

The Lonesome Trail
Jim Taylor

"Certainly there is no hunting like the hunting of man and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never really care for anything else thereafter." – Ernest Hemingway-

"The human target element always stimulates interest." –Ed McGivern-

The Kid had been on the trail for several days now and had not gotten much sleep. He was not nearly as jumpy as at the beginning. He figured that was probably from being tired. The exhaustion in him seemed to go all the way through to his bones. The mare also moved more slowly than she had at the start and he knew she was probably weary and hungry also, grass being in short supply the last day or so. He scanned the hills around him as they moved along. The fatigue kept eating away at him, yet he stayed watchful, alert and wasn't edgy. The layers of trail dust that covered him and his clothes had dried days of perspiration except the fresh beads that rolled down him. It'd been nearly a week since he'd bathed. His clothes had several holes in them, some of them small, near round with crusted dried blood on them. Yet he kept moving, eyes watching, hand clenched on the rifle lying across the saddle in front of him.

At first glance it looked like most any old lever action rifle. Closer inspection revealed sling swivels on the fore end band and the stock. The rear sight was not a traditional buckhorn but a military-style "ladder" sight that was graduated in meters. The writing on the gun was in Spanish. The rifle had seen lots of use, some of it recent, but it had not been abused. The horse, rider and rifle blended well together. They were all tired.

The sun sinking in the western edge of the hills increased his weariness and he began to look for a place to bed down for the evening. Across the dry riverbed in front of him he could make out a green patch in the darkening shade and the thought that there may be grass and water caused him to turn the mare in that direction. Evidently she could smell something attractive because she snorted and picked up her gait, almost excited-like. He figured it had to be water.

During the fifteen minutes or so that he took to cross the river valley the Kid kept an eye out for movement or some sign that someone else was about. He watched the mare also but she never showed any signs of recognizing another horse or any other persons in the area as she concentrated on getting to that patch of green they were heading towards. The last hundred yards he pulled the mare to the right and

rode across and around the trees and grass, looking to see if he could spot any signs of ambush. After taking her in a short semi-circle he let her have her head and they turned in toward the water. As they walked up he could see the dirt tank was a natural one that trapped water from the river when it had any and caught runoff from the hills around it during other times. There was grass for the horse, plenty of water for both of them and it sure looked inviting.

He climbed out of the saddle onto stiff legs. The mare anxiously stuck her nose in the water and greedily sucked it up. Keeping the rifle in hand he loosened the cinch, pulled the saddle and blankets off her sweaty back and laid them under a nearby tree. He took one of the blankets and rubbed the mare as best he could, wiping her down and rubbing what he knew were achy spots on the horse's back. She looked up at him several times and finally he pulled the bit out of her mouth, making it easier for her to get at the grass. He pulled a rope off his saddle and tied it around her neck and then to a nearby tree. She had enough room to get to the water and plenty of grass and seemed content. Chores done he lay down in the grass using the saddle as a pillow, rifle still in hand and was promptly asleep.

He slept uneasily, waking up several times in the night with a start, setting up quickly, rifle at the ready. Once he woke up thirsty and got up to get a drink. Later he woke up thinking he heard the Old Man and lay there listening for a while to the night sounds, while the consciousness flooded his mind with the lay there listening for a while to the night sounds, while the consciousness flooded his mind with the thought that he couldn't hear the Old Man from where he was. The mare stood hipshot nearby, unconcerned and he rolled over, closed his eyes and was back asleep quickly. He wakened just before dawn and lay there letting the tiredness seep out. Some of his wounds were aching and there was a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach that made him realize it had been more than 30 hours since he had eaten. As he lay there watching it get light his mind went back to the start of this thing. He had tried not to dwell on it for the last few days but now the memory came flooding back and he felt almost powerless to stop it, like it had a life of its own.

They had come riding down the canyon, him and the Old Man, just minding their own business. Their little jaunt had started two days before when the Old Man mentioned that he would like to ride up to the old Spanish diggings and nose around a bit while there was a little free time. It sounded good to the Kid so they got the horses ready, packed what they needed and headed out. The trip had been uneventful. The countryside was enjoyable in it's fall trappings and the weather was cool. The Old Man led the way across a small pass and

down a fairly narrow canyon. He said it would save them a day's travel to their destination.

