About fifteen miles below Monterey, on the wild coast, the Torres family had their farm, a few sloping acres above a cliff that dropped to the brown reefs and to the hissing white waters of the ocean. Behind the farm the stone mountains stood up against the sky. The farm buildings huddled like little clinging aphids on the mountain skirts, crouched low to the ground as though the wind might blow them into the sea. The little shack, the rattling, rotting barn were gray-bitten with sea salt, beaten by the damp wind until they had taken on the color of the granite hills. Two horses, a red cow and a red calf, half a dozen pigs and a flock of lean, multicolored chickens stocked the place. A little corn was raised on the sterile slope, and it grew short and thick under the wind, and all the cobs formed on the landward sides of the stalks.

Mama Torres, a lean, dry woman with ancient eyes, had ruled the farm for ten years, ever since her husband tripped over a stone in the field one day and fell full length on a rattlesnake. When one is bitten on the chest there is not much that can be done.

Mama Torres had three children, two undersized black ones of twelve and fourteen, Emilio and Rosy, whom Mama kept fishing on the rocks below the farm when the sea was kind and when the truant officer was in some distant part of Monterey County. And there was Pepé, the tall smiling son of nineteen, a gentle, affectionate boy, but very lazy. Pepé had a tall head, pointed at the top, and from its peak, coarse black hair grew down like a thatch all around. Over his smiling little eyes Mama cut a straight bang so he could see. Pepé had sharp In-
The heavy knife lanced out and sunk into the post again. Mama moved forward like a ship and scattered the play.

“All day you do foolish things with the knife, like a toy-baby,” she stormed. “Get up on thy huge feet that eat up shoes. Get up!” She took him by one loose shoulder and hoisted at him. Pepe grinned sheepishly and came halfheartedly to his feet. “Look!” Mama cried. “Big lazy, you must catch the horse and put on him thy father’s saddle. You must ride to Monterey. The medicine bottle is empty. There is no salt. Go thou now, Peanut! Catch the horse.”

A revolution took place in the relaxed figure of Pepe. “To Monterey, me? Alone? Si, Mama.”

She scowled at him. “Do not think, big sheep, that you will buy candy. No, I will give you only enough for the medicine and the salt.”

Pepe smiled. “Mama, you will put the hatband on the hat?” She relented then. “Yes, Pepe. You may wear the hatband.” His voice grew insinuating, “And the green handkerchief, Mama?”

“Yes, if you go quickly and return with no trouble, the silk green handkerchief will go. If you make sure to take off the handkerchief when you eat so no spot may fall on it . . .”

“Si, Mama. I will be careful. I am a man.”

“Thou? A man? Thau art a peanut.”

He went into the rickety barn and brought out a rope, and he walked agiley enough up the hill to catch the horse.

When he was ready and mounted before the door, mounted on his father’s saddle that was so old that the oaken frame showed through torn leather in many places, then Mama brought out the round black hat with the tooled leather band, and she reached up and knotted the green silk handkerchief about his neck. Pepe’s blue denim coat was much darker than his jeans, for it had been washed much less often.

Mama handed up the big medicine bottle and the silver coins. “That for the medicine,” she said, “and that for the salt. That for a candle to burn for the papa. That for dulces for the little ones. Our friend Mrs. Rodriguez will give you dinner and maybe a bed for the night. When you go to the church say only

dian cheek bones and an eagle nose, but his mouth was as sweet and shapely as a girl’s mouth, and his chin was fragile and chiseled. He was loose and gangling, all legs and feet and wrists, and he was very lazy. Mama thought him fine and brave, but she never told him so. She said, “Some lazy cow must have got into thy father’s family, else how could I have a son like thee.” And she said, “When I carried thee, a sneaking lazy coyote came out of the brush and looked at me one day. That must have made thee so.”

Pepe smiled sheepishly and stabbed at the ground with his knife to keep the blade sharp and free from rust. It was his inheritance, that knife, his father’s knife. The long heavy blade folded back into the black handle. There was a button on the handle. When Pepe pressed the button, the blade leaped out ready for use. The knife was with Pepe always, for it had been his father’s knife.

One sunny morning when the sea below the cliff was glinting and blue and the white surf creamed on the reef, when even the stone mountains looked kindly, Mama Torres called out the door of the shack, “Pepe, I have a labor for thee.”

There was no answer. Mama listened. From behind the barn she heard a burst of laughter. She lifted her full long skirt and walked in the direction of the noise.

Pepe was sitting on the ground with his back against a box. His white teeth glistened. On either side of him stood the two black ones, tense and expectant. Fifteen feet away a redwood post was set in the ground. Pepe’s right hand lay limply in his lap, and in the palm the big black knife rested. The blade was closed back into the handle. Pepe looked smiling at the sky.

Suddenly Emilio cried, “Ya!”

Pepe’s wrist flicked like the head of a snake. The blade seemed to fly open in mid-air, and with a thump the point dug into the redwood post, and the black handle quivered. The three burst into excited laughter. Rosy ran to the post and pulled out the knife and brought it back to Pepe. He closed the blade and settled the knife carefully in his listless palm again. He grinned self-consciously at the sky.

“Ya!”
Mama said wisely, "A boy gets to be a man when a man is needed. Remember this thing. I have known boys forty years old because there was no need for a man."

Soon afterwards they retired, Mama in her big oak bed on one side of the room, Emilio and Rosy in their boxes full of straw and sheepskins on the other side of the room.

The moon went over the sky and the surf roared on the rocks. The roosters crowed the first call. The surf subsided to a whispering surge against the reef. The moon dropped toward the sea. The roosters crowed again.

The moon was near down to the water when Pepé rode on a winded horse to his home flat. His dog bounced out and circled the horse yelping with pleasure. Pepé slid off the saddle to the ground. The weathered little shack was silver in the moonlight and the square shadow of it was black to the north and east. Against the east the pilings 'mountains' were misty with light; their tops melted into the sky.

Pepé walked wearily up the three steps and into the house. It was dark inside. There was a rustle in the corner.

Mama cried out from her bed. "Who comes? Pepé, is it thou?"

"Sí, Mama."

"Did you get the medicine?"

"Sí, Mama."

"Well, go to sleep, then. I thought you would be sleeping at the house of Mrs. Rodriguez." Pepé stood silently in the dark room. "Why do you stand there, Pepé? Did you drink wine?"

"Sí, Mama."

"Well, go to bed then and sleep out the wine."

His voice was tired and patient, but very firm. "Light the candle, Mama. I must go away into the mountains."

"What is this, Pepé? You are crazy." Mama struck a sulphur match and held the little blue burr until the flame spread up the stick. She set light to the candle on the floor beside her bed. "Now, Pepé, what is this you say?" She looked anxiously into his face.

He was changed. The fragile quality seemed to have gone
from his chin. His mouth was less full than it had been, the lines of the lips were straighter, but in his eyes the greatest change had taken place. There was no laughter in them any more, nor any bashfulness. They were sharp and bright and purposeful.

He told her in a tired monotone, told her everything just as it had happened. A few people came into the kitchen of Mrs. Rodriguez. There was wine to drink. Pepé drank wine. The little quarrel—the man started toward Pepé and then the knife—it went almost by itself. It flew, it darted before Pepé knew it. As he talked, Mama’s face grew stern, and it seemed to grow more lean. Pepé finished. “I am a man now, Mama. The man said names to me I could not allow.”

Mama nodded. “Yes, thou art a man, my poor little Pepé. Thou art a man. I have seen it coming on thee. I have watched you throwing the knife into the post, and I have been afraid.” For a moment her face had softened, but now it grew stern again. “Come! We must get you ready. Go. Awaken Emilio and Rosy. Go quickly.”

Pepé stepped over to the corner where his brother and sister slept among the sheepskins. He leaned down and shook them gently. “Come, Rosy! Come, Emilio! The mama says you must arise.”

The little black ones sat up and rubbed their eyes in the candlelight. Mama was out of bed now, her long black skirt over her nightgown. “Emilio,” she cried. “Go up and catch the other horse for Pepé. Quickly, now! Quickly.” Emilio put his legs in his overalls and stumbled sleepily out the door.

“You heard no one behind you on the road?” Mama demanded.

“No, Mama. I listened carefully. No one was on the road.”

Mama darted like a bird about the room. From a nail on the wall she took a canvas water bag and threw it on the floor. She stripped a blanket from her bed and rolled it into a tight tube and tied the ends with string. From a box beside the stove she lifted a flour sack half full of black stringy jerky. “Your father’s black coat, Pepé. Here, put it on.”

Pepé stood in the middle of the floor watching her activity.

She reached behind the door and brought out the rifle, a long 38-56, worn shiny the whole length of the barrel. Pepé took it from her and held it in the crook of his elbow. Mama brought a little leather bag and counted the cartridges into his hand. “Only ten left,” she warned. “You must not waste them.”

Emilio put his head in the door. “Qui’té l’caballo, Mama.”

“Put on the saddle from the other horse. Tie on the blanket. Here, tie the jerky to the saddle horn.”

Still Pepé stood silently watching his mother’s frantic activity. His chin looked hard, and his sweet mouth was drawn and thin. His little eyes followed Mama about the room almost suspiciously.

Rosy asked softly, “Where goes Pepé?”

Mama’s eyes were fierce. “Pepé goes on a journey. Pepé is a man now. He has a man’s thing to do.”

Pepé straightened his shoulders. His mouth changed until he looked very much like Mama.

At last the preparation was finished. The loaded horse stood outside the door. The water bag dripped a line of moisture down the bay shoulder.

The moonlight was being thinned by the dawn and the big white moon was near down to the sea. The family stood by the shack. Mama confronted Pepé. “Look, my son! Do not stop until it is dark again. Do not sleep even though you are tired. Take care of the horse in order that he may not stop of weariness. Remember to be careful with the bullets—there are only ten. Do not fill thy stomach with jerky or it will make thee sick. Eat a little jerky and fill thy stomach with grass. When thou comest to the high mountains, if thou seest any of the dark watching men, go not near to them nor try to speak to them. And forget not thy prayers.” She put her lean hands on Pepé’s shoulders, stood on her toes and kissed him formally on both cheeks, and Pepé kissed her on both cheeks. Then he went to Emilio and Rosy and kissed both of their cheeks.

Pepé turned back to Mama. He seemed to look for a little softness, a little weakness in her. His eyes were searching, but Mama’s face remained fierce. “Go now,” she said. “Do not wait to be caught like a chicken.”
Pepé pulled himself into the saddle. "I am a man," he said.

It was the first dawn when he rode up the hill toward the little canyon which let a trail into the mountains. Moonlight and daylight fought with each other, and the two warring qualities made it difficult to see. Before Pepé had gone a hundred yards, the outlines of his figure were misty; and long before he entered the canyon, he had become a gray, indefinite shadow.

Mama stood stiffly in front of her doorstep, and on either side of her stood Emilio and Rosy. They cast furtive glances at Mama now and then.

When the gray shape of Pepé melted into the hillside and disappeared, Mama relaxed. She began the high, whining keen of the death wail. "Our beautiful—our brave," she cried. "Our protector, our son is gone." Emilio and Rosy moaned beside her. "Our beautiful—our brave, he is gone." It was the formal wail. It rose to a high piercing whine and subsided to a moan. Mama raised it three times and then she turned and went into the house and shut the door.

Emilio and Rosy stood wondering in the dawn. They heard Mama whimpering in the house. They went out to sit on the cliff above the ocean. They touched shoulders. "When did Pepé come to be a man?" Emilio asked.

"Last night," said Rosy. "Last night in Monterey." The ocean clouds turned red with the sun that was behind the mountains.

"We will have no breakfast," said Emilio. "Mama will not want to cook." Rosy did not answer him. "Where is Pepé gone?" he asked.

Rosy looked around at him. She drew her knowledge from the quiet air. "He has gone on a journey. He will never come back."

"Is he dead? Do you think he is dead?"

Rosy looked back at the ocean again. A little steamer, drawing a line of smoke sat on the edge of the horizon. "He is not dead," Rosy explained. "Not yet."

Pepé rested the big rifle across the saddle in front of him. He let the horse walk up the hill and he didn't look back. The stony slope took on a coat of short brush so that Pepé found the entrance to a trail and entered it.

When he came to the canyon opening, he swung once in his saddle and looked back, but the houses were swallowed in the misty light. Pepé jerked forward again. The high shoulder of the canyon closed in on him. His horse stretched out its neck and sighed and settled to the trail.

It was a well-worn path, dark soft leaf-mould earth strewn with broken pieces of sandstone. The trail rounded the shoulder of the canyon and dropped steeply into the bed of the stream. In the shallows the water ran smoothly, glinting in the first morning sun. Small round stones on the bottom were as brown as rust with sun moss. In the sand along the edges of the stream the tall, rich wild mint grew, while in the water itself the cress, old and tough, had gone to heavy seed.

The path went into the stream and emerged on the other side. The horse sloshed into the water and stopped. Pepé dropped his bridle and let the beast drink of the running water.

Soon the canyon sides became steep and the first giant sentinel redwoods guarded the trail, great round red trunks bearing foliage as green and lacy as ferns. Once Pepé was among the trees, the sun was lost. A perfumed and purple light lay in the pale green of the underbrush. Gooseberry bushes and blackberries and tall ferns lined the stream, and overhead the branches of the redwoods met and cut off the sky.

Pepé drank from the water bag, and he reached into the flour sack and brought out a black string of jerky. His white teeth gnawed at the string until the tough meat parted. He chewed slowly and drank occasionally from the water bag. His little eyes were slumberous and tired, but the muscles of his face were hard set. The earth of the trail was black now. It gave up a hollow sound under the walking hoofbeats.

The stream fell more sharply. Little waterfalls splashed on the stones. Five-fingered ferns hung over the water and dripped spray from their fingertips. Pepé rode half over in his saddle, dangling one leg loosely. He picked a bay leaf from a tree beside the way and put it into his mouth for a moment to flavor the dry jerky. He held the gun loosely across the pommel.

Suddenly he squared in his saddle, swung the horse from the trail and kicked it hurriedly up behind a big redwood tree. He
The air was parched and full of light dust blown by the breeze from the eroding mountains. Pepé drank sparingly from his bag and corked it tightly and hung it on the horn again. The trail moved up the dry shale hillside, avoiding rocks, dropping under clefts, climbing in and out of old water scars. When he arrived at the little pass he stopped and looked back for a long time. No dark watchers were to be seen now. The trail behind was empty. Only the high tops of the redwoods indicated where the stream flowed.

Pepé rode on through the pass. His little eyes were nearly closed with weariness, but his face was stern, relentless and manly. The high mountain wind coasted sighing through the pass and whistled on the edges of the big blocks of broken granite. In the air, a red-tailed hawk sailed over close to the ridge and screamed angrily. Pepé went slowly through the broken jagged pass and looked down on the other side.

The trail dropped quickly, staggering among broken rock. At the bottom of the slope there was a dark crease, thick with brush, and on the other side of the crease a little flat, in which a grove of oak trees grew. A scar of green grass cut across the flat. And behind the flat another mountain rose, desolate with dead rocks and starving little black bushes. Pepé drank from the bag again for the air was so dry that it encrusted his nostrils and burned his lips. He put the horse down the trail. The hooves slipped and struggled on the steep way, starting little stones that rolled off into the brush. The sun was gone behind the westward mountain now, but still it glowed brilliantly on the oaks and on the grassy flat. The rocks and the hillsides still sent up waves of the heat they had gathered from the day’s sun.

Pepé looked up to the top of the next dry withered ridge. He saw a dark form against the sky, a man’s figure standing on top of a rock, and he glanced away quickly not to appear curious. When a moment later he looked up again, the figure was gone.

Downward the trail was quickly covered. Sometimes the horse floundered for footing, sometimes set his feet and slid a little way. They came at last to the bottom where the dark chaparral was higher than Pepé’s head. He held up his rifle on one side and his arm on the other to shield his face from the sharp brittle fingers of the brush.

Pulled up the reins tight against the bit to keep the horse from whinnying. His face was intent and his nostrils quivered a little.

A hollow pounding came down the trail, and a horseman rode by, a fat man with red cheeks and a white stubble beard. His horse put down its head and blubbered at the trail when it came to the place where Pepé had turned off. “Hold up!” said the man and he pulled up his horse’s head.

When the last sound of the hoofs died away, Pepé came back into the trail again. He did not relax in the saddle any more. He lifted the big rifle and swung the lever to throw a shell into the chamber, and then he let down the hammer to half cock.

