There were some minor scratches from protruding rocks, and one direct contact knocked the breath out of her.

But Johnny Harp moved in a comparatively straight line, and Shirley stayed directly behind him.

Until his footsteps faded and died.

Shirley stopped and stayed where she was for several minutes, striving to memorize her position there in the

dark. She knew in what direction she'd started; also, that she had varied little from a direct line.

Storing that information, she returned to the bus and went to find her children in dreamland . . .

The following morning, with everyone still asleep, she fared forth again, and her sense of night direction could be faulted in no way. With a little searching, she found her own footsteps in the desert dust following the larger, deeper ones of Johnny Harp.

The footsteps ended abruptly, and Shirley found herself in a rock maze of confusing irregularities. Various clefts and miniature canyons led off in many directions. It would take hours, perhaps days, to unravel them.

She was about to turn back in defeat when a cry of pain echoed through the rocks, a cry that told her she was far closer to her goal than she'd realized.

She went swiftly in the indicated direction, guided a short time later by a second cry just beyond a nearby boulder. She rounded the rock and saw Johnny Harp cringing on the ground. An older, bald-headed man had one foot poised to kick him.

"Stop that!" Shirley cried.

The effect was somewhat ludicrous. The man stiffened. He balanced there for a moment as he brought his eyes around. Then he lost his balance and teetered like a character in an old Chase movie until he found his balance.

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am. I want you to stop abusing that poor boy!"

"Maybe you just ought to mind your business and go back where you came from."

Shirley, her lips set grimly, marched bravely past the man, seized Johnny's hand and insisted that he get to his feet.

"I'll go back when I'm ready. In the meantime, I want to know why you keep abusing Johnny."

Sam Barton's surprise widened to take in this new aspect. "You know his name?"

"Of course. I know your name, too. You're Sam somebody."

Sam divided his eyes between Johnny and this intruder.

"What's been going on around here?" he muttered.

"I've been curious about that myself," Shirley said. "I don't know why you're hiding out here in these badlands and I don't care very much. I just want you to stop abusing this boy. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"What have you got to back up your play, lady?"

Shirley withered him with what she hoped was a powerful glance. She took Johnny's hand.

"Come on, Johnny. Come with me. We'll find room for you in town."

It was a spur-of-the-moment act. Shirley did not know what result she expected. Still, she was surprised by Johnny's quick refusal. He jerked his hand away and drew back.

"I have to stay with Sam."

"Why? You know he treats you badly."

"Sam takes care of me."

Shirley had proceeded from motherly indignation right from the start. The anger and resentment that drove her on had only that for its foundation. Now, Johnny Harp's words brought greater understanding.

Above all else, Johnny Harp groped for security. He was willing to suffer in payment. So cutting him off from Sam Barton meant taking on the responsibility of caring for him.

This raised several questions. Would it be fair to her own children? And if so, was she capable of giving security to a child in a man's body?

The uncertainty was enough to shake her whole attack. Sam Barton's grin, a mixture of amusement and satisfaction, indicated his understanding of her new problem.

The end result for Shirley was defeat. A thought flashed into her mind: *What on earth am I doing here? Who am I to correct the ills of the world?*

She turned and fled. Out of Sam Barton's sight, she stopped and leaned against a rock and sobbed. After a while, she straightened and composed herself.

When she arrived back at the bus, her control was again complete.

"Where you been, Mom?" Chris asked the question as he awoke and yawned.

"Out for a little walk, dear. It's going to be a lovely day—a little cooler, I think. You children get up and wash yourselves. I'll see to breakfast . . ."

After Shirley was driven from the field, Sam Barton's disintegration went on. Johnny, afraid of his anger, slipped off into the rocks.

Perhaps Sam would have abused him further or perhaps not. His anger, at any rate, was of wider scope now. He wanted to strike back in depth and breadth against the defeat that was rising about him. Revenge. And as long as a man could hardly achieve satisfaction from flailing at the skies, he could only exact satisfaction from symbols here on earth.

He could only destroy people.

And the more people he destroyed, the more surely could he make fate aware of his rage.

With this in mind, he searched for a plan. Ideas that would have horrified him a month earlier were now savored in his mind.

That bus. If he could get the whole pack of them inside and gas them to death, it would be a master stroke. But their motor had conked out so there was no place to get the carbonmonoxide. There was his own truck stashed off in the desert but bringing it in wasn't practical.