The canyon was full of alder and tamarack trees with a nice little stream running through it. It had been the scene of much placer mining in the early days and remnants of the prospectors could be seen in old stone foundations or an old fireplace here and there. For most of its length the canyon was less than a hundred yards wide and in some spots it was less than a hundred feet, but there was plenty of grass and a lot of game to be seen. Deer, turkeys, Javelina and the weird coati-mundi that looked to the Kid like a cross between an anteater and a raccoon were abundant. One of the coatis had dropped or fallen from a tree right in front of the Old Man's horse as they were riding along and quick as a blink the Old Man had his pistol in his hand, ready to shoot the thing. It made the Kid laugh, seeing the Old Man jerk his pistol that way.

They followed the canyon as it snaked down toward the river for most of the day, enjoying the scenery and the ride and each other's company. A little after noon, by the Old Man's reckoning, they had stopped for a bite to eat and to let the horses rest and then had continued on. When the shadows had started getting longer they were in part of the canyon that narrowed. As they snaked around a corner and into a clearing suddenly there were 4 men standing in front of them with guns in their hands! Startled the Old Man and the Kid had pulled up the horses and as they did one big bearded guy said loudly, "Get down off them horses and keep your hands where we can see them." Before he was done speaking the Old Man's sixshooter was going and men were yelling and shooting. The Kid threw himself or fell (he never did figure out which) off the horse and was on the ground on his side shooting his levergun. It was all very confusing, horses stamping around snorting and people yelling and guns going off. In slow motion a man in a red shirt appeared in front of the Kid pointing a rifle at the Old Man. The Kid's hands felt like they were thick and in molasses as he fired and levered his rifle and fired again, worried that he couldn't shoot fast enough.

Then suddenly it was quiet. The noise of the quiet was almost overwhelming as the Kid got up off the ground. There were people lying around in various places and the Kid seemed to have problems focusing his eyes. Forcing himself to look around he saw two men running through the trees and he, with shaking hands, snapped a shot at them. He couldn't understand why he was shaking so hard and suddenly felt as if he was going to throw up and so weak that he had to lean against a tree for support.

How long he stood there he did not know, but it couldn't have been for too long. Slowly he began to come up out of some kind of fog that seemed to be over his mind and he heard groaning. Scared he looked around, wondering where the Old Man was! There were men lying in various places, a couple of them sort of moving arms or legs but not going any place. The Old Man was on the off side of a large tree and was dragging himself up against it, trying to lean back on it. The Kid ran to him yelling, "Dad! Dad! Are you okay?" Seeing the blood on his clothes and face made his heart seem to skip a beat and then race. Helping the Old Man recline back against the tree he pulled the Old Man's shirt open, dreading. Wiping the blood away as best he could the Kid could see where a bullet had gone in at the edge of the Old Man's ribs on the left side. There was a big puffed-up whelp where it had traveled along the ribs and a really nasty exit wound out the back. The Old Man's head had a large gash above the ear and there was a big knot toward the top like he had gotten hit with a club.

The next half hour was a blur as he cleaned the Old Man's wounds and bandaged them from the kit in the saddlebags. During that time all but one of the men scattered around the clearing had quit moving. And the Kid discovered he had been shot. He had a burn across his left shoulder.. sort of a groove .. that hurt like hell but was not real serious. A bullet had gone through his left leg about three inches above the knee, on the outside, in and out. It had only penetrated two inches or so of his leg and probably just barely hit the muscle. It made his leg difficult to use but he kept going until he had the Old Man resting comfortably. Another had gone through his left side just above the belt line, on the outside, just in the flesh. He found several bullet holes in his shirt and pants where the bullets had gone through the clothing but missed him. Slowly it began to dawn on him that they had been extremely lucky to have come out of this alive.

One of the men in the clearing began making croaking sounds and since the Old Man was resting sort of comfortably the Kid eased over, making sure the guy did not have a gun or was trying to ambush him. He figured out the guy was asking for water and was opening the canteen for him when the man gave a big sigh and went limp. Checking for a pulse he found none. Looking at him for a minute the Kid suddenly remembered the guy in the red shirt and how he had been pointing a rifle at the Old Man when he had shot him. The Kid only remembered shooting twice but Mr. Red Shirt seemed to have quite a few bullet holes in him. Other images were coming back now and he wondered where all the men had come from. He had only seen four when they pulled into the clearing. Now, looking around, there surely were five bodies lying here. And there were those two who had run off. That would have been seven and the Kid wondered how he

had missed seeing them all. They must have been aiming to ambush them he figured and he wondered why.