The trail grew very steep. Now the redwood trees were smaller and their tops were dead, bitten dead where the wind reached them. The horse plodded on; the sun went slowly overhead and started down toward the afternoon.

Where the stream came out of a side canyon, the trail left it. Pepé dismounted and watered his horse and filled up his water bag. As soon as the trail had parted from the stream, the trees were gone and only the thick brittle sage and manzanita and chaparral edged the trail. And the soft black earth was gone, too, leaving only the light tan broken rock for the trail bed. Lizards scampered away into the brush as the horse rattled over the little stones.

Pepé turned in his saddle and looked back. He was in the open now: he could be seen from a distance. As he ascended the trail the country grew more rough and terrible and dry. The way wound about the bases of great square rocks. Little gray rabbits skittered in the brush. A bird made a monotonous high creaking. Eastward the bare rock mountaintops were pale and powder-dry under the dropping sun. The horse plodded up and up the trail toward a little V in the ridge which was the pass.

Pepé looked suspiciously back every minute or so, and his eyes sought the tops of the ridges ahead. Once, on a white barren spur, he saw a black figure for a moment, but he looked quickly away, for it was one of the dark watchers. No one knew who the watchers were, nor where they lived, but it was better to ignore them and never to show interest in them. They did not bother one who stayed on the trail and minded his own business.
Up and out of the crease he rode, and up a little cliff. The grassy flat was before him, and the round comfortable oaks. For a moment he studied the trail down which he had come, but there was no movement and no sound from it. Finally he rode out over the flat, to the green streak, and at the upper end of the damp he found a little spring welling out of the earth and dropping into a dug basin before it seeped out over the flat.

Pepé filled his bag first, and then he let the thirsty horse drink out of the pool. He led the horse to the clump of oaks, and in the middle of the grove, fairly protected from sight on all sides, he took off the saddle and the bridle and laid them on the ground. The horse stretched his jaws sideways and yawned. Pepé knotted the lead rope about the horse’s neck and tied him to a sapling among the oaks, where he could graze in a fairly large circle.

When the horse was gnawing hungrily at the dry grass, Pepé went to the saddle and took a black string of jerky from the sack and strolled to an oak tree on the edge of the grove, from under which he could watch the trail. He sat down in the crisp dry oak leaves and automatically felt for his big black knife to cut the jerky, but he had no knife. He leaned back on his elbow and gnawed at the tough strong meat. His face was blank, but it was a man’s face.

The bright evening light washed the eastern ridge, but the valley was darkening. Doves flew down from the hills to the spring, and the quail came running out of the brush and joined them, calling clearly to one another.

Out of the corner of his eye Pepé saw a shadow grow out of the bushy crease. He turned his head slowly. A big spotted wildcat was creeping toward the spring, belly to the ground, moving like thought.

Pepé cocked his rifle and edged the muzzle slowly around. Then he looked apprehensively up the trail and dropped the hammer again. From the ground beside him he picked an oak twig and threw it toward the spring. The quail flew up with a roar and the doves whistled away. The big cat stood up: for a long moment he looked at Pepé with cold yellow eyes, and then fearlessly walked back into the gulch.

The dusk gathered quickly in the deep valley. Pepé muttered his prayers, put his head down on his arm and went instantly to sleep.

The moon came up and filled the valley with cold blue light, and the wind swept rustling down from the peaks. The owls worked up and down the slopes looking for rabbits. Down in the brush of the gulch a coyote gabbled. The oak trees whispered softly in the night breeze.

Pepé started up, listening. His horse had whinnied. The moon was just slipping behind the western ridge, leaving the valley in darkness behind it. Pepé sat tensely gripping his rifle. From far up the trail he heard an answering whinny and the crash of shod hooves on the broken rock. He jumped to his feet, ran to his horse and led it under the trees. He threw on the saddle and cinched it tight for the steep trail, caught the unwilling head and forced the bit into the mouth. He felt the saddle to make sure the water bag and the sack of jerky were there. Then he mounted and turned up the hill.

It was velvet dark. The horse found the entrance to the trail where it left the flat, and started up, stumbling and slipping on the rocks. Pepé’s hand rose up to his head. His hat was gone. He had left it under the oak tree.

The horse had struggled far up the trail when the first change of dawn came into the air, a steel grayness as light mixed thoroughly with dark. Gradually the sharp snaggled edge of the ridge stood out above them, rotten granite tortured and eaten by the winds of time. Pepé had dropped his reins on the horn, leaving direction to the horse. The brush grabbed at his legs in the dark until one knee of his jeans was ripped.

Gradually the light flowed down over the ridge. The starved brush and rocks stood out in the half light, strange and lonely in high perspective. Then there came warmth into the light. Pepé drew up and looked back, but he could see nothing in the darker valley below. The sky turned blue over the coming sun. In the waste of the mountainside, the poor dry brush grew only three feet high. Here and there, big outcroppings of unrotted granite stood up like mouldering houses. Pepé relaxed a little.
He drank from his water bag and bit off a piece of jerky. A single eagle flew over, high in the light.

Without warning Pepé’s horse screamed and fell on its side. He was almost down before the rifle crash echoed up from the valley. From a hole behind the struggling shoulder, a stream of bright crimson blood pumped and stopped and pumped and stopped. The hooves threshed on the ground. Pepé lay half stunned beside the horse; he looked slowly down the hill. A piece of sage clipped off beside his head and another crash echoed up from side to side of the canyon. Pepé flung himself frantically behind a bush.

He crawled up the hill on his knees and one hand. His right hand held the rifle up off the ground and pushed it ahead of him. He moved with the instinctive care of an animal. Rapidly he wormed his way toward one of the big outcroppings of granite on the hill above him. Where the brush was high he doubled up and ran, but where the cover was slight he wriggled forward on his stomach, pushing the rifle ahead of him. In the last little distance there was no cover at all. Pepé poised and then he darted across the space and flashed around the corner of the rock.

He leaned panting against the stone. When his breath came easier he moved along behind the big rock until he came to a narrow split that offered a thin section of vision down the hill. Pepé lay on his stomach and pushed the rifle barrel through the slit and waited.

The sun reddened the western ridges now. Already the buzzards were settling down toward the place where the horse lay. A small brown bird scratched in the dead sage leaves directly in front of the rifle muzzle. The coasting eagle flew back toward the rising sun.

Pepé saw a little movement in the brush far below. His grip tightened on the gun. A little brown doe stepped daintily out on the trail and crossed it and disappeared into the brush again. For a long time Pepé waited. Far below he could see the little flat and the oak trees and the slash of green. Suddenly his eyes flashed back at the trail again. A quarter of a mile down there had been a quick movement in the chaparral. The rifle swung over. The front sight nestled in the V of the rear sight. Pepé studied for a moment and then raised the rear sight a notch. The little movement in the brush came again. The sight settled on it. Pepé squeezed the trigger. The explosion crashed down the mountain and up the other side, and came rattling back. The whole side of the slope grew still. No more movement. And then a white streak cut into the granite of the slit and a bullet whined away and a crash sounded up from below. Pepé felt a sharp pain in his right hand. A sliver of granite was sticking out from between his first and second knuckles and the point protruded from his palm. Carefully he pulled out the sliver of stone. The wound bled evenly and gently. No vein nor artery was cut.

Pepé looked into a little dusty cave in the rock and gathered a handful of spider web, and he pressed the mass into the cut, plastering the soft web into the blood. The flow stopped almost at once.

The rifle was on the ground. Pepé picked it up, levered a new shell into the chamber. And then he slid into the brush on his stomach. Far to the right he crawled, and then up the hill, moving slowly and carefully, crawling to cover and resting and then crawling again.

In the mountains the sun is high in its arc before it penetrates the gorges. The hot face looked over the hill and brought instant heat with it. The white light beat on the rocks and reflected from them and rose up quivering from the earth again, and the rocks and bushes seemed to quiver behind the air.

Pepé crawled in the general direction of the ridge peak, zigzagging for cover. The deep cut between his knuckles began to throb. He crawled close to a rattlesnake before he saw it, and when it raised its dry head and made a soft beginning whirr, he backed up and took another way. The quick gray lizards flashed in front of him, raising a tiny line of dust. He found another mass of spider web and pressed it against his throbbing hand.

Pepé was pushing the rifle with his left hand now. Little drops of sweat ran to the ends of his coarse black hair and rolled down his cheeks. His lips and tongue were growing thick and heavy. His lips writhed to draw saliva into his mouth. His
little dark eyes were uneasy and suspicious. Once when a gray lizard paused in front of him on the parched ground and turned its head sideways he crushed it flat with a stone.

When the sun slid past noon he had not gone a mile. He crawled exhaustedly a last hundred yards to a patch of high sharp manzanita, crawled desperately, and when the patch was reached he wriggled in among the tough gnarly trunks and dropped his head on his left arm. There was little shade in the meager brush, but there was cover and safety. Pepé went to sleep as he lay and the sun beat on his back. A few little birds hopped close to him and peered and hopped away. Pepé squirmed in his sleep and he raised and dropped his wounded hand again and again.

The sun went down behind the peaks and the cool evening came, and then the dark. A coyote yelled from the hills, and Pepé started awake and looked about with misty eyes. His hand was swollen and heavy; a little thread of pain ran up the inside of his arm and settled in a pocket in his armpit. He peered about and then stood up, for the mountains were black and the moon had not yet risen. Pepé stood up in the dark. The coat of his father pressed on his arm. His tongue was swollen until it nearly filled his mouth. He wriggled out of the coat and dropped it in the brush, and then he struggled up the hill, falling over rocks and tearing his way through the brush. The rifle knocked against stones as he went. Little dry avalanches of gravel and shattered stone went whispering down the hill behind him.

After a while the old moon came up and showed the jagged ridge top ahead of him. By moonlight Pepé traveled more easily. He bent forward so that his throbbing arm hung away from his body. The journey uphill was made in dashes and rests, a frantic rush up a few yards and then a rest. The wind coasted down the slope rattling the dry stems of the bushes.

The moon was at meridian when Pepé came last to the sharp backbone of the ridge top. On the last hundred yards of the rise no soil had clung under the wearing winds. The way was on solid rock. He clambered to the top and looked down on the other side. There was a draw like the last below him, misty with moonlight; brushed with dry struggling sage and chaparral. On the other side the hill rose up sharply and at the top the jagged rotten teeth of the mountain showed against the sky. At the bottom of the cut the brush was thick and dark.

Pepé stumbled down the hill. His throat was almost closed with thirst. At first he tried to run, but immediately he fell and rolled. After that he went more carefully. The moon was just disappearing behind the mountains when he came to the bottom. He crawled into the heavy brush feeling with his fingers for water. There was no water in the bed of the stream, only damp earth. Pepé laid his gun down and scooped up a handful of mud and put it in his mouth, and then he spluttered and scraped the earth from his tongue with his finger, for the mud drew at his mouth like a poultice. He dug a hole in the stream bed with his fingers, dug a little basin to catch water; but before it was very deep his head fell forward on the damp ground and he slept.

The dawn came and the heat of the day fell on the earth, and still Pepé slept. Late in the afternoon his head jerked up. He looked slowly around. His eyes were slits of wariness. Twenty feet away in the heavy brush a big tawny mountain lion stood looking at him. Its long thick tail waved gracefully, its ears were erect with interest, not laid back dangerously. The lion squatted down on its stomach and watched him.

Pepé looked at the hole he had dug in the earth. A half inch of muddy water had collected in the bottom. He tore the sleeve from his hurt arm, with his teeth ripped out a little square, soaked it in the water and put it in his mouth. Over and over he filled the cloth and sucked it.

Still the lion sat and watched him. The evening came down but there was no movement on the hills. No birds visited the dry bottom of the cut. Pepé looked occasionally at the lion. The eyes of the yellow beast drooped as though he were about to sleep. He yawned and his long thin red tongue curled out. Suddenly his head jerked around and his nostrils quivered. His big tail lashed. He stood up and slunk like a tawny shadow into the thick brush.

A moment later Pepé heard the sound, the faint far crash of horses' hooves on gravel. And he heard something else, a high whining yelp of a dog.
Pepé took his rifle in his left hand and he glided into the brush almost as quietly as the lion had. In the darkening evening he crouched up the hill toward the next ridge. Only when the dark came did he stand up. His energy was short. Once it was dark he fell over the rocks and slipped to his knees on the steep slope, but he moved on and on up the hill, climbing and scrabbling over the broken hillside.

When he was far up toward the top, he lay down and slept for a little while. The withered moon, shining on his face, awakened him. He stood up and moved up the hill. Fifty yards away he stopped and turned back, for he had forgotten his rifle. He walked heavily down and poked about in the brush, but he could not find his gun. At last he lay down to rest. The pocket of pain in his armpit had grown more sharp. His arm seemed to swell out and fall with every heartbeat. There was no position lying down where the heavy arm did not press against his armpit.

With the effort of a hurt beast, Pepé got up and moved again toward the top of the ridge. He held his swollen arm away from his body with his left hand. Up the steep hill he dragged himself, a few steps and a rest, and a few more steps. At last he was nearing the top. The moon showed the uneven sharp back of it against the sky.

Pepé’s brain spun in a big spiral up and away from him. He slumped to the ground and lay still. The rock ridge top was only a hundred feet above him.

The moon moved over the sky. Pepé half turned on his back. His tongue tried to make words, but only a thick hissing came from between his lips.

When the dawn came, Pepé pulled himself up. His eyes were sane again. He drew his great puffed arm in front of him and looked at the angry wound. The black line ran up from his wrist to his armpit. Automatically he reached in his pocket for the big black knife, but it was not there. His eyes searched the ground. He picked up a sharp blade of stone and scraped at the wound, sawed at the proud flesh and then squeezed the green juice out in big drops. Instantly he threw back his head and whined like a dog. His whole right side shuddered at the pain, but the pain cleared his head.

In the gray light he struggled up the last slope to the ridge and crawled over and lay down behind a line of rocks. Below him lay a deep canyon exactly like the last, waterless and desolate. There was no flat, no oak trees, not even heavy brush in the bottom of it. And on the other side a sharp ridge stood up, thinly brushed with starving sage, littered with broken granite. Strewed over the hill there were giant outcroppings, and on the top the granite teeth stood out against the sky.

The new day was light now. The flame of the sun came over the ridge and fell on Pepé where he lay on the ground. His coarse black hair was littered with twigs and bits of spider web. His eyes had retreated back into his head. Between his lips the tip of his black tongue showed.

He sat up and dragged his great arm into his lap and nursed it, rocking his body and moaning in his throat. He threw back his head and looked up into the pale sky. A big black bird circled nearly out of sight, and far to the left another was sailing near.

He lifted his head to listen, for a familiar sound had come to him from the valley he had climbed out of; it was the crying yelp of hounds, excited and feverish, on a trail.

Pepé bowed his head quickly. He tried to speak rapid words but only a thick hiss came from his lips. He drew a shaky cross on his breast with his left hand. It was a long struggle to get to his feet. He crawled slowly and mechanically to the top of a big rock on the ridge peak. Once there, he arose slowly, swaying to his feet, and stood erect. Far below he could see the dark brush where he had slept. He braced his feet and stood there, black against the morning sky.

There came a ripping sound at his feet. A piece of stone flew up and a bullet dined off into the next gorge. The hollow crash echoed up from below. Pepé looked down for a moment and then pulled himself straight again.

His body jarred back. His left hand fluttered helplessly toward his breast. The second crash sounded from below. Pepé swung forward and toppled from the rock. His body struck and rolled over and over, starting a little avalanche. And when at last he stopped against a bush, the avalanche slid slowly down and covered up his head.
They lived a long time. Pat was thirty when they died within a month of each other. They were unhappy and bitter and discontented with their lives, and yet each one clung tenaciously to the poor spark and only died after a long struggle.

There were two months of horror for Pat. For three weeks he nursed his mother while she lay rigid on the bed, her breath clattering in and out of her lungs. She watched him with stony, accusing eyes as he tried to make her comfortable. When she was dead, her eyes still accused him.

Pat unlocked the terrible parlor; the neighbors sat in rows before the coffin, a kind of audience, while the service went on. From the bedroom came the sound of old Mr. Humbert’s peevish weeping.