He had a rifle and plenty of ammunition, but shooting

them one by one didn't add up either. He could get one or two perhaps but not all of them. They'd scatter and make the job too difficult.

Then the plan evolved, full-blown, right there in his mind. Sam smiled. It went to prove that when a man wants something bad enough, he finds a way to get it.

He kicked his plan around for a while, trying to find holes in it. There were none. So he had only to congratulate himself, not realizing the while that the desert—which had defeated better men before him—had gotten him also, had invaded him and softened him and gotten him ready for eventual self-destruction . . .

CHAPTER 12

In God's Pocket

□ Late that afternoon, while she washed the floor of the bus, reveling in the unlimited supply of water, Shirley got a communication from the church. It came in the form of a whoop from Keith.

"Hey, Mom! I've got it. It's ready."

Shirley turned her chore over to the reluctant Tracy and went to answer the summons.

She found her older son, sweat-streaked but triumphant, surveying his handiwork.

"Try it. I'll pump."

Shirley sat down at the organ and ran her fingers over the keys. She was amazed.

"Beautiful! How did you ever do it?"

"Hard work. I don't know what all those stops are for. They're in German."

"We'll figure them out."

Keith's mood changed. He frowned at the ceiling. "It's still clear in my mind—that ghost music, but I can't nail it down."

"It will come. I remember that it reminded me a little of "*Lara's Theme*" from *Zhivago*."

"I think I'm close. Listen to this."

Keith picked up his guitar and dropped to one knee. He tuned two of the strings and caressed the frets thoughtfully for a moment and then began to play.

Shirley listened. "You're right. I do believe you're right, Keith. You *have* got it."

"It's not right, though. Not yet. When a tune comes to me, I can usually shape it up in fifteen minutes. But not this one. It comes but it comes hard."

"I think perhaps—"

Shirley paused to frown, analyzing the melody in her mind.

"The mood is there—exactly what I want," Keith said, "but the rhythm—"

"Maybe we need the lyrics first."

"If I go in from that end, I'll never get it."

Shirley's face brightened. "Let's try this."

She played softly while Keith got up from where he'd been kneeling beside the bellows and pumped them with his foot.

"We need help," he said. With that, he opened his lungs and bellowed, "Danny! Where are you? Get up here on the double."

In a little while, Danny arrived, breathless, lugging his guitar.

"The bellows," Keith said. "We need somebody to pump."

"Pump a bellows?" Danny howled, outraged. "But I'm an artist!"

"You're a bellows pumper right now. Get going."

The Partridges went to work. Two hours later, Shirley took a break to check on the family. Danny, not so intensely inspired as Keith, wandered away also.

Keith plugged stubbornly onward, but finally even he became discouraged.

"It won't come," he muttered, almost sobbing.

He left the church and went moodily back to the bus, where the family was dining sparingly on the last of the viands that had nourished them for the last several days.

"Enough for one more day," Shirley said, and added with a cheer she did not feel, "I'm sure something will turn up by that time."

The family bought that, more or less, but the general mood was down. Conversation languished as the camp light flickered and they drifted off to sleep. With only Shirley and Keith still awake, the latter straightened suddenly in a blaze of elation.

"Mom!" he whispered exultantly. "I've got it! I've really got it! It just came!"

"Wonderful, dear. In the morning, we'll—"

"No! Now! Right now! It can't wait."

"But—"

Keith was already nudging Danny. "Wake up. You're needed."

Danny opened bleary eyes.

"Quiet," Keith cautioned. "We've got work to do."

"Work? Where—what—?"

"At the church."

"You're off your rocker!"

Nonetheless, with flashlight in hand, Keith led the way to the church and up into the dark loft.

"Okay," he said to Danny, "you're going to be present at the birth of a masterpiece, so feel properly honored and start pumping that bellows . . ."

They went to work, the three of them. Time passed unheeded. The hours fled and dawn came.

Exhausted, they filed back down the ladder to find the other three Partridges huddled by the wall inside the church.

Laurie woke up as they approached.

"What on earth—?" Shirley said.

"We woke up and found you gone," Laurie replied sleepily. "I tried to light the light but it finally conked out. So we came down here to listen—and wait."

Tracy awoke. She yawned. "Mom, you know what day this is?"

"What day, darling?"

"The day something will turn up. You said so last night. Remember?"

Shirley did remember.

Bleakly . . .