That night dragged slowly and the Kid stewed all through it. The Old Man never really came to his senses, mumbling and stirring all night long. The Kid worried over him, afraid he would get his wounds bleeding more. He had dressed his own wounds and had eaten a small handful of aspirin to take the edge off the ever-growing pains. Before morning he had made the decision that come first light he was climbing up out of the canyon, taking the Old Man if there was any way possible. He was going to try to hit the highway some miles to the east to get him to a doctor. And he was going to trail those two who had run off and deal with them if he could find them.

The Kid awoke with a start - the sun coming over the horizon poking him in the eyes. He had dozed off while remembering those past days.

It was mostly a nightmare, getting the Old Man out of that canyon, the trip across the cut-up flats trying to find the highway, the Old Man's wounds bleeding, his own causing him much grief. But the good thing was that less than 6 hours after climbing up out of that canyon he had found the road and best of all, a passing rancher had taken both the Old Man and his worn-out horse with him and headed for the nearest medical help at San Manuel. The rancher had tried to persuade the Kid to go with him also, but the Kid said, "No thanks", mumbled something about important business left in the canyon, and turned his horse back in the direction of the lower reaches of it where it spilled out near the river. He figured he would cut sign there and if not, then he would backtrack up the canyon until he did.

After entering the canyon again the Kid took some time casting around for signs that someone had come that way. It wasn't too long before he cut the trail of several horses heading down-canyon toward the river. Unsure if it was the men he was looking for or not he followed the tracks and came on a spot where they had made camp, probably until it got light so they could tell where they were. There were some bloody homemade bandages around the campsite and the Kid figured from this that he had at least winged one of them. Or maybe the Old Man had gotten a shot into one of them when he had his pistol going. The Old Man rarely missed, even under pressure and shooting fast. Back in the saddle the Kid followed their tracks down to the river bed, dry in this season, dry most seasons, and saw that they headed up river toward the South, toward Mexico. And he started after them.

That had been three days ago.

Restless the Kid sat up and he felt the wound in his leg and the one in his side bind. Opening his shirt he noticed the skin on his side around the bullet wound was red and inflamed, kind of angry-looking. He figured he must be running a low fever - probably why his thoughts kept running on like they did. He rummaged in the saddlebag and found the aspirin and washed them down from the canteen. As he put the aspirin back he noticed the bag of jerky and realized he was hungry.

Reaching in the saddlebag for a piece of jerky the Kid contemplated the trip upriver. The riders ahead of him obviously had a destination in mind. Most likely it was Mexico. This riverbed had long been a route up out of Mexico for wetbacks looking for work on the ranches. Smugglers bringing in Mexican weed and taking guns back into Mexico had also used it. Whoever the riders were they knew the route. They had avoided any of the ranches along the river and stayed clear of the few towns it passed by. He knew he wasn't too far behind them and as he lay there sucking on the hard dried meat he wondered what would happen when he caught up to them. How could he approach them? What would be the best way to get close? These and other thoughts raced through his mind and then it hit him like blow to stomach - They may be lying in wait for him! Wanting him to come in on them so they could get rid of him and have a free run into Mexico. He had been so intent on catching up to them the last couple days he had not thought much about that, at least not consciously. Oh sure he had been on his guard, careful not to ride into places that looked like a trap. But he had been thinking that all they wanted to do was get away. What if they had come this far, knowing the country, so they could set a trap?

Thoughtful now the Kid did his morning business and washed up, wishing he had some coffee. The mare nickered at him and seemed to want to get going, restless like. Still the Kid hung back, thinking.

They had crossed the Redington road yesterday where the riverbed swung to the southwest. From where the Kid was he could see a high peak off to the west and figured it must be Wildhorse Mountain. If it was then Lime Peak would be off to the east with the Redington road in between and Benson to the south of them. Remembering back he thought he could recall from a map that the river went southwest for a ways, then swung back to the southeast before crossing the Interstate Highway at Benson. If he was right this could be a shortcut! If he was close enough to them, maybe he could cut across country and get ahead of them! If If ... If If he could get ahead of them and get set up they would ride right into his sights instead of him riding into theirs. It was worth the gamble. Forgetting his aching wounds and the tiredness he grabbed the saddle and blankets. In a

few moments the horse was ready and with stiff legs he swung on her back. As they walked out from the trees he checked his rifle to make sure a shell was in the chamber and that the magazine was full.

With the sun coming up off his left shoulder they crossed the riverbed and climbed the crumbling bank. Once on top the Kid began working his way through the cholla and prickly pear up the hillside. On top of a small rise he paused to look back the way he had come, then urged the mare forward. She was anxious to get going and set off at a trot, threading her way around the rocks and cactus. His goal was south of them, how far he wasn't sure. But if he could get to where the river bed pointed south again before they did..... The Kid left the thought unfinished. Right now he wanted to concentrate on getting there. What happened afterward would happen.