The second period of nursing began immediately after the first funeral, and continued for three weeks more. Then the neighbors sat in rows before another coffin. Before the funerals, the parlor had always been locked except during the monthly cleaning. The blinds were drawn down to protect the green carpets from the sun. In the center of the room stood a gilt-legged marble-topped table which bore, on a tapestry of Millet’s “Angelus,” a huge Bible with a deeply tooled cover. On either side of the Bible sat squat vases holding tight bouquets of everlasting flowers. There were four straight chairs in the parlor, one against each of the four walls—two for the coffin and two for the watchers. Three large pictures in gilt frames hung on the walls: colored, enlarged photographs of each of the old Humberts looking stern and dead, but so taken that their eyes followed an intruder about the room. The third picture showed the corpse of Elaine in its boat on the thin sad river. The shroud hung over the gunwale and dipped into the water. On a corner table stood a tall glass bell in which three stuffed orioles sat on a cherry branch. So cold and sepulchral was this parlor that it had never been entered except by corpses and their attendants. It was indeed a little private mortuary chamber. Pat had seen three aunts and an uncle buried from that parlor.

Pat stood quietly by the graveside while his neighbors shaped up a tent of earth. Already his mother’s grave had sunk a little, leaving a jagged crack all around its mound. The men were pat-
ting the new mound now, drawing a straight ridgepole and smoothing the slope of the sides. They were good workmen with the soil; they liked to make a good job with it whether it be furrow or grave mound. After it was perfect, they still walked about patting it lightly here and there. The women had gone back to the buggies and were waiting for their husbands to come. Each man walked up to Pat and shook his hand and murmured some solemn friendly thing to him. The wagons and surreys and buggies were all moving away now, disappearing one by one in the distance. Still Pat stood in the cemetery staring at the two graves. He didn’t know what to do now there was no one to demand anything of him.

Fall was in the air, the sharp smell of it and the little jerky winds of it breathing up and then dying in mid-blow. Wild doves sat in a line on the cemetery fence all facing one way, all motionless. A piece of old brown newspaper scudded along the ground and clung about Pat’s ankles. He stooped and picked it off, looked at it for a moment and then threw it away. The sound of grating buggy wheels came from the road. T. B. Allen tied his horse to the fence and walked up to Pat. “We thought you’d be going someplace tonight,” he said in an embarrassed voice. “If you feel like it, we’d like you to come to supper at our house—and stay the night, too.”

Pat started out of the coma that had fallen on him. “I should be going away from here,” he said. He rumbled for another thought. “I’m not doing any good here.”

“It’s better to get away from it,” Allen said.

“It’s hard to leave, Mr. Allen. It’s a thing you’ll sometimes want to remember, and other times you’ll want to forget it, I guess. But it’s hard to leave because then you know it’s all over—forever.”

“Well, why don’t you come to supper over at our house?”

All of Pat’s guards were down; he confessed, “I never had supper away from home in my life. They”—he nodded toward the graves—“They didn’t like to be out after dark. Night air wasn’t good for them.”

“Then maybe it would be good for you to eat at our house. You shouldn’t go back to the empty place, at least not tonight.

A man ought to save himself a little.” He took Pat’s arm and swung him toward the gate. “You follow me in your wagon.” And as they went out of the gate a little elegy escaped from him. “It’s a fit thing to die in the fall,” he said. “It wouldn’t be good to die in the spring and never to know about the rainfall nor how the crops shaped. But in the fall everything’s over.”

“They wouldn’t care, Mr. Allen. They didn’t ever ask about the crops, and they hated the rain because of their rheumatism. They just wanted to live. I don’t know why.”

For supper there were cold cuts of beef, and potatoes fried raw with a few onions, and bread pudding with raisins. Mrs. Allen tried to help Pat in his trouble by speaking often of his parents, of how good and kind they were, of his father’s honesty and his mother’s famous cookery. Pat knew she was lying about them to help him, and he didn’t need it. He was in no agony of grief. The thick lethargy still hung over him so that it was a great effort to move or to speak.

He was remembering something that had happened at the funeral. When the pall-bearers lifted the casket from its two chairs, one of the men tripped against the marble-topped table. The accident tipped over one of the vases of everlasting and pushed the Bible askew on its tapestry. Pat knew that in decency he should restore the old order. The chairs should be pushed against their walls and the Bible set straight. Finally he should lock up the parlor again. The memory of his mother demanded these things of him.

The Allens urged him to stay the night, but after a while, he bade them a listless good night and dragged himself out to harness his horse. The sky was black and cold between the sharp stars, and the hills hummed faintly under a lowering temperature. Through his lethargy, Pat heard the clopping of the horse’s hooves on the road, the crying of night birds and the whisper of wind through the drying leaves. But more real to him were his parents’ voices sounding in his head. “There’ll be frost,” his father said. “I hate the frost worse than rats.” And his mother chimed in, “Speaking of rats—I have a feeling there’s rats in the cellar. I wonder if Pat has set the traps this year past. I told him to, but he forgets everything I tell him.”
Pat answered the voices. “I put poison in the cellar. Traps aren’t as good as poison.”

“A cat is best,” his mother’s whining voice said. “I don’t know why we never have a cat or two. Pat never has a cat.”

“I get cats, mother, but they eat gophers and go wild and run away. I can’t keep cats.”

The house was black and unutterably dreary when he arrived. Pat lighted the reflector lamp and built a fire in the stove to warm the kitchen. As the flame roared through the wood, he sank into a chair and found that he was very comfortable. It would be nice, he thought, to bring his bed into the kitchen and to sleep beside the stove. The straightening of the house could be done tomorrow, or any day for that matter.

When he threw open the door into the sitting room, a wave of cold, lifeless air met him. His nostrils were assailed by the smell of funeral flowers and age and medicine. He walked quickly to his bedroom and carried his cot into the warm and lighted kitchen.

After a while Pat blew out the light and went to bed. The fire cracked softly in the stove. For a time the night was still, and then gradually the house began to swarm with malignant life. Pat discovered that his body was tense and cold. He was listening for sounds from the sitting room, for the creak of the rocking chair and for the loud breathing of the old people. The house cracked, and although he had been listening for sounds, Pat started violently. His head and legs became damp with perspiration. Silently and miserably he crept from his bed and locked the door into the sitting room. Then he went back to his cot and lay shivering under the covers. The night had become very still, and he was lonely.

The next morning Pat awakened with a cold sense of duty to be performed. He tried to remember what it was. Of course, it was the Bible lying off-center on its table. That should be put straight. The vase of everlasting should be set upright, and after that the whole house should be cleaned. Pat knew he should do these things in spite of the reluctance he felt for opening the door into the sitting room. His mind shrank from the things he would see when he opened the door—the two rocking chairs, one on either side of the stove; the pillows in the chair seats would be holding the impressions of his parents’ bodies. He knew the odors of age and of unguents and of stale flowers that were waiting for him on the other side of the door. But the thing was a duty. It must be done.

He built a fire and made his breakfast. It was while he drank the hot coffee that a line of reasoning foreign to his old manner of life came to him. The unusual thoughts that thronged upon him astounded him at once for their audacity and for their simplicity.

“Why should I go in there?” he demanded. “There’s no one to care, no one even to know. I don’t have to go in there if I don’t want to.” He felt like a boy who breaks school to walk in a deep and satisfying forest. But to combat his freedom, his mother’s complaining voice came to his ears. “Pat ought to clean the house. Pat never takes care of things.”

The joy of revolt surged up in him. “You’re dead!” he told the voice. “You’re just something that’s happening in my mind. Nobody can expect me to do things any more. Nobody will ever know if I don’t do things I ought to. I’m not going in there, and I’m never going in there.” And while the spirit was still strong in him, he strode to the door, plucked out the key and threw it into the tall weeds behind the house. He closed the shutters on all the windows except those in the kitchen, and nailed them shut with long spikes.

The joy of his new freedom did not last long. In the daytime the farm work kept him busy, but before the day was out, he grew lonely for the old duties which ate up the hours and made the time short. He knew he was afraid to go into the house, afraid of those impressions in the cushions and of the disarranged Bible. He had locked up two thin old ghosts, but he had not taken away their power to trouble him.

That night, after he had cooked his supper, he sat beside the stove. An appalling loneliness like a desolate fog fell upon him. He listened to the stealthy sounds in the old house, the whispers and little knockings. So tensely did he listen that after a while he could hear the chairs rocking in the other room, and once he made out the rasping sound of a lid being unscrewed
from a jar of salve. Pat could not stand it any longer. He went to the barn, harnessed his horse and drove to the Pastures of Heaven General Store.

Three men sat around the fat-bellied stove, contemplating its corrugations with rapt abstraction. They made room for Pat to draw up a chair. None of the men looked at him, because a man in mourning deserves the same social immunities a cripple does. Pat settled himself in his chair and gazed at the stove. “Remind me to get some flour before I go,” he said.

All of the men knew what he meant. They knew he didn’t need flour, but each one of them, under similar circumstances, would have made some such excuse. T. B. Allen opened the stove door and looked in and then spat on the coals. “A house like that is pretty lonely at first,” he observed. Pat felt grateful to him although his words constituted a social blunder.

“I’ll need some tobacco and some shotgun shells, too, Mr. Allen,” he said by way of payment.

Pat changed his habits of living after that. Determinedly he sought groups of men. During the daytime he worked on his farm, but at night he was invariably to be found where two or three people were gathered. When a dance or a party was given at the schoolhouse, Pat arrived early and stayed until the last man was gone. He sat at the house of John Whiteside; he arrived first at fires. On election days he stayed at the polls until they closed. Wherever a group of people gathered, Pat was sure to show up. From constant stalking of company he came to have almost an instinct for discovering excitements which would draw crowds.

Pat was a homely man, gangling, big-nosed and heavy-jawed. He looked very much like Lincoln as a young man. His figure was as unfitted for clothes as Lincoln’s was. His nostrils and ears were large and full of hair. They looked as though furry little animals were hiding in them. Pat had no conversation; he knew he added little to the gatherings he frequented, and he tried to make up for his lack by working, by doing favors, by arranging things. He liked to be appointed to committees for arranging school dances, for then he could call on the other committee members to discuss plans; he could spend evenings deco-
pretty. I wonder if Mr. Humbert will let me see it sometime.”

The two women walked out of hearing.

When they were gone, Pat stood up and looked at the great rose. He had never seen how beautiful it was—a haystack of green leaves and nearly covered with white roses. “It is pretty,” he said. “And it’s like a nice house in Vermont. It’s like a Vermont house, and—well, it is pretty, a pretty bush.” Then, as though he had seen through the bush and through the wall, a vision of the parlor came to him. He went quickly back to his work among the berries, struggling to put the house out of his mind. But Mae’s words came back to him over and over again, “It must be pretty inside.” Pat wondered what a Vermont house looked like inside. John Whiteside’s solid and grand house he knew, and, with the rest of the valley, he had admired the plush comfort of Bert Munroe’s house, but a pretty house he had never seen, that is, a house he could really call pretty. In his mind he went over all the houses he knew and not one of them was what Mae must have meant. He remembered a picture in a magazine, a room with a polished floor and white woodwork and a staircase; it might have been Mt. Vernon. That picture had impressed him. Perhaps that was what Mae meant.

He wished he could see the postcard of the Vermont house, but if he asked to see it, they would know he had been listening. As he thought of it, Pat became obsessed with a desire to see a pretty house that looked like this. He put his hoe away and walked in front of his house. Truly the rose was marvelous. It dropped a canopy over the porch, hung awnings of white stars over the closed windows. Pat wondered why he had never noticed it before.

That night he did something he couldn’t have contemplated before. At the Munroe door, he broke an engagement to spend an evening in company. “There’s some business in Salinas I’ve got to attend to,” he explained. “I stand to lose some money if I don’t go right in.”

In Salinas he went straight to the public library. “Have you got any pictures of Vermont houses—pretty ones?” he asked the librarian.
"You'll probably find some in the magazines. Come! I'll show you where to look."

They had to warn him when the library was about to close. He had found pictures of interiors, but of interiors he had never imagined. The rooms were built on a plan; each decoration, each piece of furniture, even the floors and walls were related, were a part of the plan. Some deep and instinctive feeling in him for arrangement, for color and line, had responded to the pictures. He hadn't known rooms could be like that—all in one piece. Every room he had ever seen was the result of a gradual and accidental accumulation. Aunt Sophie sent a vase, father bought a chair. They put a stove in the fireplace because it threw more heat; the Sperry Flour Company issued a big calendar and mother had its picture framed; a mail order house advertised a new kind of lamp. That was the way rooms were assembled. But in the pictures someone had an idea, and everything in the room was a part of the idea. Just before the library closed he came upon two pictures side by side. One showed a room like those he knew, and right beside it was another picture of the same room, with all the clutter gone, and with the idea in it. It didn't look like the same place at all. For the first time in his life, Pat was anxious to go home. He wanted to lie in his bed and to think, for a strange new idea was squirming into being in the back of his mind.

Pat could not sleep that night. His head was too full of plans. Once he got up and lighted the lamp to look in his bank book. A little before daylight he dressed and cooked his breakfast, and while he ate, his eyes wandered again and again to the locked door. There was a light of malicious joy in his eyes. "It'll be dark in there," he said. "I better rip open the shutters before I go in there."

When the daylight came at last, he took a crowbar and walked around the house, tearing open the nailed shutters as he went. The parlor windows he did not touch, for he didn't want to disturb the rose bush. Finally he went back into the kitchen and stood before the locked door. For a moment the old vision stopped him. "But it will be just for a minute," he argued. "I'll start in tearing it to pieces right away." The crowbar poised and crashed on the lock. The door sprang open crying miserably on its dry hinges, and the horrible room lay before him. The air was foggy with cobwebs; a musty, ancient odor flowed through the door. There were the two rocking chairs on either side of the rusty stove. Even through the dust he could see the little hollows in their cushions. But these were not the terrible things. Pat knew where lay the center of his fears. He walked rapidly through the room, brushing the cobwebs from his eyes as he went. The parlor was still dark, for its shutters were closed. Pat didn't have to grope for the table; he knew exactly where it was. Hadn't it haunted him for ten years? He picked up table and Bible together, ran out through the kitchen and hurled them into the yard.

Now he could go more slowly. The fear was gone. The windows were stuck so hard that he had to use the bar to pry them open. First the rocking chairs went out, rolling and jumping when they hit the ground, then the pictures, the ornaments from the mantel, the stuffed orioles. And when the movable furniture, the clothing, the rugs and vases were scattered about under the windows, Pat ripped up the carpets and crammed them out, too. Finally he brought buckets of water and splashed the walls and ceilings thoroughly. The work was an intense pleasure to him. He tried to break the legs from the chairs when he threw them out. While the water was soaking into the old dark wallpaper, he collected all of the furniture from under the windows, piled it up and set fire to it. Old musty fabrics and varnished wood smoldered sullenly and threw out a foul stench of dust and dampness. Only when a bucket of kerosene was thrown over the pile did the flame leap up. The tables and chairs cracked as they released their ghosts into the fire. Pat surveyed the pile joyfully.

"You would sit in there all these years, wouldn't you?" he cried. "You thought I'd never get up the guts to burn you. Well, I just wish you could be around to see what I'm going to do, you rotten stinking trash." The green carpets burned through and left red, flaky coals. Old vases and jars cracked to pieces in the heat. Pat could hear the sizzle of mentholatum and pain-killer gushing from containers and boiling into the fire. He felt
that he was presiding at the death of his enemy. Only when the
pile had burned down to coals did he leave it. The walls were
soaked thoroughly by now, so that the wallpaper peeled off in
long, broad ribbons.

That afternoon Pat drove in to Salinas and bought all the
magazines on house decoration he could find. In the evening,
after dinner, he searched the pages through. At last, in one of
the magazines, he found the perfect room. There had been a
question about some of the others; there was none about this
one. And he could make it quite easily. With the partition be-
tween the sitting room and the parlor torn out, he would have
a room thirty feet long and fifteen wide. The windows must be
made wide, the fireplace enlarged and the floor sandpapered,
stained and polished. Pat knew he could do all these things. His
hands ached to be at work. “Tomorrow I’ll start,” he said. Then
another thought stopped him. “She thinks it’s pretty now. I
can’t very well let her know I’m doing it now. Why, she’d know
I heard her say that about the Vermont house. I can’t let people
know I’m doing it. They’d ask why I’m doing it.” He wondered
why he was doing it. “It’s none of their darn business why,” he
explained to himself. “I don’t have to go around telling people
why I’ve got my reasons. By God! I’ll do it at night.” Pat
laughed softly to himself. The idea of secretly changing his
house delighted him. He could work here alone, and no one
would know. Then, when it was all finished, he could invite a
few people in and pretend it was always that way. Nobody
would remember how it was ten years ago.