Late in the afternoon of that previous day, the young man who had so effortlessly cowed and controlled this elders at the business conference was winging over the desert in a helicopter.

He was angry—and justifiably so—with his pilot. His pilot was lost and the young man had scant patience with people who did not know where it was at.

"How come they let you up in the air with this thing when you don't know where you're going?" the young man asked.

"Sorry," the other muttered. "They just gave me the wrong directions. Have you seen anything that looks like a ghost town in this devil's garden?"

"That's not my job. You're supposed to have the eagle eye."

"We'll circle again," the pilot said wearily.

"We sure will. Again and again and again. As long as the gas holds out."

They circled again with the same negative result.

"We'll have to give it up," the pilot said finally. "We'll be in pitch darkness before you know it."

"One more time."

The pilot sighed and manipulated his controls. And, as he had predicted, pitch darkness found them.

"Okay," the young man said, "I guess we'll have to call it a—"

He stiffened, frowned, and jerked open the plastiglass window by his side.

"What's with you?" the pilot asked.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Music."

"I didn't hear a thing."

"I did."

"What?"

"Music. Swing around again. Try to cover the same circle."

"But—"

"That's an order, private!"

"Okay. It's your funeral."

"Yours, too, if we hit a mountain. But don't worry. God's got me in His pocket. Circle back . . ."

The young man's head was hanging out the window now, his ears straining.

"It's there!" he shouted into the wind. "I can hear it! Down there somewhere."

"Music, you say?" the pilot murmured.

"Not only that, but the *right* music! Lemme out of this fire trap!"

"You're crazy!"

"I said, let me out!"

"I can't. I don't dare land in this blackness!"

"You don't have to. Ease down. Throw out the ladder."

"You'll be killed."

"Not possible. I can't let that music get away. I'd hate myself in the morning."

"That's better than nursing a broken neck and two broken legs."

But so peremptory were the commands, that the pilot was already easing gingerly earthward.

"Okay," he said, "the ladder touched. But for lord's sake—"

The young man was already out and over the side. The pilot peered down after him and yelled, "What about me? What'll I do?"

"Go home to your family. Maybe you can still make supper. Give them my love."

"But—"

"I'll be okay. Where there's music, there's people. *Addio*, and *danken*—"

The young man's voice was swallowed by the night.

The pilot turned wearily toward home, wondering why the mad ones had all the money . . .

CHAPTER 13

The Shattered Idol

□ On the morning of that day Tracy held in such high hope, Keith and Shirley and Danny slept off the exertions of the previous night. Happy, but exceedingly weary, they turned in after Shirley instructed Chris and Tracy to stick together.

Laurie moped.

She had two reasons.

One—she had not been recruited for the birthing session of what might turn out to be Keith's greatest song, "*The Ballad of the Badlands*." She thought she deserved better at the hands of her family.

Two—a more pleasant reason. She was enjoying the lovely pain of unrequited love.

But then, was it unrequited? How could she say that for sure when she'd seen her adored only once and for a few minutes? She had not had time to explain to him how it was with sophisticated girls of her high sensitivity—that when love finally came to them, it was instantaneous, like a rock dropped on their pretty heads from the sky.

She pondered these aspects for a while and then went

into the desert—to the place where she'd spent those priceless minutes with her beloved and had been hit by the rock of love.

Then, before she knew it, she was making like a bloodhound except that she used her eye instead of her nose. It was an exciting endeavor because even the sandal tracks left by William Rivers in the desert soil were beautiful.

The search was slow and tiring out there in the pitiless heat. At times, the tracks disappeared—where William Rivers had thoughtlessly walked over bare stones. Then Laurie had to range in a circle and hunt hard in order to pick up the spoor again.

With the sun high in the heavens, she began to get pretty thirsty. But she was not frightened because she'd been careful to keep a rearward eye—to note landmarks—so she could return to the bus without difficulty.

The search was with startling lack of success for quite a while, until Laurie, her tongue thick and her eyes burning, was about ready to give it up.

Then she rounded a boulder and there he was!

And upon beholding his broad tanned back, Laurie knew she could not have failed. Destiny would not have permitted it.

He sat cross-legged, his spine straight, the sun blazing down on his golden skin.

Laurie advanced in his direction, noting as she did so the sod house banked against a rock wall nearby.

Now that she was there, Laurie didn't know what to do next. He should have at least acknowledged her presence. Still, she understood. He was in meditation, his mind faraway.