Unbidden his mind kept going around and around the possibilities and though he did not want to, as he rode on making his way across the broken countryside his thoughts kept coming to this - Could he shoot them without warning? Shooting in the heat of battle is one thing. Laying for them and shooting them cold was quite another. Sure, they deserved it. They had ambushed him and the Old Man and at that, for a moment only, the thought intruded that the Old Man may not have made it. He pushed that worry aside and went back to wondering about the other thing that he didn't want to think about either, but could not seem to stay away from. The Preacher's words came back from so long ago "Thou shalt not kill". He remembered the Preacher explaining that the Commandment meant premeditated murder, not selfdefense or defense of your nation, and that bothered him all the more. What he had in mind for the last few days was revenge. Hunting these two renegades down and shooting them like rabid dogs. The longer he tracked them the more the thoughts had weighed on him. Yet something had to be done. They could not be allowed to escape as if nothing had happened. Out of nowhere the thought came "Vengeance is mine" and though he could not recall if he had read it or the Preacher had talked about it, he knew that God had once told folks that. Was what he was planning vengeance? Or was it justice? Or the thoughts going around in his head were distracting him and the Kid shook himself and tried to pay attention to the land around him. This kind of worrying would only get him killed if he wasn't careful.

Stopping below a small hill he climbed out of the saddle, loosened the cinch and let the mare blow. He was working his way south keeping between the riverbed and the Redington road. The river swung a ways out to the west and then came back east again and if he planned it right he would intersect it up ahead, saving quite a few miles. If the two he was following kept to their course of going up the river toward

Mexico and if he could get ahead of them ... he trailed that thought off and wondered if they would leave the river bed? He didn't think so for they had stayed with it for a long ways now, their intention of getting into Mexico pretty plain to read. The Kid figured if he did manage to get ahead of them, and if they did not show up in a reasonable amount of time, he would just backtrack down the river and see if he could either find them or the place where they had turned away from it.

He stayed below the skyline as he rode. It was a simple matter of habit from years of hunting the elusive Coues Deer, the Javelina and other desert game. If he silhouetted himself against the skyline he would be seen, that's all there was to it. It was something most game animals knew by instinct and it had been taught to the Kid by the Old Man before the Kid was in his teens. Not that he was a long way out of his teens, but at the moment he felt as if he was a hundred years old.

The ground ahead changed and dropped off as he rode and he figured he was getting close to the river. Anxiety gnawed at his stomach and he fought back sudden nervousness. No time to start getting queasy he warned himself. The horse could sense his sudden wariness and became tense also, walking more stiff legged. The sight of the riverbed in front of him brought a sudden urge to take deep breaths and for a minute it seemed as if he was losing control. Then suddenly calm flooded through him and he eased down into the saddle, unaware that he had almost been standing in the stirrups. Here it was. He had a job to do. Best get to it.

He could see back west down the riverbed for nearly a quarter of a mile. The sand appeared undisturbed and there was no sign any riders had passed that way. Upriver to his left, the bed of the river twisted around and under some rocky hills, cutting off the view. As soon as he saw it he knew where he would leave the mare. There were plenty of rock outcroppings and little washes running into the riverbed. He was sure he could make a stand where he would not be seen and still not be too far from his horse if he had to make a run for it. Only he wasn't figuring on running.

Worrying that he may be seen, the Kid turned the mare east and made for the bend. He did not want to leave tracks in the sandy bottom to warn those who would be coming that way. During the time it took to reach the river's bend he was nervous, looking around and generally feeling uncomfortable. This was the hard part. If they spotted him before he got set it would wreck everything. He had to have surprise on his side. When he finally got to the spot he had picked out he breathed a sigh of relief. He led the mare into a small ravine and leaving the saddle in place, tied her to a small tree; confident she

would remain there until he came for her. He wished he had water to give her for he knew she was feeling the heat as much as he was. "As soon as this is over old girl" he told her, "I'll get you some good feed and all the water you want." He scratched her ears and then, lifting his rifle, he climbed out of the ravine and began walking back the way he had come. He had a spot in mind and wanted to get set.