This was the way he ordered his life: During the day he
worked on the farm, and at night rushed into the house with a
feeling of joy. The picture of the completed room was tacked up
in the kitchen. Pat looked at it twenty times a day. While he was
building window seats, putting up the French-grey paper, coa-
ting the woodwork with cream-colored enamel, he could see the
completed room before him. When he needed supplies, he
drove to Salinas late in the evening and brought back his ma-
terials after dark. He worked until midnight and went to bed
breathlessly happy.

The people of the valley missed him from their gatherings.

At the store they questioned him, but he had his excuse ready.
“I’m taking one of those mail courses,” he explained. “I’m
studying at night.” The men smiled. Loneliness was too much
for a man, they knew. Bachelors on farms always got a little
queer sooner or later.

“What are you studying, Pat?”

“Oh! What? Oh! I’m taking some lessons in—building.”

“You ought to get married, Pat. You’re getting along in
years.”

Pat blushed furiously. “Don’t be a damn fool,” he said.

As he worked on the room, Pat was developing a little play,
and it went like this: The room was finished and the furniture in
place. The fire burned brightly; the lamps threw misty reflections on
the polished floor and on the shiny furniture. “I’ll go to her
house, and I’ll say, offhand, ‘I hear you like Vermont houses.’ No!
I can’t say that. I’ll say, ‘Do you like Vermont houses? Well, I’ve
got a room that’s kind of like a Vermont room.’” The preliminari-
aries were never quite satisfactory. He couldn’t come on the perfect
way for enticing her into his house. He ended by skipping that
part. He could think it out later.

Now she was entering the kitchen. The kitchen wouldn’t be
changed, for that would make the other room a bigger surprise.
She would stand in front of the door, and he would reach around
her and throw it open. There was the room, rather dark, but full
of dark light, really. The fire flowed up like a broad stream, and
the lamps reflected on the floor. You could make out the glazed
chintz hangings and the fat tiger of the overmantel hooked rug.
The pewter glowed with a restrained richness. It was all so warm
and snug. Pat’s chest contracted with delight.

Anyway, she was standing in the door and—what would she
say? Well, if she felt the way he did, maybe she wouldn’t say
anything. She might feel almost like crying. That was peculiar,
the good full feeling as though you were about to cry. Maybe
she’d stand there for a minute or two, just looking. Then Pat
would say—“Won’t you come in and sit for a while?” And of
course that would break the spell. She would begin talking about
the room in funny choked sentences. But Pat would be offhand
about it all. “Yes, I always kind of liked it.” He said this out loud
as he worked. "Yes, I always thought it was kind of nice. It came to me the other day that you might like to see it."

The play ended this way: Mae sat in the wingback chair in front of the fire. Her plump pretty hands lay in her lap. As she sat there, a far-away look came into her eyes. . . . And Pat never went any farther than that, for at that point a self-consciousness overcame him. If he went farther, it would be like peeking in a window at two people who wanted to be alone. The electric moment, the palpitating moment of the whole thing was when he threw open the door; when she stood on the threshold, stunned by the beauty of the room.

At the end of three months the room was finished. Pat put the magazine picture in his wallet and went to San Francisco. In the office of a furniture company, he spread his picture on the desk. "I want furniture like that," he said.

"You don't mean originals, of course."

"What do you mean, originals?"

"Why, old pieces. You couldn't get them for under thirty thousand dollars."

Pat's face fell. His room seemed to collapse. "Oh!—I didn't know."

"We can get you good copies of everything here," the manager assured him.

"Why of course. That's good. That's fine. How much would the copies cost?"

A purchasing agent was called in. The three of them went over the articles in the picture and the manager made a list: pie-crust table, drop-leaf gate-leg table, chairs: one windsor, one rush seat ladderback, one wingback, one fireplace bench; rug, rugs, glazed chinztz hangings, lamps with frosted globes and crystal pendants; one open-faced cupboard, pictorial bone-china, pewter candlesticks and sconces.

"Well, it will be around three thousand dollars, Mr. Humbert."

Pat frowned with thought. After all, why should he save money? "How soon can you send it down?" he demanded.

While he waited for a notice that the furniture had arrived in Salinas, Pat rubbed the floor until it shone like a dull lake. He walked backward out of the room erasing his faint foot marks with a polisher. And then, at last, the crates arrived at the freight depot. It took four trips to Salinas in his truck to get them, trips made secretly in the night. There was an air of intrigue about the business.

Pat uncrated the pieces in the barn. He carried in chairs and tables, and, with a great many looks at the picture, arranged them in their exact places. That night the fire flowed up, and the frosted lamps reflected on the floor. The fat tiger on the hooked rug over the fireplace seemed to quiver in the dancing flame-light.

Pat went into the kitchen and closed the door. Then, very slowly he opened it again and stood looking in. The room glowed with warmth, with welcoming warmth. The pewter was even richer than he had thought it would be. The plates in the open-faced cupboard caught sparks on their rims. For a moment Pat stood in the doorway trying to get the right tone in his voice. "I always kind of liked it," he said in his most offhand manner. "It just came to me the other day that you might like to see it." He paused, for a horrible thought had come to him. "Why, she can't come here alone. A girl can't come to a single man's house at night. People would talk about her, and besides, she wouldn't do it." He was bitterly disappointed. "Her mother will have to come with her. But—maybe her mother won't get in the way. She can stand back here, kind of, out of the way."

Now that he was ready, a powerful reluctance stopped him. Evening after evening passed while he put off asking her to come. He went through his play until he knew exactly where she would stand, how she would look, what she would say. He had alternative things she might say. A week went by, and still he put off the visit that would bring her to see his room.

One afternoon he built up his courage with layers of will. "I can't put it off forever. I better go tonight." After dinner, he put on his best suit and set out to walk to the Munroe house. It was only a quarter of a mile away. He wouldn't ask her for tonight. He wanted to have the fire burning and the lamps lighted when she arrived. The night was cold and very dark. When Pat stumbled in the dust of the road, he thought with dismay how his polished shoes would look.
There were a great many lights in the Munroe house. In front of the gate, a number of cars were parked. “It’s a party,” Pat said to himself, “I’ll ask her some other night. I couldn’t do it in front of a lot of people.” For a moment he even considered turning back. “It would look funny though, if I asked her the first time I saw her in months. She might suspect something.”

When he entered the house, Bert Munroe grasped him by the hand. “It’s Pat Humbert,” he shouted. “Where have you been keeping yourself, Pat?”

“I’ve been studying at night.”

“Well it’s lucky you came over. I was going to go over to see you tomorrow. You heard the news, of course!”

“What news?”

“Why, Mae and Bill Whiteside are going to get married next Saturday. I was going to ask you to help at the wedding. It’ll just be a home affair with refreshments afterwards. You used to help at the schoolhouse all the time before you got this studying streak.” He took Pat’s arm and tried to lead him down the hall. The sound of a number of voices came from the room at the end of the hall.

Pat resisted firmly. He exerted all his training in the offhand manner. “That’s fine, Mr. Munroe. Next Saturday, you say? I’d be glad to help. No, I can’t stay now. I got to run to the store right away.” He shook hands again and walked slowly out the door.

In his misery he wanted to hide for a while, to burrow into some dark place where no one could see him. His way was automatically homeward. The rambling house was dark and unutterably dreary when he arrived. Pat went into the barn and with deliberate steps climbed the short ladder and lay down in the hay. His mind was shrunken and dry with disappointment. Above all things he did not want to go into the house. He was afraid he might lock up the door again. And then, in all the years to come, two puzzled spirits would live in the beautiful room, and in his kitchen, Pat would understand how they gazed wistfully into the ghost of a fire.

(Chapter X)
THE TREASURE HUNT

How Danny's friends sought mystical treasure on Saint Andrew's Eve. How Pilon found it and later how a pair of serge pants changed ownership twice.

If he had been a hero, the Portagee would have spent a miserable time in the army. The fact that he was Big Joe Portagee, with a decent training in the Monterey jail, not only saved him the misery of patriotism thwarted, but solidified his conviction that as a man's days are rightly devoted half to sleeping and half to waking, so a man's years are rightly spent half in jail and half out. Of the duration of the war, Joe Portagee spent considerably more time in jail than out.

In civilian life one is punished for things one does; but army codes add a new principle to this—they punish a man for things he does not do. Joe Portagee never did figure this out. He didn't clean his rifle; he didn't shave; and once or twice, on leave, he didn't come back. Coupled with these shortcomings was a propensity Big Joe had for genial argument when he was taken to task.

Ordinarily he spent half his time in jail; of two years in the army, he spent eighteen months in jail. And he was far from satisfied with prison life in the army. In the Monterey jail he was accustomed to ease and companionship. In the army he found only work. In Monterey only one charge was ever brought against him: Drunk and Disorderly Conduct. The charges in the army bewildered him so completely that the effect on his mind was probably permanent.

When the war was over, and all the troops were disbanded, Big Joe still had six months' sentence to serve. The charge had been: "Being drunk on duty. Striking a sergeant with a kerosene can. Denying his identity (he couldn't remember it, so he denied everything). Stealing two gallons of cooked beans. And going A.W.O.L. on the Major's horse."

If the Armistice had not already been signed, Big Joe would probably have been shot. He came home to Monterey long after the other veterans had arrived and had eaten up all the sweets of victory.

When Big Joe swung down from the train, he was dressed in an army overcoat and tunic and a pair of blue serge trousers.

The town hadn't changed much, except for prohibition; and prohibition hadn't changed Torrelli's. Joe traded his overcoat for a gallon of wine and went out to find his friends.

True friends he found none that night, but in Monterey he found no lack of those vile and false harpies and pimps who are ever ready to lead men into the pit. Joe, who was not very moral, had no revulsion for the pit; he liked it.

Before very many hours had passed, his wine was gone, and he had no money; and then the harpies tried to get Joe out of the pit, and he wouldn't go. He was comfortable there.

When they tried to eject him by force, Big Joe, with a just and terrible resentment, broke all the furniture and all the windows, sent half-clothed girls screaming into the night; and then, as an afterthought, set fire to the house. It was not a safe thing to lead Joe into temptation; he had no resistance to it at all.

A policeman finally interfered and took him in hand. The Portagee sighed happily. He was home again.

After a short and juryless trial, in which he was sentenced to thirty days, Joe lay luxuriously on his leather cot and slept heavily for one-tenth of his sentence.

The Portagee liked the Monterey jail. It was a place to meet people. If he stayed there long enough, all his friends were in and out. The time passed quickly. He was a little sad when he had to go, but his sadness was tempered with the knowledge that it was very easy to get back again.

He would have liked to go into the pit again, but he had no
money and no wine. He combed the streets for his old friends, Pilon and Danny and Pablo, and could not find them. The police sergeant said he hadn’t booked them for a long time.

“They must be dead,” said the Portagee.

He wandered sadly to Torrelli’s, but Torrelli was not friendly toward men who had neither money nor barterable property, and he gave Big Joe little solace; but Torrelli did say that Danny had inherited a house on Tortilla Flat, and that all his friends lived there with him.

Affection and a desire to see his friends came to Big Joe. In the evening he wandered up toward Tortilla Flat to find Danny and Pilon. It was dusk as he walked up the street, and on the way he met Pilon, hurrying by in a businesslike way.

“Ai, Pilon. I was just coming to see you.”

“Hello, Joe Portagee.” Pilon was brusque. “Where you been?”

“In the army,” said Joe.

Pilon’s mind was not on the meeting. “I have to go on.”

“I will go with you,” said Joe.

Pilon stopped and surveyed him. “Don’t you remember what night it is?” he asked.

“No. What is it?”

“It is Saint Andrew’s Eve.”

Then the Portagee knew; for this was the night when every paisano who wasn’t in jail wandered restlessly through the forest. This was the night when all buried treasure sent up a faint phosphorescent glow through the ground. There was plenty of treasure in the woods too. Monterey had been invaded many times in two hundred years, and each time valuables had been hidden in the earth.

The night was clear. Pilon had emerged from his hard daily shell, as he did now and then. He was the idealist tonight, the giver of gifts. This night he was engaged in a mission of kindness.

“You may come with me, Big Joe Portagee, but if we find any treasure I must decide what to do with it. If you do not agree, you can go by yourself and look for your own treasure.”

Big Joe was not an expert at directing his own efforts. “I will go with you, Pilon,” he said. “I don’t care about the treasure.”

The night came down as they walked into the forest. Their feet found the pine-needle beds. Now Pilon knew it for a perfect night. A high fog covered the sky, and behind it the moon shone, so that the forest was filled with a gauzely light. There was none of the sharp outline we think of as reality. The tree trunks were not black columns of wood, but soft and unsubstantial shadows. The patches of brush were formless and shifting in the queer light. Ghosts could walk freely tonight, without fear of the disbelief of men; for this night was haunted, and it would be an insensitive man who did not know it.

Now and then Pilon and Big Joe passed other searchers who wandered restlessly, zigzagging among the pines. Their heads were down, and they moved silently and passed no greeting. Who could say whether all of them were really living men? Joe and Pilon knew that some were shades of those old folk who had buried the treasures; and who, on Saint Andrew’s Eve, wandered back to the earth to see that their gold was undisturbed. Pilon wore his saint’s medallion, hung around his neck, outside his clothes; so he had no fear of the spirits. Big Joe walked with his fingers crossed in the Holy Sign. Although they might be frightened, they knew they had protection more than adequate to cope with the unearthly night.

The wind rose as they walked, and drove the fog across the pale moon like a thin wash of gray water color. The moving fog gave shifting form to the forest, so that every tree crept stealthily along and the bushes moved soundlessly, like great dark cats. The treetops in the wind talked huskily, told fortunes and foretold deaths. Pilon knew it was not good to listen to the talking of the trees. No good ever came of knowing the future; and besides, this whispering was unholy. He turned the attention of his ears from the trees’ talking.

He began a zigzag path through the forest, and Big Joe walked beside him like a great alert dog. Lone silent men passed them and went on without a greeting; and the dead passed them noiselessly, and went on without a greeting.

The fog siren began its screaming on the Point, far below them; and it wailed its sorrow for all the good ships that had drowned on the iron reef, and for all those others that would sometime die there.
Pilon shuddered and felt cold, although the night was warm. He whispered a Hail Mary under his breath.

They passed a gray man who walked with his head down and who gave them no greeting.

An hour went by, and still Pilon and Big Joe wandered as restlessly as the dead who crowded the night.

Suddenly Pilon stopped. His hand found Big Joe's arm. "Do you see?" he whispered.

"Where?"

"Right ahead there."

"Yes—I think so."

It seemed to Pilon that he could see a soft pillar of blue light that shone out of the ground ten yards ahead of him.

"Big Joe," he whispered, "find two sticks about three or four feet long. I do not want to look away. I might lose it."

He stood like a pointing dog while Big Joe scurried off to find the sticks. Pilon heard him break two small dead limbs from a pine tree. And he heard the snaps as Big Joe broke the twigs from his sticks. And still Pilon stared at the pale shaft of nebulous light. So faint it was that sometimes it seemed to disappear altogether. Sometimes he was not sure he saw it at all. He did not move his eyes when Big Joe put the sticks in his hands. Pilon crossed the sticks at right angles and advanced slowly, holding the cross in front of him. As he came close, the light seemed to fade away, but he saw where it had come from, a perfectly round depression in the pine needles.

Pilon laid his cross over the depression, and he said, "All that lies here is mine by discovery. Go away, all evil spirits. Go away, spirits of men who buried this treasure, In Nomen Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti," and then he heaved a great sigh and sat down on the ground.

"We have found it, oh my friend, Big Joe," he cried. "For many years I have looked, and now I have found it."

"Let's dig," said Big Joe.

But Pilon shook his head impatiently. "When all the spirits are free? When even to be here is dangerous? You are a fool, Big Joe. We will sit here until morning; and then we will mark the place, and tomorrow night we will dig. No one else can see the

light now that we have covered it with the cross. Tomorrow night there will be no danger."

The night seemed more fearful now that they sat in the pine needles, but the cross sent out a warmth of holiness and safety, like a little bonfire on the ground. Like a fire, however, it only warmed the front of them. Their backs were to the cold and evil things that wandered about in the forest.