She circled around him, and his mind proved to be right there with him. He looked at her as though there was nothing whatever exceptional about her arrival. He didn't even say hello.

“You look thirsty. Would you like a drink?”

"I've never wanted one so badly in my life!"

He pointed. "There's a bucket and a dipper in the shade there by the shack. Help yourself."

Laurie headed for the water, stumbling over only one rock in the process. As she finished drinking, William Rivers arose from his cross-legged position, displaying the magnificent physique Laurie remembered. The white shorts he wore would have put just the right touch to his glamorous image if they hadn't been caked with dirt.

His flashing white teeth almost made up for it, however.

Conversation proved extremely difficult for Laurie, what with her idol not helping her a bit. She searched for something to say.

"Have you been out here long?"

"About a month. I stayed in the hotel at Devil's Flat for a while and then came out here."

"Where do you get your water?"

"There's a water hole over behind the rocks."

Wonderfully romantic conversation, Laurie pouted to herself. She realized that she herself was not the most glamorous figure on earth, but he should have been able to see the love glowing in her eyes.

He spent most of his time squinting off across the desert, however, speaking only when he was spoken to.

"Were you in meditation?" Laurie asked.

"Yeah. Memorizing. There's a lot to learn. All the patterns."

Patterns of ESP, Laurie supposed, or cosmic consciousness, although she'd never heard the term used in those areas.

"Do you find the desert a superior place to concentrate?" she asked.

"Best place in the world. No interruptions. Finest spot on earth for conditioning."

Laurie's stomach was gnawing at her. Even a girl madly in love still needed food. Pride kept her from asking, how-

ever. She could only hope that when William Rivers' time came to eat, he would ask her to share his simple fare. And simple it would be, she was sure. Possibly some of the mystical yogic viands that stimulated the spirit.

She sympathized with the fact that his consciousness was probably far out beyond that of ordinary mortals, but she would have appreciated it if he had paid more attention to her. Persistence, she hoped, was the key. Eventually, he had to return from the aerie where his thoughts dwelt and become more aware of her as a person, as a girl, as a woman whose heart was waiting for him.

For this reason, she stuck around, interposing a question now and then that was answered pleasantly enough but always with the minimum number of words necessary. Then William Rivers' eyes would again scan the horizons.

Suddenly, Laurie saw them light up and looked in that direction to see what had caused it.

A girl. A tall girl, as golden as William himself. She wore shorts and a bra and looked like something out of Vogue, though Vogue would hardly have used the background.

William Rivers' expression was not unlike that of a man striking gold. But still, no floods of rhetoric were loosed.

"The wife," he said.

That was two more words than Laurie could pry loose from her own vocabulary. She spoke inwardly, however. Without taking anything away from the golden goddess, she thought: *If I was dressed for the beach, I wouldn't look so bad myself.*

Then there was more. The girl paused, waited, and a golden child appeared from behind the rocks and grasped his golden mother's hand.

Four, perhaps five, he wore sandals and shorts to match his size, and he waved at his daddy as though he hadn't seen him in years.

The girl glided gracefully up, preceded by the child, who jumped into William's waiting arms.

"Jennifer," he said. "And Bill Junior."

Tilting his head toward his guest, he said, "Laurie. She's with the family over on the flats."

"Oh, yes. The little girl you found?"

"Uh-huh."

"I dropped by to thank your husband again," Laurie said. "It was wonderful of him to bring Tracy back to us."

"Nothing at all," William said.

"Won't you stay for tea?" Jennifer asked.

"Oh, no, thank you. It's getting late and I must get back."

What with her embarrassment, it wasn't difficult for Laurie to refuse the offer of food—well, not very difficult. Then she was off, blindly, into the desert.

Her thoughts were understandably mixed. She saw herself as a female pirate out after some other woman's man, although no judge would have convicted her of that. Then there was the feeling of a female idiot who'd brazenly tagged after a man who scarcely knew she was alive.

In unconscious desperation, she fell back on a safe, solid love, her miserable faculties telling her that was the best kind after all.

Lonny.

Lonny Wells.

So beautiful. So unattainable.

Adoring Lonny wasn't a lonely business, either. There were so many others doing the same thing that a girl felt a sense of comradeship that was comforting. Wherever she went, coast to coast, she could find another member of the club—another girl hopelessly in love with Lonny.