The Kid made his way back around the river bend to a place where a large wash spilled into the river from the north. There was a small pile of boulders there, some bush and a couple scraggly Palo Verde trees. From that point he could see west down the riverbed for four hundred yards or so. It gave him a good vantage point as well as allowing for several avenues for escape should he need them. Perfect for an ambush he thought, and at that his stomach went all shaky. Ambush! Why should that bother him? These scum had waylaid him and the Old Man without any warning. Why should he give them any chance? By now he was set in the rocks, some loose branches covering the area where he could watch without being seen. As he waited the thoughts flew spontaneously around in his mind. Sure, he knew all along it was going to come to this. But now here it was! Could he just shoot them down without any warning? Was he doing something that would damn his soul? Or did honor and justice somehow figure into this? If he didn't stop them who would? As the sun grew hotter so did the thoughts until suddenly two figures on horseback appeared, riding down the river toward him and his breath caught in his throat! Was this them? They appeared a lot sooner than he had figured; yet he felt relief. The waiting was over.

The Kid eased his rifle into position and lined up the sights on the approaching riders. They kept to the edge of the dry riverbed, riding in and out of the shadows cast by the hills and ridges. Time dragged and sweat began to drip into the Kid's eyes. He wiped his eyes, frantic that he might miss something. His breath sounded loud in his ears and seemed to echo off the rocks around him. Two hundred yards. He noticed his hands shaking and willed them to stop to no avail. Keeping his finger out of the trigger guard he pulled the hammer back to full cock. The noise of the trigger setting into the notch almost scared him with its loudness.

At one level his mind was detached, almost amused at these reactions. He knew they were silly. Breathing doesn't sound that loud and cocking the gun couldn't be heard over the noise of horse hooves at two hundred yards. Yet at a deeper more primitive level his emotions seemed to be in control in spite of what he knew. The horses approached at a walk and seemed to take forever covering the ground between them. The Kid had picked a spot where he was going to start

in on them, an area with no easy escape except forward or backward. The rock walls of the riverbank were almost vertical and getting a horse up them would be nearly impossible. As the riders approached his breathing grew more ragged and he felt the urge to DO IT NOW!

Forcing himself to wait he tried to see who he was dealing with. Their clothes were dirty and ragged, much like his. One wore a ball cap and the other an old slouch hat of some kind, dirty and misshapen. One hundred yards now. The rider on the left had a crude bandage around his head. Their horses were gaunt and used up. Both the riders looked around them all the time as if they were fearful. The Kid noticed one had a rifle lying across his saddle while the other had a pistol in a holster on his belt and a rifle in a saddle scabbard.

Now they were starting into the "kill area" and the Kid eased his finger onto the trigger, lining up the sights on the rifleman's chest. The sights were shaking but not badly as the Kid started the squeeze --- and couldn't do it! He just could not shoot a man in cold blood from ambush! And without thinking a further thought he stood up, rifle at the shoulder, sights on the rifleman and yelled, "STOP! GET YOUR HANDS UP!" never noticing that the fast breathing and the shaking of his hands had stopped.

All at once, so fast that the Kid later had to think hard to remember what had happened ..the other rider jerked his pistol so quickly the Kid could hardly see it coming and fired a shot. The Kid had his sights lined up on the man with the rifle and triggered a shot into that man's chest as he was attempting to bring his rifle up. Levering his gun he swung the rifle and shot at the pistol man who was firing at him again. The man whirled his horse around while firing at the Kid. A shot came from the rifleman on the ground and the Kid swung back on him and fired again, then levered the rifle as he swung back toward the other rider who was spurring his horse away from the fight, but was still shooting. The Kid levered two fast shots at the retreating rider and at the last shot the horse suddenly dropped flinging the rider over its head. And just like that there was quiet.

The Kid reached for extra ammo in his pockets with fingers that felt fat and clumsy. His hands would not work right and he had trouble getting the shells loaded into the gun. All the time he kept watching the two still figures in the sand. By the time he had stuffed five or six shells into the magazine the shaking started in earnest and his stomach started to heave on him. Trying to keep them in sight the Kid's stomach involuntarily emptied itself of what little was in it ... mostly it was dry heaves. Through watering eyes he kept watch as his body seemed to lose all strength. How long he sat there on the rocks he wasn't sure. After awhile he was aware of being terribly thirsty and

started looking for his canteen. As he looked around his vision seemed to open up and he realized he had been seeing things as if he were looking through a long tunnel.

The water refreshed him and the shaking had pretty much stopped. There had been no movement from either man and the Kid wondered what he should do now. Absent-mindedly he began to pick up his empties scattered around where he was sitting. Counting them he was amazed to see there were 9 of them. He only remembered firing five! Try as he might he could not recall firing those other shots.