Pilon got up and drew a big circle around the whole place, and he was inside when he closed the circle. "Let no evil thing cross this line, in the Name of the Most Holy Jesus," he chanted. Then he sat down again. Both he and Big Joe felt better. They could hear the muffled footsteps of the weary, wandering ghosts; they could see the little lights that glowed from the transparent forms as they walked by; but their protecting line was impregnable. Nothing bad from this world or from any other world could cross into the circle.

"What are you going to do with the money?" Big Joe asked.

Pilon looked at him in contempt. "You have never looked for treasure, Big Joe. Portagee, you do not know how to go about it. I cannot keep this treasure for myself. If I go after it intending to keep it, then the treasure will dig itself down and down like a clam in the sand, and I shall never find it. No, that is not the way. I am digging this treasure for Danny."

All the idealism in Pilon came out then. He told Big Joe how good Danny was to his friends.

"And we do nothing for him," he said. "We pay no rent. Sometimes we get drunk and break the furniture. We fight with Danny when we are angry with him, and we call him names. Oh, we are very bad, Big Joe. And so all of us, Pablo and Jesus Maria and the Pirate and I talked and planned. We are all in the woods tonight, looking for treasure. And the treasure is to be for Danny. He is so good, Big Joe. He is so kind; and we are so bad. But if we take a great sack of treasure to him, then he will be glad. It is because my heart is clean of selfishness that I can find this treasure."

"Won't you keep any of it?" Big Joe asked, incredulous.

"Not even for a gallon of wine?"

Pilon had no speck of the Bad Pilon in him this night. "No,
not one scrap of gold! Not one little brown penny! It is all for Danny, every bit."

Joe was disappointed. "I walked all this way and I won't even get a glass of wine for it," he mourned.

"When Danny has the money," Pilon said delicately, "it may be that he will buy a little wine. Of course I shall not suggest it, for this treasure is Danny's. But I think maybe he might buy a little wine. And then if you were good to him, you might get a glass."

Big Joe was comforted; for he had known Danny a long time. He thought it possible that Danny might buy a great deal of wine.

The night passed on over them. The moon went down and left the forest in muffled darkness. The fog siren screamed and screamed. During the whole night Pilon remained unspotted. He preached a little to Big Joe as recent converts are likely to do.

"It is worth while to be kind and generous," he said. "Not only do such actions pile up a house of joy in Heaven; but there is, too, a quick reward here on earth. One feels a golden warmth glowing like a hot enchilada in one's stomach. The Spirit of God clothes one in a coat as soft as camel's hair. I have not always been a good man, Big Joe Portagee. I confess it freely."

Big Joe knew it perfectly well.

"I have been bad," Pilon continued ecstatically. He was enjoying himself thoroughly. "I have lied and stolen. I have been lecherous. I have committed adultery and taken God's name in vain."

"Me too," said Big Joe happily.

"And what was the result, Big Joe Portagee? I have had a mean feeling. I have known I would go to Hell. But now I see that the sinner is never so bad that he cannot be forgiven. Although I have not yet been to confession, I can feel that the change in me is pleasing to God, for His grace is upon me. If you too would change your ways, Big Joe, if you would give up drunkenness and fighting and those girls down at Dora Williams' House, you too might feel as I do."

But Big Joe had gone to sleep. He never stayed awake very long when he was not moving about.

The grace was not quite so sharp to Pilon when he could not tell Big Joe about it, but he sat and watched the treasure place while the sky grayed and the dawn came behind the fog. He saw the pine trees take shape and emerge out of obscurity. The wind died down and the little blue rabbits came out of the brush and hopped about on the pine needles. Pilon was heavy-eyed but happy.

When it was light he stirred Big Joe Portagee with his foot. "It is time to go to Danny's house. The day has come," Pilon threw the cross away, for it was no longer needed, and he erased the circle. "Now," he said, "we must make no mark, but we must remember this by trees and rocks."

"Why don't we dig now?" Big Joe asked.

"And everybody in Tortilla Flat would come to help us," Pilon said sarcastically.

They looked hard at the surroundings, saying, "Now there are three trees together on the right, and two on the left. That patch of brush is down there, and here is a rock." At last they walked away from the treasure, memorizing the way as they went.

At Danny's house they found tired friends. "Did you find any?" the friends demanded.

"No," said Pilon quickly, to forestall Joe's confession.

"Well, Pablo thought he saw the light, but it disappeared before he got to it. And the Pirate saw the ghost of an old woman, and she had his dog with her."

The Pirate broke into a smile. "That old woman told me my dog was happy now," he said.

"Here is Big Joe Portagee, back from the army," announced Pilon.

"Hello, Joe."

"You got a nice place here," said the Portagee, and let himself down easily into a chair.

"You keep out of my bed," said Danny, for he knew that Joe Portagee had come to stay. The way he sat in a chair and crossed his knees had an appearance of permanence.

The Pirate went out and took his wheelbarrow and started into the forest to cut his kindlings; but the other five men lay
down in the sunshine that broke through the fog, and in a little while they were asleep.

It was midafternoon before any of them awakened. At last they stretched their arms and sat up and looked listlessly down at the bay below, where a brown oil tanker moved slowly out to sea. The Pirate had left the bags on the table, and the friends opened them and brought out the food the Pirate had collected.

Big Joe walked down the path toward the sagging gate. “See you later,” he called to Pilon.

Pilon anxiously watched him until he saw that Big Joe was headed down the hill to Monterey, not up toward the pine forest. The four friends sat down and dreamily watched the evening come.

At dusk Joe Portagee returned. He and Pilon conferred in the yard, out of earshot of the house.

“We will borrow tools from Mrs. Morales,” Pilon said. “A shovel and pickax stand by her chicken house.”

When it was quite dark they started. “We go to see some girls, friends of Joe Portagee’s,” Pilon explained. They crept into Mrs. Morales’ yard and borrowed the tools. And then, from the weeds beside the road, Big Joe lifted out a gallon jug of wine.


Big Joe quieted him firmly. “I did not tell where the treasure was,” he said with some dignity. “I told like this, ‘We found a treasure,’ I said, ‘but it is for Danny. When Danny has it, I will borrow a dollar and pay for the wine.’”

Pilon was overwhelmed. “And they believed, and let you take the wine?” he demanded.

“Well—” Big Joe hesitated. “I left something to prove I would bring the dollar.”

Pilon turned like lightning and took him by the throat. “What did you leave?”

“Only one little blanket, Pilon,” Joe Portagee wailed. “Only one.”

Pilon shook at him, but Big Joe was so heavy that Pilon only succeeded in shaking himself. “What blanket?” he cried. “Say what blanket it was you stole.”

Big Joe blubbered. “Only one of Danny’s. Only one. He has two. I took only the little tiny one. Do not hurt me, Pilon. The other one was bigger. Danny will get it back when we find the treasure.”

Pilon whirled him around and kicked him with accuracy and fire. “Pig,” he said, “dirty thieving cow. You will get the blanket back or I will beat you to ribbons.”

Big Joe tried to placate him. “I thought how we are working for Danny,” he whispered. “I thought, ‘Danny will be so glad, he can buy a hundred new blankets.’”

“Be still,” said Pilon. “You will get that same blanket back or I will beat you with a rock.” He took up the jug and uncorked it and drank a little to soothe his frayed sensibilities; moreover, he drove the cork back and refused the Portagee even a drop. “For this theft you must do all the digging. Pick up those tools and come with me.”

Big Joe whined like a puppy and obeyed. He could not stand against the righteous fury of Pilon.

They tried to find the treasure for a long time. It was late when Pilon pointed to three trees in a row. “There!” he said.

They searched about until they found the depression in the ground. There was a little moonlight to guide them, for this night the sky was free of fog.

Now that he was not going to dig, Pilon developed a new theory for uncovering treasure. “Sometimes the money is in sacks,” he said, “and the sacks are rotted. If you dig straight down you might lose some.” He drew a generous circle around the hollow. “Now, dig a deep trench around, and then we will come up on the treasure.”

“Aren’t you going to dig?” Big Joe asked.

Pilon broke into a fury. “Am I a thief of blankets?” he cried. “Do I steal from the bed of my friend who shelters me?”

“Well, I ain’t going to do all the digging,” Big Joe said.

Pilon picked up one of the pine limbs that only the night before had served as part of the cross. He advanced ominously toward Big Joe Portagee. “Thief,” he snarled. “Dirty pig of an untrue friend. Take up that shovel.”

Big Joe’s courage flowed away, and he stooped for the shovel
on the ground. If Joe Portagee’s conscience had not been bad, he might have remonstrated; but his fear of Pilon, armed with a righteous cause and a stick of pine wood, was great.

Big Joe abhorred the whole principle of shoveling. The line of the moving shovel was unattractive. The end to be gained, that of taking dirt from one place and putting it in another, was, to one who held the larger vision, silly and gainless. A whole lifetime of shoveling could accomplish practically nothing. Big Joe’s reaction was a little more simple than this. He didn’t like to shovel. He had joined the army to fight and had done nothing but dig.

But Pilon stood over him, and the trench stretched around the treasure place. It did no good to profess sickness, hunger, or weakness. Pilon was inexorable, and Joe’s crime of the blanket was held against him. Although he whined, complained, held up his hands to show how they were hurt, Pilon stood over him and forced the digging.

Midnight came, and the trench was three feet deep. The roosters of Monterey crowed. The moon sank behind the trees. At last Pilon gave the word to move in on the treasure. The bursts of dirt came slowly now; Big Joe was exhausted. Just before daylight his shovel struck something hard.

“Ai,” he cried. “We have it, Pilon.”

The find was large and square. Frantically they dug at it in the dark, and they could not see it.


The daylight came before they had it out. Pilon felt metal and leaned down in the gray light to see. It was a good-sized square of concrete. On the top was a round brown plate. Pilon spelled out the words on it:

UNITED STATES GEODETIC SURVEY +1915 +
ELEVATION 600 FEET

Pilon sat down in the pit and his shoulders sagged in defeat.

“No treasure?” Big Joe asked plaintively.

Pilon did not answer him. The Portagee inspected the cement post and his brow wrinkled with thought. He turned to the sorrowing Pilon. “Maybe we can take this good piece of metal and sell it.”

Pilon peered up out of his dejection. “Johnny Pom-pom found one,” he said with a quietness of great disappointment. “Johnny Pom-pom took the metal piece and tried to sell it. It is a year in jail to dig one of these up,” Pilon mourned. “A year in jail and two thousand dollars’ fine.” In his pain Pilon wanted only to get away from this tragic place. He stood up, found a weed in which to wrap the wine bottle, and started down the hill.

Big Joe trotted after him solicitously. “Where are we going?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Pilon.

The day was bright when they arrived at the beach, but even there Pilon did not stop. He trudged along the hard sand by the water’s edge until Monterey was far behind and only the sand dunes of Seaside and the rippling waves of the bay were there to see his sorrow. At last he sat in the dry sand, with the sun warming him. Big Joe sat beside him, and he felt that in some way he was responsible for Pilon’s silent pain.

Pilon took the jug out of its weed and uncorked it and drank deeply, and because sorrow is the mother of a general compassion, he passed Joe’s wine to the miscreant Joe.

“How we build,” Pilon cried. “How our dreams lead us. I had thought how we would carry bags of gold to Danny. I could see how his face would look. He would be surprised. For a long time he would not believe it.” He took the bottle from Joe Portagee and drank coollly. “All this is gone, blown away in the night.”

The sun was warming the beach now. In spite of his disappointment Pilon felt a traitorous comfort stealing over him, a treacherous impulse to discover some good points in the situation.

Big Joe, in his quiet way, was drinking more than his share of the wine. Pilon took it indignantly and drank again and again.

“But after all,” he said philosophically, “maybe if we had found gold, it might not have been good for Danny. He has always been a poor man. Riches might make him crazy.”
Big Joe nodded solemnly. The wine went down and down in the bottle.

"Happiness is better than riches," said Pilon. "If we try to make Danny happy, it will be a better thing than to give him money."

Big Joe nodded again and took off his shoes. "Make him happy. That's the stuff."

Pilon turned sadly upon him. "You are only a pig and not fit to live with men," he said gently. "You who stole Danny's blanket should be kept in a sty and fed potato peelings."

They were getting very sleepy in the warm sun. The little waves whispered along the beach. Pilon took off his shoes.

"Even Stephen," said Big Joe, and they drained the jug to the last drop.

The beach was swaying gently, heaving and falling with a movement like a ground-swell.

"You aren't a bad man," Pilon said. But Big Joe Portagee was already asleep. Pilon took off his coat and laid it over his face. In a few moments he too was sleeping sweetly.

The sun wheeled over the sky. The tide spread up the beach and then retreated. A squad of scampering kildeers inspected the sleeping men. A wandering dog sniffed them. Two elderly ladies, collecting seashells, saw the bodies and hurried past lest these men should awaken in passion, pursue and criminally assault them. It was a shame, they agreed, that the police did nothing to control such matters. "They are drunk," one said.

And the other stared back up the beach at the sleeping men. "Drunken beasts," she agreed.

When at last the sun went behind the pines of the hill in back of Monterey, Pilon awakened. His mouth was as dry as alum; his head ached and he was stiff from the hard sand. Big Joe snored on.

"Joe," Pilon cried, but the Portagee was beyond call. Pilon rested on his elbow and stared out to sea. "A little wine would be good for my dry mouth," he thought. He tipped up the jug and got not a single drop to soothe his dry tongue. Then he turned out his pockets in the hope that while he slept some miracle had taken place there; but none had. There was a broken pocketknife for which he had been refused a glass of wine at least twenty times. There was a fishhook in a cork, a piece of dirty string, a dog's tooth, and several keys that fit nothing; Pilon knew of. In the whole lot was not a thing Torrelli would consider as worth having, even in a moment of insanity.

Pilon looked speculatively at Big Joe. "Poor fellow," he thought. "When Joe Portagee wakes up he will feel as dry as I do. He will like it if I have a little wine for him." He pushed Big Joe roughly several times; and when the Portagee only mumbled, and then snored again, Pilon looked through his pockets. He found a brass pants' button, a little metal disk which said "Good Eats at the Dutchman," four or five headless matches, and a little piece of chewing tobacco.

Pilon sat back on his heels. So it was no use. He must wither here on the beach while his throat called lustily for wine.

He noticed the serge trousers the Portagee was wearing and stroked them with his fingers. "Nice cloth," he thought. "Why should this dirty Portagee wear such good cloth when all his friends go about in jeans?" Then he remembered how badly the pants fitted Big Joe, how tight the waist was even with two fly-buttons undone, how the cuffs missed the shoe tops by inches. "Someone of a decent size would be happy in those pants."

Pilon remembered Big Joe's crime against Danny, and he became an avenging angel. How did this black Portagee dare to insult Danny so! "When he wakes up I will beat him! But," the more subtle Pilon argued, "his crime was theft. Would it not teach him a lesson to know how it feels to have something stolen? What good is punishment unless something is learned?" It was a triumphant position for Pilon. If, with one action, he could avenge Danny, discipline Big Joe, teach an ethical lesson, and get a little wine, who in the world could criticize him?

He pushed the Portagee vigorously, and Big Joe brushed at him as though he were a fly. Pilon deftly removed the trousers, rolled them up, and sauntered away into the sand dunes.

Torrelli was out, but Mrs. Torrelli opened the door to Pilon. He was mysterious in his manner, but at last he held up the pants for her inspection.
She shook her head decisively.

“But look,” said Pilon, “you are seeing only the spots and the dirt. Look at this fine cloth underneath. Think, señora! You have cleaned the spots off and pressed the trousers! Torrelli comes in! He is silent; he is glum. And then you bring him these fine pants! See how his eyes grow bright! See how happy he is! He takes you on his lap! Look how he smiles at you, señora! Is so much happiness too high at one gallon of red wine?”

“The seat of the pants is thin,” she said.

He held them up to the light. “Can you see through them? No! The stiffness, the discomfort is taken out of them. They are in prime condition.”

“No,” she said firmly.

“You are cruel to your husband, señora. You deny him happiness. I should not be surprised to see him going to other women, who are not so heartless. For a quart, then?”

Finally her resistance was beaten down and she gave him the quart. Pilon drank it off immediately. “You try to break down the price of pleasure,” he warned her. “I should have half a gallon.”

Mrs. Torrelli was hard as stone. Not a drop more could Pilon get. He sat there brooding in the kitchen. “Jewess, that’s what she is. She cheats me out of Big Joe’s pants.”

Pilon thought sadly of his friend out there on the beach. What could he do? If he came into town he would be arrested. And what had this harpy done to deserve the pants? She had tried to buy Pilon’s friend’s pants for a miserable quart of miserable wine. Pilon felt himself dissolving into anger at her.