After having squeezed the lemon of self-pity dry, Laurie looked to her position there on the desert. It wasn't bad. She'd veered a little too far to the left. A huge boulder

with a profile faintly like that of Reuben told her this and she went back to it. That put Devil's Flat straight ahead—at right angles to the afternoon sun.

Laurie began plodding in that direction. She'd gone perhaps a hundred yards when an apparition, rearing up ahead of her, shot her heart into her mouth.

It was a pitiful spectacle rather than a fearsome or beautiful one. Its shirt was ripped to shreds. Its trousers were in tatters from the thighs down. Its legs were scratched and it had a parboiled look of an escapee from a cannibal's soup pot.

"Where am I?" it croaked.

"Why—why you're in Nevada," Laurie said, sheer unbelief making the words difficult.

"I know that, you imbecile! *Where* in Nevada?"

"In the desert—near Devil's Flat."

"Show me the way. I've been batting around in this crazy oven most of last night and all day today. I'm beat."

The unbelief held because what Laurie's eyes told her had to be a lie. It was too utterly impossible. Some kind of a dream. Some kind of a nightmare. But her eyes insisted.

"You're—why, you're—*Lonny Wells!*"

"Of course I am. Who else?"

"I'm Laurie—one of the Partridges."

"I don't care if you're one of the bald eagles. Just show me the way to a drink of water!"

"We were at the Westfall Festival—remember? I met you there."

"Will you quit jabbering and get me out of this?"

"Of course. It's over this way . . ."

CHAPTER 14

The Devil of Devil's Flat

□ It took an hour. Then Laurie led her battered charge into the town and straight to the water buckets in the bus. He drank most of one and poured the other over himself in an ecstasy of fulfillment.

While he did so, Laurie was searching and shouting—shouting and searching.

“There’s nobody here,” she finally announced.

“It doesn’t look to me as though there ever was anybody here—not for the last hundred years.”

“My family. My whole family. They were here this morning. Mother and Keith and Danny were asleep. They’d been playing the organ all night and—”

“That must have been what I heard.”

“What *you* heard? I thought you didn’t know where Devil’s Flat was?”

“I didn’t. I was in a helicopter.”

Laurie didn’t question that. It made as much sense as anything else.

“Where could they have gone?” she asked helplessly.

“Don’t ask me, kitten. How many were there?”

"My mother and my brothers and sister. Five in all. We're the musical Partridges."

"Well, all I can say is this is a lousy place to come for an engagement."

"That isn't why we came."

"What are you, archaeologists or something?"

"We're a *rock* group. I told you."

"Well, rock can mean different things to different people."

"We got lost. That's the simple truth."

"How you got that oversized jalopy here is beyond me. But what were you saying about your family?"

"They're gone. They've vanished."

"They're probably in the cellar of one of those old buildings growing mushrooms. Let's look."

They moved up the street, Laurie calling out the names of her absent family. They approached the church, checked it, and began retracing their route.

Halfway up the street, Lonny Wells stopped Laurie with a "Shhhhh!"

"What is it?"

"I thought I heard something."

They listened in silence.

"Yell out again," Lonny said.

Laurie called and fell silent and there was a faint answering call.

"Over there," Lonny said.

"That's the bank building."

"They must be drawing out their savings. Come on."

Inside, the situation wasn't difficult to fathom. The room was empty except for a pile of rubbish that appeared to have been pushed out of one corner to reveal a trap door with an iron bar across it. The bar was effectively locked into two bolted slots, holding the trap door firmly down.

The cries from below were strident now, once the footsteps above had been heard.

Lonny Wells slipped the bar loose and opened the trap door.

Shirley's voice from below reflected the seriousness of the situation: "Hurry—please. Chris has fainted. Tracy is—"

Lonny Wells was on his knees peering into the hole. "Lord!" he muttered. "It's like an open furnace."

Tracy's arms were extended and Lonny drew her up and turned her over to Laurie. Chris was boosted up next, just on the edge of consciousness. He was laid out on the floor and then Keith was helping his mother, urging her firmly upward.

Finally, all the Partridges were out of their trap and in the open air of the street. Johnny Harp, by his own demand, was the last to come up.

Laurie stroked Shirley's saturated hair. "Mother—what on earth happened? What were you doing down there?"

Keith was the one to reply. "I feel like the world's prize idiot—trapped that way."

"If you'd only tell us—"

"It was my fault," Danny said.

"It wasn't," Tracy denied indignantly. "It was all our faults."

Laurie got the story in pieces. It seemed that a felon named Sam Barton had almost done them in. That had certainly been his intent.