Feeling somewhat more normal the Kid took more ammo from his pocket and loaded the magazine of his rifle until it was full. He was not sure what was going to happen, but he had to go take a close look at these two. On stiff legs, feeling weak and somewhat wobbly he walked out to where the first man lay. This one's horse had run off during the fight and was nowhere to be seen. Approaching cautiously he could see clearly the man was dead, eyes wide staring straight up into a sun he would never look on again. The Kid studied him for a moment, wondering at his lack of feeling one way or the other, and then walked toward the other man.

The second man was lying sprawled in front of the body of his horse, his head twisted at an odd angle. To the Kid it looked as if the horse wreck had killed him. There was a bullet wound in the man's back and one in his arm. Looking at the horse the Kid could see it had been shot in the back of the head. He figured that his bullet probably went through the man's arm and into the unfortunate horse, dropping it instantly.

He looked over the scene as carefully as he could. The man's pistol was lying near his body. The saddle and saddlebags were still on the dead horse and the Kid did not mess with them. Finally he turned and walked away, back past the other body, past the place where he had made his stand, back to where he had left his horse. By the time he reached her he was exhausted even though it had been less than a quarter mile. The mare nickered her pleasure at seeing him and after checking the rigging to make sure it was tight he shoved his rifle into the scabbard and climbed on her back. Pointing her nose east he headed for the Redington road. Exhausted to the point of collapse, all he wanted to do was find some water, some shade, and a place to sleep. Mentally he felt numb. He slumped into the saddle nearly unaware of his surroundings.

At one point the horse stopped and the lack of movement wakened him out of the stupor he had fallen into. Looking around he saw they were standing on the edge of a road. He pointed the horse's nose

south and soon the rhythmic movement lulled him back again, away from the thoughts and images to a place that was almost like sleep. In a moment of clarity he tried to shake himself awake, aware that he was suffering from lack of food and possibly infection from the wounds in his body. Soon he resigned himself to the mental twilight that hovered just outside the edge of consciousness and simply waited to see what would happen next - if there was a "next".

There was a "next" and it sure felt confusing. The Kid couldn't sort it out. He heard voices and looking up saw the men he had shot standing in front of him with guns drawn. One had part of his head missing. The other had no eyes. Trying to get his rifle from the scabbard someone else kept telling him to relax, that everything was OK. He looked around to find himself lying down and people standing over him. He tried to explain that he was just tired but the words would not come. Then suddenly he was extremely cold and as he tried to cover up, strange hands held him, telling him that he had a fever and they were trying to get it down. He couldn't figure out how he had a fever and why he was cold when he was sitting on the mare in the middle of the dry riverbed with the sun blazing down while he looked at fly-covered dead bodies laying around in the sand. It was all very confusing but eventually, he slept.

Not remembering being asleep he was suddenly awake. It was dark and he was lying in a strange bed in a strange room. There was a little light coming under the door and in the dark he could make out some details of the room. He was sure he had never been there before. The next thing he knew it was daylight, but he was still in the strange bedroom. He knew he was not dreaming. He tried to set up but movement was difficult. He felt so weird, disconnected almost, and very weak. He finally got set on the edge of the bed with his feet on the floor but discovered he had no clothes on, only a clean pair of underwear. There were fresh-looking bandages on his wounds and he seemed to have taken a bath at some point because he was clean. His rifle and saddle were in the corner. His old beat-up hat was there also. Hearing a noise he looked around and saw a young girl maybe eight or ten years old staring at him with wide eyes. Whirling away she ran from the room and he could hear her yelling, "Momma! Daddy! He's awake!"

With a rustle a tall woman entered the room and the Kid tried to cover himself with the blanket using hands that felt strangely disconnected. Behind her came a cowboy who was holding the little girl's hand. Her Daddy the Kid figured. The little girl was looking at him from around her Daddy's leg while the lady fussed over him saying, "Should you be setting up? Do you feel OK?" and some other words he didn't

catch. There was sort of a ringing in his ears along with what seemed to be the sound of rushing water. "I'm fine" he replied, "I just feel a little weak, maybe, hungry and I need to go to the bathroom." The cowboy stepped up and said, "Sally, you and Missy go on out. I'll help him."