“I am going away in a moment,” he told Mrs. Torrelli. The pants were hung in a little alcove off the kitchen.

“Good-bye,” said Mrs. Torrelli over her shoulder. She went into her little pantry to prepare dinner.

On his way out Pilon passed the alcove and lifted down not only the pants, but Danny’s blanket.

Pilon walked back down the beach, toward the place where he had left Big Joe. He could see a bonfire burning brightly on the sand, and as he drew nearer, a number of small dark figures passed in front of the flame. It was very dark now; he guided himself by the fire. As he came close, he saw that it was a Girl Scout wienie bake. He approached warily.

For a while he could not see Big Joe, but at last he discovered him, lying half covered with sand, speechless with cold and agony. Pilon walked firmly up to him and held up the pants.

“Take them, Big Joe, and be glad you have them back.”

Joe’s teeth were chattering. “Who stole my pants, Pilon? I have been lying here for hours, and I could not go away because of those girls.”

Pilon obligingly stood between Big Joe and the little girls who were running about the bonfire. The Portagee brushed the cold damp sand from his legs and put on his pants. They walked side by side along the dark beach toward Monterey, where the lights hung, necklace above necklace against the hill. The sand dunes crouched along the back of the beach like tired hounds, resting; and the waves gently practiced at striking and hissed a little. The night was cold and aloof, and its warm life was withdrawn, so that it was full of bitter warnings to man that he is alone in the world, and alone among his fellows; that he has no comfort owing him from anywhere.

Pilon was still brooding, and Joe Portagee sensed the depth of his feeling. At last Pilon turned his head toward his friend.

“We learn by this that it is great foolishness to trust a woman,” he said.

“Did some woman take my pants?” Big Joe demanded excitedly. “Who was it? I’ll kick the hell out of her!”

But Pilon shook his head as sadly as old Jehovah, who, resting on the seventh day, sees that his world is tiresome. “She is punished,” Pilon said. “You might say she punished herself, and that is the best way. She had thy pants; she bought them with greed; and now she has them not.”

These things were beyond Big Joe. They were mysteries it was better to let alone; and this was as Pilon wished it. Big Joe said humbly, “Thanks for getting my pants back, Pilon.” But Pilon was so sunk in philosophy that even thanks were valueless.

“It was nothing,” he said. “In the whole matter only the lesson we learn has any value.”
They climbed up from the beach and passed the great silver tower of the gas works.

Big Joe Portagee was happy to be with Pilon. "Here is one who takes care of his friends," he thought. "Even when they sleep he is alert to see that no harm comes to them." He resolved to do something nice for Pilon sometime.

(Chapter VIII)
I. THE GIFT

At daybreak Billy Buck emerged from the bunkhouse and stood for a moment on the porch looking up at the sky. He was a broad, bandy-legged little man with a walrus mustache, with square hands, puffed and muscled on the palms. His eyes were a contemplative, watery gray and the hair which protruded from under his Stetson hat was spiky and weathered. Billy was still stuffing his shirt into his blue jeans as he stood on the porch. He unbuckled his belt and tightened it again. The belt showed, by the worn shiny places opposite each hole, the gradual increase of Billy's middle over a period of years. When he had seen to the weather, Billy cleared each nostril by holding its mate closed with his forefinger and blowing fiercely. Then he walked down to the barn, rubbing his hands together. He curried and brushed two saddle horses in the stalls, talking quietly to them all the time; and he had hardly finished when the iron triangle started ringing at the ranch house. Billy stuck the brush and currycomb together and laid them on the rail, and went up to breakfast. His actions had been so deliberate and yet so wasteless of time that he came to the house while Mrs. Tiflin was still ringing the triangle. She nodded her gray head to him and withdrew into the kitchen. Billy Buck sat down on the steps, because he was a cow-hand, and it wouldn't be fitting that he should go first into the dining-room. He heard Mr. Tiflin in the house, stamping his feet into his boots.

The high jangling note of the triangle put the boy Jody in motion. He was only a little boy, ten years old, with hair like dusty yellow grass and with shy polite gray eyes, and with a mouth
that worked when he thought. The triangle picked him up out of sleep. It didn't occur to him to disobey the harsh note. He never had; no one he knew ever had. He brushed the tangled hair out of his eyes and skinned his nightgown off. In a moment he was dressed—blue chambray shirt and overalls. It was late in the summer, so of course there were no shoes to bother with. In the kitchen he waited until his mother got from in front of the sink and went back to the stove. Then he washed himself and brushed back his wet hair with his fingers. His mother turned sharply on him as he left the sink. Jody looked shyly away.

"I've got to cut your hair before long," his mother said.
"Breakfast's on the table. Go on in, so Billy can come."

Jody sat at the long table which was covered with white oilcloth washed through to the fabric in some places. The fried eggs lay in rows on their platter. Jody took three eggs on his plate and followed with three thick slices of crisp bacon. He carefully scraped a spot of blood from one of the egg yolks.

Billy Buck clumped in. "That won't hurt you," Billy explained. "That's only a sign the rooster leaves."

Jody's tall stern father came in and Jody knew from the noise on the floor that he was wearing boots, but he looked under the table anyway, to make sure. His father turned off the oil lamp over the table, for plenty of morning light now came through the windows.

Jody did not ask where his father and Billy Buck were riding that day, but he wished he might go along. His father was a disciplinarian. Jody obeyed him in everything without questions of any kind. Now, Carl Tiflin sat down and reached for the egg platter.

"Got the cows ready to go, Billy?" he asked.

"In the lower corral," Billy said. "I could just as well take them in alone."

"Sure you could. But a man needs company. Besides your throat gets pretty dry." Carl Tiflin was jovial this morning.

Jody's mother put her head in the door. "What time do you think to be back, Carl?"

"I can't tell. I've got to see some men in Salinas. Might be gone till dark."

The eggs and coffee and big biscuits disappeared rapidly. Jody followed the two men out of the house. He watched them mount their horses and drive six old milk cows out of the corral and start over the hill toward Salinas. They were going to sell the old cows to the butcher.

When they had disappeared over the crown of the ridge Jody walked up the hill in back of the house. The dogs trotted around the house corner hunching their shoulders and grinning horribly with pleasure. Jody patted their heads—Doubletree Mutt with the big thick tail and yellow eyes, and Smasher, the shepherd, who had killed a coyote and lost an ear doing it. Smasher's one good ear stood up higher than a collie's ear should. Billy Buck said that always happened. After the frenzied greeting the dogs lowered their noses to the ground in a businesslike way and went ahead, looking back now and then to make sure that the boy was coming. They walked up through the chicken yard and saw the quail eating with the chickens. Smasher chased the chickens a little to keep in practice in case there should ever be sheep to herd. Jody continued on through the large vegetable patch where the green corn was higher than his head. The cowpumps were green and small yet. He went on to the sagebrush line where the cold spring ran out of its pipe and fell into a round wooden tub. He leaned over and drank close to the green mossy wood where the water tasted best. Then he turned and looked back on the ranch, on the low, whitewashed house girded with red geraniums, and on the long bunkhouse by the cypress tree where Billy Buck lived alone. Jody could see the great black kettle under the cypress tree.

That was where the pigs were scalped. The sun was coming over the ridge now, glaring on the whitewash of the houses and barns, making the wet grass blaze softly. Behind him, in the tall sagebrush, the birds were scampering on the ground, making a great noise among the dry leaves; the squirrels piped shrilly on the side-hills. Jody looked along at the farm buildings. He felt an uncertainty in the air, a feeling of change and of loss and of the gain of new and unfamiliar things. Over the hillside two big black buzzards sailed low to the ground and their shadows slipped smoothly and quickly ahead of them. Some animal had
died in the vicinity. Jody knew it. It might be a cow or it might be the remains of a rabbit. The buzzards overlooked nothing. Jody hated them as all decent things hate them, but they could not be hurt because they made away with carrion.

After a while the boy sauntered down the hill again. The dogs had long ago given him up and gone into the brush to do things in their own way. Back through the vegetable garden he went, and he paused for a moment to smash a green muskmelon with his heel, but he was not happy about it. It was a bad thing to do, he knew perfectly well. He kicked dirt over the ruined melon to conceal it.

Back at the house his mother bent over his rough hands, inspecting his fingers and nails. It did little good to start him clean to school for too many things could happen on the way. She sighed over the black cracks on his fingers, and then gave him his books and his lunch and started him on the mile walk to school. She noticed that his mouth was working a good deal this morning.

Jody started his journey. He filled his pockets with little pieces of white quartz that lay in the road, and every so often he took a shot at a bird or at a rabbit that had stayed sunning itself in the road too long. At the crossroads over the bridge he met two friends and the three of them walked to school together, making ridiculous strides and being rather silly. School had just opened two weeks before. There was still a spirit of revolt among the pupils.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon when Jody topped the hill and looked down on the ranch again. He looked for the saddle horses, but the corral was empty. His father was not back yet. He went slowly, then, toward the afternoon chores. At the ranch house, he found his mother sitting on the porch, mending socks.

“There’s two doughnuts in the kitchen for you,” she said. Jody slid to the kitchen, and returned with half of one of the doughnuts already eaten and his mouth full. His mother asked him what he had learned in school that day, but she didn’t listen to his doughnut-muffled answer. She interrupted, “Jody, tonight see you fill the wood-box clear full. Last night you crossed the sticks and it wasn’t only about half full. Lay the sticks flat tonight. And Jody, some of the hens are hiding eggs, or else the dogs are eating them. Look about in the grass and see if you can find any nests.”

Jody, still eating, went out and did his chores. He saw the quail come down to eat with the chickens when he threw out the grain. For some reason his father was proud to have them come. He never allowed any shooting near the house for fear the quail might go away.

When the wood-box was full, Jody took his twenty-two rifle up to the cold spring at the brush line. He drank again and then aimed the gun at all manner of things, at rocks, at birds on the wing, at the big black pig kettle under the cypress tree, but he didn’t shoot for he had no cartridges and he wouldn’t have until he was twelve. If his father had seen him aim the rifle in the direction of the house he would have put the cartridges off another year, Jody remembered this and did not point the rifle down the hill again. Two years was enough to wait for cartridges. Nearly all of his father’s presents were given with reservations which hampered their value somewhat. It was good discipline.

The supper waited until dark for his father to return. When at last he came in with Billy Buck, Jody could smell the delicious brandy on their breaths. Inwardly he rejoiced, for his father sometimes talked to him when he smelled of brandy, sometimes even told things he had done in the wild days when he was a boy.

After supper, Jody sat by the fireplace and his shy polite eyes sought the room corners; and he waited for his father to tell what it was he contained, for Jody knew he had news of some sort. But he was disappointed. His father pointed a stern finger at him.

“You’d better go to bed, Jody. I’m going to need you in the morning.”

That wasn’t so bad. Jody liked to do the things he had to do as long as they weren’t routine things. He looked at the floor and his mouth worked out a question before he spoke it. “What are we going to do in the morning, kill a pig?” he asked softly.

“Never you mind. You better get to bed.”
When the door was closed behind him, Jody heard his father and Billy Buck chuckling and he knew it was a joke of some kind. And later, when he lay in bed, trying to make words out of the murmurs in the other room, he heard his father protest, “But, Ruth, I didn’t give much for him.”

Jody heard the hoot-owls hunting mice down by the barn, and he heard a fruit tree limb tap-tapping against the house. A cow was lowing when he went to sleep.

When the triangle sounded in the morning, Jody dressed more quickly even than usual. In the kitchen, while he washed his face and combed back his hair, his mother addressed him irritably. “Don’t you go out until you get a good breakfast in you.”

He went into the dining-room and sat at the long white table. He took a steaming hotcake from the platter, arranged two fried eggs on it, covered them with another hotcake and squashed the whole thing with his fork.

His father and Billy Buck came in. Jody knew from the sound on the floor that both of them were wearing flat-heeled shoes, but he peered under the table to make sure. His father turned off the oil lamp, for the day had arrived, and he looked stern and disciplinary, but Billy Buck didn’t look at Jody at all. He avoided the shy questioning eyes of the boy and soaked a whole piece of toast in his coffee.

Carl Tiflin said crossly, “You come with us after breakfast!”

Jody had trouble with his food then, for he felt a kind of doom in the air. After Billy had tilted his saucer and drained the coffee which had slopped into it, and had wiped his hands on his jeans, the two men stood up from the table and went out into the morning light together, and Jody respectfully followed a little behind them. He tried to keep his mind from running ahead, tried to keep it absolutely motionless.

His mother called, “Carl! Don’t you let it keep him from school.”

They marched past the cypress, where a singletree hung from a limb to butcher the pigs on, and past the black iron kettle, so it was not a pig killing. The sun shone over the hill and threw long, dark shadows of the trees and buildings. They crossed a stubble-field to shortcut to the barn. Jody’s father unhooked the door and they went in. They had been walking toward the sun on the way down. The barn was black as night in contrast and warm from the hay and from the beasts. Jody’s father moved over toward the one box stall. “Come here!” he ordered. Jody could begin to see things now. He looked into the box stall and then stepped back quickly.

A red pony colt was looking at him out of the stall. Its tense ears were forward and a light of disobedience was in its eyes. Its coat was rough and thick as an Airedale’s fur and its mane was long and tangled. Jody’s throat collapsed in on itself and cut his breath short.

“He needs a good currying,” his father said, “and if I ever hear of you not feeding him or leaving his stall dirty, I’ll sell him off in a minute.”

Jody couldn’t bear to look at the pony’s eyes any more. He gazed down at his hands for a moment, and he asked very shyly, “Mine?” No one answered him. He put his hand out toward the pony. Its gray nose came close, sniffing loudly, and then the lips drew back and the strong teeth closed on Jody’s fingers. The pony shook its head up and down and seemed to laugh with amusement. Jody regarded his bruised fingers. “Well,” he said with pride—“Well, I guess he can bite all right.” The two men laughed, somewhat in relief. Carl Tiflin went out of the barn and walked up a side-hill to be by himself, for he was embarrassed, but Billy Buck stayed. It was easier to talk to Billy Buck. Jody asked again—“Mine?”

Billy became professional in tone. “Sure! That is, if you look out for him and break him right. I’ll show you how. He’s just a colt. You can’t ride him for some time.”

Jody put out his bruised hand again, and this time the red pony let his nose be rubbed. “I ought to have a carrot,” Jody said. “Where’d we get him, Billy?”

“Bought him at a sheriff’s auction,” Billy explained. “A show went broke in Salinas and had debts. The sheriff was selling off their stuff.”

The pony stretched out his nose and shook the forelock
from his wild eyes. Jody stroked the nose a little. He said softly, “There isn’t a—saddle?”

Billy Buck laughed. “I’d forgot. Come along.”

In the harness room he lifted down a little saddle of red morocco leather. “It’s just a show saddle,” Billy Buck said disparagingly. “It isn’t practical for the brush, but it was cheap at the sale.”

Jody couldn’t trust himself to look at the saddle either, and he couldn’t speak at all. He brushed the shining red leather with his fingertips, and after a long time he said, “It’ll look pretty on him though.” He thought of the grandest and prettiest things he knew. “If he hasn’t a name already, I think I’ll call him Gabilan Mountains,” he said.

Billy Buck knew how he felt. “It’s a pretty long name. Why don’t you just call him Gabilan? That means hawk. That would be a fine name for him.” Billy felt glad. “If you will collect tail hair, I might be able to make a hair rope for you sometime. You could use it for a hackamore.”

Jody wanted to go back to the box stall. “Could I lead him to school, do you think—to show the kids?”

But Billy shook his head. “He’s not even halter-broke yet. We had a time getting him here. Had to almost drag him. You better be starting for school though.”

“I’ll bring the kids to see him here this afternoon,” Jody said.

Six boys came over the hill half an hour early that afternoon, running hard, their heads down, their forearms working, their breath whistling. They swept by the house and cut across the stubble-field to the barn. And then they stood self-consciously before the pony, and then they looked at Jody with eyes in which there was a new admiration and a new respect. Before today Jody had been a boy, dressed in overalls and a blue shirt—quieter than most, even suspected of being a little cowardly. And now he was different. Out of a thousand centuries they drew the ancient admiration of the footman for the horseman. They knew instinctively that a man on a horse is spiritually as well as physically bigger than a man on foot. They knew that Jody had been miraculously lifted out of equality with them, and had been placed over them. Gabilan put his head out of the stall and sniffed them.