Chris and Danny had come to the bank that morning—

"It was weird," Danny said. "All of a sudden I realized what was wrong with the bank. It didn't have any vault, any safe—"

"I'd have figured it out if I'd really thought hard," Chris cut in morosely.

"When we got here, we found that pile of trash pushed

off the trap door. We went down and found a complete counterfeiting outfit. A pair of the most beautiful ten-dollar plates you ever saw. That Sam Barton was making himself rich, or was planning to."

"But what were you all doing down there with the door—?"

"I called everybody to come and look. We were all down there. Then this cat—his name is Johnny Harp—was pushed down in there to die with us."

"Good lord! The man must be a maniac. Why did he want to kill you?"

"He was here first with his funny money operation. We came and got in his way."

"But to kill you—a whole family!"

Shirley explained as best she could from the information she'd pried out of Johnny.

"He was a—well, a highly neurotic man from the start. They came here after he spent a great deal of time and money getting ready to—to—"

"To *make* money," Chris said.

"You said *they*. Does he have a gang?"

"There were three of them. Barton had a younger assistant who got scared and left."

Lonny Wells looked at Johnny. "This is the other one?"

"Yes."

"You seem to be on pretty friendly terms with him."

"He's on our side," Keith said. "You'll understand."

"Where's Sam Barker now?"

"Off in the desert somewhere, I suppose. I don't think he'll bother us again."

"What makes you think that?"

"The way he talked. Clear off his rocker."

"If he's out there, he won't last long. We'll get in touch with the fuzz. Maybe they can pick him up in time."

"Getting in touch with people isn't the easiest thing to do in this desert."

"No problem," Lonny said cheerfully. "These kids better get back to your bus where they can be taken care of . . ."

By the time all introductions were made, it was too late for anyone to be greatly awed by the personalities involved. Only Laurie continued to thrill inwardly about the miracle of it all:

Meeting Lonny Wells here in the desert. And finding that he *needed me!* How lucky can a girl get?

There was one exception. Lonny Wells himself. By way of further clarifying the situation, Laurie mentioned, quite objectively, that one William Rivers and wife and child were living in a sod hut over south.

"Some kind of a crazy yogi type."

Lonny Wells' eye popped wide. "Did you say William Rivers—Bill *Rivers?*"

"I suppose his friends might call him Bill. Why?"

"You've got to be kidding, or you don't read the papers. He's the greatest running back in the country!"

"Running back *where?*" Laurie asked.

"Football, you goon," Danny broke in. "His picture is part of my *Groovy Graham Breakfast Food* collection."

Lonny said, "He pulled the Comanches to a national football championship all by himself."

"Then what's he doing out here?"

"It's the way he trains. He toughens himself up during the off-season by coming into the desert, but nobody ever knew where he went. That way he starts the season hard as nails—"

Tracy took exception to that. "He is not hard as nails! He's—he's a gentle giant!"

"Okay. But I've got to meet him. I want his autograph."

"*You* want somebody else's autograph?" Chris asked, almost choking on his surprise.

"More than that. Maybe I can get him to take a part in my picture."

That opened the whole barrel of apples.

"I want that song I heard, too. The perfect theme for 'Desert Rock.'"

Everyone but Danny was speechless. He frowned and said, "Well, now. I don't know. We worked hard on that melody. We were thinking of making it our own theme. I'm perfectly willing to discuss it with you, though."

Finding that the situation still hadn't been drained of surprises, Lonny gaped at the ten-year-old Partridge. Then he gaped at Shirley.

"Do I talk business with *him*?"

She laughed. "We do have an agent. He should show up here eventually."

"But in the meantime . . ." Danny said, putting on his best business frown.

Lonny threw up his hands in a mock gesture of self-defense. "Hold it. I'll wait for your agent. I've got a hunch you'd negotiate me out of my socks and shoes."

"Okay," Danny replied grumpily. "If the idea frightens you, we'll let Reuben take over."

"In the meantime, I'd like to hear 'The Ballad of the Badlands' under more ideal conditions. What about it?"

They all adjourned to the church, the excitement proving ideal medicine for what had happened to the Partridges in the bank vault.

The rock session that followed almost sent Lonny Wells up the wall.

"All this," he moaned, "and not a tape recorder within miles!"

Shirley wanted to have a serious talk with Lonny; let him in on the dangers at Graveyard Hill, the shortage of supplies.