Once he finished in the bathroom the cowboy helped the Kid get dressed and walked with him to the kitchen. The Kid sank thankfully onto a large wooden chair. He smelled the coffee and bacon and eggs and suddenly realized he was starved! As the food was served up he introduced himself and was in turn introduced to Missy (eight years old she informed him) and Sally and Bob. They had found him near the road several days earlier, weak, fevered, and in bad shape. They had brought the mare and him to their ranch, stabled her and nursed him back to health. As they ate they told him about how they had taken care of him and how he was out of his head for a while. The Kid listened, savoring the food and the coffee. It seemed it had been forever since he had such a good meal and he expressed his thanks to the lady of the house for such a feast. She laughed as she went about clearing up the table. Bob suggested they go set on the porch and talk. It was obvious he had something on his mind and the Kid could see it.

Bob cleared his throat and began, "They found a couple dead Mex nationals up the San Pedro. They had been shot in some kind of gun battle." "When was that?" the Kid responded.

"Three days ago."

Thoughts jumbled in his head and he tried to sort them out. It was clear Bob had figured what was what. "Why did you take me in? Why not call the cops?" the Kid asked.

"Well," Bob said, "those Mex's had some saddlebags loaded with money. And it turns out they were a couple of known dope runners, part of a bigger gang. Seems that someone killed a bunch of 'em up in Alder Canyon. The cops figure they had a falling out among themselves over the money and these two shot most of the rest of the gang. One of 'em survived and trailed these two down and shot them but was probably hit himself. They figure his body will turn up somewhere around where they found them two in the river bottom. Since you didn't have any money on you we figured you didn't take the money, so at least you were no robber or drug dealer. I figure you weren't part of it, so why should I call the cops? There ain't no reason for them to know anything about you. Besides, whoever took care of them did us a favor."

"You could have been wrong" the Kid replied.

"I can always call the cops if I need to," said Bob. Then he asked bluntly, "Were you a part of it?"

The Kid looked at him for a moment and then almost without willing it, the whole story poured out. Bob sat listening quietly and as the Kid finished he said, "So you don't know if your Daddy made it or not do you?" The Kid closed his eyes for second and then silently shook his head no. The older man said, "Hell son we have a phone! Let's just call and see what has happened. Folks are sure to be wondering about you." and with that took his arm and helped him into the house.

The next few minutes were a whirlwind of confusion for the Kid as the number was dialed and his dad was asked about. Then the phone was in his hand and through his own screaming thoughts he heard his dad asking, "Son! Son! Are you there?" He could hardly believe what he was hearing and finally found his voice to say, "Yes dad. It's me." to which he heard a large sigh of relief. The Old Man's voice sounded strong and the Kid was relieved to hear that he was recovering from his wounds. Plans were arranged to have a friend come and pick up the Kid along with his horse and transport them home. The old Man warned him, "Keep quiet about this last week. The less said the better." They said their goodbyes and then the phone went quiet, though the roaring in his head seemed to fill the house. The Old Man was Okay!! He sounded as tough as ever. He could hardly comprehend it. All this time he had been trying to prepare himself for the worst. Now it was not needed. Through watering eyes he quietly breathed a "Thank you" to the Lord.

In a few hours the truck and horse trailer were there. The mare was loaded, goodbyes and promises to keep in touch were said and the trip home began. The Kid napped during the trip and the driver, a close and trusted friend of the Old Man's let him be. The Kid woke as they pulled into the ranch and saw that the Old Man and others were there to welcome him home. It was a good feeling to be back. The Kid realized that he had, at least for a time, begun to believe he would never see the home place again, and his emotions almost overwhelmed him. The Old Man hugged him as he got out of the truck and the Kid held on to him, noticing that the Old Man was obviously sore and tender yet. Heck, he was himself! But it didn't matter! They were back home.

After the mare was seen to and everything settled down the Old Man and the Kid sat in the kitchen and over coffee the Kid told the story of what had happened. Even now it was beginning to take on an unreal

feeling, like it was almost a dream or a story he had read. The Old Man listened intently, and then when the Kid had finished filled him in on what was happening. "The Sheriff figured out right quick that I was involved somehow", he said, "when I showed up at the hospital with bullet holes in me." He explained that the Sheriff pretty much figured the Kid was the one involved in the shooting down on the San Pedro but that he had kept their names out of it. "He owes me" the Old Man said, but did not explain. There was a problem however. Somehow word had gotten out that the Old Man and the Kid were involved in all this and the jefe of the drug cartel in Mexico had been informed of their actions. Though there were no direct threats made, word filtered back that the Old Man and the Kid along with their family might be in for some "payback". The Sheriff had told the Old Man to be on guard and he was not the kind of man to spread unfounded rumors. "So what are we to do?" the Kid asked. The Old Man stared for a few minutes and then said, "I think we need to go get the boss of that gang." The Kid sat quietly and then asked, "When?" He did not ask why the Old Man had come up with this idea. If the Old Man felt the threat against them was serious then it probably was. He knew that the Old Man had most likely been thinking on this before he found out whether the Kid was still alive or not, and if the Old Man said this was something that needed to be done, then it needed to be done. Once the Old Man set his mind on something there was rarely any changing it, especially if he felt that "right" was on his side. The Kid also knew that the Old Man would have a well-thought-out plan down to the last detail, so his only question was, "When?"