“Why’n’t you ride him?” the boys cried. “Why’n’t you braid his tail with ribbons like in the fair?” “When you going to ride him?”

Jody’s courage was up. He too felt the superiority of the horseman. “He’s not old enough. Nobody can ride him for a long time. I’m going to train him on the long halter. Billy Buck is going to show me how.”

“Well, can’t we even lead him around a little?”

“He isn’t even halter-broke,” Jody said. He wanted to be completely alone when he took the pony out for the first time. “Come and see the saddle.”

They were speechless at the red morocco saddle, completely shocked out of comment. “It isn’t much use in the brush,” Jody explained. “It’ll look pretty on him though. Maybe I’ll ride bareback when I go into the brush.”

“How you going to rope a cow without a saddle horn?”

“Maybe I’ll get another saddle for every day. My father might want me to help him with the stock.” He let them feel the red saddle, and showed them the brass chain throat-latch on the bridle and the big brass buttons at each temple where the headstall and brow band crossed. The whole thing was too wonderful. They had to go away after a little while, and each boy, in his mind, searched among his possessions for a bribe worthy of offering in return for a ride on the red pony when the time should come.

Jody was glad when they had gone. He took brush and currycomb from the wall, took down the barrier of the box stall and stepped cautiously in. The pony’s eyes glittered, and he edged around into kicking position. But Billy touched him on the shoulder and rubbed his high arched neck as he had always seen Billy Buck do, and he crooned, “So-o-o, boy,” in a deep voice. The pony gradually relaxed his tenseness. Jody curried and brushed until a pile of dead hair lay in the stall and until the pony’s coat had taken on a deep red shine. Each time he finished he thought it might have been done better. He braided the mane into a dozen little pigtails, and he braided the forelock, and then he undid them and brushed the hair out straight again.
the mice had nibbled Gabilan's tail until it was stringy and thin. He usually ran the last little way to the barn. He unlatched the rusty hasp of the barn door and stepped in, and no matter how quietly he opened the door, Gabilan was always looking at him over the barrier of the box stall and Gabilan whinnied softly and stamped his front foot, and his eyes had big sparks of red fire in them like oakwood embers.

Sometimes, if the work horses were to be used that day, Jody found Billy Buck in the barn harnessing and currying. Billy stood with him and looked long at Gabilan and he told Jody a great many things about horses. He explained that they were terribly afraid for their feet, so that one must make a practice of lifting the legs and patting the hoofs and ankles to remove their terror. He told Jody how horses love conversation. He must talk to the pony all the time, and tell him the reasons for everything. Billy wasn’t sure a horse could understand everything that was said to him, but it was impossible to say how much was understood. A horse never kicked up a fuss if someone he liked explained things to him. Billy could give examples, too. He had known, for instance, a horse nearly dead beat with fatigue to perk up when told it was only a little farther to his destination. And he had known a horse paralyzed with fright to come out of it when his rider told him what it was that was frightening him. While he talked in the mornings, Billy Buck cut twenty or thirty straws into neat three-inch lengths and stuck them into his hatband. Then during the whole day, if he wanted to pick his teeth or merely to chew on something, he had only to reach up for one of them.

Jody listened carefully, for he knew and the whole county knew that Billy Buck was a fine hand with horses. Billy's own horse was a stringy cayuse with a hammer head, but he nearly always won first prize at the stock trials. Billy could rope a steer, take a double half-hitch about the horn with his riata, and dismount, and his horse would play the steer as an angler plays a fish, keeping a tight rope until the steer was down or beaten.

Every morning, after Jody had curried and brushed the pony, he let down the barrier of the stall, and Gabilan thrust past him
and raced down the barn and into the corral. Around and around he galloped, and sometimes he jumped forward and landed on stiff legs. He stood quivering, stiff ears forward, eyes rolling so that the whites showed, pretending to be frightened. At last he walked snorting to the water-trough and buried his nose in the water up to the nostrils. Jody was proud then, for he knew that was the way to judge a horse. Poor horses only touched their lips to the water, but a fine spirited beast put his whole nose and mouth under, and only left room to breathe.

Then Jody stood and watched the pony, and he saw things he had never noticed about any other horse, the sleek, sliding flank muscles and the cords of the buttocks, which flexed like a closing fist, and the shine the sun put on the red coat. Having seen horses all his life, Jody had never looked at them very closely before. But now he noticed the moving ears which gave expression and even inflection of expression to the face. The pony talked with his ears. You could tell exactly how he felt about everything by the way his ears pointed. Sometimes they were stiff and upright and sometimes lax and sagging. They went back when he was angry or fearful, and forward when he was anxious and curious and pleased; and their exact position indicated which emotion he had.

Billy Buck kept his word. In the early fall the training began. First there was the halter-breaking, and that was the hardest because it was the first thing. Jody held a carrot and coaxed and promised and pulled on the rope. The pony set his feet like a burro when he felt the strain. But before long he learned. Jody walked all over the ranch leading him. Gradually he took to dropping the rope until the pony followed him unled wherever he went.

And then came the training on the long halter. That was slower work. Jody stood in the middle of a circle, holding the long halter. He clucked with his tongue and the pony started to walk in a big circle, held in by the long rope. He clucked again to make the pony trot, and again to make him gallop. Around and around Gabilan went thundering and enjoying it immensely. Then he called, "Whoa," and the pony stopped. It was not long until Gabilan was perfect at it. But in many ways he was a bad pony. He bit Jody in the pants and stomped on Jody's feet. Now and then his ears went back and he aimed a tremendous kick at the boy. Every time he did one of these bad things, Gabilan settled back and seemed to laugh to himself.

Billy Buck worked at the hair rope in the evenings before the fireplace. Jody collected tail hair in a bag, and he sat and watched Billy slowly constructing the rope, twisting a few hairs to make a string and rolling two strings together for a cord, and then braiding a number of cords to make the rope. Billy rolled the finished rope on the floor under his foot to make it round and hard.

The long halter work rapidly approached perfection. Jody's father, watching the pony stop and start and trot and gallop, was a little bothered by it.

"He's getting to be almost a trick pony," he complained. "I don't like trick horses. It takes all the—dignity out of a horse to make him do tricks. Why, a trick horse is kind of like an actor—no dignity, no character of his own." And his father said, "I guess you better be getting him used to the saddle pretty soon."

Jody rushed for the harness-room. For some time he had been riding the saddle on a sawhorse. He changed the stirrup length over and over, and could never get it just right. Sometimes, mounted on the sawhorse in the harness-room, with collars and hames and tugs hung all about him, Jody rode out beyond the room. He carried his rifle across the pommel. He saw the fields go flying by, and he heard the beat of galloping hoofs.

It was a ticklish job, saddling the pony for the first time. Gabilan hunched and reared and threw the saddle off before the cinch could be tightened. It had to be replaced again and again until at last the pony let it stay. And the cinching was difficult, too. Day by day Jody tightened the girth a little more until at last the pony didn’t mind the saddle at all.

Then there was the bridle. Billy explained how to use a stick of licorice for a bit until Gabilan was used to having something in his mouth. Billy explained, "Of course we could force-break
him to everything, but he wouldn't be as good a horse if we did. He'd always be a little bit afraid, and he wouldn't mind because he wanted to."

The first time the pony wore the bridle he whipped his head about and worked his tongue against the bit until the blood oozed from the corners of his mouth. He tried to rub the heads-tall off on the manger. His ears pivoted about and his eyes turned red with fear and with general ambulantaciousness. Jody rejoiced, for he knew that only a mean-souled horse does not resent training.

And Jody trembled when he thought of the time when he would first sit in the saddle. The pony would probably throw him off. There was no disgrace in that. The disgrace would come if he did not get right up and mount again. Sometimes he dreamed that he lay in the dirt and cried and couldn't make himself mount again. The shame of the dream lasted until the middle of the day.

Gabian was growing fast. Already he had lost the long-leggedness of the colt; his mane was getting longer and blacker. Under the constant currying and brushing his coat lay as smooth and gleaming as orange-red lacquer. Jody oiled the hoofs and kept them carefully trimmed so they would not crack.

The hair rope was nearly finished. Jody's father gave him an old pair of spurs and bent in the side bars and cut down the straps and took up the chainlets until they fitted. And then one day Carl Tifflin said:

"The pony's growing faster than I thought. I guess you can ride him by Thanksgiving. Think you can stick on?"

"I don't know," Jody said shyly. Thanksgiving was only three weeks off. He hoped it wouldn't rain, for rain would spot the red saddle.

Gabian knew and liked Jody by now. He nickered when Jody came across the stubble-field, and in the pasture he came running when his master whistled for him. There was always a carrot for him every time.

Billy Buck gave him riding instructions over and over. "Now when you get up there, just grab tight with your knees and keep your hands away from the saddle, and if you get threwed, don't let that stop you. No matter how good a man is, there's always some horse can pitch him. You just climb up again before he gets to feeling smart about it. Pretty soon, he won't throw you no more, and pretty soon he can't throw you no more. That's the way to do it."

"I hope it don't rain before," Jody said.

"Why not? Don't want to get threwed in the mud?"

That was partly it, and also he was afraid that in the flurry of bucking Gabian might slip and fall on him and break his leg or his hip. He had seen that happen to men before, had seen how they writhed on the ground like squashed bugs, and he was afraid of it.

He practiced on the sawhorse how he would hold the reins in his left hand and a hat in his right hand. If he kept his hands thus busy, he couldn't grab the horn if he felt himself going off. He didn't like to think of what would happen if he did grab the horn. Perhaps his father and Billy Buck would never speak to him again, they would be so ashamed. The news would get about and his mother would be ashamed too. And in the schoolyard—it was too awful to contemplate.

He began putting his weight in a stirrup when Gabian was saddled, but he didn't throw his leg over the pony's back. That was forbidden until Thanksgiving.

Every afternoon he put the red saddle on the pony and cinched it tight. The pony was learning already to fill his stomach out unnaturally large while the cinching was going on, and then to let it down when the straps were fixed. Sometimes Jody led him up to the brush line and let him drink from the round green tub, and sometimes he led him up through the stubble-field to the hilltop from which it was possible to see the white town of Salinas and the geometric fields of the great valley, and the oak trees clipped by the sheep. Now and then they broke through the brush and came to little cleared circles so hedged in that the world was gone and only the sky and the circle of brush were left from the old life. Gabian liked these trips and showed it by keeping his head very high and by quivering his nostrils with interest. When the two came back from an expedition they smelled of the sweet sage they had forced through.
Time dragged on toward Thanksgiving, but winter came fast. The clouds swept down and hung all day over the land and brushed the hilltops, and the winds blew shrilly at night. All day the dry oak leaves drifted down from the trees until they covered the ground, and yet the trees were unchanged.

Jody had wished it might not rain before Thanksgiving, but it did. The brown earth turned dark and the trees glistened. The cut ends of the stubble turned black with mildew; the haystacks grayed from exposure to the damp, and on the roofs the moss, which had been all summer as gray as lizards, turned a brilliant yellow-green. During the week of rain, Jody kept the pony in the box stall out of the dampness, except for a little time after school when he took him out for exercise and to drink at the water-trough in the upper corral. Not once did Gabilan get wet.

The wet weather continued until little new grass appeared. Jody walked to school dressed in a slicker and short rubber boots. At length one morning the sun came out brightly. Jody, at his work in the box stall, said to Billy Buck, “Maybe I’ll leave Gabilan in the corral when I go to school today.”

“Be good for him to be out in the sun,” Billy assured him. “No animal likes to be cooped up too long. Your father and me are going back on the hill to clean the leaves out of the spring.” Billy nodded and picked his teeth with one of his little straws.

“If the rain comes, though—” Jody suggested.

“Not likely to rain today. She’s rained herself out.” Billy pulled up his sleeves and snapped his arm bands. “If it comes on to rain—why a little rain don’t hurt a horse.”

“Well, if it does come to rain, you put him in, will you, Billy? I’m scared he might get cold so I couldn’t ride him when the time comes.”

“Oh sure! I’ll watch out for him if we get back in time. But it won’t rain today.”

And so Jody, when he went to school, left Gabilan standing out in the corral.

Billy Buck wasn’t wrong about many things. He couldn’t be. But he was wrong about the weather for that day, for a little

after noon the clouds pushed over the hills and the rain began to pour down. Jody heard it start on the schoolhouse roof. He considered holding up one finger for permission to go to the outhouse and, once outside, running home to put the pony in. Punishment would be prompt both at school and at home. He gave it up and took ease from Billy’s assurance that rain couldn’t hurt a horse. When school was finally out, he hurried home through the dark rain. The banks at the sides of the road spouted little jets of muddy water. The rain slanted and swirled under a cold and gusty wind. Jody dog-trotted home, slopping through the gravelly mud of the road.

From the top of the ridge he could see Gabilan standing miserably in the corral. The red coat was almost black, and streaked with water. He stood head down with his rump to the rain and wind. Jody arrived running and threw open the barn door and led the wet pony in by his forelock. Then he found a gunny sack and rubbed the soaked hair and rubbed the legs and ankles. Gabilan stood patiently, but he trembled in gusts like the wind.

When he had dried the pony as well as he could, Jody went up to the house and brought hot water down to the barn and soaked the grain in it. Gabilan was not very hungry. He nibbled at the hot mash, but he was not very much interested in it, and he still shivered now and then. A little steam rose from his damp back.

It was almost dark when Billy Buck and Carl Tiffin came home. “When the rain started we put up at Ben Herche’s place, and the rain never let up all afternoon,” Carl Tiffin explained. Jody looked reproachfully at Billy Buck, and Billy felt guilty.

“You said it wouldn’t rain,” Jody accused him.

Billy looked away. “It’s hard to tell, this time of year,” he said, but his excuse was lame. He had no right to be fallible, and he knew it.

“The pony got wet, got soaked through.”

“Did you dry him off?”

“I rubbed him with a sack and I gave him hot grain.”

Billy nodded in agreement.

“Do you think he’ll take cold, Billy?”
“A little rain never hurt anything,” Billy assured him.

Jody’s father joined the conversation then and lectured the boy a little. “A horse,” he said, “isn’t any lap-dog kind of thing.” Carl Tiflin hated weakness and sickness, and he held a violent contempt for helplessness.

Jody’s mother put a platter of steaks on the table and boiled potatoes and boiled squash, which clouded the room with their steam. They sat down to eat. Carl Tiflin still grumbled about weakness put into animals and men by too much coddling.

Billy Buck felt bad about his mistake. “Did you blanket him?” he asked.

“No, I couldn’t find any blanket. I laid some sacks over his back.”

“We’ll go down and cover him up after we eat, then.” Billy felt better about it then. When Jody’s father had gone in to the fire and his mother was washing dishes, Billy found and lighted a lantern. He and Jody walked through the mud to the barn. The barn was dark and warm and sweet. The horses still munched their evening hay. “You hold the lantern!” Billy ordered. And he felt the pony’s legs and tested the heat of the flanks. He put his cheek against the pony’s gray muzzle and then he rolled up the eyelids to look at the eyeballs and he lifted the lips to see the gums, and he put his fingers inside his ears. “He don’t seem so chipper,” Billy said. “I’ll give him a rubdown.”

Then Billy found a sack and rubbed the pony’s legs violently and he rubbed the chest and the withers. Gabilan was strangely spiritless. He submitted patiently to the rubbing. At last Billy brought an old cotton comforter from the saddle-room, and threw it over the pony’s back and tied it at neck and chest with string.

“Now he’ll be all right in the morning,” Billy said.

Jody’s mother looked up when he got back to the house. “You’re late up from bed,” she said. She held his chin in her hard hand and brushed the tangled hair out of his eyes and she said, “Don’t worry about the pony. He’ll be all right. Billy’s as good as any horse doctor in the country.”

Jody hadn’t known she could see his worry. He pulled gently away from her and knelt down in front of the fireplace until it burned his stomach. He scorched himself through and then went in to bed, but it was a hard thing to go to sleep. He awakened after what seemed a long time. The room was dark but there was a grayness in the window like that which precedes the dawn. He got up and found his overalls and searched for the legs, and then the clock in the other room struck two. He laid his clothes down and got back into bed. It was broad daylight when he awakened again. For the first time he had slept through the ringing of the triangle. He leaped up, flung on his clothes and went out of the door still buttoning his shirt. His mother looked after him for a moment and then went quietly back to her work. Her eyes were brooding and kind. Now and then her mouth smiled a little but without changing her eyes at all.