It went on and on, despite the empty stomachs of the Partridges.

Finally, Shirley got an opportunity to give the facts to Lonny Wells—that there would be no breakfast in the morning because Sam Barton had thoughtfully destroyed all the food before going off into the desert.

In a detail of this incident, Johnny Harp had stood up to Sam for the first time since they'd been together, which could have been the reason Sam sentenced him to death in the bank vault along with the Partridges.

This left the necessity of an urgent appeal to William Rivers.

However, Lonny merely said, "No problem. Everything will work out."

Too weary to press the matter, Shirley sincerely hoped it would, and before the Partridges were too weak to feed themselves.

That was the thought in her mind as she went to sleep along with the rest . . .

CHAPTER 15

L'Envoi

□ Lonny Wells, first and foremost, was a showman. The surprise, the dramatic incident, was so much a part of his make-up that he thought in those terms during every waking hour.

This talent had never been so smoothly displayed as upon the following morning.

With the Partridges all awake and Tracy eating the last chocolate cookie, Lonny said, "Just tighten your belts another notch, folks. In a little while, we'll be eating like kings."

Danny voiced the general Partridge skepticism. "And just how will that be brought about? Manna from heaven?"

"Exactly," Lonny said. He peered up into the sky, turning his eyes in a slow circle.

He pointed.

"There it comes now."

The Partridges looked as one and saw two small dots moving in their direction. Then it was three small dots, one hanging below and between the other two.

They stared. Finally, Chris said, "Helicopters! Two big ones."

"Rented them from the army," Lonny said, enjoying the scene fully as much as though it was being laid out in front of an audience of thousands.

"But what's that thing hanging between them?"

"Food. Food for the multitudes in the desert."

"A whole boxcar full?"

"Other things, too. What they're carrying is the first installment of the equipment we'll need to make 'Desert Rock, here in Devil's Flat. My new epic picture."

Tracy was the most amazed. "You mean to do all this overnight?"

"Hardly, little chick. We've had our eye on this place for sometime. Sent some men out to photograph it. Did a lot of figuring. Now about that song of yours, 'Ballad of the Badlands' . . ."

Nothing was decided until two days later. During that time, Devil's Flat changed magically. A new town came winging through the skies, piece by piece, to be set up nearby. Messages flew back and forth and transportation was almost as swift.

Reuben Kinkaid arrived, and the powers that can move men and mountains went into closed conference, Lonny sitting as usual at the head of the table.

Three hours later, Reuben came out. He was mopping his face even though he'd been sitting in air-conditioned comfort.

"Talk about a businessman—that kid's got it," Reuben said.

"What happened?" the Partridges demanded.

Reuben grinned. "I'm not so bad at hard bargaining myself. We keep copyright on the song but it identifies with Wells and 'Desert Rock' for two years after the picture's release."

"But it's my song—our song!" Keith wailed. "Why should it identify with Wells?"

"You sold us down the river!" Danny said.

Reuben's grin remained. "Not hardly. The song will still identify with the Partridges. The group will sing it in the picture. A solid part will be written in for all you guys. And the money? I'm afraid to tell you."

Each Partridge had a comment. Danny said, "Tell us about the money. Our hearts are strong."

Shirley was all stars-in-her-eyes. "Imagine! Making a movie with Lonny Wells!"

Danny and Keith spoke simultaneously. "There's still a lot of work to be done on the lyrics."

Only Shirley veered away from personal interests. "Did you discuss Johnny Harp?"

"Uh-huh. As far as we could. It's the general opinion that he'll come scot-free on the criminal charges. He'll have to stand questions and investigations but then Wells will kind of sponsor him. Some kindness, some psychiatric treatment, who knows?"

"I'm glad," Shirley murmured.

Several things important in themselves were hardly noticed. Sam Barton was found in the desert two days later babbling insanely and was taken away to an institution.

The Federal men came and hauled the counterfeiting equipment away.

Simone, healthy and pesty again, was flown west at Tracy's insistence.

Reporters flocked in.

Lonny Wells' publicity department went to work on a twenty-four-hour schedule.

But Reuben Kindaid made the comment that put the icing on the cake. Modestly ignoring his part for a moment, the hard bargaining, he said:

"Only my Partridges could come to a hundred-year-old ghost town, solve a major crime, and then come up with the juiciest movie contract of the century."

Then Danny capped it.

Yawning, he said, "And what else is new?"

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