"Next month" was the reply. "We are in no shape right now to ride." The Old Man went on to say that he knew the DEA was planning a massive raid next month against the distributor's of the drugs being brought up from Mexico. It was to be coordinated with a strike on the Mexican side of the border at the headquarters of this particular drug ring. The Old Man figured on slipping into Mexico a few days before the raid, scouting the area and setting up to take out the leader when the law enforcement boys hit the place. The confusing aftermath of losing their leader and the resulting internal power struggle along with being hit by the drug enforcement police should cause the Old Man and the Kid to be forgotten, or at least ignored, since the gang would have much bigger problems. At least he was hoping it would work out that way. It seemed the ideal time to strike. "Alright" said the Kid. "We go next month then."

It was actually closer to two months later that early one morning the Kid and the Old Man lay in the brush on a hill some five hundred yards above the ranch headquarters in Mexico. This particular ranch had been used as the main distribution point for drugs going into the US for a number of years. The Old Man never told the Kid how he had

gotten the information as to where the gang called home, or how he knew when the drug raid was to take place and the Kid, never asked. They had made their way across the border and into Mexico, traveling at night and hiding during the day, taking their time. Three days had passed since they'd set up on the hill. Hidden in the scrub, they watched and waited. The Old Man had the boss singled out and had learned his routine as much as possible. Now all that was needed was for the cops to arrive.

The Old Man was set up with a Ruger Model 77 Mark II in .22-250. It had a long heavy barrel, now chambered with handloads using 55 gr. Hornady V-Max bullets. The load would group inside an inch at two hundred yards. The scope was a Leupold M3 Vari-X III Long Range , set now to the highest power. The gun was resting solidly on a portable shooting rest the Old Man packed on his horse. The Kid was looking through a spotting scope and a Remington 700 in .30-06 lay nearby. Both of them were wearing sixguns. They were not planning a fight but one never knew. They waited for daylight and the raid.

The Old Man did not seem nervous. He looked through the scope as dawn began to brighten and said, "Get ready. I see movement." Through the spotting scope the Kid saw uniformed Officers approaching from several angles. The Old Man said, "Keep an eye on the rear door by the barn." and the Kid moved the scope slightly to bring it into view. Suddenly there was the sound of gunfire! Two or three shots, then a volley! The back door opened and people began coming out cautiously, guns in hand. The Kid could see them come out, look around and then keeping low, make their way towards the barn. A barrage of gunfire erupted now and the Kid thought he could hear voices yelling from the distance. All at once the Old Man stiffened, his hand closed tighter on the rifle and through the spotting scope the Kid could see a man coming out the back door. The man paused to look around and the Old Man's rifle spoke. A long seemingly slow vapor trail arced toward the man in the door and before he could move spray erupted from the side of his head! He collapsed on the walk, a pool of blood forming under him.

The Old Man was pulling back, gathering his gear as the Kid looked up from the scope. "Good shot dad" he said, "Direct hit. He won't be coming after anyone." All the Old Man said was, "Pack up. Let's get out of here. It wouldn't do for us to be discovered." and making his way back to where the horses were, he never looked back.

The ride home was uneventful. It took them several days to get back across the border and by the time they reached home the raid in Mexico was old news. It seemed that six of the gang including the leader were killed in the raid and a number of others were captured.

The strike, in coordination with the raid on the US side, took out a large drug ring that at least slowed the flow into the US for the time being. No one was under any illusions about stopping the flow altogether, but a blow had been struck.

The Kid and the Old Man never discussed it, though the Kid did note that the Old Man removed the barrel from the .22-250 and re-barreled it the next week. Just a precaution he figured. The Old Man always did think through things as much as possible. The Kid said his prayers every night and every night asked forgiveness for his sins. At times the memories troubled him, until one day he found this verse in the Bible.

But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.

He reckoned they had provided for their family, for since that time no threats or attacks ever came against them. He was not sure he had the meaning of the Scripture correct, yet it was a comfort to him. And from the day he read that Scripture he never again had any more worries, though he still made it a practice to ask the Lord for forgiveness for his sins every day.