Jody ran on toward the barn. Halfway there he heard the sound he dreaded, the hollow rasping cough of a horse. He broke into a sprint then. In the barn he found Billy Buck with the pony. Billy was rubbing its legs with his strong thick hands. He looked up and smiled gaily. “He just took a little cold,” Billy said. “We’ll have him out of it in a couple of days.”

Jody looked at the pony’s face. The eyes were half closed and the lids thick and dry. In the eye corners a crust of hard mucus stuck. Gabilan’s ears hung loosely sideways and his head was low. Jody put out his hand, but the pony did not move close to it. He coughed again and his whole body constricted with the effort. A little stream of thin fluid ran from his nostrils.

Jody looked back at Billy Buck. “He’s awful sick, Billy.”

“Just a little cold, like I said,” Billy insisted. “You go get some breakfast and then go back to school. I’ll take care of him.”

“But you might have to do something else. You might leave him.”

“No, I won’t. I won’t leave him at all. Tomorrow’s Saturday. Then you can stay with him all day.” Billy had failed again, and he felt badly about it. He had to cure the pony now.

Jody walked up to the house and took his place listlessly at
the table. The eggs and bacon were cold and greasy, but he didn’t notice it. He ate his usual amount. He didn’t even ask to stay home from school. His mother pushed his hair back when she took his plate. “Billy’ll take care of the pony,” she assured him.

He moped through the whole day at school. He couldn’t answer any questions nor read any words. He couldn’t even tell anyone the pony was sick, for that might make him sicker. And when school was finally out he started home in dread. He walked slowly and let the other boys leave him. He wished he might continue walking and never arrive at the ranch.

Billy was in the barn, as he had promised, and the pony was worse. His eyes were almost closed now, and his breath whistled shrilly past an obstruction in his nose. A film covered that part of the eyes that was visible at all. It was doubtful whether the pony could see any more. Now and then he snorted, to clear his nose, and by the action seemed to plug it tighter. Jody looked dispiritedly at the pony’s coat. The hair lay rough and unkempt and seemed to have lost all of its old luster. Billy stood quietly beside the stall. Jody hated to ask, but he had to know.

“Billy, is he—is he going to get well?”

Billy put his fingers between the bars under the pony’s jaw and felt about. “Feel here,” he said and he guided Jody’s fingers to a large lump under the jaw. “When that gets bigger, I’ll open it up and then he’ll get better.”

Jody looked quickly away, for he had heard about that lump. “What is it the matter with him?”

Billy didn’t want to answer, but he had to. He couldn’t be wrong three times. “Strangles,” he said shortly, “but don’t you worry about that. I’ll pull him out of it. I’ve seen them get well when they were worse than Gabilan is. I’m going to steam him now. You can help.”

“Yes,” Jody said miserably. He followed Billy into the grain room and watched him make the steaming bag ready. It was a long canvas nose bag with straps to go over a horse’s ears. Billy filled it one-third full of bran and then he added a couple of handfuls of dried hops. On top of the dry substance he poured a little carbolic acid and a little turpentine. “I’ll be mixing it all up while you run to the house for a kettle of boiling water,” Billy said.

When Jody came back with the steaming kettle, Billy buckled the straps over Gabilan’s head and fitted the bag tightly around his nose. Then through a little hole in the side of the bag he poured the boiling water on the mixture. The pony started away as a cloud of strong steam rose up, but then the soothing fumes crept through his nose and into his lungs, and the sharp steam began to clear out the nasal passages. He breathed loudly. His legs trembled in an ague, and his eyes closed against the biting cloud. Billy poured in more water and kept the steam rising for fifteen minutes. At last he set down the kettle and took the bag from Gabilan’s nose. The pony looked better. He breathed freely, and his eyes were open wider than they had been.

“See how good it makes him feel,” Billy said. “Now we’ll wrap him up in the blanket again. Maybe he’ll be nearly well by morning.”

“I’ll stay with him tonight,” Jody suggested.

“No. Don’t you do it. I’ll bring my blankets down here and put them in the hay. You can stay tomorrow and steam him if he needs it.”

The evening was falling when they went to the house for their supper. Jody didn’t even realize that someone else had fed the chickens and filled the wood-box. He walked up past the house to the dark brush line and took a drink of water from the tub. The spring water was so cold that it stung his mouth and drove a shiver through him. The sky above the hills was still light. He saw a hawk flying so high that it caught the sun on its breast and shone like a spark. Two blackbirds were driving him down the sky, glittering as they attacked their enemy. In the west, the clouds were moving in to rain again.

Jody’s father didn’t speak at all while the family ate supper, but after Billy Buck had taken his blankets and gone to sleep in the barn, Carl Tiflin built a high fire in the fireplace and told stories. He told about the wild man who ran naked through the country and had a tail and ears like a horse, and he told about the rabbit-cats of Moro Cojo that hopped into the trees for
birds. He revived the famous Maxwell brothers who found a vein of gold and hid the traces of it so carefully that they could never find it again.

Jody sat with his chin in his hands; his mouth worked nervously, and his father gradually became aware that he wasn't listening very carefully. "Isn't that funny?" he asked.

Jody laughed politely and said, "Yes, sir." His father was angry and hurt, then. He didn't tell any more stories. After a while, Jody took a lantern and went down to the barn. Billy Buck was asleep in the hay, and, except that his breath rasped a little in his lungs, the pony seemed to be much better. Jody stayed a little while, running his fingers over the red rough coat, and then he took up the lantern and went back to the house. When he was in bed, his mother came into the room.

"Have you enough covers on? It's getting winter."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, get some rest tonight." She hesitated to go out, stood uncertainly. "The pony will be all right," she said.

Jody was tired. He went to sleep quickly and didn't awaken until dawn. The triangle sounded, and Billy Buck came up from the barn before Jody could get out of the house.

"How is he?" Jody demanded.

Billy always wolfed his breakfast. "Pretty good. I'm going to open that lump this morning. Then he'll be better maybe."

After breakfast, Billy got out his best knife, one with a needle point. He whetted the shining blade a long time on a little carborundum stone. He tried the point and the blade again and again on his calloused thumb-ball, and at last he tried it on his upper lip.

On the way to the barn, Jody noticed how the young grass was up and how the stubble was melting day by day into the new green crop of volunteer. It was a cold sunny morning.

As soon as he saw the pony, Jody knew he was worse. His eyes were closed and sealed shut with dried mucus. His head hung so low that his nose almost touched the straw of his bed. There was a little groan in each breath, a deep-seated, patient groan.

Billy lifted the weak head and made a quick slash with the knife. Jody saw the yellow pus run out. He held up the head while Billy swabbed out the wound with weak carbolic acid salve.

"Now he'll feel better," Billy assured him. "That yellow poison is what made him sick."

Jody looked unbelieving at Billy Buck. "He's awful sick."

Billy thought a long time what to say. He nearly tossed off a careless assurance, but he saved himself in time. "Yes, he's pretty sick," he said at last. "I've seen worse ones get well. If he doesn't get pneumonia, we'll pull him through. You stay with him. If he gets worse, you can come and get me."

For a long time after Billy went away, Jody stood beside the pony, stroking him behind the ears. The pony didn't flip his head the way he had done when he was well. The groaning in his breathing was becoming more hollow.

Doubletree Mutt looked into the barn, his big tail waving provocatively, and Jody was so incensed at his health that he found a hard black clod on the floor and deliberately threw it. Doubletree Mutt went yelping away to nurse a bruised paw.

In the middle of the morning, Billy Buck came back and made another steam bag. Jody watched to see whether the pony improved this time as he had before. His breathing eased a little, but he did not raise his head.

The Saturday dragged on. Late in the afternoon Jody went to the house and brought his bedding down and made up a place to sleep in the hay. He didn't ask permission. He knew from the way his mother looked at him that she would let him do almost anything. That night he left a lantern burning on a wire over the box stall. Billy had told him to rub the pony's legs every little while.

At nine o'clock the wind sprang up and howled around the barn. And in spite of his worry, Jody grew sleepy. He got into his blankets and went to sleep, but the breezy groans of the pony sounded in his dreams. And in his sleep he heard a crashing noise which went on and on until it awakened him. The wind was rushing through the barn. He sprang up and looked down the lane of stalls. The barn door had blown open, and the pony was gone.
He caught the lantern and ran outside into the gale, and he saw Gabilian weakly shambling away into the darkness, head down, legs working slowly and mechanically. When Jody ran up and caught him by the forelock, he allowed himself to be led back and put into his stall. His groans were louder, and a fierce whistling came from his nose. Jody didn’t sleep any more then. The hissing of the pony’s breath grew louder and sharper.

He was glad when Billy Buck came in at dawn. Billy looked for a time at the pony as though he had never seen him before. He felt the ears and flanks. “Jody,” he said, “I’ve got to do something you won’t want to see. You run up to the house for a while.”

Jody grabbed him fiercely by the forearm. “You’re not going to shoot him?”

Billy patted his hand. “No. I’m going to open a little hole in his windpipe so he can breathe. His nose is filled up. When he gets well, we’ll put a little brass button in the hole for him to breathe through.”

Jody couldn’t have gone away if he had wanted to. It was awful to see the red hide cut, but infinitely more terrible to know it was being cut and not to see it. “I’ll stay right here,” he said bitterly. “You sure you got to?”

“Yes, I’m sure. If you stay, you can hold his head. If it doesn’t make you sick, that is.”

The fine knife came out again and was whetted again just as carefully as it had been the first time. Jody held the pony’s head up and the throat taut, while Billy felt up and down for the right place. Jody sobbed once as the bright knife point disappeared into the throat. The pony plunged weakly away and then stood still, trembling violently. The blood ran thickly out and up the knife and across Billy’s hand and into his shirtsleeve. The sure square hand sawed out a round hole in the flesh, and the breath came bursting out of the hole, throwing a fine spray of blood. With the rush of oxygen, the pony took a sudden strength. He lashed out with his hind feet and tried to rear, but Jody held his head down while Billy mopped the new wound with carbolic salve. It was a good job. The blood stopped flowing and the air puffed out the hole and sucked it in regularly with a little bubbling noise.

The rain brought in by the night wind began to fall on the barn roof. Then the triangle rang for breakfast. “You go up and eat while I wait,” Billy said. “We’ve got to keep this hole from plugging up.”

Jody walked slowly out of the barn. He was too dispirited to tell Billy how the barn door had blown open and let the pony out. He emerged into the wet gray morning and sloshed up to the house, taking a perverse pleasure in splashing through all the puddles. His mother fed him and put dry clothes on him. She didn’t question him. She seemed to know he couldn’t answer questions. But when he was ready to go back to the barn she brought him a pan of steaming meal. “Give him this,” she said.

But Jody did not take the pan. He said, “He won’t eat anything,” and ran out of the house. At the barn, Billy showed him how to fix a ball of cotton on a stick, with which to swab out the breathing hole when it became clogged with mucus.

Jody’s father walked into the barn and stood with them in front of the stall. At length he turned to the boy. “Hadin’t you better come with me? I’m going to drive over the hill.” Jody shook his head. “You better come on, out of this,” his father insisted.

Billy turned on him angrily. “Let him alone. It’s his pony, isn’t it?”

Carl Tiffin walked away without saying another word. His feelings were badly hurt.

All morning Jody kept the wound open and the air passing in and out freely. At noon the pony lay wearily down on his side and stretched his nose out.

Billy came back. “If you’re going to stay with him tonight, you better take a little nap,” he said. Jody went absently out of the barn. The sky had cleared to a hard thin blue. Everywhere the birds were busy with worms that had come to the damp surface of the ground.

Jody walked to the brush line and sat on the edge of the mossy tub. He looked down at the house and at the old bunkhouse and at the dark cypress tree. The place was familiar, but curiously changed. It wasn’t itself any more, but a frame for
things that were happening. A cold wind blew out of the east
now, signifying that the rain was over for a little while. At his
feet Jody could see the little arms of new weeds spreading out
over the ground. In the mud about the spring were thousands
of quail tracks.

Doubletree Mutt came sidewaysly and embarrassed up
through the vegetable patch, and Jody, remembering how he
had thrown the clod, put his arm about the dog’s neck and
kissed him on his wide black nose. Doubletree Mutt sat still, as
though he knew some solemn thing was happening. His big tail
slapped the ground gravely. Jody pulled a swollen tick out of
Mutt’s neck and popped it dead between his thumbnails. It was
a nasty thing. He washed his hands in the cold spring water.

Except for the steady swish of the wind, the farm was very
quiet. Jody knew his mother wouldn’t mind if he didn’t go in to
eat his lunch. After a little while he went slowly back to the
barn. Mutt crept into his own little house and whined softly to
himself for a long time.

Billy Buck stood up from the box and surrendered the cot-
tow swab. The pony still lay on his side and the wound in his
throat bellowed in and out. When Jody saw how dry and dead
the hair looked, he knew at last that there was no hope for the
pony. He had seen the dead hair before on dogs and on cows,
and it was a sure sign. He sat heavily on the box and let down
the barrier of the box stall. For a long time he kept his eyes on
the moving wound, and at last he dozed, and the afternoon
passed quickly. Just before dark his mother brought a deep dish
of stew and left it for him and went away. Jody ate a little of it,
and, when it was dark, he set the lantern on the floor by the
pony’s head so he could watch the wound and keep it open.
And he dozed again until the night chill awakened him. The
wind was blowing fiercely, bringing the north cold with it. Jody
brought a blanket from his bed in the hay and wrapped himself
in it. Gabilan’s breathing was quiet at last; the hole in his throat
moved gently. The owls flew through the hayloft, shrieking and
looking for mice. Jody put his hands down on his head and
slept. In his sleep he was aware that the wind had increased. He
heard it slamming about the barn.

It was daylight when he awakened. The barn door had
swung open. The pony was gone. He sprang up and ran out
into the morning light.

The pony’s tracks were plain enough, dragging through the
frost-like dew on the young grass, tire tracks with little lines
between them where the hoofs had dragged. They headed for
the brush line halfway up the ridge. Jody broke into a run and
followed them. The sun shone on the sharp white quartz that
stuck through the ground here and there. As he followed the
plain trail, a shadow cut across in front of him. He looked up
and saw a high circle of black buzzards, and the slowly revolv-
ing circle dropped lower and lower. The solemn birds soon dis-
appeared over the ridge.

Jody ran faster then, forced on by panic and rage. The trail
entered the brush at last and followed a winding route among
the tall sagebrushes.

At the top of the ridge Jody was winded. He paused, puffing
noisily. The blood pounded in his ears. Then he saw what he
was looking for. Below, in one of the little clearings in the brush,
lay the red pony. In the distance, Jody could see the legs moving
slowly and convulsively. And in a circle around him stood the
buzzards, waiting for the moment of death they know so well.

Jody leaped forward and plunged down the hill. The wet
ground muffled his steps and the brush hid him. When he ar-
ived, it was all over. The first buzzard sat on the pony’s head
and its beak had just risen dripping with dark eye fluid. Jody
plunged into the circle like a cat. The black broodship arose
in a cloud, but the big one on the pony’s head was too late. As
it hopped along to take off, Jody caught its wing tip and pulled
it down. It was nearly as big as he was. The free wing crashed
into his face with the force of a club, but he hung on. The claws
fastened on his leg and the wing elbows battered his head on
either side. Jody groped blindly with his free hand. His fingers
found the neck of the struggling bird. The red eyes looked into
his face, calm and fearless and fierce; the naked head turned
from side to side. Then the beak opened and vomited a stream
of putrefied fluid. Jody brought up his knee and fell on the great
bird. He held the neck to the ground with one hand while his
other found a piece of sharp white quartz. The first blow broke
the beak sideways and black blood spurted from the twisted,
leathery mouth corners. He struck again and missed. The red
fearless eyes still looked at him, impersonal and unafraid and
detached. He struck again and again, until the buzzard lay
dead, until its head was red pulp. He was still beating the dead
bird when Billy Buck pulled him off and held him tightly to
calm his shaking.

Carl Tiflin wiped the blood from the boy's face with a red
bandana. Jody was limp and quiet now. His father moved the
buzzard with his toe. "Jody," he explained, "the buzzard didn't
kill the pony. Don't you know that?"

"I know it," Jody said wearily.

It was Billy Buck who was angry. He had lifted Jody in his
arms, and had turned to carry him home. But he turned back
on Carl Tiflin. "'Course he knows it," Billy said furiously. "Je-
sus Christ! man, can't you see how he'd feel about it?"